

## **Chicago Tribune, editorial, April 15, 2014**

### **The slow strangling of Ukraine**

In its responses to Vladimir Putin's flagrant aggression against Ukraine, the Obama administration has been playing catch-up — and without much sense of urgency or resolve. Small wonder, then, that the Russian government and its allies in Ukraine have shown little hesitancy in reaching for what they want.

What they wanted first was Crimea, which Russia invaded and annexed just a few weeks ago. What they apparently want next is eastern Ukraine, where pro-Russian forces have occupied government buildings in several cities, demanded union with Russia and ignored the Ukrainian government's Monday deadline for them to leave. After it passed, they took over more buildings.

They were not cowed by President Oleksandr Turchynov's announcement that he was sending military units to carry out a "large-scale anti-terrorist operation" to see that Putin does not "repeat the Crimean scenario in Ukraine's east." Maybe the rebels expect forceful help from Russia, which has deployed some 40,000 troops close to the border, along with tanks and aircraft, that could cross over on short notice.

A Kremlin spokesman said, "The president of Russia is watching events in these regions and is deeply worried." For "deeply worried," read "smacking his lips."

In that context, it was small consolation to hear an adviser to Secretary of State John Kerry say that the United States is "looking at" possibly sending arms to Ukraine. It would have been more heartening to hear that the weapons and equipment were already there or at least on their way.

Likewise with the European Union plan to convene an emergency meeting to consider additional sanctions — next week. As for Joe Biden's plan to visit Kiev April 22, what chores does the vice president have that couldn't wait for him to fly over now to show solidarity with the Ukrainians?

Not only has the response to Putin's predation been too late, it's been too little. The sanctions levied by the Obama administration and the EU were notable only for how few of Putin's cronies they affected. The closest thing to military aid has been a shipment of

military field rations. If Ukraine's army gets overrun, at least it won't be on empty stomachs.

By now, there may be no realistic option for stopping the Kremlin from gobbling up another chunk of sovereign Ukrainian territory. But the West can make sure the Russian president knows in advance he will pay a painful price for invading a neighbor — and let him face that pain sooner rather than later.

The administration can start by shipping weapons and military gear that Ukraine can use in self-defense against the bully next door. Washington should also be sharing intelligence with Kiev — something the administration has so far refused to do, despite urging from both Democratic and Republican members of the House Intelligence Committee.

It could revive the missile defense system that was planned for deployment in Poland and the Czech Republic but then canceled. Putin said it was a threat to Russian security, which at the moment sounds like an excellent reason to build it.

The U.S. and the EU can also widen the sanctions net by curtailing the access of Russian banks to the global financial system and freezing the Western holdings of additional Russian government and business figures. Because of its greatly increased commerce with the rest of the world, Russia is far more vulnerable to this sort of pressure than it was in its communist days.

The Kremlin and its favored tycoons profit from energy exports, and the West has ways to squeeze those. One is by allowing exports of America's growing supply of natural gas, which would allow Europe to reduce its reliance on Russia. This option would take time to inflict pain on Putin, but he's playing a long game in asserting his dominance in the region, and Washington can play a long game too.

But the important thing is that it get serious about this high-stakes contest — and be in it to win it. Europe will be a safer and more stable place if the Russians know that no bad deed will go unpunished.