Putin’s Efforts to Divide the West

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The ongoing political polarization preventing the Western political mainstream from reaching consensus on essential questions, diffuse power structures, and multiple political chokepoints provide a favorable dynamic for the Kremlin to achieve its goals, especially if its propagandist campaigns are successful in convincing Western audiences the war is too costly for them domestically.

The most recent Ukrainian counteroffensive in the second half of 2023 has exposed Ukraine’s military vulnerabilities on the one hand and Russia’s strengthened defense capabilities on the other. Among the top challenges facing Ukraine is speedy and uninterrupted access to Western military equipment and technology. Ukrainians also require reconstruction support from the West, which is vital to shore up their morale and bring back some of the millions of exiled citizens. Russia, on the contrary, has ramped up domestic arms production, increased the number of volunteers to fight in the war, and successfully continued its sanctions circumvention efforts. Absent consistent large-scale economic and military assistance from the West, Russia might gain a significant military advantage over Ukraine in 2024.

Provision of support to Ukraine depends on Western ability to maintain unity. However, by late 2023 this unity had started to crumble. In total, newly committed aid by allies dropped by almost 90 percent between August and October 2023 compared to the same period in 2022. Of the 42 previous Ukrainian country donors, only 20 committed new aid packages between October and December 2023, the lowest number since the start of the war. Ukraine is also becoming hostage to partisan battles in the West, as its support has increasingly been contested in both the European Union and the United States.

The Kremlin is hoping to exploit these partisan dynamics and further undermine support for Ukraine in the West by using tools such as gas dependencies, investments and oligarchs, disinformation, intelligence and spies, and support for populist parties. Some of these tools are analyzed below.

Energy Leverage

Since the start of the war, the Kremlin has attempted to undermine Western unity through its energy tools. In preparation for the war, Russian state-controlled energy giant Gazprom gradually reduced gas supplies to Europe. By mid-2022, the European Union was experiencing a 60 percent drop in Russian gas deliveries compared to mid-2021. Russia coupled
gas supply reductions with high-volume information campaigns as its state-linked media broadcasted fights and protests breaking out in Europe due to high energy prices. Gazprom also released ads threatening to freeze Europe.⁸

To replace Russian gas, Europe hiked imports of liquefied natural gas from other countries while slashing gas use. The loss of Russia’s cheap natural gas was particularly consequential for Germany, one of its main consumers. Supply disruptions pushed up electricity prices, forcing Berlin to spend billions of euros to ease the burden of rising bills and deepening Germany’s budget crisis. High costs of hydrocarbons prompted German chemical giant BASF to cut jobs and stop its share buybacks.⁹ As a result, Germany experienced a minor recession in 2023, becoming the world’s worst-performing major developed economy and the only G7 economy to contract.¹⁰

However, besides Germany, the drag on EU economic activity was not as deep as expected when Russia’s invasion of Ukraine began and the first comprehensive sanctions took place. Moreover, gas prices returned to prewar levels in 2023. At least in the short term, the European Union has successfully adapted and accumulated substantial natural gas inventories sufficient to survive winter 2023. It seems Gazprom, rather than the European Union, took the greatest blow from its own actions by losing much of the European markets and undermining its own geopolitical relevance.

**Information Leverage**

In early 2022, the Kremlin’s disinformation strategy failed to sell its pro-war narratives in the West. The U.S. administration’s strategy of disclosing classified intel contributed to exposing Russia’s propagandist efforts.¹¹ Western public opinion almost uniformly sided with Ukraine.¹²

Russia subsequently adapted its information strategy to emphasize domestic costs of the war for the West. Thus, comparing to the early months of war, later in 2022, Russia-linked accounts on Twitter had reduced mentions of Nazis and NATO, replacing them with complaints about energy and cost of living. In France, the Kremlin-backed disinformation effort pushed the talking points that Western sanctions against Russia have damaged the economy through a decline in trade and left the country at risk of falling into the deepest social and economic crisis, and that the supply of arms to Ukraine has undermined the country’s ability to defend itself.¹³ This approach has worked much better for Russia. As measured by the popularity of those narratives in Western domestic debates, claims that the West’s support for Ukraine is too costly or too risky have found much more fertile ground with Western audiences by playing to pocketbook concerns and war fatigue rather than historical or geopolitical grievances.¹⁴

Another disinformation effort is aimed at presenting Western support for Ukraine as futile or hypocritical. A recent BBC study found thousands of fake accounts on TikTok spreading false claims about senior Ukrainian officials and their relatives, presenting them as obsessed with money and uncaring about the war effort.¹⁵ Russian diplomats and Kremlin-linked media platforms are also spreading accusations that the West has a double standard about civilian casualties when it comes to Ukraine and Gaza.¹⁶

**Political Leverage**

For years, Russia’s influence in Europe and the United States has relied on its links to non-mainstream populist political actors.¹⁷ At the start of the 2022 war, this leverage seemed to have disappeared when many European populists shifted their stances following their voters’ uniform condemnation of Putin and embrace of Ukraine.¹⁸ Most notably, Matteo Salvini’s Lega and Giorgia Meloni’s Fratelli d’Italia parties both flipped their stances to adopt more pro-Europe, pro-U.S., and anti-Russia positions.¹⁹ The intensity of condemnation, however, varied, with some parties presenting others as being at least partially responsible for the war along with Russia.

In recent months, however, old and new populist parties have become more critical of support for Ukraine. On the left, the newly elected Slovakian government led by Prime Minister Robert Fico in early November 2023 rejected a draft plan to donate rockets and ammunition to Kyiv, while prominent German
politician Sahra Wagenknecht announced plans to launch a new party opposing sanctions against Russia and arms supplies to Ukraine.\textsuperscript{20}

On the right, former U.S. president Donald Trump, who leads in the 2024 Republican primaries, has offered more scrutiny on military budgets, as his supporters in Congress blocked funding to the bill that included aid for Ukraine. France’s National Rally and Germany’s Alternative for Germany are growing in popularity, presenting the war in Ukraine as a waste of European resources.\textsuperscript{21} In the Netherlands, the recent victory of the far-right Party for Freedom (PVV), which offered to halt military and financial support for Ukraine, threatens the assistance of the fifth-largest EU aid provider to Ukraine.\textsuperscript{22} But the main proponent of lifting Western sanctions against Russia and blocking aid for Ukraine is Hungary’s far-right prime minister Viktor Orbán. He has adopted a successful strategy of threatening to block European financial aid for Ukraine and Ukraine’s EU accession unless the European Commission unblocks frozen funds for Hungary.\textsuperscript{23} The commission’s recent caving into his blackmail sets a dangerous precedent, which other actors might soon pick up.\textsuperscript{24}

\textbf{Will the Western Coalition Stick Together?}

In the coming months, the Kremlin is likely to continue using energy, political, and informational tools along the lines discussed here. At the core of Putin’s strategy is identifying the points of discord in the West and amplifying them with a goal of complicating Western ability to sustain consistent support for Ukraine. The ongoing political polarization preventing the Western political mainstream from reaching consensus on essential questions, diffuse power structures, and multiple political chokepoints provide a favorable dynamic for the Kremlin to achieve its goals, especially if its propagandist campaigns are successful in convincing Western audiences the war is too costly for them domestically.

It appears the Western tide is turning for Ukraine. But the problem goes beyond the Kremlin’s aptitude to exploit Western divisions. Broadly speaking, Ukraine is suffering from the West’s inability to understand the existential importance of the war for its own survival and its policymakers’ continued lack of strategy for ensuring victory. Since early 2022, the West has offered Ukraine just enough military aid to survive but not enough to threaten Russia with defeat, which has allowed the Kremlin time to improve its military positions and undermine popular support for Ukraine in the West. The current situation generates multiple fissures in the West, which—if the past is any indication—the Kremlin will prove very apt at exploiting.

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