

DUSSELDORF, Germany, March 12, 2014 /PRNewswire/ --

The Russian president, Vladimir Putin, is not the ruthless aggressor the West makes him out to be, argues Gabor Steingart, the publisher of Germany's leading financial newspaper *Handelsblatt*.

The West is engaged in what Americans in their more clear-headed moments would call "pit bull politics" - a policy of shoot-from-the-hip attacks driven by instinct, not reason. Pit bull politics is politics with teeth bared but no brains in sight.

In Crimea, the political situation looks like this at the moment: NATO forces are being moved closer to the border with Russia, economic sanctions are being drafted and a firestorm of abuse is raining down on the Kremlin. Some compare Putin with Stalin. Hillary Clinton compares him to Hitler, but for those who choose, Count Dracula and Emperor Nero are still available.

But in matter of fact, Putin is one of the most peace-loving leaders around. Without significant resistance, about half of the population of the former Soviet sphere of influence were allowed to depart and head for the West, including the Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians, Georgians, Kazakhs, Moldovans and now Ukrainians. Fourteen pro-Western states have emerged from the former territory of the USSR. Three of those have adopted the euro. Ten former Warsaw Pact states have even become members of NATO.

"Realpolitik" begins with a recognition of mutual realities. And the most important reality in our time is this: The Soviet empire is collapsing and if there is anyone who can turn this dangerously destructive process into stability, it is Putin.

Crimea, the home of pit bull politics, belongs to Russia as Vermont does to the United States. Most of the population is Russian. It is the base of the Russian Black Sea fleet. In its 240 years of statehood, the Crimea belonged to

Russia

for 171 years and it was only due to a vodka-induced whim of the former Communist Party boss, Nikita Khrushchev, that it was incorporated into the

Ukraine

, which was itself predominantly Russian at the time, on

February 19

, 1954.

If Putin gives up Crimea, he gives up a chunk of his own self-image.

His aggression is politically, militarily and historically necessary to his continued status as a major world leader. Today he is in a similar situation to the young John F. Kennedy in October 1962

when

Moscow

had begun stationing nuclear missiles in

Cuba

- in

the United States'

own backyard. Kennedy quite rightly did not care at all about Cuban national sovereignty and with a spectacular marine blockade, which he referred to as a Cuban "quarantine," he forced the Soviets to turn back.

No world power will let a rival set up camp on its borders. Anyone who does not acknowledge this basic principle might make a good church leader but not a practitioner of realpolitik.

Punishing Putin for his obviously Machiavellian act with economic sanctions is neither auspicious nor smart. Each snarl is responded to with a snarl. Each bite results in a bite back. Pit bull politics is all about mutually assured stupidity, and war.

Our economic ties with Russia could help us in these tense times. European and American

companies, which not only trade with Russia but operate factories, department stores and airports there, are not divisions of NATO in camouflage. Their mission is to increase prosperity with mutual benefits. Russia heats our living rooms. We supply it with farm combine harvesters.

Russia delivers gold, grain and potash fertilizer. We send our food and medicine there.

The currency upon which this relationship is based is trust. The supplier relationship is a relationship too. Reliability of supply is a promise of reciprocity that cannot be switched on or off at a general's pleasure.

Whoever wishes to punish Russia out of an ill-considered desire for self-preservation is punishing himself. The West will denigrate its own democratic principles if it punishes Russia because next Saturday's Crimean referendum is not to its liking.

Any practitioner of realpolitik knows Putin cannot lose Crimea. If he let this happen, he would be a president on his way out. Succeeding Putin would likely be anarchy dressed in a military uniform, not a functioning democracy. America, Europe -- all of those with faces red with fury at Putin -- would be well advised to first restrain ourselves rather than to try to restrain him. We should put our inner pit bulls back on the leash.

Contact: Kerstin Jaumann, Press Officer

Verlagsgruppe Handelsblatt

Kasernenstraße 67, 40213 Düsseldorf, Germany

Phone: +49-211-887-1015 // Email Address: k.jaumann@vhb.de

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