



How to stop Putin's war against Ukraine

By Vladimir Dubrovskiy¹

April 2022

Some in the West think Putin is obsessed with Ukraine because he sincerely believes that Ukrainians and Russians are 'just two branches of the same people', and there is a small group of 'Nazi-Ukrainians' that sway this 'part of Russia' towards the West. This is why he is waging his war. But he does not call the rest of the European nations 'the same people', and that may mean he is unlikely to go further west and attack NATO countries – especially given that they are much better protected. Therefore, the argument goes, 'let us sit on the fence and wait until this madness ends, then get back to business as usual – especially because we do need Russian resources'.

There is perhaps some truth in that line of reasoning. Putin seems to be obsessed with what he and his ideologists call the 'Ukrainian problem' just as much as Hitler and those around him were obsessed with the 'Jewish problem'. However, the nature of this obsession is dramatically different. For Germany under Nazi rule the reason was racial: they sought to exterminate 'non-Aryan peoples' (Jews, Roma, etc.) regardless of other factors. But Putin appears to hate the Ukrainians not for their ethnicity, culture and language (which are, indeed, quite close to the Russian ones, although still distinct), but first and foremost for the difference in values. The freedom and dignity that Ukrainians proved to cherish above all are precisely those European values that are inimical to the Russian system of rules based on a strong patronal 'vertical of power' of masters and slaves with the unblemished God-given Tsar on top. Putin indeed feels threatened by Ukraine, though not in the military sense – that is just ridiculous – but through the idea of spreading these values and exemplifying their virtues to the Russian people. Here is exactly the point where cultural and

¹ Vladimir Dubrovskiy is a political economist based in Kyiv (Senior Economist at CASE Ukraine).

language proximity along with strong kinship ties between two peoples becomes critical, because, as Putin fears, 'the same people' can easily 'infect' his own subjugates with such 'contaminating' values (in fact, that may or may not be true).

But, as we have already learned the hard way, treating Putin (and a 'collective Putin' – the wider line-up of Russia's political class) as a rational actor is a grave mistake. Rather he (they) are driven by resentment mixed with inherent hatred to the values that run counter to their own. From this viewpoint, his (their) main enemy is the West that 'defeated' the USSR in the Cold War and imposed (as Putin presents it) its 'unnatural' values on the Ukrainian and Russian people. The Russians, in his opinion, have mostly withstood this pressure (except for some 'traitors to the nation'), and after some 'wrong-turns' in the 1990s managed to revive 'spiritual bonds' and started 'rising up from their knees'. However, 'the Ukrainian branch of the Russian people' in Putin's view emerged as 'turncoats' who had succumbed to the West's soft power and betrayed their 'common past'. They rejected pro-Russian Yanukovich in 2014 and instead turned towards Europe. Of course, the 'traitors' are hated even more than the main enemy (the West), but the latter nevertheless remain the ultimate target.

Still, this is not the whole story, because in the Russian paradigm the people have no voice, they are considered 'objects' not subjects, to be fully subdued and manipulated by the elites. Therefore, as Putin sees it, it is not the Ukrainian (= same as Russian) people that betrayed the 'russkiy mir' (Russian world), but some malicious elites, swayed or installed by the West, that turned the herd against the 'common past'. Hence the crazy idea of 'liberation' from some mythical 'Nazi' rule. But from this perspective it becomes obvious that the real enemy that Putin is fighting in Ukraine is not the Ukrainians themselves, but the West and basic Western values and freedoms. Unlike Hitler, for which any 'non-Aryan' person was an enemy regardless of anything else, for Putin the compliant Ukrainians are allies, and only the pro-Western ones are enemies – just as the pro-Western Russians.

This approach, unlike a Ukraine-centric one, explains more facts, including the most important one – Putin's ultimatum to NATO that he put forward in December 2021. Obviously, he sees his 'historical mission' in getting revenge for the 'greatest geopolitical disaster of the 20th century' in defeating the West through nuclear blackmail. In doing this, he uses war against Ukraine as a 'signalling game' with the aim of proving the credibility of his threats – and not for the first time. Such 'games' have a prominent role in the Russian *modus operandi*.

This is because, as Henry Hale explained, the whole (largely informal) 'vertical of power' is based on self-fulfilling expectations: the hierarchy members keep loyalty to the supreme patron as long as they believe that obedience will be rewarded (and disloyalty – punished) by the patron's discretionary orders.² The latter is, in turn, being fulfilled by other members also because they believe that otherwise the patron will inevitably punish them for non-obedience.

Two important implications that follow from this are:

1. A patron has power as long as he is perceived eternal, all-seeing and all-mighty. If only the members realise that the game is finite, they start defecting. Their end-game strategy is to take-and-run, just as in a bank run – first come, first serve. Thus, a 'vertical' avalanche-like destruction happens not at the point where all of resources are exhausted, but much earlier, when a critical mass of elites realises that the game will be over soon.

² Henry E. Hale, *Patronal Politics: Eurasian Regime Dynamics in Comparative Perspective*, Cambridge University Press, November 2014, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/patronal-politics/4C1B4D49A7F17739E75A5AB7B66E2115>

2. Having that in mind, a patron should, all of the time, credibly signal his might and resolve to his subjugates. Once he stops or fails to demonstrate this, the hierarchy crashes.

Add to this that Russian/Soviet culture is based on zero-sum thinking that treats a compromise as an indication of weakness.

Both these implications matter a lot for the case in point about Ukraine. Let us start with the second one. Firstly, the attack on Ukraine is a 'signalling game' in the context of Russia's confrontation with the West aimed at demonstrating Russia's resolve, hence credibility of its threats. But that also means...

..Secondly, Putin cannot afford losing this game. He will go as far as he can, including, possibly, mass mobilisation through conscription, and even using chemical or possibly nuclear weapons, not to mention indiscriminate bombing and shelling of civilian areas that (as we see) he is already engaged in. He will not rest for any compromise other than capitulation of Ukraine. Zelensky, on the other hand, is not going to surrender, nor will Ukrainian society allow him to do so. Which makes for a deadlock of antagonistic interests, and only one will survive in the long run.

Thirdly, even if Putin finally defeats Ukraine, this will not make the West more compliant in fulfilling the ultimatum, and he is likely to double-down on his bets instead of looking for a compromise. Thus, the next attack could well be against NATO itself. Before 24th February many analysts and commentators (including this author) considered that Putin was bluffing and was likely to resort to some 'plan B' if the West did not succumb to his demands. That thinking was flawed. By attacking Ukraine he has already burned all of his bridges, and become the World's Villain #1. Putin has not much to lose since then in terms of the price for his aggressive behaviour. At the same time, stopping at any point short of outright victory would signal his weakness – and this is what he cannot afford, and would do everything to avoid.

The usual counter-argument to the last statement is that direct collusion with NATO would mean mutually assured destruction (MAD) – this is the factor that restrained the leaders from all-out nuclear war within the whole post-WWII period. However, here the 'mutually assured' is also based on the credibility of threats. Putin likely thinks that the West's threat is not credible anymore. In fact, the threat of fully-fledged nuclear attack in response to a limited one (not to mention extensive use of conventional weapons) is hardly credible, because once destruction is wrought, further escalation would bring only more destruction to all sides. This is why for MAD to be effective requires constant demonstrations of resolve and even aggression – also as a sort of 'signalling game'. However, now there are the mixed signals that the Biden administration, while showing important support for Ukraine, has demonstrated also a certain reluctance to confront its enemies by all means available (in the same way as the Obama administration did in 2014). Niall Ferguson writes on this explicitly, about what the very modest response to the annexation of Crimea and intervention in the Donbas in 2014, coupled later with a panic withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, actually signals about severe lack of resolve.³ No surprise at all that Putin sees this as a unique window of opportunity for his expansionist plans.

Hence, the unpleasant conclusion is that there is hardly any other way to escape a Devil's choice between surrender to Putin's ultimatum (certainly not the last one he will try to issue) and an all-out nuclear standoff where, at minimum, Putin needs to be removed. Still this might appear insufficient, because he is not a lone maniac with a 'red button' – the whole 'collective Putin', as far as can

³ Niall Ferguson, The Fates of Ukraine and Putin Turn on 7 Forces of History, Bloomberg, March 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2022-03-09/niall-ferguson-ukraine-invasion-struggles-could-be-the-end-for-putin>

judged, lines up behind confrontation with the West and the war in Ukraine. Moreover, this is not a war of a single man or even some elites; an apparent majority of the Russian population seems to support him in this confrontation. Thus, he is likely to be replaced by some, not much less (if not even more), dangerous person (a 'Putin 2.0').

In the same vein, no compromise peace settlement the Ukrainian people can accept is likely to be able to bring about a prolonged peace. As mentioned above, any compromise in the Russian zero-sum culture is considered as an unacceptable concession, near to defeat. At the same time, the Russians en masse feel offended and humiliated by the sanctions and by the way the world now treats them. They consider an aggressive war as the normal behaviour of a superpower – 'just like the US did in Yugoslavia and Iraq', they say. And they lack (or simply reject) the information about war crimes their army commits in Ukraine. So, for them, such treatment is 'unfair'. And, consequently, in case of a compromise peace deal, their sense of resentment will rise even more.

Only a meltdown of Russia that will drive its inhabitants through the kind of real catharsis that the Germans and Japanese had to undergo after WWII can solve the problem once and for all. The actual alternative is a nuclear war, which would bring far more atrocities even for the Russian people.

Many experts used to say that sanctions would put pressure on the Russian economy, and bring about domestic change through that pressure. Unfortunately, that is much too optimistic. First of all, the sanctions are not hermetic as long as China, India, and a number of other countries, often endowed with the necessary technologies or natural resources, not only lack appetite to join the sanctions, but are going to benefit from them. Furthermore, the Russian economy is sufficiently strong and large enough, despite its flaws and weaknesses. It is in far better shape than the Soviet one in 1980s, although much more globalised. Even partial reversal of this globalisation is not going to bring hunger and real misery.

Last but not least, for the ideologically indoctrinated Russian people, the pride of their imperial revival can more than compensate for some non-critical material losses, especially if it is easily explained as the 'enemies' plot against (our) greatness'. Not to mention that most people in Russia used to see the authorities' power as 'God given', hate the rebels and love a 'strong hand'; and the minority that constitute a civil society of conscious citizens is small, dispersed, and largely constrained to live in exile. It is another matter that views may not always be so divorced from some of the attitudes one finds in some circles back in Russia. Thus, the regime is resilient enough and can withstand severe sanctions for decades, just as Iran, Cuba, Venezuela, and North Korea do. It may fail to develop and produce the modern weapons, but still keep the nuclear missiles, which is enough to blackmail the West.

Still, the most vulnerable part of the Russian political-economic and institutional system is its backbone, the above-described 'vertical of power' – the only way in which the Russian Empire in all of its reincarnations (unlike in the democracies) can exist and remain more or less effective and stable. Thus, the softest, safest, least risky and most effective way to achieve the regime's meltdown from afar is avalanche-like destruction of the 'vertical of power'.

The same analysis as outlined above suggests the way for achieving this: 'to make the game finite'. The Russian political class should realise that this time they have crossed a red line and the whole world is absolutely serious in its commitment to put an end to the strivings of empire. For example, by undermining its economic base, depriving it from access to modern technologies at all levels, and, at the same time, putting an unbearable burden of the new arms race on it, just as it was with the USSR in 1980s. They should realise that not only Putin is mortal, but the whole system they

serve in is. And there are no 50+ years ahead, as it was with the Soviet Union when it collaborated with Nazi Germany in starting WWII, because, unlike then, there are no allies Russia can mobilise. There are, of course, still question marks over China's position in all this.

That is, actually, one of the arguments against excessive pressure on Russia: the West is not interested in seeing China strengthened on the back of Russian natural resources and access to vast territories. However, realistically speaking, those resources will anyway become available to China in the global line-drawing between the democracies (led by the US) and autocracies (led by China). These alignments are all coming sharper into focus from, among other things, the Biden administration ideas around the Summit of Democracy. Russia under Putin is firmly in the autocracies camp, because values matter more than anything else. Furthermore, this confrontation, although vitally important for the free world, is likely going to be rather peaceful – in sharp contrast to Putin's military aggression and nuclear blackmailing. So, even some strengthening of China with Russian resources (anyway inevitable) seems to be less dangerous than current Russian aggression.

The second usual argument against excessive pressure on Russia is the risk of a nuclear attack: a 'cornered rat', as Putin once alluded, can become aggressive and dangerous, because it has nothing to lose. However, Russia is already behaving this way, and demonstrating its readiness to use nuclear weapons. Still, the order of launching a rocket, if given, should be fulfilled by human beings, the members of the system hierarchy. They are more likely to disobey it in the event of a hierarchy 'meltdown', than now, when it is at full strength. The same logic applies to the argument that the Evil Empire's destruction can go the 'Yugoslav' way, with terrible conflicts and eruptions between its constituent parts. But, in the event of hierarchy destruction its members will be busy with their own end-games, and hardly able to wage a war. It is worth noting that in case of Yugoslavia it was Milosevic's fully functional dictatorship state that started all of those wars. Not to mention huge religious and historical cleavages within the Yugoslav republics that are largely absent in Russia, except for the North Caucasus.

Finally, there always was an argument that, just like in case of the USSR's meltdown, nuclear arms can end up in the hands of totally irresponsible actors i.e. terrorists. In fact, that is what is emerging, as in the case of Putin and his entourage. All other former Soviet republics, and primarily Ukraine, surrendered their nuclear arsenals under international supervision. But, now we see the only remaining nuclear arsenal held in the hands of ideologically-driven and dangerous actors that may resort to applying it against the West. We all hope not. But, equally, it could hardly be worse, especially given that the procedure for using those arms is so complex that only in a Hollywood movie can a single terrorist launch a nuclear war – but an operational hierarchy of Russia, as long as it remains effective, can make that nightmare real.

Of course, defeating Russia even in such a 'soft' way bears high risks and incurs high costs, including but not limited to the energy-related ones. However, it is time to realise that Russia is already engaged in war with the West, not only with Ukraine, and the risks and costs rise every day. This war would probably never have reached its present level if the West had shown more resolve eight years ago, when it had just started. Appeasement had no effect, and now Putin has multiplied the bets. He will do so again should he be allowed to win this round. Now, the task is not only to stop him here and now, but also devise a smart and credible strategy of bringing down the whole Russian 'vertical of power', by making the game finite.