

Reflections on World Politics: Russia - #23

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Putin Is Approaching a Dead End

New Battlefield Realities: Reports from the various fronts of the war in Ukraine are indicating that there are some new dynamics at work. Russia is making no significant progress in enlarging their control of key areas in the east and south of Ukraine and Ukrainian forces are reporting that the Russians are firing outdated missiles and have used up to 50% of their weapons which is dramatically reducing their military capabilities. Meanwhile missile systems from the West are enabling Ukrainians to destroy three ammunition depots, five army bases, and two command posts of the Russian Armed Forces in Odesa, just to give you one example.

A second new dynamic is the emerging warfare of Ukrainian partisans who are attacking Russian forces and eliminating collaborators who support the occupying Russian political leaders in areas currently under their control. In addition, they are putting a price tag on these collaborators' lives and even giving rewards for capturing some of the top leaders. They also attacked the headquarters of the Russian Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol, Crimea, with a drone.

In addition, ten Russian generals have been killed since the war began and six other commanders have been dismissed, which is complicating decisions relating to tactical and operational issues. These changing dynamics do not mean the war will come to an end in the near future, but some Russian soldiers are refusing to return to service in Ukraine and intercepted phone calls from Russian soldiers on the front line describe their staggering losses and their fear of facing highly motivated Ukrainian soldiers who are fiercely protecting their homeland.

Putin's Dilemma: Professor Timothy Snyder makes it clear that Putin's decision to invade Ukraine was a crime and also a mistake. For an autocrat whose power rests on his image as a strong man with strategic capability, how can Putin admit he is losing? Russia is now fighting because not to fight would be embarrassing – which means Putin's leadership position is increasingly under threat. Putin can try again to create another justification for launching this attack, which is how he rules the country. As an autocrat, post-truth narratives are always open to revision and most Russians who support him are both gullible and cynical.

Peter Pomerantsev, a media expert in Russia, left the country because of what he calls Putin's "Empire of Humiliation." He describes the attack on Ukraine as an act of imperialism, a colonial war meant to destroy another nation's right to exist. His whole approach is to humiliate people by using his power over them, making them feel worthless and dependent on him. He uses the same approach toward the Russians themselves. He points out that living in Putin's Russia means enduring the daily humiliation of being governed by an extractive class that takes money and the lives of its own people.

What are the future options for an autocrat who begins to lose power and respect? Three options – none of which is desirable: jail, exile, or death. Putin has created this system of governance and now he faces its logical conclusion. If he creates a false picture of the war, denying the reality on the battlefield, sooner or later he will be removed. I have no idea when or how this will happen.

Putin – the Survivalist: One of the best biographies of Vladimir Putin is Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin, written by Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy. They take a creative approach in explaining Putin by describing six “identities” and I want to focus on the insights they share about “Putin the Survivalist.” In their view, Putin is often underestimated in the West by our failure to understand that he will fight as long and as hard and as dirty as necessary to achieve his goals. He will use all available methods and will be ruthless. The authors emphasize that “we often fail to appreciate. . . how dangerously little Putin understands about us – our motives, our mentality, and, also, our values.”

The Kremlin works hard to give Putin every advantage over others, so access to him is strictly limited and his public appearances are highly orchestrated and well prepared. Their goal is to make him unknowable to outsiders. Western leaders will have to deal with the reality of Putin’s views, which Hill and Gaddy describe in these terms: “he **does** think differently from his U.S. and European counterparts. He **does** see the West as a threat to him and his system.” He will probe and attack Ukraine until the country submits to him and, beyond Ukraine, all of Eastern Europe and the Baltic states are his targets.

Warnings from a Former Russian Foreign Minister: Andrei Kozyrev, who served as the first Foreign Minister following the establishment of the Russian Federation in 1991 through 1996, described Russia’s invasion of Ukraine as “barbaric” but warned that his larger goal is the destruction of Western democracy. Putin claims that “Russia’s values are superior and diametrically opposed to Western decadence.” This claim to superiority is the key to understanding the war crimes and genocidal nature of Russia’s war on Ukraine, according to Kozyrev. He noted that Putin’s Kremlin cronies agree that “Russia simply cannot afford to lose the United States as a clear enemy in the eyes of the people, the army, and the government. It needs a common enemy to unite them.”

In fact, Kozyrev argues that Putin’s plan to create the “Antidemocracy International” as a global network fueled by anti-Western fury is off to a bad start. Pro-democracy forces have come together in ways that surprised many analysts, and Ukraine has emerged as a remarkable energizer for opponents of autocratic rule. The fight against Putin’s brutal aggression is not over, and we can no longer be surprised by his tactics, but he is facing a dead end as Russia’s autocrat. There is no way out of this for him if the West continues its timely support for Ukraine with needed military weaponry.

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