

# Neglecting Ukraine aids Putin

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## Neglecting Ukraine aids Putin

There's a megalomaniac saying what he'll do and a dithering Western response. It sounds a lot like 1938.

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VLADIMIR Putin, 71, will secure another six-year term as president in a fortnight, extending his iron grip until 2030.

Welcomed as a pro-Western breath of fresh air in 2000, the multi-billionaire has become a dangerously weak "strong man" running a nuclear-armed "criminal gang", to quote Yulia Navalnaya.

Navalnaya courageously addressed the European Parliament in Strasbourg last Wednesday, just 12 days after the murder of her husband, chief opposition figure, Alexei Navalny.

Navalny had survived a previous Novichok poisoning only to die while imprisoned above the Arctic Circle, of "sudden death syndrome".

Putin despises such courage, especially in the lead up to presidential formalities.

Since Navalny's elimination, the anti-Ukraine war campaigner Oleg Orlov, 70, has been sentenced to two-and-a-half years in prison for "discrediting the armed forces". Probably a life sentence.

The joint winner of the 2022 Nobel prize had penned an article entitled "They wanted fascism. They got it."

"The verdict showed that my article was accurate and true," the diminutive Orlov remarked grimly as he was cuffed and led away.

Vowing to fight on despite the obvious personal risk, Navalnaya warned MEPs that Putin is "capable of anything" and should not be bargained with.

It would be less than 24 hours before that "anything" became explicit: "There has been talk about the possibility of sending NATO military contingents to Ukraine ... but now the consequences for possible interventionists will be far more tragic," Putin railed.

"They must realise that we also have weapons that can hit targets on their territory. All this really threatens a conflict with the use of nuclear weapons and the destruction of civilisation."

There's an eerie atmosphere of 1938 about this - of a megalomaniac saying what he'll do and of a dithering and diffuse Western response.

Criticised early on for engaging with Putin, French President Emmanuel Macron had recently freelanced about NATO countries committing ground forces in future. That was quickly shut down.

Needling Putin is something Western powers seem almost as reluctant about as punching Russia's kleptocracy where it really hurts. Navalnaya urged Western countries to "stop being boring" and to take the Kremlin's money declaring, "if you really want to defeat Putin, you have to become an innovator".

Her entreaty comes as two powerful leaders, notably both also women, urged the seizure of Russian funds currently locked in international accounts.

US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen, and EU President Ursula Von Der Leyen believe nearly \$440 billion in Russian-owned cash and securities held by a NATO countries, G7



While the West waits, Vladimir Putin only gets more powerful. Picture Getty Images

members and others, should be fair game given Moscow's illegal invasion. Speaking to G20 finance ministers in Sao Paulo, Brazil, Yellen said ways should be explored to "unlock the value" of these assets to assist Kyiv now and later in its post-war reconstruction.

"There is a strong international law, economic and moral case for moving forward," she told other nations. "The G7 should work together to explore a number of approaches that have

been suggested." Von Der Leyen declared "there could be no stronger symbol and no greater use for that money".

Others though, harbour doubts even if the "freeze" on these accounts was originally enacted specifically to prevent Moscow's use of funds for its attack on Ukraine.

At the same G20 meeting, French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire said "we don't have a legal basis to seize Russian assets and we should never act if we don't obey by the international law."

The absurdity of this distinction seems obvious amid the carnage in Ukraine. On the one hand you have Macron floating a future troop deployment and on the other, his Finance Minister Le Maire quibbling over the niceties of diverting the proceeds of crime to the cause of neutralising a lawless

aggressor and saving civilians.

If the deployment of lethal force is the ultimate sanction, resorted to only when available non-violent means have been exhausted, then surely using an aggressor's sequestered riches against it to save innocent lives and vouchsafe human rights is ipso facto a legitimate intermediate step - and therefore a moral necessity.

The West needs to get serious here, and fast. Ukraine is running dangerously short

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**The West needs to get serious here, and fast. Ukraine is running dangerously short of weapons.**

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of weapons as winter approaches and while European materiel manufacturers are fast tooling up and are expected to meet demand in the next 12 months or so, the existential need is right now. Not so Russia

which, unburdened by the need to provide for its own impoverished citizens, has quietly reconfigured itself as a wartime economy, spending something like four in 10 rubles on defence. All this on Putin's non-war, his "special military operation".

Independent financial journalists Maksim Tovkaylo and Farida Rustamova told America's PBS network in November that while Moscow obscures its military commitment, total expenditure on armed forces and law enforcement would soak up 39 per cent of its budget in 2024.

Germany, which has more than doubled its defence budget, sits at 2.1 per cent.

As the West navel-gazes about ethics, and Republicans slavishly heed Donald Trump's disgusting appeasement of Putin by denying arms and money first promised to Kyiv six months ago, Australia can and must do more.

Claiming air-worthiness problems as an excuse for denying Ukraine our discarded Taipan helicopters, and refusing to re-open our embassy in Kyiv when others have, suggests handwringing in a time of urgency is not just a northern hemisphere disease.

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