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Guest Essay

I'm the Foreign Minister of Poland. This Is How to Negotiate With Putin.

By Radosław Sikorski

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There is a saying that each U.S. administration discovers Russia anew. Almost every president in recent decades has entered the White House hoping for [a fresh start](#), but the result has always been the same: The more that's offered to Moscow, the more it demands.

In the early hours of Sept. 10, more than 20 drones launched from Russia [violated](#) Poland's airspace. NATO jets were scrambled to shoot them down. These drones did not veer off course. They did not drift into a NATO country by mistake. My government is certain that it was a provocation orchestrated by the Russian regime. Just over a week later, three Russian fighter jets [violated](#) Estonian air space for around 12 minutes.

These and [other incidents](#) are yet more proof that the Kremlin is not interested in peace but in escalation. If you are surprised by that, you have not been paying attention.

Since his inauguration, President Trump has tried every diplomatic avenue to achieve peace in Ukraine. He created the position of special envoy for peace missions and nominated to the post someone acceptable to the Kremlin; American diplomats have met their Russian counterparts on neutral ground, and the special envoy has visited [Moscow](#) several times; Mr. Trump has personally and publicly asked President Vladimir Putin of Russia to "[STOP!](#)" the war in Ukraine, and when Mr. Putin ignored the request, Mr. Trump offered to meet him one on one in Alaska.

But the arithmetic of war speaks for itself: Russia is not looking for an offramp. Its military spending for 2025 is [estimated](#) to reach 15.5 trillion rubles, around \$190 billion, up 3.4 percent from 2024. Spending on defense and security in 2026 is projected to consume roughly 40 percent of Russia's entire [budget](#).

And this April — three months after the new U.S. administration took office — Ukrainian officials [said](#) that Russia was planning to increase its troop presence in Ukraine by 150,000 by year's end. Russian bombs have never stopped pounding Ukrainian cities. Now come the brazen incursions into NATO airspace. These incursions are not a sideshow; they are another rung up the ladder of escalation.

Mr. Putin may have accepted the invitation to Alaska, but not to negotiate in good faith —

he wanted to buy time. His long-term goals have not changed: rebuild the Russian empire, undermine trans-Atlantic security guarantees, divide the West, and — last, but certainly not least — weaken the United States.

In 2013, Mr. Putin wrote in an [essay](#) in this newspaper that “we need to use the United Nations Security Council and believe that preserving law and order in today's complex and turbulent world is one of the few ways to keep international relations from sliding into chaos.” Sounds reasonable, doesn't it?

The essay was headlined “A Plea for Caution From Russia,” and opposed American plans to intervene in Syria against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, who had attacked his own citizens with [sarin gas](#). Within a year Russian soldiers would be in Crimea and eastern Ukraine, and eight years later Mr. Putin would start the deadliest war in Europe since World War II, which has so far left nearly 1.5 million soldiers killed or wounded, according to [an estimate](#). No U.N. Security Council mandate was given and the U.N. General Assembly condemned the attack, to no avail.

But it is possible to negotiate with Russia. Just do it in two stages: Make a show of force first, and only then have dialogue. The negotiations between President Ronald Reagan and the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev that helped to end the Cold War could not have taken place had Reagan not first exploited the weaknesses of the U.S.S.R. by exerting heavy military and economic pressure, including by supporting groups and countries that were challenging the Soviets all over the world, like the [Polish Solidarity movement](#) and the [Afghan mujahedeen](#). This two-stage approach did the trick: When the Kremlin elite realized that they were too weak to break Reagan's determination they began to negotiate.

Mr. Putin is not there yet. The only way to bring him to a negotiating table is by making him realize that he cannot kill his way out of the mistake he made on Feb. 24, 2022, when he began the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

To do this, it is essential to continue to support Ukraine financially and militarily, and to undermine the foundations of the Russian war economy. A good beginning would be for the self-described MAGA acolytes in Hungary and Slovakia to [listen](#) to Mr. Trump and stop buying Russian oil, and to finally use the more than \$200 billion of frozen Russian assets in Europe to [give financial assistance](#) to the victims of Mr. Putin's war.

The largest country on earth doesn't need more land. It should take better care of what is already within its internationally recognized borders. The leadership of Russia must understand that its attempt to rebuild Europe's last empire is doomed to fail. The age of empires is over.

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