

Why Hopes of Putin's Unconditional Surrender Could Prove to Be Futile

By [Simon Saradzhyan](#)

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With almost a week past the tragic crashing of a Malaysia Airlines passenger jet over eastern Ukraine, it is becoming clear that whatever initial hopes Western leaders might have had — that Russia's Vladimir Putin can be shamed or coerced into unconditionally throwing the pro-Russian rebels under the bus — are futile. There is hope, however, that both the conflicting sides and their supporters will sit down to negotiate a sustainable resolution to the conflict, which threatens the foundations of Europe's already fragile system of collective security.

Putin Won't Be Either Shamed

Even before the July 17th tragedy, some of the more eloquent of Western-based Russia watchers claimed that Putin had ditched the pro-Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine. "As I [wrote](#) back in May, now that he's sown chaos in Ukraine — but uneager to participate in someone else's civil war — President Vladimir Putin has thrown the rebels under the bus," Julia Ioffe [assured](#) readers of The New Republic on July 9th.

The crash of MH17, which Ukrainian and several Western governments claimed was brought down by a surface-to-air missile fired from territory controlled by rebels in eastern Ukraine, increased the number of Western pundits who hold this view exponentially.

For instance, respected and experienced Russia hand Mark Galeotti prophesized in the immediate aftermath of the crash: “When the histories are written, this will be deemed the day the insurgency lost” because “the Kremlin will, for all its immediate and instinctive bluster and spin, have to definitively and overtly withdraw from arming and protecting the rebels.”

Another pundit has even gone as far as to imply that the Russian leadership will somehow acquiesce to Western and Ukrainian air forces jointly bombing the rebels into oblivion. “Without Russian support, the separatists will be quickly be defeated. The tragic shooting-down of MH17 provides Ukraine and the west with an opportunity to rid Donbas of its separatists by using superior air power, no longer fearing Russian surface-to-air missiles,” [according](#) to Taras Kuzio of the University of Alberta.

I'd say anyone who seriously contemplates a scenario in which NATO planes will bomb rebels out of Donetsk must be as divorced from reality as conspiracy theorists who believe some of the MH17 passengers could have been dead days before the ill-fated flight.

I too think that the long-term damage Putin's Ukraine policy has done to Russia's standing on the international scene in general, and its relations with the West in particular, will be significant, even though it might not be felt in the Kremlin immediately. And I strongly hope those guilty of such a horrendous crime as the downing of a passenger plane (if it was, indeed, brought down by a missile), must be identified and prosecuted regardless of whether they have mistaken it for a warplane or not.

But I find the belief that Putin can be somehow either shamed into accepting the complete destruction or unconditional surrender of the pro-Russian militias in eastern Ukraine to be wishful thinking, no matter how many more times Western editorials brand the Russian leader a "pariah" or "outlaw" and condemn Russia as being a "rogue state."

Or Coerced

If anyone had any illusions that a guilty conscience alone might prompt Putin to reconsider his policies, they should recall his reaction to recent, well-grounded accusations that Russia, by annexing Crimea, had violated its commitments to respect Ukraine's territorial integrity under the 1999 Budapest Memorandum.

Nor does the history of accidental downing of passenger planes contain any precedents of a complicit state reversing its foreign policy in the aftermath. Washington didn't reverse its stance on Tehran after acknowledging that the US military accidentally shot Iran Air Flight 655 in 1988.

In fact, then U.S. President George H.W. Bush didn't even offer a full and formal apology, according to a timeline of such accidental shootings [put together](#) by Vox. As the Vox timeline shows, none of the complicit states, which include Ukraine, by the way, suffered from any serious punitive measures as long as they admitted complicity and paid compensations.

While Putin cannot be shamed into ditching the rebels in Eastern Ukraine, is there any hope that he can be coerced into doing so? I'd say: not much, if any.

To have a tangible impact on Putin's cost-benefit analysis vis-à-vis Ukraine, the United States and European Union would have to jointly impose broad crippling sanctions to hobble entire sectors of the Russian economy. The U.S. is ready for such a collective move. After all, Russia is not even among the top 10 U.S. trading partners, with the total trade volume between the two countries under [\\$40 billion](#) in 2013.

In comparison, the EU's trade with Russia is 10 times larger, exceeding [\\$450 billion](#) in 2012 and making Russia the EU's third largest trading partner. That very same economic relationship between Old Europe and Russia also explains why any hope of full-blown military containment of Russia in a new Cold War, which a number of US legislators and pundits have called for, would be futile.

It is highly unlikely that European countries and NATO members such as Germany, France or Italy would agree to contain Russia indefinitely, no matter how many some of the alliance's top officials say Russia should be treated as adversary. After all, the economic interdependence between these countries and Russia has become so strong that it would take an extraordinary and sustained effort on the part of Russia to antagonize Old Europe into sacrificing its economic interests in the long term to join the U.S. in containing Russia.

Of course, the U.S. can always impose sectoral sanctions unilaterally. Some of these punitive measures, such as exclusion from the dollar payment system, would hurt Russia tremendously while damage to the U.S. would be disproportionately smaller. But such unilateral moves would eventually give European, Chinese and other companies an advantage over US companies, which is something that American businesses bitterly oppose.

Russia's Potential as a Spoiler

In addition to firing back economically, Western sanctions can antagonize Russia and turn it into an international spoiler, undermining Western countries' vital national security interests rather than coercing Moscow into surrendering on Ukraine.

When I tasked myself back in March with listing things that Russia can do to retaliate, if antagonized by Western sanctions, I came up with quite a [long itinerary](#) of asymmetric responses. Those could include such short-term measures as blocking NATO's Afghan transit across Eurasia, undermining sanctions imposed on Tehran over its nuclear program and arming Tehran and other foes of the West with weaponry systems that would significantly increase the costs of hypothetical strikes by the U.S. and its allies.

This list also includes longer, revenge-is-sweet-when-served-cold measures, such as entering a military-political alliance with China. It would be delusional to expect Russia to maintain a common front with the West on Iran sanctions if it were subjected to the same kind of sanctions itself by the West. Speaking of the Iran sanctions, I would note the West has spent over a decade, escalating those before they began to significantly impact Tehran's willingness to negotiate in earnest.

And still Tehran is nowhere near "surrendering" to the West's demands despite crippling

sanctions. Escalating sanctions on Russia to the same level as on Iran would be even more difficult. Moreover, it would hurt Western economies and the global economy more, given that Russia exports much more oil and gas than Iran and those exports cannot be easily replaced.

At the same time such sanctions won't have the same impact on Russia as they did on Iran, given the greater size, resilience and diversity of the Russian economy and its economic ties. "The only kind of sanctions that might have a deep enough impact to force Russia to abandon its strategic objectives are ones that we would never implement," economists Clifford Gaddy and Barry Ickes wrote in their recent [treatise](#) of futility of Western efforts to coerce Putin through sanctions.

Putin Cannot Afford Losing Face

I am not saying, however, that there can't be a notable escalation of joint EU-U.S. punitive measures against Russia.

Such measures would impact Putin's cost-benefit analysis as well as his decision-making, no doubt making him more amenable to a compromise. But it would still be a compromise, not unconditional surrender. Even if sanctions hurt, Putin still cannot afford to lose face at home. If he cuts the separatists loose without reaching a deal with Kiev granting at least some of Russia and the separatists' wishes, then he would lose both the main source of his legitimacy and popular support at home.

Not even the Kremlin's highly effective propaganda machine would be able to explain such a reversal to Putin's core conservative constituency, who have so enthusiastically cheered on Putin's taking of Crimea, references to a new greater Russia and vows to protect ethnic Russians everywhere.

Those who think Putin's rule is so iron that it can just present a reversal of policy to common Russians as a *fait accompli*, without plausible explanation, should recall the protests that followed his September 2011 speech that he would be take the Kremlin seat back from Dmitry Medvedev.

In fact, rather than lose face, Putin might as well grant the wishes of the conservative core of his supporters and annex eastern Ukraine, especially if he is cornered by Western actions into thinking a full-blown Cold War and Kiev's integration into the West are inevitable. "Sanctions lead to greater control by Putin over the economy... and reinforce Putin's political power," according to Gaddy and Ickes of Brookings.

Peaceful Talks Are the Only Way to Resolve the Conflict

But I hope such a scenario will not materialize. It would do considerable damage to Russia, Ukraine and their allies. Moreover, I am betting that Putin will eventually force the separatists to settle with Kiev. But that won't happen until Ukraine agrees to some sort of a deal that would accommodate at least some of Russia's wishes vis-a-vis Ukraine, which include the codification of its neutrality and decentralization, as [formulated](#) by the Russian government in March.

Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko is dead wrong if he thinks that the international outrage over the MH17 tragedy gives him carte blanche to try to wipe the insurgency in eastern Ukraine out with sheer force. Urban warfare tends to be nasty, bloody and ugly even for well-prepared and armed troops, of which Ukraine has few as it contemplates the taking of Donetsk by force.

Russian forces were more numerous and they had greater fire support during the storming of Grozny, but they still lost thousands and spent months trying to take that city, which had both a smaller population and total area than Donetsk (although the rebels in Donetsk are less numerous than the Chechens that defended Grozny and enjoy less support among the city's residents).

Ukrainian armed forces are already suffering casualties at a rate that, if sustained, would surpass 1,560 per year. That would be more than what the Russian army acknowledged losing in the deadliest year of the second Chechen war.

Moreover, even if attainable at an acceptable cost, any military victory over pro-Russian forces in eastern Ukraine won't heal the country's ethnic and political wounds and therefore won't be final. The losing side will not accept defeat and will wait for the next chance to challenge the outcome.

Both Poroshenko and his foes should therefore aim for a peaceful resolution to the conflict, hopefully with strong encouragement from key external players, including Russia, the U.S. and the EU. The EU even has an additional incentive to push for a resolution to the conflict, as Russian-Ukrainian animosities threaten to leave the EU this winter without billions of cubic feet of Russian gas that transit through Ukraine.

A successful [peace plan](#) would include decentralization (including the election of governors and taxation powers for Ukraine's regions), legal guarantees of the rights of all ethnic minorities, reaffirmation of Ukraine's non-bloc status, an arrangement that would prevent Ukraine from re-exporting EU goods to Russia and Russian commodities to the EU, and, of course a ceasefire, followed by amnesty.

In fact, Poroshenko's own peace plan — which his aides circulated back in June — addresses most of Russians' and pro-Russians' reasonable wishes, and, therefore, constitutes a good starting point for the parties in the conflict to reach a reasonable compromise with the participation of Russia, the EU and U.S., perhaps under the aegis of the OSCE, of which they are all members.

Hopefully the U.S. and EU will encourage Poroshenko to remember his own peace plan and pursue it. Neither the West nor Russia can afford winning and keeping Ukraine, whose inefficient economy needs billions of dollars in loans just to get by this year and which will ultimately collapse if Russia, which is [Ukraine's largest single economic partner by far](#), curtails trade across their border.

If as a result of these collective efforts, there emerges a Ukraine outside of any military alliances, capable of sustaining itself economically and headed toward ethnic and political reconciliation, that could be an [outcome](#) that not only Kiev and Donetsk — but also Luhansk and Lviv, Moscow, Brussels and Washington — can probably live with. At least that was [the](#)

[hope I formulated back in February](#), and I continue to cling to it.

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