

# Russia's Regime-Survival Realism: How the Quest to Preserve Putinism Drives Russian Aggression

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In George Orwell's dystopian novel *1984* – which has become a bestseller among Russians after their country invaded Ukraine in February 2022<sup>1</sup> – a dictatorship wages war not to achieve any foreign policy objective or grand utopian vision, but to distract the population, and break its desire to resist oppression and injustice at home. “[T]he consciousness of being at war, and therefore in danger,” as Orwell put it, “makes the handing-over of all power to a small caste seem the natural, unavoidable condition of survival.”<sup>2</sup> Hijacked by a self-serving governing class, war is a callous hoax, which sole purpose is to keep society in check, and autocratic rule intact.

In Vladimir Putin's Russia, aggression against Ukraine has served this Orwellian purpose before. The 2014 annexation of Crimea defused the growing discontent and opposition to Russia's dictatorship, raising Putin's sagging approval ratings to stratospheric levels for four years, even as the Russian economy suffered. And the much larger conflict in 2022 still rallied Russian society behind its authoritarian ruler, despite inflicting crushing defeats, horrific casualties, and far more economic damage.<sup>3</sup>

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Was tapping into this tremendous power of conflict to boost Russian authoritarianism the Kremlin's primary motive to invade Ukraine? Many analyses of the causes of Russian aggression have ignored this explanation, preferring to focus on traditional *realpolitik* explanations that assume away the influence of Russian domestic politics on foreign policy. Others have attributed the Kremlin's belligerence to the neo-imperial ideologies of the Russian elite, or to Putin's mindset and personality quirks.

These alternative explanations have not aged well. If the Kremlin was motivated by fears of Western encroachment and the desire to keep Ukraine in Russia's "sphere of influence," then Russian aggression has been utterly self-defeating. To the extent that a threat from a hostile West ever existed, Russia's violent behavior only amplified it. The Crimea annexation, the proxy war in the Donbas, and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine have invigorated NATO and unified the European continent against Russia like never before.

Russian aggression has most spectacularly backfired against its supposed geopolitical and neo-imperial main objective: keeping Ukraine in Russia's orbit. This is best captured by the shifting sentiments of Ukraine's citizens. According to surveys by the Kyiv International Institute for Sociology, the share of Ukrainians who viewed Russia negatively increased from less than 10 percent in 2013 to 32 percent in 2020, and ultimately to a whopping 92 percent in 2022.<sup>4</sup> For all intents and purposes, Russian aggression has transformed Ukraine into a territory that Moscow cannot hope to conquer or dominate.

Delusions, miscalculations, and sheer incompetence may have prejudiced the Kremlin to use force in ways that undermined its geopolitical and ideological objectives. But these distortions cannot explain why the Kremlin engaged in the supposedly *realpolitik*- and ideologically-motivated aggression against Ukraine and the West only relatively recently.

We should not forget that during Vladimir Putin’s early tenure in the early 2000s – the period of NATO’s greatest eastward expansion – the Kremlin declared that it did not see the Alliance and its enlargement as a threat.<sup>5</sup> Putin himself expressed hope that Russia might someday join it.<sup>6</sup> He was eager to partner with the United States in the war on terror, and allowed unprecedented access for the U.S. military to Russia’s geopolitical “back yard” in Central Asia. In 2002, Putin stated that he expected Ukraine to join NATO, and that Ukraine’s membership would not affect its friendly relations with Russia.<sup>7</sup>

It is unlikely that the Russia’s regime had such a dramatic a change of heart on these issues due to some deep-rooted convictions, which only manifested over time. The idea that the Russian elite genuinely harbored anti-Western sentiments is hard to reconcile with the fact that during Putin’s reign, up to 75 percent of Russia’s national income was held in offshore accounts, mostly in the West.<sup>8</sup> It also seems doubtful that a kleptocratic regime – under whose rule up to a quarter of the country’s gross national product and at least a fifth of its military budget was lost to corruption every year<sup>9</sup> – is sincerely invested in restoring Russia’s imperial greatness. And launching wars to secure some sort of a “great leader” legacy is not a plausible motive for a corrupt personalist autocrat like Putin, who cannot safely retire, let alone hope to have an enduring legacy.

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Launching wars to secure a “great leader” legacy is not a plausible motive for a corrupt personalist autocrat like Putin, who cannot safely retire.

It seems more natural that conflicts launched by such a ruthlessly venal and insecure leadership are motivated by the self-serving, Orwellian goal of holding

onto power. And yet, this explanation is rarely considered in Western debates about the sources of Russia’s aggression. Launching conflicts to boost a regime’s domestic legitimacy is dismissed, often subconsciously, as the behavior of a tinpot dictatorship. This does not correspond to the

prevailing mental image of Russia as a great power, which should wage wars for grand geopolitical or ideological reasons. It does not come naturally to accept that Putin's Russia has turned into an oversized North Korea: an insecure rogue dictatorship that lashes out abroad to cling onto power at home.

## **A History of Aggression to Justify Strongman Rule**

Those who doubt that Vladimir Putin initiates conflicts to secure his rule domestically should remember how he rose to power. The very first act of Putinism was a stage-managed invasion of Chechnya – Russia's largest and bloodiest (if we also account for civilians killed) conflict prior to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The 1999 invasion of Chechnya, as some of its chief architects confirm, was orchestrated to rally popular support for Vladimir Putin's ascent to the Russian presidency. Gleb Pavlovsky, the Kremlin spin-master who oversaw the operation to elect Boris Yeltsin's successor, later admitted that the whole process was planned and set in place at least six months before Putin was selected for this role. "I knew the plot; I only needed an actor," Pavlovsky reminisced.<sup>10</sup>

The "plot" was to promote a "strongman savior" replacement for Yeltsin against the backdrop of a stage-managed antiterror campaign in the runaway province of Chechnya. Sergei Stepashin, Putin's predecessor in the Prime Ministerial post, verified these claims,<sup>11</sup> admitting that the preparations for the "anti-terrorist operation" against Chechnya were initialized in the spring of 1999. The invasion was launched after a series of apartment bombings throughout Russia, which are widely believed to have been staged as a "false flag" operation by the FSB to provide the emotional shock justifying military action.<sup>12</sup>

Putinism was literally established by an Orwellian plot to justify strongman rule through conflict. The Chechnya campaign also illustrates how enthusiastically Putin himself embraced this strategy. Pavlovsky and Stepashin stressed that both the PR team for the 2000 presidential election and Russia's security services strongly advised Putin to opt for a more limited incursion into Chechnya, reducing the risks of a bloody quagmire. Putin, however, decided to ignore this advice and to "go big," exhibiting an eagerness to take risks and stake his political fortune on bold operations of this sort.

Another key takeaway from this formative experience of Putinism is how astonishingly effective the conflict legitimization strategy has been. When Putin was appointed as Prime Minister and Yeltsin's successor in August 1999, he had negative ratings: his disapproval was 3 percent higher than his approval, according to the independent Levada polling Center. Russians originally saw Putin as another faceless, corrupt bureaucrat, controlled by the ailing and despised Boris Yeltsin. But after just three months of the brutal campaign in Chechnya, Putin's became a national hero. His approval ratings exceeded his disapproval by almost 70 percentage points.<sup>13</sup>

Putin's popular appeal was, in other words, manufactured from scratch, based on a stage-managed conflict. War allowed the previously unknown and camera-shy apparatchik to cast himself into the role of the iron-willed messiah, who could "lift Russia from its knees" after its disastrous decline in the 1990s. Putin's towering popularity, based on the reputation he established with the second Chechen war, became the key pillar of his rule. As long as Putin appeared as the effective strongman, who could impose order and defend Russia against its enemies, he had majority support. This enabled him to both keep the elites in check and stave off mass unrest.<sup>14</sup>

We still lack direct, "smoking gun" evidence – like the insider accounts for the second Chechen war – that Putin's later wars were also driven by similar motives. But the way Putinism

was forged in the conflict in Chechnya, coupled with the timing, manner, and impact of Russia's subsequent acts of aggression, allows us to triangulate this purpose with a high degree of confidence. Just like Chechnya, every other conflict the Kremlin has instigated over the past 23 years, made ordinary Russians forget about their regime's failings, blame external enemies for their troubles, justify repressive policies, and rally around Putin.<sup>15</sup> Each time, war provided a massive boost to Putin's popular approval, raising it to unimpeachable levels of above 80 percent for extended time periods.

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Russia's conflicts since 1999 taught the Kremlin that war solves all domestic problems and costs almost nothing.

Russia's conflicts were also exceptionally successful in defusing major domestic challenges to Putin's continued rule. The war against Georgia in 2008 reaffirmed

his primacy after the presidential "switcheroo" that temporarily placed Dmitry Medvedev on the throne. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 recouped the losses from the 2011-12 protest wave – the largest popular revolt against Putin's rule so far – and defused the threat of spillover from Ukraine's Maidan revolution. The Syrian intervention cemented Putin's image as the restorer of Russia's great power status. From the standpoint of Vladimir Putin's security in office, war has been the gift that has never stopped giving – and he and his underlings have not failed to notice this. As the jailed Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny recently observed, the cumulative experience of over two decades of sporadic conflict taught the Kremlin that war solves all domestic problems and costs almost nothing.<sup>16</sup>

## **The Popular Rebellion Menace**

Skeptics have argued that Putin's grip on power was never so insecure as to require diversionary conflicts to preserve it: that his ratings were too high and the repressive apparatus too strong for any rebellion to succeed.<sup>17</sup> But these arguments fail to appreciate that the coercive capacity and mass appeal of Russia's autocracy are more fragile than commonly assumed. Most Russians support Putin not because they think his rule has improved their lives, but because they see no other choice.

The roots of Putin's popularity lie in the widespread fear that without his stabilizing influence, Russia will slip back to the chaos, humiliation, and near collapse of the 1990s. This makes ordinary Russians tolerate enormous levels of corruption, mismanagement, and hardship. But it also means that popular consent to Putinism is a forced choice. It might crumble if fear of instability turns into anger at the regime's growing failures and depravity. And such anger could quickly spill into the streets, challenge Putin's authority, fracture the elite, and grow too big to suppress. This is exactly how the "color revolutions" in Eastern Europe, the Arab Spring, and many other popular revolts unfolded. The autocracies deposed in these protest waves had seemingly unbeatable security forces, faced no obvious opposition, and did not appear excessively unpopular.

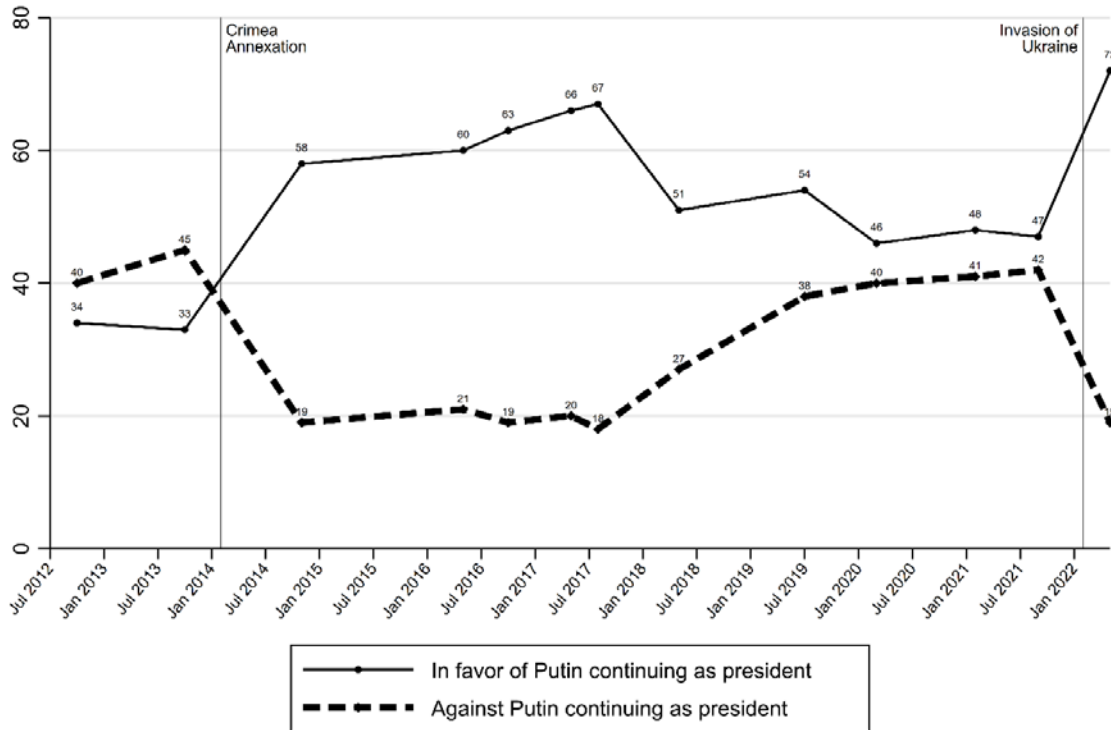
And Russia has consistently performed much worse on some of the key underlying issues that fueled these prior uprisings. Consider Egypt under the Mubarak regime. In 2010, just ahead of the Arab Spring, Egypt held the 105<sup>th</sup> place in Transparency International's global corruption perception index. At the same time, Russia ranked 49 places worse – more than a third of the entire

scale – taking the 154<sup>th</sup> position on the index. Such unfavorable comparisons suggest that a threat from a “color revolution” against the Putin regime is far from trivial.

Approval ratings are a poor measure of this vulnerability, as they tend to collapse onlhafter an uprising is under way. Instead, the potential for a popular revolt is better captured by more subtle signs of “Putin fatigue” that could transform into opposition. One of the best indicators of this sort has been a Levada Center survey question, asking Russians whether they want Putin to run again for the presidency, or retire at the end of his current term.

The way Russians responded to this question since 2012 perfectly sums up the danger of mass rebellion – and how effective Russia’s wars have been in neutralizing it. In the fall of 2013, just before the Euro-Maidan revolution engulfed neighboring Ukraine, a clear plurality of 45 percent of Russians told pollsters they wanted Putin to retire at the end of his term in 2018. A mere 33 percent wanted him to run again.





**Figure 1: Support for Putin’s Reelection After the End of His Current Presidential Term, 2012-2022**

Source: Levada Center Surveys

This is an alarming sign for a dictatorship that relies on its leader’s unrivaled mass appeal to maintain control. And the margin in favor of Putin’s departure was rising rapidly – doubling from 6 to 12 percent over the previous year, when Russia was still gripped by an extraordinary protest wave against Putinism. The Kremlin had, for all intents and purposes, lost the ability to win elections without massive fraud – the main trigger of color revolutions.<sup>18</sup>

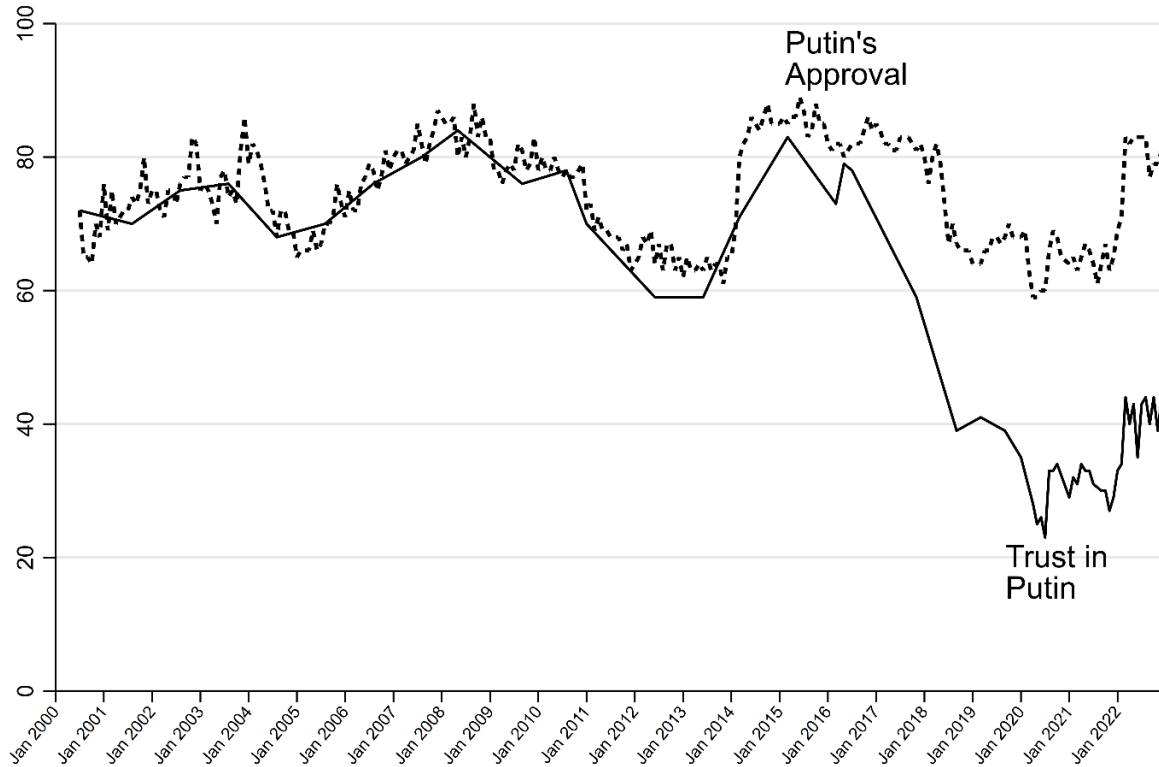
Then the Russian regime annexed Crimea and launched the proxy war in the Donbass. The distraction from the conflict and the outpouring of enthusiasm about Russia’s newfound global clout quickly dispelled the reservations about Putin’s continued rule. By 2015, over 60 percent of Russians wanted Putin to run for office again at the end of his term, and barely 20 percent still

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wanted him to leave. This rally in favor of Putin's continued rule lasted for four years, allowing him an easy reelection in 2018. War turned the clock back to Putin's early days, when he was widely admired for his exploits in Chechnya.

But the dysfunction of Putinism caught up with it again, and by 2022, Russia's dictatorship was in an even greater need to be resuscitated with another conflict. Angered by the extremely unpopular pension age extension in 2018, many Russians who rallied in favor of Putin's continued reign after the Crimea annexation changed their minds. The share of Russians who wanted Putin to leave after the end of his term was once again rising fast. As of September of 2021, 42 percent of Russians wanted Putin to leave at the end of his term, versus 47 who wanted him to run again, according to Levada Center surveys.

This time, however, Russia's leader seemed liable to lose his remaining support much faster. The reason was an unprecedented "hollowing out" of the popular appeal of Putinism. For most of his time in power, public trust in Putin's leadership closely tracked his approval ratings. About the same percentage of Russians who approved Putin's performance in office also said they trusted Putin to solve their problems. This began to change after 2018. While Putin's approval ratings slid from 80 to about 65 percent, trust in his leadership plummeted to around 30 percent by 2020, according to Levada Center data.



**Figure 2: Popular Approval and Trust in Vladimir Putin, 2000-2023**

*Source: Levada Center Surveys*

This 35-percentage points trust/approval gap meant that nearly half of Putin’s remaining popular support has become shallow and could crumble under pressure. And the erosion of the mass appeal of Putinism kept getting worse. By the end of 2021, only about a quarter of Russians said they trusted their president to solve their problems, according to the state-owned pollster VCIOM.<sup>19</sup> At this rate, the Putin regime was beginning to lose confidence even among its core supporters.

This growing crisis of confidence unfolded ahead of Russia’s highest-stakes election for the last two decades. Putin’s next presidential campaign, scheduled for 2024, became his most controversial yet. Based on constitutional amendments that effectively abolish term limits for

Putin, victory in the 2024 presidential race would put him on track to become Russia’s “leader for life” – a taboo for many Russians.<sup>20</sup>

The last time Putin tried to extend his term by orchestrating the switch with Medvedev, he triggered the largest mass protest wave of his rule. And in the run-up to the 2024 election, popular discontent was building up sooner and much faster. Throughout 2020-21, up to 30 percent of Russians openly declared they would take part in protests with economic demands.<sup>21</sup> The rate of actual labor protests in 2021 was the highest for Putin’s entire reign,<sup>22</sup> despite the COVID-19 pandemic and the dramatic uptick in repression. In Russia’s neighborhood, popular revolts pushed the dictatorships in Belarus and Kazakhstan to the brink of collapse,<sup>23</sup> and pollsters detected signs that these events may encourage Russians to rise in protest too.<sup>24</sup>

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Russia’s leader sees every drop in his popularity as a direct threat to his survival, requiring an aggressive response.

But would a dictator pay such attention to these attitude swings to let them drive his foreign policy? All evidence suggests that

Vladimir Putin would. Ever since his ascent to power in 2000, Putin has been absolutely obsessed with tracking the public mood to stave off threats to his rule. A 2011 *New York Times* investigation uncovered that Putin has personally overseen a burgeoning opinion research infrastructure for this purpose.<sup>25</sup> Most of Russia’s commercial and public polling companies have been involved in this operation, which monitors every aspect of public opinion on behalf of the Kremlin. A parallel organization has been set up within the Federal Protection Service (FSO) – the agency in charge of Putin’s personal security. A 2020 investigative report by Russia’s independent news outlet *Meduza* found that the FSO has maintained a massive program to survey popular attitudes toward Vladimir Putin and to detect potential indicators of popular rebellion.<sup>26</sup>

Putin is known to eagerly receive detailed weekly briefings on these polls, which have decisively shaped his policies and public image. This was vividly captured in a 2020 report of the Russian investigative outlet *Proekt*. Russia's leader, according to testimony from insiders, sees every drop in his popularity, and even the rising appeal of his underlings, as a direct threat to his survival.<sup>27</sup>

## **Lashing Out Abroad to Thwart “Color Revolutions” At Home**

This obsessive fear of popular revolt – and the tendency to react violently to it – is a byproduct of Putin's formative experiences, as well as those of his entourage. Early in their careers, Putin and his top lieutenants – many of whom rose through the ranks of the Soviet security apparatus – watched powerlessly as their regime and its allies crumbled as result of popular uprisings. The most traumatic moment of Putin's KGB career was not a standoff with an encroaching Western power; it came when he barely managed to scare off an angry mob that was about to ransack his post in Dresden, East Germany.<sup>28</sup>

When this generation of security service veterans rose to power in the 2000s, it faced a rising global tide of mass revolts against corrupt dictatorships similar to Russia's.<sup>29</sup> They had every reason to be terrified by this trend. Each wave of popular uprisings abroad seemed to trigger larger and more dangerous protests in Russia. The 2005 pensioners' revolt came on the heels of Ukraine's Orange revolution, and the other “color revolutions” in Eastern Europe. The 2011-12 protest wave against Putin's rule followed in the wake of the Arab Spring. Despite the hype about Russia's authoritarian resurgence, Putinism was becoming increasingly vulnerable to popular uprisings and more reliant on conflict to defuse them.

The Kremlin has admitted this in its official foreign and security policy doctrines. The flurry of new strategies and influential opinions that came out of Russia's security and foreign policy establishment after 2011 unequivocally singled out "color revolutions" as the greatest threat to Russia's security, exceeding the danger of foreign invasion. Non-violent popular revolts, according to this new vision (often (mis)labelled as the "Gerasimov doctrine"), have become the main form of aggression against Russia because they undermined its government from within, circumventing conventional defenses.<sup>30</sup> If the regime-preservation motive for Russian aggression was implied by Putin's declining legitimacy and aggressive actions, Russia's doctrines have proclaimed it openly.

There is no doubt that this strategic outlook was influenced by the Manichean worldviews and biases of Putin's inner circle. But it is more compelling as a rational, cold-blooded strategy for regime preservation. Peel away the hyped-up Western threat and the self-righteous posturing, and Russia's security doctrines read like a perfect Orwellian ploy to justify authoritarian rule. A constant war against Russia is being waged during peacetime and with non-violent means. While the main enemies are external, the key danger lies at home. Predatory foreign elites are clandestinely supporting extremist opposition forces in Russia to sow chaos. Western sanctions are being imposed to lower living standards and incite ordinary Russians to rebel. Russian culture and traditional values are under assault by radical foreign ideologies. There can be only one conclusion: Russia will not survive this barbarian onslaught without the strong, unwavering leadership of Vladimir Putin.

Since at least 2011, Russia's strategic posture was driven by this effort to recast the growing domestic insecurity of the Putin regime into a struggle for national survival against foreign enemies. To protect its rule at home, the Putin regime decided to go on the offensive<sup>31</sup> – to project

power beyond Russia's borders in order to "counterpunch" against the alleged external threats.<sup>32</sup> To undermine the appeal of democracy and to deter perceived meddling in its domestic affairs, the Putin regime targeted Western elections through cyber and information-warfare. To make its region "safe for autocracy," it created its own versions of NATO and the European Union – propping up nearby dictatorships through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Union. When push came to shove, the Kremlin intervened militarily in Syria in 2015 and Kazakhstan in 2021 to protect fellow dictatorships abroad (and threatened to do so in Belarus in 2020).<sup>33</sup> Ultimately, Russia's most blatant acts of aggression were attempts at regime change. The invasions of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 all aimed to topple neighboring post-revolutionary democracies, which posed a high risk of democratic contagion to Russia.<sup>34</sup>

These aggressive actions did not increase Russia's security or its relative power by any stretch of the imagination. If anything, they hastened its isolation and decay.<sup>35</sup> They nonetheless accomplished their main purpose: preserving Putinism at all costs – even when this came at the expense of Russia's broader geopolitical interests.

Call this *regime-survival realism*. In Putin's Russia, this Orwellian version of *realpolitik* is far more likely to trump traditional, national-interest realism and ideology than the other way around. To be sure, geopolitical realities and ideological dispositions do still matter. But they largely serve an auxiliary purpose: to determine the best foreign policies to pursue and doctrines to hijack in order to boost the Putin regime. Authoritarian preservation is always in the driver's seat. A corrupt personalist dictatorship – whose leader has a 70 percent chance to end up dead, in prison, or in exile if he loses power, judging by the fate of his peers from across the globe<sup>36</sup> – could not function in any other way.

## **What to Expect from the Kremlin's Regime Survival *Realpolitik***

Regime-survival realism does not only capture the priorities of Russia's dictatorship more accurately; it also predicts that the Kremlin will behave more dangerously than the traditional realist and ideological models of Russian conduct suggest. Three of its implications are critically important, and should be part and parcel of any debate about containing Russia.

First off, the Putin regime cannot be appeased with geopolitical concessions. Offering an end to NATO and EU enlargement, neutrality for Ukraine, allowing Russia to retain areas it occupied, and other conciliatory moves, would do nothing to reduce the Kremlin's reliance on conflict to justify authoritarianism and to demobilize dissent in Russia. For the same reason, ceasefires and peace agreements with the Putin regime are unlikely to stick. Lacking alternative sources of legitimacy, the Kremlin will eventually need to revert to conflict to stay in power. An armistice in Ukraine before the 2022 invasion is fully rolled back would only allow the Kremlin to hold territory, recover its strength, and strike again.

Second, Russia's dictatorship is more difficult to contain than commonly assumed because it is not bound by the standard geopolitical considerations. It is hard to apply external leverage on the Putin regime because it is extraordinarily capable of sacrificing Russia's broader national interests in order to preserve itself. It can tolerate an economy throttled by sanctions and war for a long time if this makes people dependent on government handouts and shifts blame for their hardships to foreigners. Thus, to drain Russian state coffers and wear down the patience of the Russian people, the United States and its allies must impose sweeping sanctions, which also hurt their own economies. The Kremlin is also perfectly willing to turn Russia into a "vassal state" to China in exchange for an economic lifeline that keeps Putinism afloat.<sup>37</sup> Here, Western powers



cannot offer anything more compelling to the Russian dictatorship to make it break away from its dangerous alignment with Beijing.

The Kremlin can even survive further military setbacks in Ukraine, as long as ordinary Russians still believe that the fight is not over. As the seminal research of Giacomo Chiozza and Hein Goemans shows, autocrats are safest while wars of their own making are still ongoing and the outcomes remain uncertain.<sup>38</sup> Hence, to break the Kremlin's habit of controlling Russian society through conflict, the victims of aggression – Ukrainians in particular – must be empowered to defeat it decisively.

Some commentators have warned that Ukrainian counteroffensives could tempt a cornered Putin regime to employ nuclear weapons. While this risk is real, a Western strategy that is overly inhibited by Russian nuclear threats is not the best way to prevent them from materializing. As the past 23 years of dealing with Putinism have demonstrated, reluctance to confront Russian warmongering is seen as a sign of weakness, inviting further aggression. If nuclear coercion can sway Western postures now, when such threats are among the few remaining trump cards of the increasingly more desperate Putin regime, then the Kremlin is all but guaranteed to rely on them even more. This will increase the odds of dangerous standoffs, and eventually, nuclear use.

But the main argument against being oversensitive to the threat of escalation is that the Putin regime might escalate even without being provoked. This is the third, and perhaps the most troubling insight from analyzing Russian behavior from a regime survival standpoint. In the past, the Kremlin felt compelled to engage in conflicts with the highest stakes when its grip on Russian society was most tenuous. Since 1999, Russia's regime launched the largest, riskiest, and most violent conflicts (Chechnya 1999 and Ukraine 2022) when the domestic legitimacy of Putinism was at its weakest.

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Keeping alive the illusion that Russia can still conquer Ukraine is why the Kremlin may yet attempt another ill-advised set of major offensives in 2023.

Now desperately weakened by the Ukraine fiasco, the Putin regime has few options but to double down on its Orwellian scheme of vindicating

authoritarianism through conflict. To succeed, this strategy does not need to completely reverse the tide of the war in Ukraine. Instead, its basic purpose is to sustain the illusion that a Russian victory is still possible.

Much of Russia's perverse behavior on the battlefield owes to this rationale. Maintaining the appearance of success is the main objective of the strikes against Ukraine's civilian infrastructure, which are depleting Russian guided missile stockpiles with little hope of breaking Ukrainian resolve.<sup>39</sup> This is why Russia has been wasting its scarce resources on a pointless assault on fortified Ukrainian positions around Bakhmut.<sup>40</sup> Keeping alive the illusion that Russia can still conquer Ukraine is why the Kremlin may yet attempt another ill-advised major assault on its neighbor in the winter and spring of 2023.<sup>41</sup>

This behavior defies military logic. But it makes sense from a regime preservation standpoint. Stopping the war in Ukraine could force a reckoning that the Putin regime may not survive. Putinism would have to contend with a ruined economy, massive casualties and a hollowed out military power, with very little to show for it. So, the Russian dictatorship is trapped: it must pretend it can still subdue Ukraine. This is where the main escalation risks lie. As Russia's resources, manpower, and patience dry out, the urge to use weapons of mass destruction seem poised to increase.

To escape this escalation spiral, Ukraine should be enabled to push Russia back to the lines of demarcation prior to February 24, 2022. This would effectively defeat Russia's 2022 invasion,

underscoring the futility of continued aggression. Equally important, retaking the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions in Ukraine's south could seriously threaten Russia's grip on Crimea: the crown jewel of Putin's conflict legitimization strategy.

Ukraine would not need to launch a ground assault to challenge Russia's presence in Crimea. Liberating Ukraine's southern regions would allow its long-range artillery to reach Russian strategic assets across much of Crimea. This could make the Russian position on the peninsula precarious, even without an effort to retake it – thus avoiding one of the Kremlin's more explicit “red lines” for nuclear use.<sup>42</sup> With additional long-range precision weapons, which will be provided by the spring of 2023,<sup>43</sup> Ukraine could target key logistics hubs and supply chokepoints, like the Kerch bridge, as well as Russia's vaunted Black Sea fleet. A sustained campaign of this sort would put Russian forces in Crimea in danger of being worn down in the same manner as in the Kherson city area before their forced retreat in November 2022.

With this threat hanging over its head, the Putin regime will find it difficult to keep targeting Ukraine's civilian infrastructure or assaulting other parts of Ukrainian territory. Further Russian aggression will become unsustainable if Ukraine can strike back against the most prized conquest of Putinism. A credible threat to Russia's position in Crimea could turn the logic of regime-survival realism against Russia's dictatorship. For the first time in his 23 years in power, Vladimir Putin would stand to lose more than he would gain from continuing to justify his rule through conflict. This is the key precondition for stopping Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

## Notes

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