



US should support, but also prod, Ukraine

October 12, 2019 **Lawrence J. Haas** *The Hill*

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President Donald Trump's controversial interactions with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky must not distract attention from the important question of U.S. policy toward Russia in connection with its war in Ukraine — especially as Zelensky and key European leaders send disturbing signals that they want to appease Russia's Vladimir Putin in hopes of ending the war.

Ukraine remains a key issue of East-West contention and, at the moment, the highest profile flashpoint of Putin's efforts to extend Russia's influence far beyond its borders. How the United States and its allies respond will go a long way toward either containing Putin or encouraging him to push harder.

Washington should reaffirm that it won't recognize Russia's annexation of Crimea, maintain its sanctions on Moscow, look to add more sanctions in the face of Russia's further aggression in Ukraine and elsewhere, and seek additional ways to fortify Ukraine beyond the military aid it has already provided.

Washington also should discourage French and German calls to accommodate Putin in hopes of reducing East-West tensions — calls that are causing serious splits in Europe over how best to respond to Putin's aggressive behavior around the world.

To be sure, Zelensky was elected in April after vowing to end the war, which has cost more than 13,000 lives. Nevertheless, he should understand that exactly *how* he ends the war will shape Ukraine's future relations with Russia.

Ukraine was among the Soviet Union's founding republics and remained one until the Soviet crack-up of the early 1990s. Since its independence, it has cooperated with Washington in important ways — eliminating Soviet nuclear warheads that it inherited, ending its role in helping Iran build its Bushehr nuclear power plant, and contributing troops to the U.S.-led coalition against Iraq in 2003 — but it has been slow to pursue the political and economic reforms that would cement its ties to the West.

Putin, who has called the Soviet Union's collapse the “greatest geopolitical disaster” of the 20th Century, clearly considers Ukraine key to his efforts to expand his global influence while undermining Western unity.

After successfully pressuring Kyiv to back out of a major pending economic agreement with the European Union in 2013, which would have turned Ukraine more to the West and reduced Russian influence in Kyiv, Putin sent special forces into Crimea a year later, annexed the territory, drove pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine to wage war, and attacked Ukrainian naval vessels.

In response to Putin's deadly mischief, Washington and the EU have imposed a host of sanctions. Washington also has provided Kyiv with hundreds of millions of dollars in economic and military assistance.

Zelensky, however, has sent mixed signals of late about whether he wants to hang tough against Putin or seek an accommodation with him to end the war. The Ukrainian president has urged the West to maintain sanctions, but also agreed to hold elections in eastern Ukraine — prompting protests in dozens of Ukrainian cities in recent days — and to pull his forces back from Russian-backed fighters. While he says Ukrainian law should govern the elections, they clearly could fall prey to Russian influence and enable Putin to reintegrate the separatist areas into Russia.

Meanwhile, French and German leaders welcomed Zelensky's agreement to hold these elections and expressed hope that they will pave the way for an international summit that will finally end the fighting.

While French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel say they oppose sanctions relief in the absence of peace, they also clearly view sanctions as an obstacle to warmer ties with Moscow. Both France and Germany have successfully lobbied for Russia's readmission into the Council of Europe, a major human rights forum from which it was suspended after the Crimea invasion, despite the fact that Putin has maintained, if not expanded, his nefarious behavior since then.

Washington must not join the appeasement bandwagon. It should expand U.S. sanctions on Moscow in the face of Putin's increasingly aggressive behavior and provide additional military aid to Kyiv as needed.

At the same time, U.S. officials should prod Zelensky to build upon recent Ukrainian reforms in health and other areas that will improve governance, enhance living standards, and give Washington more reason to embrace the embattled state. To date, he has sent mixed signals about whether he's serious about reform.

As John Herbst, George W. Bush's ambassador to Ukraine, put it to NPR the other day, Putin "wants to upend the security of Europe, which has been essential for our own security and, for that matter, our own prosperity... We have a vital interest in stopping Putin, and the place to do it is Ukraine."

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