AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY COUNCIL

The Kremlin Isn't Just Fighting Ukraine. It's Fighting The Future

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A year into the brutal invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin is giving no signs of abandoning its war of choice. In his February 21st State of the Nation address, Vladimir Putin signaled what amounted to a redoubled commitment to his "special military operation" against Kyiv. "Step by step, carefully and consistently we will deal with the tasks we have at hand," Russia's president intoned.

The message was hardly unexpected. By now, few observers still hold out hope that Putin will reverse course without being forced to do so. Even so, it was jarring, precisely because the past year has proved so costly for Russia by practically every metric.

Militarily, Russia's once-feared army has been massively diminished. According to the United Nations, as many as 60,000 Russian soldiers have died since the start of the fighting a year ago. (Ukrainian estimates, meanwhile, place the tally at much higher: nearly 146,000). If even the smaller number is accurate, Russia has lost four times as many forces in one year of war in Ukraine than it did during a decade of occupation in Afghanistan. It has also helped shatter the image of Russia's army as a formidable fighting machine that had prevailed, and influenced the thinking of Western strategic planners, for the past three decades.

Economically, as scholars at Yale University's School of Management are actively documenting, U.S. and European sanctions have prompted an exodus of Western business from the Russian Federation – one that (despite some data to the contrary) appears to be both significant and ongoing. Over time, and in spite of the defiant proclamations of its officials, this trend will have profoundly negative implications for Russia's fiscal health.

Russia's population is fleeing, too. Somewhere between 500,000 and one million Russians are estimated to have left the country over the past year in response to the conflict, Putin's subsequent "partial mobilization" order, and deepening domestic repression – an outflow unrivaled in size and scope since the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. In the process, the war has significantly accelerated the country's already-steep and ongoing demographic decline.

Against this backdrop, Putin's persistence seems downright foolhardy. But it is more understandable when you recognize that, for Russia, the conflict isn't just about Ukraine. Rather, Russia is fighting a future in which its international standing and global relevance is deeply diminished.

This is so for at least three reasons.

First, the Russian sphere of influence is shrinking. For years, its nationalists have extolled the virtues of the "Russkiy Mir" (Russian World), a zone of ethnic compatriots and compatible cultures in which Russia's traditional, conservative values edge out Western liberalism. But in truth, the "Russkiy Mir" is getting smaller. Across the territory of the former Soviet Union, Moscow's influence is receding over time as former holdings assert their independence. This is true in places like Uzbekistan, where, more than three decades after the fall of the USSR, younger generations speak Russian haltingly or not at all. It's also the case in places with large Russian minorities, like Latvia, which are slowly but surely working to edge Russian out of their school curricula in order to better integrate those citizens into their own national projects.

As a result, Russia's influence – and relevance – in those places is diminishing, adding urgency to the imperial aspirations of its rulers. Quite simply, for the Kremlin, the time available to restore Russia's imperial greatness is running out.

Second, Russia itself is dying as a national project. In recent years, the deepening authoritarianism of Putin's state has forced many Russians – particularly those in what observers have termed its "creative class," encompassing intellectuals, teachers and scientists – to leave the country. That exodus has been massive; when tallied in 2021, approximately five million people were estimated to have fled Russia in the two decades since Vladimir Putin took power. This, in turn, has compounded a systemic demographic crisis caused by factors such as high mortality, low life expectancy and poor health care.

The problem is a pressing one, and over time has the power to threaten the very viability of the Russian state. And it helps reinforce the Kremlin's conviction that it must acquire new lands, and therefore new subjects, in order to fortify its shrinking state.

Finally, Ukraine is central to Russia's imperial aspirations. For Putin and his ilk, Russia represents a distinct civilization, and one that, thinkers like the notorious Eurasianist Alexander Dugin have argued, "cannot exist outside of its essence as an empire, by its geographical situation, historical path and fate of the state." Ukraine is an indispensable part of this puzzle, for logical reasons. Without the historic seat of the Russian empire, the modern Russian state is simply a state.

That realization goes a long way toward explaining why Putin and his cohort spend so much time denying that Ukraine is a real country (something Putin did once more in his February 21st address). Simply put, allowing Ukraine to be independent – or, worse yet, to chart a clear path toward the West –would sound the death knell for any lingering hopes of empire that Russia's rulers still harbor.

In his seminal 1951 poem, Dylan Thomas famously counseled his readers: "Do not go gentle into that good night… Rage, rage against the dying of the light." That is precisely what Russia is doing, against the backdrop of dimming demographics and waning ideological appeal. The consequences are the current war in Ukraine – and, depending on its outcome, potentially greater conflict with the West to come.

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