

No Way Out? Why the West Should Offer an Exit Option to Russia's Elites and Population

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be much more difficult to stop the war in the future, but Russia could turn into a country where most people have internalized strong anti-Western sentiments and believe that Russia should oppose the US and the EU at all costs in any situation possible. This type of resentment would be very difficult to eradicate and would make Russia much more dangerous in the long run than it is now.

This scenario becomes more likely with each day the war goes on. Stopping the conflict soon could halt Russians' nationalist awakening and push them back into a depoliticized state; under these conditions, anti-Westernism in Russia will remain superficial and able to be reversed (e.g., by Putin's successor, who will sooner or later come to power). But if Russian society becomes politicized, its strong anti-Western sentiments are likely to outlive the Putin regime and dictate the evolution of Russian politics in the long run.

About the Author

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Those in the West who oppose the idea of freezing the conflict may underestimate the long-term risks of this societal evolution for Europe and for the world. Certainly, freezing the conflict is impossible without the agreement of Ukraine (which is unlikely now and cannot be forced from outside); furthermore, it is associated with risks (a ceasefire might be unstable and Russia might maintain control of some Ukrainian territory). However, the transformation of Russian society, if not stopped as soon as possible, might produce a much bigger risk: a nuclear power with large natural resources, economic ties to China and the Global South, and (and this is something that we have not seen in Russia/the Soviet Union since the 1960s) with a population and elites that share a deep aversion to Europe and the West. While a frozen conflict is certainly a suboptimal solution, the alternative could be much worse.

No Way Out? Why the West Should Offer an Exit Option to Russia's Elites and Population

Michael Rochlitz (University of Bremen)

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With Russia's high-intensity war against Ukraine entering its 15th month, both countries' futures look bleak. Ukraine has to fight for its survival against a foe that seems determined to fight on and still has ample reserves of manpower and natural resources. The West is supporting Ukraine with weaponry, but the war is fought on Ukraine's territory, and its economy and people are suffering heavily.

Russia's future looks similarly bleak, if not worse. The country's leadership has maneuvered itself into a grim impasse. The war is going badly for Russia, but having staked everything on one card, Putin and his cronies cannot end it without losing face. Even if offered such an option, it remains unclear if they would take it, as it seems increasingly likely that fighting this war is what they wanted all along (Courtois et al. 2023). In the meantime, Russia is bleeding soldiers at a rate likely much higher than Ukraine, as Ukraine is fighting with more modern weaponry and more advanced doctrine. The war has also deprived Russia of its economic future. The long-term costs of losing Europe's energy markets are severe (Babina et al. 2023). Moreover, hundreds of

thousands of highly qualified specialists, in particular from the IT sector, have left the country (Borak 2023). Many of them are unlikely to return, depriving Russia of the possibility to diversify its economy in preparation for a time after oil and gas. Meanwhile, Russia's shift toward a harsher form of authoritarianism is intensifying a problem with which the Russian economy has long struggled, namely the heavy-handed pressure on Russia's business community by the security services (Rochlitz 2022). Finally, the risk that Russia might break apart and descend into a new "time of troubles" is no longer completely unrealistic, with infighting between different factions becoming increasingly and openly visible (Rogov 2023).

The West Needs a Strategy for Russia's Future

For now, Western sanctions are mainly aimed at limiting Russia's economic ability to fight the war and signaling that continuing to do so would be very costly for the Russian economy. In this, they have been successful. Nevertheless, the economic or political collapse of

Russia would be disastrous for the West. There is thus a need for a viable long-term strategy for Russia. The West needs to send a clear signal to the different stakeholders in Russia that the sanctions are not aimed against the Russian people or against Russia as a country, but only against Putin and his war of aggression in Ukraine. If such a strategy were to be devised, whom should it address and what should it look like?

Over the last 20 years, Putin has done a thorough job of depoliticizing and atomizing Russian society, eliminating groups and actors who were willing to take responsibility for the future of the country. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify four different groups of stakeholders with different attitudes toward the war and Russia's future.

Four Groups of Stakeholders

The group that has been pulling the strings for the last couple of years and that is responsible for the current disaster is the security services. Their leadership—in particular Putin, Bortnikov, Patrushev, and a number of other high-level *siloviki*—have made it clear that their increasingly weird views of the world are not some sophisticated charade; they indeed believe what they are saying. This is in part a result of Putin's strategy to replace competent officials with ones that are less qualified but loyal and ideologically closer to his views (Petrov and Rochlitz 2019, Egorov and Sonin 2023). It also results from a failure by Russia's elites to engage with and come to terms with the crimes of the KGB and the Soviet past (Belton 2021). The desperate attempts by several Western politicians to prevent a Russian invasion in early 2022 have shown that it might be very difficult, if not impossible, to lead a constructive dialogue with this group.

Fortunately, they are not the only stakeholders active in Russia. Two other groups that have played an important role over the last year are the country's national and regional economic administrations, and Russia's business community. Over the last 15 years, Russia has suffered a number of severe economic shocks, such as the 2008/2009 financial crisis, the annexation of Crimea and the ensuing sanctions, the Covid pandemic, and now the war with Ukraine. During these disasters, Russia's administrations and its business community have become increasingly apt at working together to mitigate and resist economic shocks by accumulating sufficient reserves in calmer times, hedging investments,

and always expecting the next possible disaster. This is not an efficient way to manage an economy, but it is a matter of survival in an economy such as Russia's, and it permitted Russia to soften the economic blow of Western sanctions in 2022 (Yakovlev 2023). While Russia's technocrats and its business community are not immune to Kremlin propaganda, they also understand that Putin's actions have massively harmed Russia's economic interests. This could make them receptive to an offer from the West.

Finally, there is Russia's population. While opinion polls continue to show that nominal support for the war remains high, a recent in-depth sociological study found that much of this support is due to people being too afraid or exhausted to take a political stand against the war, rather than being convinced that fighting a war with Ukraine is a good idea (Nasarec 2023). A recent survey experiment similarly found that Russians are much more concerned about economic stagnation and decline than they are about Russia's geopolitical role in the world (Rochlitz et al. 2022). While Russia's population is too atomized and lacks the political organization to take an active role for now, it might also—at least in theory—be receptive to a charm offensive from the West.

What Might a Western Strategy for Russia Look Like?

One of the reasons respondents were afraid of a Russian defeat was a feeling that “the whole world is against us” (Nasarec 2023). This is a dangerous situation, but it is also an understandable outcome of Russian propaganda and Western sanctions. To counter this, the West would have to reach out to Russia's population, as well as its technocratic administrations and its business community, with a clear signal that the goal of the sanctions is not to destroy Russia, but to end Putin's murderous war of aggression. One option, for example—in addition to a Marshall Plan for the large-scale reconstruction of Ukraine—would be a plan to reintegrate Russia into the European economic system. This plan would have to be equipped with the necessary political weight and financial credibility to send a clear signal to Russia's population and pro-business forces in Russia: Russia has the possibility of a successful economic future alongside Europe, and it is Putin and his war alone that stand in the way of such a common future.

About the Author

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Party Politics in Russia: Two and a Half Scenarios

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The conditions for institutionalized political competition in Russia have further deteriorated in recent years. Since 2021, the Russian regime has been on a trajectory from an “informational autocracy” (Gurieff/Treisman 2022) to a more classical, repressive authoritarian regime. In a broad campaign that began before the full-scale invasion, the authorities have dismantled or outlawed oppositional organizations and the remaining independent media, have imprisoned or driven into exile virtually all prominent politicians of the non-systemic opposition, and have effectively introduced war censorship. Harnessing advanced technological solutions, the authorities in Moscow have created one of the most sophisticated systems of facial recognition, and the Kremlin recently pushed through “Fan ID,” a contested system of digital profiles of football fans, who had been one of the last uncontrolled organized collectives. Further to these general restrictions and increases in surveillance, the authorities have done much to undermine Alexey Navalny’s Smart Voting project, an idea that might have come to the rescue of party politics, as it increased the value of campaigning under a clearly identifiable opposition-party brand. Finally, the introduction of electronic voting has increased the potential for electoral falsifications to a whole new level.

Of no less importance are the signals that parties themselves have been sending to show that they have understood the signs of the times. All parliamentary parties except for “New People,” a pro-business party with purported Kremlin connections, have joined the choir of extreme nationalism, routinely spreading anti-Ukrainian and anti-Western propaganda, and moving domestic politics, where they have more scope to criti-

cize the government, to the back burner. Leonid Slutsky, leader of the LDPR since Vladimir Zhirinovsky’s death in 2022, has even suggested merging all opposition parties into a “party of victory” that would support “the implementation of the president’s sound instructions.” Gennady Zyuganov has made similar comments about a “Party of Russia” to which all “patriotic” forces would belong. Given all of the above, one might legitimately ask: is there room for any kind of party politics in Russia’s future?

Scenario 1: GDR-ization

The first scenario, as recently outlined by journalist and political observer Andrei Pertsev (2023), might be called “GDR-ization.” In this scenario, the parties would retain their formal labels (Putin has often criticized the single-party character of the Soviet regime) but would lose any trace of real—and, importantly, self-professed—autonomy, instead openly presenting themselves as a unified force of support for Putin and the state. In Pertsev’s short outline, the party system would have to be understood as a single political organism composed of actors that (profess to) represent different segments of the population but do not—even formally—engage in competition. In this scenario, elections are not focal points of contention or even a façade thereof, but rather moments of demonstrated societal unity.

A clear sign of such GDR-ization is that Putin himself seems to view it this way. In his address to the Federal Assembly in February 2023, he thanked all parliamentary parties for putting their disagreements behind them and helping the “patriotic movement,” including by providing supplies for the front. The model also