

Reflections on World Politics #8

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It's Not Just About Putin

Our News Sources: Many of us get the majority of our updates on world events from TV news programs or newspaper commentaries. These news sources have a basic orientation toward emphasizing the role of celebrities, in part because of their short timelines and the brevity of their reports. Most articles about the war in Ukraine focus on the two presidents, Vladimir Putin and Volodymyr Zelensky. Unfortunately, this “celebrity culture” orientation gets in the way of developing a deeper understanding of the forces at work in this tragic conflict.

As the Russian military invasion faltered and their forces were withdrawn from the area surrounding Ukraine’s capital city of Kiev, analysts increasingly raised the question of Putin’s potential removal from power, especially as the dead bodies of Russian soldiers began stacking up and the West’s sanctions weakened their country’s economy.

Russia’s Deep State: There have been very few coups in Russian history, and only two since the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. Following Joseph Stalin’s death in 1953, Lavrenti Beria, his brutal head of the KGB, was forcibly removed from power and assassinated along with six of his colleagues. Nikita Khrushchev was also toppled from power, but in his case, in a nonviolent action by security forces and the Russian military in October 1964.

It is very difficult to know how and if Putin would be removed from power, either by leaders of his security forces or because of massive public protests; both seem unlikely right now. But the more important pattern is that autocrats like Putin are almost always replaced by autocratic successors. Personalist autocrats have rarely been succeeded by democratic leaders. In fact, 80% of these types of autocrats end up in jail or exile or dead. The sad reality is that Putin’s removal from power will not change the threat from Russia’s “deep state,” driven by the hawkish military leaders around Putin who compete to show how hostile they are to the West. These cronies have all been involved in supporting the war against Putin. This means we must understand that this is not simply a struggle against Putin.

It is important to understand that Putin rebuilt the Russian state bureaucracy, which was largely dysfunctional by the end of Boris Yeltsin’s presidency, and he dramatically enlarged the country’s national security establishment, which includes the military as well as intelligence and law enforcement agencies. The leaders of these institutions will most likely be the ones to decide who will replace him. Russians refer to this national security network as “*siloviki*” which Western analysts translate as “guys with guns” or “men of power.”

The funding for both internal security agencies and the defense ministry is 30% of Russia’s national budget. Experts estimate that the number of personnel at Russian internal security

agencies has grown by 10% since 2014, following the mass protests directed at Putin's re-election. This is a very repressive environment -- one in which no opposition is allowed.

It seems likely that there will be increased repression of any form of protest that these agencies view as dangerous. Their brutal treatment of protestors, even those who are elderly, demonstrate how these various agencies are competing to outdo each other and prove their loyalty to Putin and his Security Council.

The Oligarchs Lose Power in Russia: During Yeltsin's administration in the 1990s, Russian oligarchs emerged as major power brokers. With Yeltsin's heart problems and worsening alcoholism, the oligarchs not only became extremely wealthy by exploiting their contacts with Yeltsin's family and key government officials, but also by funding his re-election campaign in 1996 when the polls gave him little hope of success.

When Putin came to power in 2000, he quickly made it clear to the oligarchs that they could keep their wealth if they stayed out of Russia's politics. He enforced this by pressuring several oligarchs to go into exile and taking over their media empires; he also imprisoned one of them and nationalized his successful private oil company. The remaining oligarchs prospered, while understanding that their wealth was tied to their loyalty to Putin. But when Western sanctions were introduced in 2014, following Russia's involvement in Ukraine's domestic politics, many of these oligarchs lost their contacts in the West. Putin responded shrewdly, offering them financial help in the form of huge state contracts to rebuild Russia's military-industrial complex and other major infrastructure projects.

War Crimes: Journalists often ask President Zelensky if Putin is a "war criminal." He repeatedly answers yes, but adds that this is also the case with Putin's entire Security Council and the chain-of-command that oversees the attack on Ukraine. He understands – and we must as well – that it is Russia's national security network and its military leadership that are behind this war to destroy Ukraine as an independent nation. Putin's Kremlin cronies will continue his plan to rebuild the Russian empire, with or without him. We need to have no illusions about this. Russia is and will continue to be a threat to other countries on its border, and a cease-fire will only delay their renewed attack when the West gets distracted by other events. The best defense against Russia's aggression is the continued unity of the United States with NATO and all the members of the European Union. Do we have the backbone, and the depth of commitment, to sustain Ukraine in this battle? If not, further aggression by Russia is sure to follow.



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