

What Could Come Next? Assessing the Putin Regime's Stability and Western Policy Options

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What Could Come Next?

Assessing the Putin Regime's Stability and Western Policy Options

By Max Bergmann

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THE ISSUE

This issue brief assesses the stability of the Putin regime, analyzing its strengths and weaknesses and outlining the potential for future regime transition. Should Ukraine continue to make military advances, it may make Putin's position untenable. Although the West has a post-victory strategy for Ukraine, namely a framework for reconstruction and a path toward EU and NATO membership, it lacks a vision for Russia in the aftermath of a Ukrainian victory. This issue brief argues that the West should offer an alternative path for Russia and outline a vision for a more liberal future. Doing so could have a powerful effect on Russia and add pressure on the Kremlin.

INTRODUCTION

The war in Ukraine is sapping the strength and resilience of Vladimir Putin's regime. Russia's continued military failures there, combined with high casualties and worsening economic deprivation, could put his regime at risk.

Russia's invasion has been more than a military debacle. The war has pulled back the curtain on the Kremlin and revealed an incompetent, corrupt, and poorly run state. It threatens to undermine Putin's very legitimacy. The Kremlin **prioritized** modernizing its military for more than two decades, and despite substantial investment and presidential attention, the Russian military's performance has been **shambolic**. Russia is perhaps now more isolated and less respected than at any other time during Putin's 23-year reign. He is now asking more of the public than ever before. Desperate to salvage the situation in Ukraine, he has mobilized hundreds of thousand Russian men to replace the **estimated** 100,000 soldiers already killed or wounded in the war. There is now talk in Moscow of the war being **existential**. Keeping hold of territory in Ukraine is not existential

for Russia—but it may be increasingly existential to the survival of the Putin regime.

If Ukraine continues to reverse Russia's post-February 2022 territorial gains, it may make Putin's position untenable in Moscow. The West, led by the United States, is supporting Ukraine with modern advanced Western weaponry, massive financial aid, a global diplomatic campaign to isolate Russia, and an unprecedented sanctions effort designed to strangle the Russian economy. The Western objectives in Ukraine, despite claims otherwise, are relatively straightforward: to weaken Russia, preserve Ukrainian democracy, and enable Ukraine to reclaim its territory.

Keeping hold of territory in Ukraine is not existential for Russia—but it may be increasingly existential to the survival of the Putin regime.

The West does not have a strategy of regime change in Russia. However, if its overall efforts prove successful

and Ukraine can end the conflict on its own terms, Putin's regime could fall. A failed war, combined with economic deprivation and loss of prestige, makes regime collapse a possible outcome. While it is hard to see how Putin departs, it is also hard to see how his regime survives such a situation. But although the West has a post-victory strategy for Ukraine, namely a framework for **reconstruction** and a path toward EU and NATO membership, it lacks a vision for Russia in the aftermath of a Ukrainian victory.

This issue brief assesses the potential for the war to prompt a transition of power in Russia, as well as the possible ramifications of this. It concludes, contrary to much of the prevailing view, that if Putin leaves power, it will likely be due to a reaction against the war and Putin's hardline approach. The potential for Ukrainian military success to cause regime instability in Moscow has generated understandable nervousness among many Western governments about what could follow Putin. In fact, there is a growing assumption that what follows his reign could very well be worse. Such a pessimistic outlook might seem sober—but, as this issue brief argues, it could very well be wrong. This is because regime supporters and war hawks will, most likely, vigorously seek to keep Putin in power, prop up the regime, and stay the course. Thus, for a transition to occur there will need to be a strong demand for change. This will likely be driven by two interlocking factors: the Putin regime's loss of legitimacy (with the public, the security services, elites, and the state) and the existence of a clear alternative to Russia's current path. Ukraine and the West have created the conditions for the first, Putin's loss of legitimacy. However, the West has not yet offered an alternative vision for Russia's post-Putin future.

There is a clear and more rational path for Moscow: end the war, reconcile with the West, and reverse Russia's economic, diplomatic, and cultural isolation. However, while Russia can end the war on its own, reconciling with the West and reversing Russia's isolation is ultimately up to the West. Thus, as this issue brief argues, building momentum for change inside Russia also requires signaling from the West that it is both open to future reengagement with a post-Putin Russia and that it believes such an alternative future is possible.

U.S. and European leaders could make clear to Russia—both the public and especially elites—that the West ultimately sees Russia as part of Europe. There is therefore a path out of Russia's isolation after Putin departs. Europe could pledge to “welcome back” a post-Putin Russia that

ends the war, respects its neighbors, releases dissidents, restores political freedoms, and seeks to positively reengage with the West. The goal would be to make it known that an alternative European future is possible for Russia should Russians seek it.

Whether this is possible or likely is a separate discussion. The West's objective in offering a positive vision for Russia's future is to put additional pressure on the regime by undermining the Kremlin narrative that the two are inevitable **adversaries** and by creating clear incentives for Russia to pursue a different course. This does not mean adopting a policy of “regime change,” something the West has rightly disavowed and has no means to implement in practice. Instead, it simply means leveraging the power the West does possess: its appeal. People, especially Europeans, want to be part of it; countries want to join it. There is no clearer example of this than Ukraine, where the government's 2013 rejection of a closer relationship with the European Union spurred the Maidan Revolution.

Calling on Western leaders to talk about reintegrating Russia into Europe may seem utterly tone-deaf. Missiles continue to descend on Ukrainian cities, targeting playgrounds, pedestrian bridges, and civilian infrastructure. In the wake of Russia's initial missile barrage on civilian infrastructure, Former Finnish prime minister Alexander Stubb **assessed** that “Russia is in the process of isolating itself from Europe for decades. . . . It did not have to be this way, but Putin decided otherwise.” The war in Ukraine has unleashed immense and justifiable anger not just toward the Kremlin but also toward the Russian public, with some prominent voices arguing that Russians are complicit through their support for Putin. There has been no mass protest or robust anti-war movement. Instead, the voices of dissent and criticism come from the far **right**, pushing Putin to increase the brutality. Because of this assumption that Russians are complicit, it is not surprising that when three civil society groups in Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia were jointly **awarded** the Nobel Peace Prize, the Ukrainian government criticized the Nobel Committee.

However, as much as righteous indignation toward Russia—and therefore the Russian public—is understandable and warranted, applying collective guilt is ultimately a self-defeating strategy. Doing so will likely strengthen Putin and Russian hardliners inside the country who claim that the West is nurturing hatred toward the entire Russian nation. If there is no way back for Russians, no alternative to isolation, why not just persist with a hardline anti-Western path? Moreover,

since Russia is not going to be occupied by a conquering power, the reality is that there will be no accountability or justice for war crimes or reparations unless Russia itself is a willing participant.

Thus far, the West has not provided any clear incentive for the Russian people or elite to mobilize against the regime. Currently, the [message](#) the West is sending is that Russia will be treated like Germany was after World War I and will face crushing reparations. Such calls may be morally and legally justified, but they also bolster Putin by demobilizing those with anti-regime sentiment. The Russian public or members of the elite are unlikely to mobilize against the regime if it means inheriting continued economic ruin (never-ending sanctions plus reparations), continued diplomatic isolation, and (potentially) more territorial concessions. Instead, Russians are more likely to act if there is a clearly better path available and if they have confidence there will be clear benefits for Russia should they succeed. Moreover, knowing that the regime, not the West, is preventing a better future can lead to growing frustration, which in time can grow and boil over.

The West shifting its rhetorical approach toward Russia and offering a positive vision for a post-Putin future might have little to no impact. However, it could add an additional source of pressure on an increasingly brittle regime and potentially open the door to rebuilding relations. Such a shift has little cost but significant potential upside.

This issue brief first assesses the stability of the Putin regime, analyzing its strengths and weaknesses. It then sketches out potential trajectories of how Putin might depart. Finally, it outlines possible Western policy options.

AUDITING REGIME STABILITY

The discussion over the fate of the Putin regime is highly speculative and may seem little more than an esoteric policy discussion—but it does have tangible policy implications. A pessimistic view about what comes after Putin or a presumption that his regime is stable could prompt Western leaders to advocate seeking a swift end to the war, pressuring Ukraine to negotiate prematurely, and seeking to return to a more “stable and predictable” relationship with the Kremlin. However, a view that Putin’s regime could be unstable and that a post-Putin Russia might seek to reconcile with the West results in a different policy course.

While still unlikely, the potential for Putin’s departure from office can no longer be discounted. The adage that



Smoke rises from a Russian tank destroyed by Ukrainian forces, on the side of a road in Luhansk region on February 26, 2022.

Source: Anatolii Stepano/AFP/Getty Images

autocratic regimes look [stable until they aren't](#) holds true. Indeed, if Putin were to leave power, historians would likely treat it as inevitable and engage in fierce debates over which of the multiple causes was most important. What is clear is that the regime is on increasingly shaky ground and is getting squeezed on four interrelated fronts.

First, Russia is suffering significant setbacks on the battlefield. Ukraine now has a military advantage, benefiting from advanced Western weaponry and heightened morale. Kyiv has made remarkable gains around [Kharkiv](#) and retaken [Kherson](#). If Ukraine continues to make significant battlefield advances and reclaim most or all the territory Russia has seized since February 2022, the war would become an unmitigated failure for Russia, amounting to a humiliating military defeat. This is especially the case for Putin, who has justified his tenure by pledging to restore Russian greatness and military strength.

Military defeat on the battlefield can easily upend a country’s social and political order and lead to a crisis of legitimacy for the government. Argentina’s [military junta](#), for instance, stepped down just three days after it surrendered to the United Kingdom following its invasion of the Falkland Islands in 1982. Putin would need to shed blame and responsibility for military defeat to the military and other officials, but doing so could prompt a counterreaction from military and security officials who blame Putin and other political leaders.

Russian reliance on amassing forces and its tolerance for high casualties might also slowly undermine support for

the war and the regime. If many Russian soldiers are killed or wounded over the winter and early spring, with newly mobilized soldiers rushed to the frontlines bearing the brunt of the losses, it could lead to significant blowback on the home front. This could create a situation in which Russia's military, which tends to accept high casualties, could run directly counter to the interests of the regime. Moreover, mobilized forces are older. They are men often with prior service who are now in their late 20s and older and are more likely to have families and dependents than 18-27-year-old conscripts. These losses will be **deeply** felt socially and economically in their communities, especially among **Russia's ethnic minorities**. If Russia loses ground on the battlefield while suffering high casualties among mobilized soldiers, the reaction could be explosive. Thus, a long attritional war might favor Russia on paper—but also sap support for the regime.

Second, mobilization could endanger public support.

Putin has built up a significant reservoir of public trust when it comes to use of the Russian military. The Russian public has seen the relatively successful deployment of force in Chechnya, Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria. Moreover, little to no sacrifice was required of the public for these past military operations. Russians expected the “special military operation” in Ukraine to be the same.

However, the war has been brought home to the average Russian through the “partial mobilization.” As Leonid Volkov—Alexei Navalny's chief of staff and chairman of the Anti-Corruption Foundation, which has been conducting polling inside of Russia since the war began—**assessed**, “Mobilization made them [the Russian public] aware of what's actually going on. It reached out to almost every family in the country. It shocked those who believed in Putin's ‘stability’ for decades.” Hundreds of thousands of Russian men have now been **arbitrarily incorporated** into the military to fight in a war that may have already resulted in more than **100,000 casualties**. Additionally, partial mobilization has sent **around 400,000** Russians, primarily men, fleeing their homeland. A September 2022 **poll** by the Levada Analytical Center showed that the majority of Russians experienced “anxiety, fear, and horror” or “anger” following the news on partial mobilization, while a growing number of citizens now consider the special military operation to be “rather” or “very” unsuccessful (31 percent in September 2022 versus 15 percent in May 2022).

There is little sense among Russians of what the war is about. General support for the war may remain high, but there is also **strong** support for a peaceful negotiated

settlement, reflecting an overarching desire to end the fighting. Kremlin messaging about the war has also shifted continuously throughout the conflict, adding to the confusion. Though the war was initially about “**denazification**,” now its messaging tends to focus on conflict with **NATO**. Indeed, the public was prohibited from even calling the special military operation a “war.” Overall support for Putin and the invasion may look stable, but public support can shift rapidly against wars of choice when sacrifices mount. For instance, when fighting erupted in Iraq in spring 2004, a year after the U.S. invasion, public opinion in the United States abruptly swung against the conflict.

Third, the Russian economy is gradually being strangled by sanctions and export controls. The announcement of massive sanctions by the United States, European Union, and others after the outbreak of the war led the value of the ruble to collapse, prompting a massive increase in interest rates. Yet the Russian economy has seemingly stabilized. The value of the ruble recovered, interest rates have been lowered, and the Russian economy is estimated to have contracted by only **3 percent** in 2022. However, as Konstantin Sonin **argues** in *Foreign Affairs*, this is due to a drop in imports, which decreases the need for dollars or euros. Sanctions may not have affected the regime's behavior, but there is substantial evidence that sanctions are effective at *gradually* strangling an economy.

Already, factories are **closing** and layoffs are mounting—and the effects will likely grow. Russia is transitioning to a fully fledged **war economy**, impacting the country's ability to fulfill basic consumer needs. The mobilization of Russian men will also disrupt the labor market, as will the need to invest limited and shrinking resources to support the war effort. The downward economic spiral will only put more strain on the Kremlin.

Fourth, Putin's credibility as a leader is gravely damaged. Putin made a catastrophic error in invading Ukraine. As Mark Galleotti **argues**, “Putin-the-man may still cling to power for years, but Putin-the-legend is dead.” Never in the past had Putin appeared strategically weak or incompetent. His gross military miscalculation in Ukraine, which has taken the lives of tens of thousands of Russian soldiers and subjected the country's citizens to long-term economic uncertainty, has damaged the president's carefully crafted image as a formidable global player. Instead of restoring Russian greatness, Putin will have left Russia weak, isolated, and humiliated on the battlefield.

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REGIME-STABILIZING FACTORS

However, Putin's downfall is by no means inevitable. There are also several factors that contribute to continued support for the regime.

First, the war has prompted greater repression. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin has significantly increased its repression and effectively closed down independent political forums. Dissidents have been **jailed**, with many facing years-long imprisonment. Journalists, academics, and policy analysts have **fled** Russia to avoid arrest. Anti-war protesters have been given long jail sentences. Thus, there is almost no political space to mobilize against the regime, which makes fomenting popular unrest exceptionally difficult.

Second, mobilization might succeed in achieving Russia's more limited war aims: to hold the territory it currently occupies in Ukraine. Putin's mobilization may blunt Ukraine's military gains, as Russia will likely seek simply to defend the territory it controls, while Ukraine would need to go on the offensive to retake territory. The war might stagnate over the winter—and, come spring, Russia's new wave of freshly trained mobilized forces could prevent Ukraine from advancing. A stalemate, a new frozen conflict, would work just fine for Putin by de facto eliminating Ukraine's path to EU and NATO membership. The war would then shift out of public consciousness, and Putin would gain breathing space to better address the immediate needs of the Russian public.

Third, Russian propaganda has mobilized the country for war. Putin failed to prepare the Russian public for a long, bloody campaign that requires sacrifice, even going

so far as to prohibit calling the “special military operation” a “war.” However, in September, in preparation for partial mobilization, the Kremlin sought to build public support for more prolonged conflict. The Russian annexation of Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson created an opportunity to mobilize the Russian public, with Putin **holding** an elaborate ceremony and rally near the Kremlin to mark the occasion.

Russia is also now justifying the conflict by claiming it is fighting NATO. According to a **special report** by the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), an overarching narrative that the Kremlin employs domestically asserts NATO is using “Ukrainian Nazis” to “break” Russia. This is not a war against Ukraine but against a collective West that seeks to see the great Russian civilization stripped of its values, traditions, culture, and morale. As researchers at RUSI argue, “The decision to ideologically mobilize the Russian public for war with the use of increasingly radicalizing language was not a nationalistic response to events but was instead directed centrally . . . to put Russia on a war footing.” This message could resonate with some Russians, stabilize support for the war, and mitigate the Kremlin's loss of legitimacy and prestige.

Fourth, Kremlin elites are dependent on Putin. Putin has created a regime that centers around him, making it highly risky for insiders to seek his ouster. Thus, as the next section shows, supporters of the regime will likely push back strongly against efforts to remove him.



People hold placards depicting Russia's president Vladimir Putin as they take part in a rally and a concert by the Kremlin Wall in central Moscow on March 18, 2015.

Source: Alexander Utkin/AFP/Getty Images

ASSESSING A TRANSITION

It is impossible to predict how Russia would transition to someone else or something new if the situation becomes untenable for Putin—yet the emerging consensus that Putin would **likely** be replaced by someone **worse** may be unfounded. An effort to replace Putin will probably emerge out of a movement to end the war, not to further it.

Most analyses of what could come next tend to look at Putin's **court** and examine who among his **inner circle** might be a potential successor. This has led to fears that Putin could be replaced by even more of a hardliner, such as Security Council secretary Nikolai Patrushev. Such analysis can lead to the conclusion that the West should favor stability in Russia and a face-saving end to the war for Putin because a humiliating defeat could give rise to a truly unhinged president (i.e., it is better to deal with the devil you know—Putin—than the devil you don't).

However, it is difficult to see a dynamic forming in which Putin is replaced by a marginally more hawkish figure from within his inner circle. This is because Putin is already hawkish. This is, after all, *his* war, on which he is already doubling down. Under Putin's "partial mobilization," the military is bombing civilian targets, committing war crimes, pulverizing cities, and showing a willingness to take enormous battlefield losses. The Russian strategy being pursued is the hardline strategy. Moreover, Putin has also shown that he listens to hardliners. Those advocating taking the war to Ukrainian civilians and mobilizing the population have gotten what they wanted. Yet, for hardliners there is always more that can be done. A more depraved hawk could marginally dial up the atrocities or could move to use a nuclear weapon—but this is a road to ruin. In fact, the effort to move in a more hardline direction could prompt the elite and public to step in to stop such a leader from ascending.

The replacement of Putin with a more hardline figure is not impossible, but neither does it help fellow hawks preserve the regime. Putin has a two-decade relationship with the Russian public and has built up an immense reservoir of trust. Although that reservoir is being depleted, any new hardline successor would likely come from within the regime's inner circle and would have similar baggage. Why orchestrate a risky soft coup to just stick with the same hawkish approach?

Moreover, if power transitions to a member of Putin's court, the new administration will likely be short-lived due to infighting. In Egypt in 2011, Hosni Mubarak tried to

end his 30-year reign by transferring power to his former intelligence chief, Omar Suleiman, whom he abruptly made vice president. However, this was not sustainable, and the armed forces almost immediately assumed power until elections could be held. Any time a long-standing autocrat departs, it destabilizes the entire governing network they have built up over the course of their rule.

Putin has created a regime that centers around him, a power-vertical, in which he is not just the key decisionmaker but also keeps all the nodes of power in balance. If he is removed, the system would likely be in danger of toppling. Putin himself has not figured out the conundrum of succession, either how to leave or who should succeed him. Instead, he has kept all options open while preventing the rise of any undisputed successor. The **2020 constitutional reforms**, instead of bringing clarity on a transition, allowed him to stay in power for life. This is in part because of Putin's ego; many politicians are reluctant to leave the stage. However, it is also because he cannot figure out how to leave without the system collapsing—and his legacy with it. If Putin surrendered his position at the top of the patronage network he has spent over two decades constructing, he would no longer be able to guarantee his personal safety, nor the security of his wealth. The same goes for Putin's closest lieutenants, who rely on his legitimacy to defend their own positions within the country's vertical power structure.

It is therefore hard to see how the existing regime survives without Putin. Far from pushing Putin out, hardliners and regime stalwarts are probably incredibly reluctant to move against him. In fact, they will likely do everything they can to keep him in power. This is perhaps the most important factor protecting the regime from collapse. Thus, if Putin is replaced or loses power, it will likely be because the war in Ukraine goes very badly. It will be because there is a desperate need for change, not just for a new leader but for a new approach to the war that does not double down on but rather ends it.

SCENARIOS FOR A POWER TRANSITION

There are several ways in which a change in power could occur in Russia.

First, the regime might become unable to govern and simply collapse. Daniel Treisman's article in *Foreign Affairs* outlines how "a comprehensive meltdown of the regime" could come about, "as multiple challenges overwhelm its [the Kremlin's] capacity to react and dysfunction drains confidence in Putin's leadership." He explains, "An

overcentralized system can work tolerably in quiet times. The clear lines of command even help in minor crises. But the need for Putin to weigh in personally becomes a serious flaw when problems are complex and fast developing. The center is quickly overwhelmed, which can lead to cascading mistakes. . . . As the burden grows, so does the danger of loss of control.”

Bureaucrats and functionaries in this scenario might quietly rebel by hesitating, delaying, and obfuscating. In doing so, they gradually stop propping up the regime. This is, after all, Putin’s experience in Dresden: When his KGB outpost was surrounded, he called for military reinforcements, but “Moscow was silent.” Instead of trying to curry favor with Moscow, regional governors might hedge and begin pushing back, as they are uncertain about which way the political winds are blowing and do not want to be caught on the wrong side. Perhaps governors in certain provinces might refuse to repress anti-war protests or deflect blame away from the Kremlin. As Treisman concludes, “Most of the regime’s enforcers are motivated by corruption rather than conviction, but they act out of faith that the system will survive. When that faith fades, the result is not a coup but foot-dragging, inaction, and ultimately desertion.”

Second, elites or insiders might initiate a coup. The need to blame someone if the war goes badly could prompt the security services and the military, as well as oligarchs, to mobilize. However, Putin has worked hard to coup-proof his regime, and there are few **informal connections** between leaders of the security services’ various power centers. Treisman **explains** that “the obstacles to such a coup are formidable. Putin has rigged the system with numerous tripwires to prevent one. Multiple agencies watch over each other. . . . Those with armed men at their command lack the mutual trust to organize a conspiracy, and any attempt to do so would be hard to hide.”

But working in an intense crisis environment can also quickly build connections, relationships, and trust among officials. Moreover, if a person’s job and life are on the line, they may be more willing to take risks to plot or scheme. As one former Putin confidant in Moscow **described** “the atmosphere in the halls of power” to the *New York Times*, “We’re giving each other looks, but to say something is impossible.” However, as pressure builds, the risk calculation can shift as well, and discontented oligarchs with large reserves of cash could bribe or incentivize officials.

History is also replete with coups led by resentful mid- and junior-level officers mobilizing against their inept

senior officers and political leaders. Russian officers’ utter mismanagement of the war in Ukraine and the disregard for the well-being of their soldiers could trigger a backlash.

Third, regime stalwarts might move to replace Putin, not to end the regime but to save it. A new leader could be appointed simply to try to relieve pressure on the regime. This might be someone from inside who could end the war and negotiate with the West, perhaps a technocrat—for example, from the Central Bank or the Ministry of Finance—or a Western-friendly oligarch. As **Vladimir Milov**, a former deputy minister of energy and an economic adviser to Alexei Navalny, has remarked, “This may look as something resemblant of the environment which existed in the Soviet Union before 1985 and the arrival of Gorbachev: he started his ‘perestroika’ not out of the blue, but rather as a response to diminished public credibility of the Soviet system and visible bottom-up popular demand for change.” Alternatively, power could be transferred to a regime insider in a desperate effort to maintain continuity, as occurred in Egypt with Mubarak.

Fourth, mass protests or movements might emerge.

Currently, there appears to be little prospect of Russians mobilizing against the regime. Putin’s approval ratings remain high, dissidents have been jailed or exiled, and repression has been dialed up. However, outrage or discontent can emerge from unlikely places under an autocratic regime. In Argentina, it was the mothers of the disappeared who stood up to the military junta. What sparks a protest against an autocratic regime can sometimes come from seemingly nowhere, such the self-immolation of a fruit seller in Tunisia or the murder of a young woman arrested for allegedly not wearing a headscarf in Iran.

These four scenarios for regime transition are not mutually exclusive. They can—and likely will—interact with and reinforce each other if a transition occurs. Protests can prompt elites to act and bureaucrats to stop working. A clear defeat in the war could lead to growing pressure on the regime from all quarters: elites, the public, and the security services. These pressures could become self-reinforcing, forming a vicious cycle for the Kremlin in which defections or protests in one part of society facilitate them in others, prompting individuals in power to take actions that would have been deemed unimaginable weeks earlier.

IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

Developments inside Russia will be decided by Russians. However, the West does have the ability to influence



A man walks past a currency exchange office in central Moscow on February 28, 2022.

Source: Alexander Nemenov/AFP/Getty Images

perceptions among elites and the public about what a post-Putin Russia might look like, which could both add to pressure on the regime and help shape the perceptions and ambitions of those who comes after.

However, for this to occur, Russia would have to end the war in Ukraine, open up political space, and reengage the West and Ukraine productively. U.S. president Joe Biden could make clear that a post-Putin Russia that takes such steps would see sanctions and travel restrictions melt away. Russia would be welcomed back to global sporting competitions, from the World Cup to the Olympics. It might also regain its global status, rejoin the Group of Seven, and restart the U.S.-Russian security dialogue aimed at building trust and putting limits on conventional and nuclear forces. Biden and European leaders could even float a longer-term possibility of Russia joining the European Union and NATO—which has an open-door policy in which any country can join if all allies agree, meaning membership is potentially open to Russia, too. While this may sound fanciful and utterly implausible, there is little reason not to leave open the possibility. The strength of the West's message comes from the fact that this is obviously a better course than doubling down on a hopeless, endless war for imperial aggrandizement that has resulted in huge human losses, economic strangulation, and international pariah status for Russia.

Furthermore, the Kremlin has found the notion that Russia is inevitably at odds with the West useful in justifying its isolation from Europe. Putin has even attempted to construct a “Eurasian” identity for Russia, with which he has sought to contrast the increasing liberalism of the West with Russia's traditional conservatism, such as on

LGBTQ+ issues. The Kremlin's rhetoric and propaganda has shifted perceptions; as a 2021 Levada [poll](#) found, fewer Russians think of Russia as a European country than did in 2019 or 2008. Yet Russia is a European country in that it has historically been oriented westward and been a pivotal player in European affairs. The pre-Soviet tsars were heavily orientated toward Europe, and even during the Soviet and Putin eras, Russia's major geopolitical, economic, and culture focus has been toward Europe. In other words, Putin's efforts to construct a Eurasian identity naturally at odds with Europe rest on shaky ground—though his narrative has been bolstered by current tensions with the West.

It could prove powerful to reject the premise that the West and Russia are inevitably at odds and highlight that Putin is the one isolating Russia, preventing it from having a European—and thus more prosperous—future. While getting such a message to penetrate Russian society and override state propaganda is difficult, it is not impossible. Messages and narratives can and do find a way to reach Russian elites and the highly connected public. Since the partial mobilization in September, the broader Russian public is also now seeking more credible information about the war in Ukraine. Biden and European leaders could give high-profile addresses and interviews on notable outlets run by Russian expatriates, such as Meduza, TV Rain, the Moscow Times, and iStories. The Biden administration could engage the growing Russian expatriate community and empower its efforts to broadcast accurate information about the war to the Russian public. Latvia's [recent suspension](#) of TV Rain was in this sense self-defeating. Instead of stifling these outlets, the West should be supporting and encouraging them, as they are the most effective vehicle for reaching the Russian public. The West should also be engaging Russians online, including on platforms such as Telegram and YouTube.

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Describing possible futures for a post-Putin Russia could create another avenue of pressure on the Kremlin. Although

such a messaging effort may have little to no impact, the cost of promoting a new narrative is virtually nothing. Meanwhile, it could have several beneficial effects:

First, it could increase public frustration with the Putin regime. The West could try to make clear that Putin is the one preventing Russia from having a European future. This—combined with military defeat, economic deprivation, and geopolitical isolation—might contribute to some Russians believing change is possible and help trigger popular unrest. To be clear, a new message from the West or speech from a U.S. president is not going to trigger popular unrest in Russia. But the belief that another path is possible for Russia, combined with military defeat, economic deprivation, and geopolitical isolation, might.

Second, it could undermine Putin's war narrative. Making clear to Russians that the West's issue is with Putin and *not* with the average Russian also helps undercut Putin's desperate effort to mobilize public support for the war. Putin needs to make up for lost time since he had deliberately sought to demobilize the Russian public at first by describing the war in Ukraine as a "special military operation." In doing so, he was signaling that this was a limited, technical mission the public did not need to worry about. He even initially cracked down on anyone who dared call it a "war." The Kremlin has not prepared the public for sacrifice or a prolonged conflict. With the war going badly, the enemy now has to be cast as more than just Ukraine—because "mighty" Russia cannot be getting ground down by "puny" Ukraine. The narrative has thus shifted to it being a fight against the West, which is out to destroy Russia. However, a message of possible Western-Russian reconciliation post-Putin would directly undercut the regime's broader narrative of eternal struggle with the West.

Third, it could mobilize those upset with the direction Putin has taken. It might help shift the calculation of elites, especially as pressure builds on the regime. Instead of sitting on their hands, elites might begin to take risks and seek out like-minded figures. Additionally, if regime collapse causes a sudden power vacuum and there is competition for power, a new leader or faction could gain support by arguing they can get sanctions removed by ending the war and improving relations with the West.

Fourth, it could help nudge the aftermath of regime collapse in a positive direction. Laying out a Western or European vision for Russia's future now could mitigate paranoia about the West's intentions within Russia if the regime collapses. The West could highlight that it does not seek the country's breakup or the destruction of the

state—especially given its tremendous concerns about the security of Russia's nuclear arsenal, the potential for renewed ethno-national violence, and the threat of successionist movements as a result of a geopolitical vacuum. Acknowledging that the West would be eager to reengage post-Putin Russia happens to both be entirely accurate and may reassure future Russian leaders, political operators, and influencers that they do not have to fear renewed engagement.

The path toward any potential partnership or reincorporation will entail a careful confidence-building dance in which each side, deeply skeptical of the other, gradually grows to trust the other's intentions. This process broke down in the post-Cold War period, especially during Putin's rise to and consolidation of power. Many nations, especially Russia's neighbors, will be deeply skeptical of its potential rehabilitation and favor an uncompromising policy that weakens Russia or furthers its disintegration. While this skepticism may be warranted, the main U.S. objective in a post-Putin Russia would be to transform it from an anti-Western, revisionist actor into one that—even if not entirely Western-aligned—at least does not threaten its neighbors.

Importantly, engaging in the rhetoric of reconciliation does not mean softening sanctions, slowing military assistance to Ukraine, or delaying pursuit of war criminals. On the contrary, the regime, the elite, and the Russian public should know that the present path is a road to economic ruin, global pariah status, and military collapse—though such rhetoric should avoid stereotyping or characterizing Russians as irredeemable.

Critics might describe the discussion of a post Putin-Russia as the United States shifting to a policy of "regime change." However, there is no point to pursuing regime change because the United States does not have the means to execute such a policy short of direct military intervention, which is unthinkable in the Russian context. Contrary to Putin's vehement claims, the United States cannot cause "color revolutions." All it and Europe can do is offer potential inclusion in the West should a country go down a democratic path. But that may be the biggest incentive of all; Ukraine's 2014 Maidan Revolution, for instance, happened when people took to the streets to demand a European future. Since the Biden administration's goal is to put pressure on the Putin regime, it is a logical extension to put ideological pressure on the Kremlin as well.

Others might claim that talk of reincorporating Russia could let it off the hook for its crimes, arguing that Russia needs accountability for its actions. The problem with this

argument is that bringing war criminals to trial and collecting potential reparations requires Russia's willing participation, which will likely depend on Russia seeing a path or trajectory for cooperation with and inclusion in the West.

IS A LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC RUSSIA POSSIBLE?

There is good reason to doubt the potential for a liberal democratic Russia that is not hostile to the West. Putin is in many ways a reflection of the Russian public. He is popular in no small measure because hardline nationalism is popular within Russia, while democracy remains badly stained by the political chaos and economic collapse of the 1990s, which led to the development of crony capitalism instead of a strong and vibrant market economy. Much of the Russian public has also been fed anti-Western propaganda for most of the past century. Thus, any new leader or regime might **revert** to a hardline nationalist posture in order to maintain public support.

Furthermore, Russia might not be able to survive as a state without autocratic rule, as its multiethnic polity built through **imperial conquest** could fall apart without Moscow wielding uncompromising authority. Even if Russian leaders seek a democratic future, the country could still unravel. Russia could descend back into the lawless chaos of the 1990s, when mafia groups, armed oligarchs, and separatist movements took advantage of the weakened state. This is undoubtedly a concern, but Russia today is very different. In the early 1990s, it faced a difficult transition from a command economy to a free-market one, and the resulting economic collapse severely weakened Russian state capacity. By contrast, a move away from Putin could bring tremendous economic benefits. A new, more liberal regime in Moscow would not face the same struggles as in the 1990s. Moreover, though there is a real potential for a new wave of secessionist movements, it is counterbalanced by broader Russian patriotism, identity, and attachment to the state.

The odds are **slim** that Russia will choose a liberal, democratic, pro-Western path—even if the public were free to do so—but neither is it impossible. Although creating a multiethnic representative democracy in Russia, a country with a near-continuous autocratic history, seems far-fetched, similar things were said about Germany after World War II. Europe, a continent almost always at war throughout its history, came together in a federal union. While Russian NATO or EU membership currently seems implausible, the West should at least be open to the potential possibility, however slim or distant.

The war in Ukraine has exposed the folly of the West's excessive optimism about the "end of history" after the fall of the Soviet Union, particularly the vision that economic engagement would inevitably lead to democratic change. But that vision, while simplistic, was not contrived out of thin air. It was borne out of lessons of the post-World War II and the post-Cold War European experience. The West may be in danger of going too far in unlearning the lessons of its past and assuming its adversaries are intrinsically wicked and immune to the appeal of democracy. Part of the West's strength is the belief that, on balance, systems in which people are free to select their leaders will do a better job overall than other forms of government. The West should not forget the inherent appeal of its free democratic system, which so worries autocrats because it inspires revolutions.

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Even if the skeptics are right, which they may be, that Russia would never be incorporated into the West and is doomed to have an autocratic future, Western leaders should still convey an integrationist message to add pressure on the Putin regime and undermine its narrative about the war in Ukraine. Demonstrating that an alternative future is possible will likely do more to undermine Putin than any performative condemnations.

Ultimately, the future of Russia will be determined by Russians, not by the West. However, it costs nothing to let Russians know that, if they pursue democracy, the West will embrace them. Such action might affect how Russians think about the Putin regime and their future.

As much as rhetoric of retribution may feel justified, just as it did toward Germany after World Wars I and II, the smarter path focused on rehabilitation and integration. The West did not offer this out of generosity but because of geopolitical competition with the Soviet Union. Similarly, encouraging and incentivizing a post-Putin Russia to drop its anti-Western outlook and its malign revisionist approach to the international order would have profound geopolitical implications for the United States vis-à-vis China, European security, and the liberal world order.

Significantly, the Soviet Union collapsed not when Reagan or the West had an iron fist but when they had an outstretched arm. The Green Movement in Iran erupted not when the United States was threatening to bomb the country but after a newly inaugurated President Obama addressed the Iranian people in a Nowruz message, offering a “**new beginning**” that became impossible when, three months later, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was reelected president under dubious circumstances. Correlation does not equal causation, but there is never one factor that causes revolution. Offering a segment of society hope for a better, more liberal future can have a powerful effect. ■

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