

Ukraine Insight

On 30 October, SAIIA Western Cape hosted a meeting jointly with the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. The meeting was addressed by Dr Eugene Czolij on “Russia, Ukraine and Hybrid Warfare”. Dr Czolij, a Canadian lawyer from Montreal, is the president of the Ukrainian World Congress, which represents more than 20 million Ukrainians around the world.

He reminded the large audience of the current situation in Ukraine, where the Donbas, the eastern industrial region, is controlled by Russian-backed forces, while Crimea was occupied and placed under Russian control in 2014. These two serious breaches of international law have caused great anger in Ukraine and amongst the Ukrainian diaspora. Dr Czolij called upon the West, in the form of the European Union (EU) and NATO to help Ukraine to reverse the situation.

As discussant, it was difficult to comment in the face of such strong feelings, but the sad truth is that the current situation in Eastern Ukraine is exactly what President Vladimir Putin wants. A stalemate, punctuated by occasional outbreaks of violence in the Donbas, suits him very well. As for the annexation of Crimea, it burnished his popularity in Russia and will not be relinquished.

However, Russia in 2018 is weaker than Ukrainian conspiracy theorists think. It could never, as Dr Czolij warned, successfully invade and conquer the whole of Ukraine, let alone move on into Eastern Europe and start World War III, nor does Putin want to. He is nothing if not a realist.

Nevertheless, Russia is quite strong enough to carry on destabilising Eastern Ukraine and hanging on to Crimea indefinitely. In so doing, it is warmly supported by the majority of Russian-speakers in those areas and if these people have to make sacrifices, Russia will see that they are well-rewarded.

Putin’s main aim in all this is to stop Ukraine from joining the EU and NATO. Kyiv’s dearly-held ambitions in this regard can never be fulfilled as long as Eastern Ukraine is in enemy hands and Ukraine’s border with Russia is contested.

Putin believes that the collapse and dismemberment of the USSR at the end of 1991 was “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century”. Most of us would disagree, but this is the official view from Moscow.

Russian President Boris Yeltsin fulminated when the Baltic States announced in the early 1990s that they would not only leave the USSR and the Commonwealth of Independent States which succeeded it, but would join the

EU and NATO. He threatened war and invasion, but Russia was patently and humiliatingly too weak to do any such thing. The Baltic States are now all three safely and cosily in both the EU and NATO and protected under Article 5 of the NATO Treaty against any aggression from the east. Putin knows this full well, although he enjoys sabre-rattling and interfering whenever he can do so cheaply.

Ukraine also broke away from the USSR in 1991, but for most of the next 23 years, it took few practical steps towards joining western institutions and most of its leaders were corrupt and fundamentally pro-Russian, even while spouting Ukrainian patriotism. After the 2014 “Revolution of Dignity” when the pro-Russian president of Ukraine, Yanukovich was deposed, the new government applied to join both NATO and the EU and has signed an Association Agreement with the latter.

Unfortunately, neither NATO or the EU can accept Ukraine as a member, however virtuous Kyiv may be. The EU’s accession criteria demand that a state is a multi-party democracy, respects human rights and has a functioning free market, all of which Ukraine has partly achieved. However, an applicant state must also settle any territorial disputes and enjoy good relations with its neighbours. As long as Kyiv contests Russia’s *de facto* ownership of Crimea and its covert control of the Donbas, this third criterion will remain unmet.

We can expect more smoke and mirrors about Ukraine for as long as they serve Moscow’s purposes and at least until 2024 and the official end of Putin’s presidency. Dreams of meaningful NATO support, let alone membership and the right to protection under Article 5 of the NATO Treaty, are just that. Nor can the UN act under chapter 7 of the Charter when Russia would veto it.

Putin has therefore succeeded in Ukraine, where Yeltsin failed in the Baltic States. To secure the rest of Russia’s western frontier, Putin has only to keep Belarus under control, which is not difficult, and to continue to undermine Moldova, part of which has been controlled by Russian surrogates since 1992.

With all due respect, Kyiv should develop alternative strategies to gain what western support it can. Most importantly it should get its house in order and deal with endemic cronyism and corruption. For now, sad as it may be, shrill denunciations of Russian actions in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea will elicit little more than sympathetic noises from the West.

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