

Vladimir Putin

Session 6: The Re-invasion of Ukraine, 2022

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Recall last time: some switch “flipped” within Putin in 2014

- **Emotion > reason? (Telephone call with Merkl in 2014)**
- **Anger the predominant emotion; “respect” as lifelong demand: anger + felt disrespect and humiliation**
- **Imperialism PLUS national-security PLUS fear of democracy on border PLUS anger re US hypocrisy PLUS disrespect for Russia. Over-determined?**
- **All the ingredients are there for a REVANCHIST mentality (revanchism = undo past losses by force)**

All these suggest a predisposition to take action

- But what is relationship between predisposition and action?
- Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow*
- ---Fast = intuition
- ---Slow = calculation
- Patronalism: encourages advisors to tell you what you want to hear
- Predisposition + intuition + patronalism = vicious circle

Foreign policy trends: since 2014 Ukraine Crisis: low-key civilizational confrontation

- **Russia-China relations deepen: authoritarians ally to counter US hegemony; alternative to “liberal intern’l order” (LIO)**
- **Use of cyber and other means to reduce cohesion of LIO.**
- **Support for right-wing parties in Europe**
- **Election interference in US**
- **Wagner Group in Africa and elsewhere**
- **Modernization of Russian military technologies**
- **Syria crisis and civil war (2011-); Ru military intervention (2015); chemical weapons issue; Ru mediation of civil war**
- **Belarus, 2020; Kazakh events (January 2022): elite-elite ties**

- **But there's nothing "low-key" about February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Why does predisposition → THIS action?**

Invasion of Ukraine, February 2022? Was it avoidable?

Yes: we drove him to it---Kennan, Mearsheimer, Kissinger: **aggrieved statesman** → Austrian State Treaty (1955) as proposed model. Neutralization of Ukraine

No : he was determined to control Ukraine and to go even farther---Applebaum and most others: **Russian imperialist revanchist**. Analogy to Hitler and Austria, 1938: “if we don’t resist, then Poland and the Baltics will be next.” Neutralization of Ukraine would not have been acceptable to him.

- **Why did he not invade during the Trump presidency, 2017-2021?**

Putin and the Trump Presidency, 2017-21

- **Assists Trump election (even if not deciding factor). And yet:**
- **Trump surprise refusal to renew the 2011 New START Treaty**
- **Trump withdrawal from 1987 INF Treaty**
- **Trump withdrawal from 1989 “Open Skies” Treaty**
- **Trump deepening of econ sanctions against Ru + opposition to Nordstream 2 gas pipeline**
- **Expressed admiration for Putin as a strong leader**
- **What was he (Trump) thinking?? Fiona Hill (*There’s Nothing for You Here*, 2022): photo ops > results; “deal of the century” > inherited agreements**

Putin response to Trump

- **Intensified agenda of undermining NATO cohesion**
- **Helsinki Summit (2018): “this was bullshit!” (Fiona Hill)**
- **Putin announces new nuclear weapons systems + reduced cooperation with Conventional Forces in Europe treaty**
- **Would Putin have invaded Ukraine in 2022 had Trump won 2020 election and been president in 2022?**

PUTIN RESPONSE TO BIDEN, 2021

- **Long Putin article re Russian-Ukrainian common roots**
- **Demand for guarantee against Ukr'n membership in NATO**
- **Demand for retraction of forward basing of NATO troops in Eastern Europe**
- **Three months of diplomatic discussions go nowhere**
- **Was this a charade? On both sides?**
- **Build-up of 190,000 Russian troops on Ukrainian border.**
- **Invasion, February 2022: Denounces “American empire of lies!”**

Why invade at that point?

- **Philip Short re Putin's thinking: legacy. Credible?**
- **Short's counterfactuals re EU vs. rejects c/f re national-security/imperialism**
- **Breslauer: national security + regime security + sphere of influence imperialism = over-determined?**
- **Tendencies among late-stage dictators? Narrow circle of advisors + overestimate probability of winning → lash out**

Familiar contours of war thus far

- **Invasion in February 2022**
- **Frustration of efforts to seize Kyiv and Kharkiv, and to assassinate Zelensky (initial goal = regime change)**
- **Plan B: conquer more of east and south → annexation**
- **Near-term frustration of Plan B. Ukr'n armed forces seize initiative → reconquest of Kherson. Ru defenses dig in. Ukrainian counteroffensive of 2023 does not “work.”**
- **Current stalemate**
- **Where will it go from here? (Hard not to root for the Ukrainians; but also hard to project their “total victory.”)**

Three telling quotes

1. “The first casualty of war is the truth” (Aeschylus; Churchill)

- What claims can we take at face value?**
- ---from Moscow**
- ---from Kyiv (re casualties; re Ukrn public opinion)**
- ---from Washington, DC; from pundits and think tanks**

What predictions or fears of 2021 have not come to pass (yet)?

Putin ill

Oligarchs will not tolerate loss of wealth to Western sanctions and seizure of assets

Western sanctions will cripple the Russian war effort.

Russia will be isolated internationally

15 nuclear reactors in Ukraine could cause a radiation holocaust

**2. “The second casualty of war is the battle plan”
(Eisenhower). Relevant to Putin’s:**

- **Optimistic assumptions re Ukraine’s “conquerability”**
- **Failure to understand weaknesses of the Russian army**
- **---strategy**
- **---corruption**
- **---lack of discretion for on-site commanders**
- **---morale**

3. “Putin believes he cannot afford to lose this war” (CIA Director William Burns, March 2022)

- ---hence, mobilization of 300,000 more troops**
- ---hence, recruitment of prisoners, both male and (now) female**
- ---hence, human wave tactics**
- ---hence, defensive fortifications a la WWII**
- ---hence, 2024 tax on the better-off and corporations**
- ---willing to fight to the last Ukrainian? And even to the last Russian?**

In context of this war:

- **Another “switch” has “flipped” within Putin, perhaps because of aversion to “losing”**
- **Building a fascist, totalitarian state, centered on the glorification of warfare**
- **Cf: *The Washington Post*, May 6, 2024 (thanks to Philip Beyer for sending): militarization of education; purging of liberals from univs; glorification of mothers having babies; create a “thousand-year eternal Russia”; xenophobia/chauvinism; build new elite.**

How “rational” is Putin?

- Is he “in his own world”? Impact of COVID isolation? Age and health? Narrowed circle of advisors limits his exposure to alternative information and interpretations. Concern re legacy increases fear of being remembered as a “loser.” Obsession with Russian Imperial history → resistance to neutralization of Ukraine?
- Currently, operating in World War II mentality a la Battle of Stalingrad (wear them down → drive them back)

Key issues that animate discussion: past

- **Why did Russian army perform so poorly? Putin misinformed release. Narrow circle of advisors. COVID isolation → wishful thinking.**
- **Why did Ukrainian army perform so well? Eight years of prep and training.**
- **Why did Zelensky perform as he did? (“I need ammunition, not a ride”) If Ukraine “wins,” he will go down in history as Churchillian. If not.....**

- **Key issues re future:**
- **Can Ukraine “win”? Can Russia “win”? How does each side define victory?**
- **On whose side is “time”?**
- **Will there be a catastrophe? Escalation to chemical (cf. May 2024 news) or nuclear? Another Chernobyl?**
- **Might NATO armed forces intervene directly? (cf. Macron and Cameron, April-May 2024). Nuclear threats**
- **Is a negotiated settlement possible? (cf. Moscow’s May 2024 call for “reasonable proposals”). Or does Putin wish for a long war to validate totalitarian turn?**

How does Putin define “loss”?

- **Routing of Russian troops in the East or South.**
- **Sensitivity of Crimea: his big “win” in 2014; note reaction to bombing of bridge to Crimea**
- **Loss of eastern provinces he had annexed.**
- **NATO membership for Ukraine---or for whatever remains of the country.**

Who is “Winning” Militarily?

- Ukrainian civilian and military infrastructure being battered.**
- New infusions of more advanced technologies from West**
- Home-made Ukrainian drones**
- Insurrection versus military victory**

- **Balance-of-power theorists versus motivation/morale + efficiency theorists**
- **Political unity and “will” perspective on both sides**
- **--Zelensky unchallenged? (Firing of military commander, 2024); foiled assassination attempt → arrested Ukr’n colonels (May 7 news)**
- **--Prigozhin/Wagner affair, 2023**

Is Russia Guilty of War Crimes?

- Undoubtedly yes. Civilians...civilian infrastructure...marching Ukr'n children to Russia.**
- Whether was provoked or not, is a criminal war**
- Will Russian leaders be held responsible at International Criminal Court? Undoubtedly no.**
- Is it useful to predict that West will bring Putin to Court? Possibly, if turns Ru elite against him**

How Measure “Winning” and “Losing”?

- Maximalist Russian goals at this point:
Pan-Russian utopia → Novorossiya?**
- Maximalist Ukrainian goals at this point**
- Maximalist NATO goals at this point: defer to Kyiv’s definition? NATO united on this?;**

Can Russia Sustain the Effort?

- Impact of sanctions on the Russian economy**
- Impact on Russian public opinion**
- Impact of high-level dissenters: for and agst**
- Impact of NATO weaponry on Russian losses**
- Impact on Russian leadership's morale of NATO unity and its expansion to Finland and Sweden**
- Potential for coup d'etat**
- If Putin's health fails (or if assassinated....)**

Does Putin Have a “Long-Game” Strategy?

- **If “cannot afford to lose,” then → his wishful thinking:**
 - **Frozen conflict a la Georgia and Moldova**
 - **NATO resolve will weaken with time**
 - **Sanctions will hurt western economies → Western political resolve will weaken**
 - **Defensive position in east and south of Ukraine; hold territory; blockade ports; bomb cities and civilian infrastructure**
 - **Time on side → victory as de facto partition.**
 - **Zelensky et al will eventually lose support**

“Political” rationality

- **“Loss aversion” theory argues that leaders on the political defensive have a lower threshold for lashing out or escalating existing commitments (to recoup “honor” and credibility at home and abroad). To “not lose”**

Interview with Tucker Carlson

- **Putin's long, introductory comments reminded me of Merkl (2014) re Putin is "in another world"; validates the notion that still another switch flipped in course of this war.**

Can Ukraine Sustain the Effort?

- **NATO supply of weaponry**
- **Collapse of Ukrainian economy**
- **Initially, 12m displaced citizens, abroad and internally**
- **Ukrainian public opinion re neg'n; draft evasion**
- **Willing to fight “to the last Ukrainian”?**
- **Who will pay to rebuild Ukraine?**

Will the US and NATO Sustain the Effort?

Military weaponry. Financial subsidy.

How much risk willing to tolerate?

Elections → leaders less willing to support Ukr?

A Scary Thought: How Much Risk of Escalation?

- Chemical weapons; nuclear weapons (Putin threats). How would NATO respond?**
- Theories of “rational” nuclear deterrence (Waltz)**
- Theories of accidental nuclear (Sagen): “Fog of War” accident; 15 Ukrainian nuclear reactors**
- Theories of escalation through military logic: interdiction of NATO supplies: within Ukraine; across NATO border. How would NATO respond?**

What Might a Settlement Look Like?

- **Treaty ensuring Ukr'n neutrality; security guarantees**
- **Eastern provinces stay within Ukraine + revision of Ukrainian Constitution**
- **OR: Ukr cedes the east (but not south) to Russia**
- **Crimea remains annexed to Russia**
- **All Russian troops exit Ukraine; UN troops replace?**
- **Ukraine free to join EU**
- **Graduated reduction of sanctions as implem'n proceeds**
- **Versus: those who argue that only Russia's defeat will ensure against repetition.**

Preconditions for such a settlement

- **Grinding stalemate militarily on east and south fronts**
- **Each side concludes that cannot achieve maximal goals at acceptable price and risk**
- **Each side is able to point to elements of “victory” in the package**
- **→ “ripe for resolution” (Zartman)**
- **OR: when an apocalyptic event → both sides recoil in horror and seek a way out.**

Do even each side's minimal goals overlap?

- Could Ukrainian politicians ever settle for ceding even parts of the east or south?**
- Could Russian politicians ever settle for giving them back? Or for leaving Crimea?**
- Could US president justify at home the strong-arming of Ukraine? (Perhaps Trump...)**
- Would Putin's death, assassination, or overthrow change the Kremlin's calculus?**

What might a post-war international order look like?

European security architecture: what would constitute a “stable equilibrium” on the continent?

Cold War equilibrium was NATO vs. Warsaw Pact.

How long sustain Russia’s “isolation”? Buffers; neutrality; no forward positioning of NATO troops?

Need East-West cooperation in many areas: arms control, non-prolif of WMD; nuclear accident prevention; anti-terrorism; pandemic control; climate change

Are we dealing with a “Hitler” or a “Brezhnev”? And how much does Moscow trust us? (Putin: “American empire of lies”)

Washington Post (May 6, 2024):

**“In Putin’s bid to recast Russia as a global superpower, he champions a society built on pro-war activism, puritanical values and scaled-back social rights”
Civilizational conflict.**

1953 analog hopeful?

1985 analog hopeful?

Or is this wishful thinking?