



**US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
Subcommittee on Europe and Regional Security Cooperation**

Hearing on

*Russian Aggression in Eastern Europe:
Where Does Putin Go Next After Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova?*

March 4, 2015

A Transatlantic Strategy to Deter Putin's Aggression

Testimony by

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Chairman Johnson, Ranking Member Shaheen, Members of the Committee, President Putin today poses a direct threat to American interests and values. His war in Ukraine and his effort to sow division among our allies are aimed at tearing up the post-Cold War order and undermining American credibility and influence.

If we fail to stop Putin in Ukraine, we will face a series of conflicts and crises in the months and years to come.

At best, Putin may consolidate his autocratic grip at home and subjugate 75 million people in Europe's East to a fate determined in Moscow. At worst, an emboldened Putin may be tempted to challenge a NATO ally directly, hoping to deal a decisive blow to the Alliance.

The choice we face, however, is not between fighting Russia or doing nothing. Rather, I believe doing nothing may lead to our fighting Russia.

We are better than that. The United States can take the lead in galvanizing the transatlantic community behind a comprehensive strategy, including ensuring that a well-functioning and well-armed European Ukraine emerges from this crisis.

In this context, I would like to make five points:

- 1) Russia's war in Ukraine today is the natural outcome of Putin's policies in recent years (and the lessons he drew from our successive lack of responses).
- 2) Putin will not stop until he encounters serious pushback.
- 3) Only the United States can galvanize Europe and the international community around an effective, comprehensive strategy to deter Putin for the long-term.
- 4) Any strategy should urgently and decisively back Ukraine as well as other vulnerable states with significant economic and military assistance in the short-term, while keeping the door open to the European Union (EU) or NATO for Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova.
- 5) We should neither abandon the Russian people nor the vision that a democratic Russia one day can find its peaceful place within a Europe whole and free.

This crisis began long before Crimea. Indeed, Russia's annexation of Crimea was the natural outcome of a clear, consistent policy dating back years. As confrontation replaced cooperation with the West as a source of legitimacy for the Kremlin, Russia meticulously laid the groundwork for what we are witnessing today. Former President Medvedev set out the doctrine of a 'privileged sphere of interests.' Putin articulated the 'compatriots policy' in which Russia claimed the right to defend the interests of Russian-speakers outside its borders, and it began distributing passports to strengthen its claims.

Russia undermined diplomatic efforts to resolve so-called frozen conflicts, and maintained Russian occupying forces as 'peacekeepers.' At the last NATO-Russia summit in 2008, Putin ridiculed the idea of Ukraine as an independent state and questioned the status of Crimea in front of NATO leaders who had just failed to agree to begin preparing Ukraine for NATO. His creeping annexation of Georgia's breakaway regions prompted the Russian-Georgian War, consolidating his occupations. Russia both developed

contingency plans and exercised seizing its neighbors' territory. Putin increasingly began wrapping all of his actions in a pseudo-ideology of Orthodox chauvinism.

He countered EU outreach with his own Eurasian Economic Union premised on coercion rather than attraction. Putin's intimidation tactics led Armenia first to abandon its EU association bid before forcing former Ukrainian President Yanukovich's about-face. Russia tried and failed to use economic coercion and energy threats to sway Moldova.

In the Ukraine crisis, Putin first probed with little green men to determine his freedom of maneuver in Crimea and, in the absence of resistance, brazenly seized the territory. The Kremlin then stoked the idea of a 'Russian Spring' across southern and eastern Ukraine, creating the myth of Novorossiia and seeking to spark spontaneous revolts using 'political tourists' from Russia. When that failed, Russia introduced Special Forces and intelligence operatives in Slavyansk, using the town as a base from which to seek to destabilize eastern Ukraine. And once Ukrainian forces gained their footing, nearly defeating the rebel forces, Russia opted for full-scale invasion. Today, the so-called separatists – former miners and farmers according to Putin – command greater quantities of the most advanced heavy weaponry than most European NATO nations.

While Ukraine is ground zero in the current struggle, there is no doubt that Putin's sights are firmly fixed on the two tiny nations that have dared stand up to his bullying: Moldova and Georgia. Moscow attempted to sway Moldova's recent elections with massive support for new pro-Kremlin parties, is courting separatists, and is poised to destabilize the nation. Despite Georgia's efforts to normalize relations with Moscow, Russia has continued its creeping annexation of Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

In the first instance, Putin has used this crisis to consolidate his own hold on at home, through greater repression of civil society and independent media even as he fuels a nationalist fervor. He has created an environment of fear and intimidation, at a minimum fostering the circumstances that led to the assassination of Boris Nemtsov. After all, the protests led by Nemtsov, much like the Maidan in Ukraine, pose a potentially existential threat to Putin's regime.

Putin of course is also seeking to dominate his neighbors, to drain them of resources to fuel his kleptocracy, and to restore a sense of Russia's greatness in the only way a bully knows – intimidating the weak, closest to him.

Furthermore, he aims to prevent any of his neighbors from joining either NATO or the EU, achieving this through coercion when possible and by dismemberment and occupation where necessary.

Ultimately, Putin knows that the best check on his power is a united transatlantic community. Hence, he has sought to divide Europe, undermining the resolve for sustained sanctions. But the most tempting objective for Putin is to call into question the credibility of NATO's Article 5 mutual defense commitment, as doing so would effectively end both NATO and America's role as a great European power.

A Russian move against an ally such as a Baltic state cannot be ruled out. Putin has demonstrated time and again that if he senses an opportunity to act, he will, convinced that the West lacks the will or ability to take decisive action. Debaltseve is only the latest case in point.

This is why today's situation is so dangerous. Putin will not stop and this crisis will not end until he encounters serious pushback.

We have seen repeatedly that Putin's objectives expand with success and contract with failure, or even the increased chance of failure. This means that the best determinant of his action is Western action.

There's a tendency, however, in Washington to argue that the Europeans should take the lead on Ukraine – after all we have our hands full with ISIS and other global responsibilities. This approach fails to understand that only the United States can galvanize Europe and other members of the international community around a tough-minded comprehensive strategy to deter Putin.

The Ukraine crisis is a Russia crisis after all. And Russia is too big, too strong, and too scary for Europe to resolve this without us. Germany may be a political and economic powerhouse, but Putin knows Chancellor Merkel

cannot enforce European diplomacy. While the Chancellor has done a remarkable job in holding Europe together in this crisis, no European state can afford to get into a confrontation with Russia.

Without US leadership in this crisis, Putin might succeed in creating a new dividing line in Europe. As he creates facts on the ground, he shifts the goalposts of what becomes an acceptable outcome in European diplomacy focused on ending violence. Europe may feel forced to accommodate a revanchist Russia rather than check its power. As we've seen throughout history, this is a dangerous formula.

Only US leadership in this crisis provides the necessary condition to ensure the sustained resolve of our allies, most of who are bearing a far greater economic cost to their own economies.

Our strategy today is basically to raise the costs on Russia by imposing sanctions, protect NATO, and count on the long-term fundamentals, which are on our side and are working against Russia. The problem is that we have an immediate crisis. Putin likely sees the immediate future as his best window of opportunity. And in the short-term, we may see a group of nations lose their sovereignty and Russia tempted to push further into NATO territory.

We can avoid this outcome. The United States has the ability to rally its allies and international partners around a comprehensive strategy that not only deters Putin's aggression, but also avoids an unstable grey zone in Europe's east.

To do so, we should begin by articulating our vision – what we want to achieve. I contend that should be a Europe whole, free, and at peace that embraces democratic nations in Europe's east and in which Russia can find its peaceful place in Europe.

We should more decisively increase the costs to Russia, including by refusing to treat Putin (and the FSB) as normal interlocutors, expanding the economic sanctions to include Putin and his inner circle, targeting Gazprom directly, and letting Moscow know that we are considering cutting off Russia from SWIFT financial transactions.

The most effective response is Ukraine succeeding in becoming a modern European state. We very well may see a shift from the military battlefields of the Donbas to the financial markets. Putin after all is out to win all of Ukraine, not simply consolidate his hold on a slice of territory in the east.

And yet US and European assistance to date is modest. There is no government-wide concerted effort to assist Ukraine comparable to the White House-led effort to implement the reset with Russia. There is no response commensurate with how Congress reacted to support campaigns against Ebola and ISIS. The amounts of assistance under consideration are too small to serve as the catalyst for reform in a nation of over 50 million people. We are far more generous helping Jordan weather the Syria crisis as we plan to provide \$1 billion in assistance to a nation of over 6 million. We provided \$1 billion to 4.5 million Georgians after Russia's invasion. While the IMF and EU can and will contribute more to Ukraine, the US sets the tone and for now the tone is ambivalent.

Assistance to Ukraine should include substantial military assistance. The United States is uniquely positioned to assist Ukraine to defend itself and to raise the costs of further Russian military action against Ukraine. There is no military solution in Ukraine and no one wants Ukraine to suffer a full-scale war with Russia. But by reassuring Putin that we will either not provide or greatly constrain our military and intelligence assistance, we signal to the Kremlin what Russia can get away with. Our current posture is escalatory as it gives Russia the confidence it needs to believe it can achieve particular means through military options at acceptable costs.

Any assistance package should therefore include substantial military assistance, including lethal military assistance such as anti-armor missiles, as well as intelligence support. Such a US decision could unlock lethal military assistance from Canada and several other European and Asian allies. We should also support large-scale training in civil resistance in Ukraine as part of creating a deterrent state.

One vehicle for such assistance could be an expansion of the European Reassurance Initiative and renaming it the European Reinforcement Initiative to underscore its focus on building well-armed, well-trained deterrent states including frontline allies, key partners such as Finland and Sweden, and states under duress including Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia.

Within NATO, even as we continue to implement the good Wales Summit decisions, the alliance should also move away from ‘reassurance,’ which focuses on the insecurities of our allies, and embrace ‘deterrence,’ which underscores the threat. To this end, the US Congress could endorse a more substantial US and NATO military presence along NATO’s Eastern flank until such time as Putin demonstrates that Russia is no longer a threat or potential threat to our allies; support a focused training effort to build frontline states’ military capacities; call for a halt to any further US force withdrawals from Europe; and order a review of US force posture including how to prioritize Russia in determining the availability of forces to US combatant commands. Such a package could be designed to leverage such US commitments to European security to secure greater European commitments to defense investment.

Russia’s aggressive new posture has translated into an intense diplomatic effort to buttress Russian influence elsewhere, especially in southeast Europe, and to disrupt ongoing European integration processes. We should respond to aggression in Europe’s East by consolidating Europe’s South. This would mean inviting Montenegro to join NATO, undertaking a renewed push to resolve the Macedonia name impasse, and intensifying efforts to build US strategic partnerships with Serbia and Cyprus.

A comprehensive transatlantic strategy to deter Putin should expand the playing field to areas of strength for us – energy and trade. We should harness America’s energy prowess to increase global supply, while supporting European efforts to create a European energy union that includes Ukraine and Moldova from that start. At the same time, we should be explicit that our intention is to negotiate a Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) that is open to European nations who have deep and comprehensive free trade agreements with the EU, notably Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia.

At the same time, the United States must work much more closely with its allies on how to mitigate Russian efforts to sow dissension within the Alliance. Such efforts begin with more transparency and stronger financial disclosure laws and practices in our societies to expose potential Russian manipulation of institutions, media, or political parties.

Western leaders must also assume responsibility for countering the

Russian propaganda war by being willing to speak publicly and clearly about Russia's actions. If we are unable to recognize the threat Putin poses to our interests or challenge the misperceptions that surround this conflict, we are unlikely to formulate an effective, sustainable strategy sufficient to deter him for the long-term – a strategy that is pursued not with confrontational rhetoric, but with resolve and determination.

As long as either KGB veterans retain their grip on the Kremlin or the nations in between NATO and Russia remain trapped in an insecure grey zone, we will face continued challenges and conflict. The Russian people, as we saw on the streets of Moscow Sunday, will some day have a say about their leaders. But the United States and its allies – along with Ukrainians, Moldovans, and Georgians – have a say about the latter.