

## The G7 summit: A failure of leadership over Ukraine

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*Media Centre – G7 Summit.* The continuing conflict in Ukraine has been high on the agenda in the build up to the G7 summit in Germany. The leaders of the G7 countries were expected to exhibit solidarity and strong leadership in the face of further Russian aggression. Recent [communiqués](#), however, paint a different picture to that of the G7 being a place of leadership for tackling significant problems in the world. This is largely because the G7 continues a policy of Russian G7 suspension, versus G8 inclusion, which would provide better opportunities for finding a negotiated settlement for Ukraine.

### Background

Russia's annexation of Crimea in February 2014 led to its [suspension](#) from the G8 group and the reincarnation of the G7 format. Putin's support for the separatist groups continues to provide a backdrop to the on-going freeze in relations between the leaders of the G7 and Russia. The use of Russian military forces against Ukrainian armed forces in the conflict, along with the supply of sophisticated weaponry and training has further destabilised the eastern region of Ukraine stretching from the Sea of Azov to the city of Luhansk. The shooting down of a Malaysia Airlines flight in July last year, allegedly by a separatist group using Russian made anti-aircraft weaponry, has led the United States and the European Union to impose further sanctions on Russia.

Whilst these sanctions have targeted key members of the Russian government and institutions that have ties to it, they have also been complemented by countries such as the UK supplying defensive military equipment to the Ukrainian armed forces. Moreover, fellow G7 members, the United States and Canada, are going further and providing boots on the ground in the form of military [trainers](#) for the Ukrainian army. Germany meanwhile, under Angela Merkel, has ruled out both selling Ukraine any offensive weaponry, and providing military assistance. Merkel has instead focused on a diplomatic and economic [approach](#) to dealing with Russia's destabilisation of a country on the very borders of Europe.

### Putin's perspective

The expansion of NATO and the EU over the last fifteen years has been seen by Russia as a threat to its spheres of influence. The large-scale presence of US military forces in former Soviet countries in Central Asia during the height of the conflict in Afghanistan has added to the Russian perception of encirclement by Western expansion. It is not difficult therefore to imagine that Putin perceives this to be a zero-sum game. The EU's botched attempt at drawing Ukraine further towards the West was a key test of Russian resolve in maintaining its influence in the 'near-abroad'. Putin's response to this threat following the Maidan street protests is, by this logic, an understandable reaction. In this context, the seizure of the Crimea region was seen as a tactical priority in order to maintain Russia's

access to its naval facilities in Sevastopol, and its only access to a warm water military port through the Black Sea.

Putin's continued support for the insurgency in eastern Ukraine remains a political tool in order to prevent the Ukrainian government from moving further towards Europe. Rather than advocating the expansion of a greater Russia to include these separatist regions, the economic burden of which would far outstrip the benefits due to taking on large scale industrial regions which are dependent on Russia for exports, Putin's aim is to continue to stoke a low-level conflict in the East of the country which can be inflamed as and when it is useful. In the lead-up to the G7 summit the media was awash with claims of a Russian military build-up on the border with Ukraine amid the speculation that Putin would make a push for the port city of Mariupol in order to create a land corridor to Crimea. The [response](#) from Putin to this speculation has been one of incredulity at the potential for conflict, whilst pointedly ignoring the summit itself.

### Rhetoric

The boycott of the G8 summit in Sochi by the leaders of the other countries was designed as a clear snub to both Putin and Russia. Intended as a measure to show strength and resolve amongst the international community, the expulsion of Russia was also meant to exhibit leadership by the G7 countries in the face of growing Russian aggression. This rhetoric continued at the Brussels summit, where the [declaration](#) reiterated the united front that the G7 held in condemning Russia's violation of Ukrainian sovereignty. Whilst these statements have provided the G7 leaders with symbolic affirmation of their leadership in the face of international crisis, the failure of the Minsk Agreement to impose a comprehensive ceasefire in the east of Ukraine continues to undermine the [statements](#) from the G7 leaders.

The expectation prior to the summit that President Obama would apply [pressure](#) to European countries to remain firm in their stance against Russian aggression underlines the lack of leadership that the G7 have shown in dealing with the conflict in Ukraine. Whilst the United States continues to advocate a more aggressive approach to dealing with the situation, the impact of countersanctions by Russia are being felt by European countries, many of whom are reliant upon Russia for energy stability. Germany continues to dominate the European response to the crisis in Ukraine, with Merkel's personal [relationship](#) with Putin featuring prominently in the country's dealings. This has placed a more measured tone on the rhetoric that has been espoused by the United States. Other G7 leaders such as the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, have shown their support for Ukraine by visiting President Poroshenko on the way to the summit, whilst continuing to not alienate Putin by planning to [host](#) him in the near future.

The narrative in Russia surrounding the crisis has been markedly different from that of the G7 leaders. The Russian government's dominance of the domestic media has meant that sanctions have been seen as decadent Western imperialist

behaviour. Whilst the continuing conflict in Ukraine has been portrayed as a patriotic struggle against the rise of a fascist regime in Kiev, which has allowed Putin to portray himself as standing up to Western aggression, thus strengthening his domestic support, at least in the short term.

Acknowledging that [sanctions](#) are not an end in and of itself, the G7 Foreign Ministers communiqué has failed to recognise the apparent contradictions between the aims of the sanctions and the actual consequences these have had on the Russian economy. In their limited breadth they have caused less damage than the recent drop in oil prices. One of the reasons behind this has been the failure in leadership by G7 countries to agree to [exclude](#) Russian banks from the SWIFT banking transfer system due to the vulnerability of their own institutions to Russian debt.

### Russlandverstehher

Literally meaning 'Russian understander', Russian hand, or even in some cases Russian apologist, the term 'Russlandverstehher' has particular relevance for the G7 summit. In the communiqués leading up to Schloss Elmau the consensus amongst the leaders of the G7 had been one of exclusion when dealing with Russia. This represents a failure in leadership over the crisis in Ukraine for whilst the G7 [expects](#) Russia to use its considerable influence to control separatist groups, it remains excluded from a seat at the table. This exclusion reiterates the rhetoric of Russia being in the cold due to its morally wrong actions, implying that the G7 countries and the EU bear no responsibility for the crisis in Ukraine. A greater understanding amongst the G7 leaders of the causes of the conflict and the reasons behind Russia's response would perhaps begin to mitigate some of the failures of leadership that have continued throughout the crisis.

### G7 Communiqués

Following the summit itself however, these failures have been magnified. Rather than bringing a new approach to the continuing crisis in Ukraine, the G7 [Leaders' Declaration](#) has simply regurgitated the same material that has been sent out in previous communiqués. Whilst reiterating its condemnation of the annexation of Crimea, the G7 fudges its leadership role once again with bland statements claiming that they are [concerned](#) about the recent fighting in the eastern part of Ukraine.

The G7 leaders statements that have professed unity in their determination to stand up to Russia however, conceal a different story. On one hand, during the press conference at the summit, Merkel stated that sanctions can be strengthened if need be, however she reiterated that the only solution to the crisis is a political one. Moreover, she denied that the leaders had spent much time discussing Russia. When pressed on the matter however, President Obama conceded that there had been a discussion about additional steps that might need to be taken if Russia 'doubled-down' on aggression. Reading between the lines it is clear that the G7 discussions in Schloss Elmau did not take the firmer

direction that the United States wished in regards to standing up to Russian aggression. Instead, it indicates disunity in the approach to dealing with Russia amongst the G7 leaders.

This disunity, for the time being at least, seems to have worked in favour of Merkel's interests and her more diplomatic and economically-focused approach to dealing with Russia. This not only showcases Merkel's increased leadership in dealing with Russia from a European perspective, it also highlights the failure of united leadership amongst the G7 as a whole.

If the G7 leaders wish to exert effective leadership over the Ukraine crisis, they will need to recognise that excluding Russia from the table means that any decisions or pronouncements they make over the crisis will continue to have no real effect. For a real solution to the Ukraine crisis to be created, Putin needs be in the room. Whilst this may stick in the throat of those that have been unconditionally condemning Russia's actions, the reality on the ground is that there will be no fulfilment of the Minsk Agreement until Russia feels that its sphere of influence is no longer under threat.

A first step towards this would be for the G7 leaders to recognise that they bear some of the blame for the crisis in Ukraine because of their approach to dealing with Russia and the failure to acknowledge the effect their actions would have, or be perceived to have, by Russia. Calling a halt to their grandstanding rhetoric and sitting down to negotiate with Putin would be the first sign of real leadership from the G7 community in dealing with the crisis in Ukraine. A sign that seems unlikely in the near future.

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