



The threat to Europe from Russia isn't going away. A new policy brief says Europe needs a clear and realistic strategy to prevail

Vladimir Putin has spent more than 20 years gradually but relentlessly reviving Russian imperialist ideology and militarising the Russian economy and education system. Europeans cannot rely on the US to come to their aid any longer, and they cannot assume that Ukraine is strong enough to absorb everything that Russia throws at it. Europe, including the UK and other non-EU countries, need a strategy to cope with a persistent and comprehensive Russian threat that will not disappear, whatever happens next in Ukraine.

A new policy brief from the Centre for European Reform and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung United Kingdom and Ireland '[Resist, constrain and change: A European strategy for relations with Russia](#)' warns that European governments need to take Russian leaders seriously when they say that their country is already at war with NATO. Russia's 'everywhere war' against European interests – cyber attacks, sabotage, terrorism and other hostile acts – is intensifying. If Europe wants to win the systemic competition with Russia and create the conditions that could eventually produce positive changes in Russia, it needs a comprehensive long-term strategy.

In the Cold War, the West successfully pursued a strategy of containment directed at the Soviet Union. The father of this strategy was the American Sovietologist George Kennan, and the strategy was successful because it was founded on his deep knowledge of both the Soviet Union and the US. EU efforts to find a strategic approach to Russia have foundered on a vision of Russia that did not correspond to the increasingly threatening reality, and an over-estimation of Europe's influence over Moscow. Without good information and analysis, European leaders are more likely to take bad decisions. Europe needs to invest in developing more expertise on Russia.

A new European strategy should have three objectives:

- to resist current Russian aggression by increasing the cost to Russia – at a minimum, preventing it from benefitting from expansionist policies. That means stopping Russia's advances in Ukraine and increasing European economic and societal resilience in the face of Russian 'shadow warfare';
- to constrain Russia's power and influence in Europe and beyond, leaving no power vacuums for it to exploit and no fissures in European societies for it to widen. The policy brief proposes that the

EU should have an Office for the Protection of European Values, modelled on Germany's Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV) to investigate and disrupt anti-democratic movements and foreign support for them. It also calls for Europe to use development assistance and international public service broadcasting to compete with Russia's growing influence in the global south;

- to increase the probability of change in Russia. Putin has spent two decades destabilising neighbouring countries and threatening the West. It is quite likely that his successors would seek better relations with the West, at least while consolidating their hold on power.

European governments must not be afraid of change in Russia: it is continuity of Putin's aggressive policies that is the bigger threat to European interests. Even if Putin's successors are not democrats, they are likely to want a pause in the confrontation with Europe while they consolidate power. To encourage change, Europe needs to put the Russian economy and Russian society under greater pressure. But only Russians themselves can overturn Russia's political culture, if they decide to live in a peaceful, democratic state instead of an aggressive personalist autocracy.

Europeans need to accept that other countries will not solve the problem of Russia for them; and to understand their own comparative economic and demographic strength. Standing up to Putin will not be cheap; not standing up to him will be more expensive.

The author of the report, Ian Bond, said *"Even after almost two decades of Putin's neo-imperialism and aggression against Russia's neighbours, Europe is still reacting against each new outrage, rather than acting strategically. It needs a long-term plan to encourage change in Russia. But first, it needs to stop Putin in Ukraine and prevent his malign influence spreading further."*

Notes for editors:

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