

Putin's game is to neuter and divide the West – and he is succeeding



[WILLIAM HAGUE](#)

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Santa's little helpers: the Adams cartoon for December 13

The Russians know how to make you feel welcome. On my [first visit to Moscow](#) as foreign secretary in 2010, whole motorways seemed to have been closed, vodka flowed freely, and the then President Medvedev hosted me at his villa in the woods. They were determined to improve on their terrible relations with the previous Labour government, and so was I.

Yet within two years we were at furious loggerheads over Syria, and the year after that we were falling out over the direction of Ukraine. Faced with Putin's invasion and annexation of Crimea, part of another European country, we British were rightly on the side of sanctions, and penalising aggression. The lashings of vodka might as well have been poured down the drain.



William Hague meets President Medvedev in 2010 CREDIT: -/EN.KREMLIN.RU

This is the sad cycle of two decades of Western relations with Russia: optimism from each incoming US president or British government, then disillusionment brought on by behaviour that cannot be accepted. From killing untold numbers of civilians in the bombing of Aleppo, to murdering dissidents in London with radioactive polonium, Russia takes actions we find beyond the pale.

Now a new US president is about to take office with a fresh determination to do business with the Kremlin, this time unencumbered by the disputes of the past, or indeed any particular knowledge of them. If reports are to be believed, Donald Trump will appoint as his secretary of state an oilman who has done many a deal with Moscow and knows Vladimir Putin personally.

If you were Mr Putin, why would you want to do this and how would you go about it? Your overriding priority is to maintain your own power, in a country in economic and social decline. Russia has a falling population, a GDP considerably smaller than the UK, and is excessively dependent on oil and gas revenues. Your power depends on increasing and controlling those revenues, with the whole pyramid of financial and political rewards resting on that.



Russian tank during conflict with Georgia in 2008 CREDIT: AFP

You also need to make sure that more open economies and democratic societies do not flourish in your neighbourhood, so that Russians do not seek to emulate them. If this means occupying part of their territory to prevent them functioning as sovereign countries, as in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, so be it.



Rex Tillerson, reported to be Donald Trump's first choice as Secretary of State

While better relations with Russia are a laudable goal, this could be Russia's best chance since the Second World War to weaken and divide the West.

And now your goal, as Mr Putin, is nothing less than European impotence. You want to make it impossible for them to pursue hostile actions such as sanctions on your cronies, expanding Nato or refusing to build new gas pipelines. If that can be achieved, your regime will be richer financially, safer politically, and seen at home as the tough and effective leadership that helps the average Russian to ignore the parlous long-term state of the country.

With the election of Mr Trump, there is a path to fulfilling this goal, provided it is done with care and cunning. First it involves consolidating the position of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, regardless of how much violence has to be unleashed before Trump's inauguration. That opens the way to offering the new US administration an end to the war in Syria on Russia's terms, with Mr Assad in power in most of the country, and the whole world able to see that you can count on Russia as an ally, but never trust the support of the West.

Having dealt with that early in 2017, the next step is to use it as the basis for a rapprochement with America, but cautiously, so that congressional critics of Mr Trump are not given too much ammunition. A good way to disarm suspicion is to offer to go back into one or two of the international agreements – on arms control and nuclear facilities – recently abrogated by Moscow. There will be some relief and even praise in the Western media, hailing a "new era" in relations and analysing Mr Putin's good diplomacy and return to responsibility.

Simultaneously, the extraordinary success and skill being developed by Russia in manipulating Western elections will offer rich pickings in 2017. The universal assumption for many years that social media and the internet would be agents of freedom has left most people slow to grasp that new technologies can be turned into powerful means of authoritarian power – for the first time reaching deep into other nations and societies.

Mr Trump has already disavowed the CIA's findings that Russian hacking was designed to promote his victory. That the president-elect of the USA refuses to believe well-founded research by his own agencies is an unmitigated triumph for Moscow. Such tactics can now be used to promote the election of pliable candidates across Europe, with the scope to fund them as well.

The French National Front has already borrowed €9 million from a Russian bank. A combination of donations and social media operations can help to push disorientated European voters the right way. Recent months have seen a pro-Russian president elected in Bulgaria, and a new government friendly to Moscow in Moldova. The Netherlands rejected the EU treaty with Ukraine in a referendum, and growing parties like the Five Star Movement in Italy have Russian ties.



Bulgarian president-elect Rumen Radev

Add a bit of military intimidation and internal agitation in the Baltic States – one third of Latvians are ethnic Russians – and another part of Europe will feel weakened. Then subtly help opposition parties in Germany's autumn elections to undermine Angela Merkel. [Manipulate politics in Montenegro](#) so it doesn't want to join Nato. Hug Serbia and keep Bosnia paralysed by the same techniques. Keep pushing up the price of oil by deals with the Arabs, so that Russian gas is sought-after.



Estonian Special Forces soldiers in a joint exercise with Latvian, Lithuanian, German, Dutch and other NATO troops in Estonia, May 2016 CREDIT: DMITRI BELIAKOV

Do all these things and soon the EU, particularly without the UK, will lack the will to challenge Russia. In foreign affairs and energy policy, Europe is only as strong as its weakest link, and soon this strategy will make sanctions impossible, western security weaker and buying Russian energy impossible to resist. Mr Putin will be able to do as he wishes, with whom he wishes.

Mr Trump is a great advocate of doing deals. The first step in doing a good deal is to have your eyes open to the strategy of the other side. Europeans certainly need to spend more on defence.

But America needs to see what could be about to unfold: under cover of better relations, the division, weakening and neutering of the West.

