

The CIA's Blind Spot About the Ukraine War

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Global Research, July 08, 2023

[Newsweek](#) 5 July 2023

Region: [Europe](#), [Russia and FSU](#), [USA](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#)

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We bring to the attention of our readers this important article by William M. Arkin published by Newsweek.

Our thanks to Newsweek

One of the biggest secrets of the Ukraine war is how much the [CIA](#) doesn't know. The Agency is as uncertain about [Volodymyr Zelensky's](#) thinking and intentions as it is about [Vladimir Putin's](#). And as the Russian leader faces his biggest challenge in the aftermath of a failed mutiny, the Agency is straining to understand what the two sides will do—because President [Joe Biden](#) has determined that the United States (and Kyiv) will not undertake any actions that might threaten Russia itself or the survival of the Russian state, lest Putin escalate the conflict and engulf all of Europe in a new World War. In exchange, it expects that the Kremlin won't escalate the war beyond Ukraine or resort to the use of nuclear weapons.

America's stance is under threat because the near-mutiny by [Yevgeny Prigozhin](#), head of the [Wagner Group](#), raises the question as to whether Moscow has run out of options.

"Putin's back is really against the wall" a senior defense intelligence official tells *Newsweek*, warning that while the CIA fully grasps how much Russia is stuck in Ukraine, it is very much in the dark with regard to what Putin might do about it. With talk of Russian nuclear weapons possibly being deployed to Belarus, and in light of Prigozhin's public exposure of the terrible costs of fighting, something that Moscow has suppressed, the official says that it is a particularly delicate moment. "What is happening off the battlefield is now most important," says the official, who was granted anonymity in order to speak candidly. "Both sides pledge to limit their actions, but it falls to the United States to enforce those pledges. This all hinges on the quality of our intelligence."

“There is a clandestine war, with clandestine rules, underlying all of what is going on in Ukraine,” says a Biden administration senior intelligence official who also spoke with *Newsweek*. The official, who is directly involved in Ukraine policy planning, requested anonymity to discuss highly classified matters. The official (and numerous other national security officials who spoke to *Newsweek*) say that Washington and Moscow have decades of experience crafting these clandestine rules, necessitating that the CIA play an outsize role: as primary spy, as negotiator, as supplier of intelligence, as logistician, as wrangler of a network of sensitive [NATO](#) relations and perhaps most important of all, as the agency trying to ensure the war does not further spin out of control.

“Don’t underestimate the Biden administration’s priority to keep Americans out of harm’s way and reassure Russia that it doesn’t need to escalate,” the senior intelligence officer says. “Is the CIA on the ground inside Ukraine?” he asks rhetorically. “Yes, but it’s also not nefarious.”

Newsweek has examined in depth the scale and scope of the CIA’s activities in Ukraine, especially in light of growing Congressional questions about the extent of U.S. aid and whether President Biden is keeping his pledge not to have “boots on the ground.” Neither the CIA nor the White House would give specific responses for confirmation, but they asked that *Newsweek* not reveal the specific locations of CIA operations inside Ukraine or Poland, that it not name other countries involved in the clandestine CIA efforts and that it not name the air service that is supporting the clandestine U.S. logistics effort. After repeated requests for an on-the-record comment, the CIA declined. Neither the Ukrainian nor Russian governments responded to requests for comment.

Over the course of its three-month investigation, *Newsweek* spoke to over a dozen intelligence experts and officials. *Newsweek* also sought out contrary views. All of the credible experts and officials *Newsweek* spoke to agreed that the CIA has been successful in discreetly playing its part in dealing with Kyiv and Moscow, in moving mountains of information and materiel and in dealing with a diverse set of other countries, some of whom are quietly helping while also trying to stay out of Russia’s crosshairs. And they didn’t dispute that on the CIA’s main task—knowing what’s going on in the minds of the leaders of Russia and Ukraine—the Agency has had to struggle.

Intelligence experts say this war is unique in that the United States is aligned with Ukraine, yet the two countries are not allies. And though the United States is helping Ukraine against Russia, it is not formally at war with that country. Thus, much of what Washington does to aid Ukraine is kept secret—and much of what is normally in the realm of the [U.S. military](#) is being carried out by the Agency. Everything that is done, including work inside Ukraine itself, must comply with limits established by Biden.

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