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Vlad the Ruthless knows exactly what he's doing – unlike his foes in the West

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In the British mind, the Crimea means [the Charge of the Light Brigade](#), Florence Nightingale, and all that, more than 150 years ago. We – and the West in general – know little of what the Crimea means right now. We should know more, because it helps explain why this week the Russians have literally got away with murder in Aleppo, why they tried to affect the result of the US presidential election and why they are winning.

In February 2014, the pro-Russian president of Ukraine was ejected by popular revolt. A few days later, masked troops without insignia took over key installations in the Crimea, which was part of Ukraine. An “independent, self-governing” Crimean republic was proclaimed, at the point of Russian gun-barrels. [It had, in effect, become part of Russia](#). A few days later, Vladimir Putin compared this coup to the “sincere, unstoppable desire of the Germans for national unity” in 1989. The (absurd) grandeur of the comparison showed the nature of his ambition.



A pro-Russian 'self-defence' unit takes an oath to the new Crimean government
CREDIT: VASILY FEDOSENKO /REUTERS

Since then, the Russians have displayed a sincere, [unstoppable desire to control the destiny of Syria](#). Possession of the Crimea and its port of Sevastopol has helped them militarily and materially in this. The Russians' new centre of gravity has emboldened them to subvert and fight in other bits of Ukraine, dominate the eastern Mediterranean navally and [bring Turkey – though Turkey is a Nato member – to heel](#).

It has also taught them about the West. By occupying the Crimea, Russia was in breach of all post-war rules about the alteration of borders by force and specifically of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum about Ukraine, which it had signed. Although it still suffers sanctions, Russia has kept what it won.

There is a tendency in the West to underplay all this, on the grounds that Russia is [poor, and getting poorer](#), which is true; or on the grounds that the West was very cruel to Russia, which is not. But in fact the change is a huge reversal of what we thought had happened after the Soviet Union collapsed on Boxing Day 25 years ago. This was supposed to be the moment when Russia and the West became partners in a security and democracy exercise spreading round the world “from Vancouver to Vladivostok”.

Under Putin, however, [Russia has made itself once again the enemy of the West](#). Carefully studying the results of its adventures as it goes along, Mr Putin has discovered that there isn't really any West to speak of. He cheats; we bleat; so he cheats again.



Russia has a lot to answer for in Aleppo CREDIT: UNCREDITED/APA

As Mikhail Gorbachev tried, too late, [to rescue the Communist Soviet Union in the late 1980s](#), he spoke of “perestroika” (restructuring) and “glasnost” (openness). None of that nonsense for Vlad. He prefers something which he notices the West lacks – what the Russians call “passionarnost”, or force of will and moral vigour. It seems to go down well in Russia. I read on Russia Today's website yesterday, the headline [“Military, church and](#)

media top Russians' trust rating". The state-run channel was reporting the findings of a state-run poll. It added that 86 per cent approve of their head of state.

Less flatteringly, Mr Putin's approach could be described as utter ruthlessness in the aggressive pursuit of his country's perceived interests. But the point is that he knows what he is doing and we don't know what we're doing.



Putin doesn't play by the same rule book as Western leaders CREDIT: MIKHAIL KLIMENTYEV/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

What he is doing is to take back control of what he sees as the Russian world, beyond Russia's current borders, regardless of the wishes of the people who live in it. He wants to revert to the carve-up which was made at Yalta in 1945. He sees Russian security as threatened by any country not in that Russian world.

His attitude to such countries is one of war. This does not mean, necessarily, that they need be attacked; but they must always be treated as enemies, and therefore deceived. Their individuals and institutions must be bought up, lied to, subverted, trolled, hacked and subjected to cyberattack. In a fascinating forthcoming book, the Russian expert James Sherr, of Chatham House, writes of the Russian-favoured technique of "reflexive control". This is to give your enemy information in such a way that he is likely to do what you want voluntarily, unaware that you want it.

Which brings us to the American election. We must assume – because to lie about this would be reputationally suicidal – that the US intelligence agencies are right that the Russians were involved in the hacking of emails relating to Hillary Clinton's campaign. We will never know, I suppose, what the exact electoral effect of these leaks was. But the reflexive control the Russians wished to exercise was to make American voters think that Mrs Clinton was corrupt, and so vote for Donald Trump.

We don't know whether Mr Trump knew about this plot, though stories abound. But what we do know is pretty amazing: conservative American voters, traditionally profoundly hostile to any intrusion by Russia, didn't seem to mind. We also know that the man who won those conservative votes dismisses the story out of hand and won't hear a word said against Mr Putin. And this week [he appointed Rex Tillerson of ExxonMobil, said to be Vlad's best friend in the United States, as Secretary of State.](#)



Obama, not Trump, is to blame for the current state of geopolitics CREDIT: CHIP SOMODEVILLA/GETTY IMAGES

Apart from anything else, this story shows the extraordinary effect of propaganda and polarisation. If Mr Putin had hacked Mr Trump's emails in order to assist Mrs Clinton, imagine how the conservative movement would have raged at the infamy of the hacker and the treason of the candidate favoured by Russia. Instead, the most self-consciously patriotic voters in the United States went for the man supported by the biggest enemy of their patria on the planet.

One must, of course, give credit where credit is due. The Western leader most to blame for the global advance of Putin's Russia is not Mr Trump – who is still not in office – but President Obama. His preference for displaying virtue over exercising power has let down America's friends everywhere – Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia, the Philippines and even, in a mild way, Britain – and encouraged America's foes – Iran, Syria, Cuba, Russia. Hardly any effort has been made by the Obama administration to expose Mr Putin's behaviour, counter his threats, galvanise European allies or trace, publish and impede the workings of Russian money, espionage and cyber-war in the West.

Donald Trump might turn out to be bolder. [It is possible that Mr Trump's correct perception that Nato has become increasingly hollow will be the prelude to his reviving it as an alliance which means what it says.](#) In which case, Secretary of State Tillerson's ability to

talk directly to Putin might come in handy. But Mr Trump did not just win the election by promising, as all of his predecessors since Roosevelt have done, that America will continue to underwrite the world order during his presidency. If I were living in Poland or Estonia, let alone Ukraine, I wouldn't be betting my future on him.

I wouldn't do so even in Britain. You have to be over 90 to have an adult memory of a time when the United States did not stand behind this country in global affairs, so we may not be quick to recognise the symptoms if this is changing. But if it is, we have almost no idea what will hit us.