

Opinion **The FT View**

Loose language on atrocities will not help Ukraine

Biden's allegation of genocide against Russia is too hasty

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Ira Slepchenko cries next to coffins, one of them with the body of her husband Sasha Nedolezhko, during an exhumation of civilians killed and buried in a mass grave in Mykulychi, Ukraine © Emilio Morenatti/AP

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After US president Joe Biden last week suggested [Russia's atrocities in Ukraine amounted to "genocide"](#), Volodymyr Zelensky lost no time in tweeting approval. "Calling things by their names is essential to stand up to evil," Ukraine's president wrote. There is no question that Russia is engaged in repugnant acts, which should be unreservedly condemned. Yet Emmanuel Macron [declined to use the word genocide](#), prompting some Ukraine supporters, unfairly, to call him an apologist for Moscow. The French president's circumspection is defensible.

For Biden, plain speaking, sometimes to a fault, has long been a political trademark; he pledged to continue the habit as president. Aides say he has been especially affected by events in Ukraine, a country he was responsible for as vice-president to Barack Obama. His outspoken stance on Russia's war has helped to ensure, too, that he is not outflanked politically by Republican opponents. And even while allies have raised eyebrows at some of his comments, they acknowledge that the US president has handled the war well.

Some human rights lawyers urge prudence, however, in how politicians describe Russia's atrocities in Ukraine. warning that war crimes and what constitutes them

have precise definitions in international law and should be left to courts and tribunals to rule upon. Genocide is defined as the intent to destroy, either in whole or in part, a particular group of people. The US president was one of the first leaders to call Russia's Vladimir Putin [a "war criminal"](#). Biden framed his comments on genocide with some caution, saying "we'll let the lawyers decide internationally" whether Moscow's behaviour qualifies — though he added "but it sure seems that way to me".

The west needs to be vigilant over potential genocide in Ukraine, not least given the signs of a sinister new narrative in Moscow. The Kremlin initially claimed its invasion was intended in part to remove a Ukrainian leadership that it falsely alleged were "Nazis". But an opinion piece published this month by RIA-Novosti news agency, part of Moscow's propaganda stable, warned Russia's military operation in Ukraine had revealed that a "significant part of the masses" were "accomplices of Nazis", and called for liquidation of Ukrainian statehood. Many Ukrainians fear this was a manifesto for genocide.

Yet Biden's suggestion that genocide is already under way goes beyond what many European leaders have been ready to say, as they fear such rhetoric could hamper diplomatic efforts to secure a ceasefire. It also raises questions about whether some conflicts elsewhere in the world ought to merit the same description.

When confronting an opponent such as the Kremlin that is deploying large-scale misinformation as a tool of war, moreover, precise use of language is especially vital. Putin's fictitious claims of "genocide" being committed against Russian-speakers in east Ukraine were another pretext for his invasion.

There are dangers, too, in making a ruthless but seemingly paranoid leader fear he is being driven into a corner. Biden's unguarded comment last month that "this man cannot remain in power" — though officials quickly beat a verbal retreat — will have fuelled Putin's long-held conviction that Washington is bent on regime change in Moscow. Frankness can be admired among politicians; wartime outrages must be denounced in the strongest terms and war leaders warned of the consequences if they cross boundaries. For democratic leaders, however, using words with care is vital at the best of times. In war, it is all the more so.

