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Labour's response to the Ukraine crisis

NEW
DIPLOMACY
PROJECT

TOP LINES

- Putin is amassing troops on the Russia-Ukraine border. His motives are to re-establish Russia's status as a great power in opposition to the West, and use the threat of military incursion as a bargaining chip to curb the West's role in Ukraine.
- A full invasion of Ukraine is not necessary for Putin's aims, and could be extremely costly for Russia. The existing military build-up is insufficient for full invasion or occupation.
- Furthermore, there are other options apart from all-out military invasion, including cyber-attacks or more limited strikes that could cause Ukraine's government to collapse and create an opportunity for Russia to install a pro-Putin puppet in Kyiv.
- Panic about war could play into Putin's hands. Instead, the UK should focus on supporting Ukraine, including by building the capacity of its emergency services and its ability to protect critical national infrastructure.
- The UK must show a willingness to work with allies, including European neighbours, such as within the Normandy and Minsk formats.
- Labour should challenge the UK Government to clean up the City's links with Russian dirty money, and instead propose greater UK-Ukraine investment.

Putin's motives

The current crisis in Ukraine is not about Ukraine but about Russia's longstanding desire and attempt to redraw the entire European security architecture. Such efforts are informed by Russia's view of (geo)cultural conflict, with the 'West' pitted against Russia. The Kremlin's 2021 National Security Strategy depicted Russia as a bastion against a volatile and violent West in clear and obvious decline. Confident of this demise, the Kremlin has chosen now to try to rewrite the post-Cold War rules in such a way as to reassert the great power status lost with the collapse of the USSR.

The Russian government interprets the current Ukrainian government as mere pawns in the West's/NATO's anti-Russian mission. The Kremlin's understanding of Ukraine, as reflected in Vladimir Putin's 5500 word essay on Ukrainian history, fails to recognise the hostility towards the Kremlin engendered by the annexation of Crimea and fomentation of conflict in eastern Ukraine.

But this does not mean Putin will launch a full invasion, despite the impression given by the UK and U.S. media. First, there is arguably little for Russia to gain politically from launching a full invasion, since it would face painful sanctions and can already use the separatist territories to destabilise Ukraine's internal and external ambitions. Second, **the military build-up on Ukraine's borders does not currently extend to the capacity for a full invasion or occupation**. Third, Putin has not threatened invasion at any point, nor has he even mentioned Ukraine in public since December 2021. Fourth, the Russian media has not launched the sort of intensive propaganda campaign to prepare the public for war, as it did before the 2014 annexation of Crimea or 2015 military engagement in Syria.

Instead, what we see so far is Russia is trying to convince the West it will invade without actually doing so. This represents a coercive effort to move the 'Overton Window' on what can be debated in terms of the European security architecture. In some senses, the build up has already served this purpose, given that the USA has deigned to discuss and respond to such unrealistic demands as NATO withdrawal from Romania and Bulgaria.

Moreover, by panicking the West, the Kremlin distracts from more realistic targets, such as further, yet more crippling cyber-attacks against Ukraine, or attacks on critical infrastructure. These would demoralise the Ukrainian population, especially combined with the military build-up and lingering threat of (re)invasion.

With the above in mind **the UK should be careful not to exaggerate or exacerbate the panic around the Russian government's intentions, as this only strengthens the Kremlin's hand and weakens Kyiv's**. Moreover, the UK should shift some of its energies from deterring Russia to supporting Ukraine, including by building the capacity of its emergency services and its ability to protect critical national infrastructure - particularly that on which the population depends.

A full-on invasion isn't the only possible outcome

The prospect of an all-out invasion has understandably dominated the conversation in the West. However, Labour's rhetoric should reflect that in reality, Ukraine faces a spectrum of Russian aggression, with a full-on invasion at one end and Moscow's already ongoing destabilisation of eastern Ukraine and use of cyber-attacks and other means of subversion at the other.

The Kremlin has plenty of options in between, most notably raid-like limited strikes against military and other targets inside government-controlled parts of Ukraine. Recent revelations about Russian plans to oust Ukraine's government and put pro-Russian politicians in charge of the country sooner speak to the fact that is Moscow exploring various scenarios for Ukraine than to it having committed to a particular course of action.

These measures would be equally illegal and also deserving of condemnation—even if they may warrant a proportionate and therefore less severe response from the West. As such, Labour should prepare for not only the worst-case scenario but also developments short of it

lest it be caught flat-footed or accused by Russian propagandists of overreacting in the event that Russia does not go as far as it can.

Labour should also keep in mind that notwithstanding the widespread view that if it comes, a Russian invasion will most likely take place in early 2022, the current standoff may continue for months in a test of the West's capacity to remain engaged on this issue.

Save your fire for Russia, not allies

Certain allies in NATO, chief among them Germany, have caught flak for not doing enough to aid Ukraine militarily and diplomatically during the standoff. **Labour should resist the temptation to join the chorus of criticism, instead saving its fire for Russia.**

First, whatever Germany's positions on narrow questions of how exactly to support Ukraine at this moment, crucially, its political establishment is fundamentally on the same page as the rest of NATO on whether Ukraine is free to decide its own future and whether Russian aggression against it is permissible. As such, the Western unity for which many have called is arguably already here. Relatedly, as Defence Secretary Ben Wallace noted while in Berlin last week, NATO allies 'can all assist Ukraine in our own way,' and Germany has certainly committed to supporting Ukraine both at this time and in the event it is attacked anew by Russia.

Second, there is something to be said for allowing some members of the alliance to remain credible interlocutors whose offers of diplomacy, and in situations like this, offramps are taken seriously in Moscow. Although the UK has signalled openness to talks with Russia, including by agreeing to talks between the two countries' foreign and defence secretaries, their adversarial relations mean that Britain is a less natural diplomatic partner to Russia than Germany. Consequently, any negotiations between them are more likely to be treated by Moscow as an opportunity to grandstand rather than as a real shot at a breakthrough, creating a need for allies seen by Moscow as prepared to negotiate in good faith.

Ukraine's frustration with Germany is understandable. But it is worth remembering that any pressure from Kyiv to push Berlin to do more is ultimately pressure from a UK *partner* to take a stronger line with a UK *ally*, to an effect that is far from certain to materially change how well Ukraine weathers a renewed Russian assault or whether Russia is deterred from taking action in defence of what it considers its vital interests.

Now is not the time to engage with Russia's grievances

Russia has sought to capitalise on the standoff to force a conversation with the West about Ukraine's future, particularly in the context of its aspiration to join NATO. No candidacy for membership in NATO is beyond debate, certainly among the alliance's members. Yet now is not the time for Labour to engage with Russia's historical and other grievances regarding NATO, as whether Ukraine joins NATO in the future is arguably beside the point.

That may come as a surprise given all the noise made by Moscow, in recent months as well as over the years. However, Russia has taken notice and watched with concern as NATO, its member-states, and Ukraine have engaged in extensive cooperation despite the dead letter status of NATO's 2008 pledge to admit Ukraine. In that time, Ukraine's military has grown stronger, forcing Russia, in contemplating a renewed assault on the country, to reckon with a force that is nothing like the extremely weak military it faced back in 2014. In addition, Russia has seen Ukraine act increasingly aggressively against its allies inside the country, out of legitimate concerns, domestic political considerations, and frustration with the failure of a more conciliatory approach alike and arguably with only limited encouragement from major Western partners.

None of this would end with a promise by NATO not to admit Ukraine. As such, no such assurance is likely to resolve the broader crisis in either Russian-Ukrainian relations or Russian relations with the West. For the West's part, the fact remains that even if such a promise led to Russia dropping its threat to attack Ukraine anew, Russia would almost certainly persist in interfering in its neighbour's affairs, in ways neither Ukrainians nor most of their Western partners would accept.

Supporting Ukraine economically

Should it wish to go further, the UK could announce further investments in Ukraine's faltering economy. In so doing, the UK would undermine a key narrative in Russian state media at home and abroad that Ukraine is a 'basketcase' which the West is abandoning.

Aim to avoid escalation, not to resolve the broader crisis, and don't overestimate the West's ability to deter

That underscores the depressing reality that the West cannot reasonably aspire to make Russia's relations with Ukraine or the West healthy again. **The aim should rather be to avoid escalation and close this particular phase of the wider crisis.**

To be sure, diplomacy addressing the major issues dividing Russia and the West are to be encouraged. Yet ongoing talks between Russia, the US, and Euro-Atlantic institutions make clear that there is no basis for anything like a 'grand bargain' that would repair relations between Russia and the West, with the best-case scenario limited diplomatic gains relating to arms control or military exercises in Europe. Crucially, Russia does not appear willing to make as many concessions as it is demanding of the West, hobbling the talks from the outset.

If Russia is asking for more than it is offering, it is ultimately because it sees control of Ukraine—either in itself or as a critical layer of defence against the West—as key to its future. For that reason, Labour should also be aware of the risk of overestimating the West's ability to deter Russia from aggression against Ukraine. Most measures the West could credibly threaten Russia with in the event of a renewed assault have already been factored in by decision-makers in Moscow. Given Ukraine's importance to Russia, it is hard to picture any of them succeeding as a deterrent if Moscow concludes it is likely to achieve its aims using

force, be it massive or limited, which frees up Labour to prioritise the proportionality of the punitive measures it recommends over their deterrent effect.

Critiquing the Government's Russia policy

Labour should draw attention to the Conservatives' weaknesses on Russia and how they undermine national security. They should criticise the government's failure to clean up Russian dirty money, in particular the lack of Companies House reform as the government is renegeing on its promises for a much-needed economic crime bill.

Labour's four point plan for dealing with Russia, as mentioned by Keir Starmer in the House of Commons, is a good starting point on these matters but **Labour should also call attention to the Conservatives' connections with Kremlin-linked elites, from Lord Lebedev to tennis matches with the Chernukhins**. Why should the Kremlin take the UK's commitments to Ukraine's security (or even the UK's security) seriously when we welcome its ill-gotten gains?

Labour should also critique the government's diminution of the UK's global role. So often, we are on the sidelines, whether it is during the recent meeting between Secretary of State Blinken and the EU 27, or whether it is in the Normandy and Minsk discussions.

About the authors

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