



# Is Russia preparing for a future without Putin? Should we?

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The political price of Russia's military misadventure in Ukraine is rising. As Russians increasingly come to understand the human, strategic, and economic costs of Vladimir Putin's latest war of choice, the Russian president's position is eroding significantly.

For the time being, Putin's use of propaganda and repression has succeeded in keeping his domestic opponents at bay. No newspapers or radio stations dare to tell the truth about the war in Ukraine. Even peaceful anti-war demonstrators are subject to 15 years in jail under harsh conditions. Even so, repression has its limits. The truth about Putin's disastrous Ukraine policy cannot, for instance, be hidden from parents whose sons return maimed from their country's new war — or don't return at all. When those parents, and their relatives, talk to their neighbors, they will be believed — and their stories will spread.

And there will be many such stories. If recent estimates of more than 20,000 Russian soldiers killed and more than 60,000 additional ones wounded are accurate, the war in Ukraine has already claimed a larger number of casualties than that which ultimately forced the USSR to withdraw from Afghanistan. And, with no end to the conflict in sight, it is reasonable to expect that the resulting anger may eventually bring millions into the streets in support of, and in coordination with, anti-Putin elements in the country's security services and army.

Pressures also are building among Russian patriots who worry about the enormous strategic cost of the war. Even before the Feb. 24 invasion, Col. Gen. Leonid Ivashov, the current head of the influential All Officers Assembly of retired and reserve officers, issued a public statement openly calling for Putin's resignation and presciently warning of the catastrophe that would follow any invasion. The stridently anti-Western Ivashov undoubtedly issued his statement knowing that it reflected the sentiment of many senior career military men. Ivashov remains free, and support for his position within the military has grown substantially.

After all, look at Russia's strategic losses. Russia's dream of annexing Ukraine is now shattered, as its aggression has irreversibly turned generations of Ukrainians against Moscow. Previously neutral Sweden and Finland are now poised to join NATO, and existing member states are expanding their military spending and coming together in ways that were unthinkable before Putin's invasion. Russia's energy leverage over Europe is greatly diminished as the continent belatedly makes serious moves toward energy diversification. The incompetent performance of Russia's army has reduced the appeal of Russian armaments and reduced the influence that comes as a result of such arrangements.

The list goes on. The bottom line, however, is that at some point a critical mass of senior military officers, realizing the long-term dangers of Putin's Ukraine policy, may come to believe that the removal of Putin is necessary in order to cut Russia's losses. At that point, elements of the Russian army might make common cause with those in the country's powerful intelligence service, the FSB, or other institutions, who have come to the same conclusion. Indeed, rumors to that effect have already been circulating in Russian circles and trickling out into the British press.

Self-interest will also motivate many to move against Putin. Consider his recent purge of more than a hundred senior FSB officers, and the uncertainty of who will be next to go in his government's widening witch hunt for scapegoats. Then there are the oligarchs, who with Putin's blessing stole billions from the Russian state — and whose fortunes, properties and possessions abroad have now been placed out of reach as a result of Western sanctions. These unhappy billionaires may not be the first to move against Putin, but if momentum for his ouster builds, they assuredly will lend their money and influence to the cause.

All of this means that a critical mass of Russia's elites who want Putin removed is beginning to coalesce. When and how such an exit will be orchestrated remains to be seen. For the moment, it is still both dangerous and difficult. But as the Ukraine war drags on, the case for a new Russian leader will become increasingly compelling.

That's why, perhaps for the first time since he took power in the last days of 1999, it's no longer premature to think about a Russia without Putin.