

**ARGUMENT**

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# What The West (Still) Gets Wrong About Putin

Asking whether to appease or not appease him is completely beside the point.

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One of the reasons it's so difficult to understand Russian intentions—and what is at stake in the Ukraine war—is the significant divergence between how external observers see events and how they are viewed from the Kremlin. Things that appear obvious to some, such as Russia's incapacity to achieve a military victory, are perceived completely differently in Moscow. The fact is that most of today's discussions over how to help Ukraine win on the battlefield, coerce Kyiv into concessions, or allow Russian President Vladimir Putin to save face have little in common with reality.

Here I will debunk five common assumptions about how Putin sees this war. The West needs to look at the situation differently if it wants to be more effective in its approach and decrease the risks of escalation.

## **Assumption 1: Putin knows he is losing.**

This stems from the mistaken idea that Russia's main goal is to seize control of large parts of Ukraine—and therefore, when the Russian military performs badly, fails to advance, or even retreats, that this amounts to failure. However, Putin's main goals in this war have never been to acquire pieces of territory; rather, he wants to destroy Ukraine in what he calls an "[anti-Russia](#)" project and stop the West from using Ukrainian territory as a bridgehead for anti-Russian geopolitical activities. As a result, Russia does not see itself as failing. Ukraine will not join NATO nor be able to exist peacefully without considering Russian demands on Russification (or "denazification" in Russian propaganda-speak) and "de-NATOfication" (known as "demilitarization" in Russian propaganda terms)—meaning a halt to any military cooperation with NATO. To follow through on these goals, Russia needs to sustain its military presence on Ukrainian territory and keep

attacking Ukrainian infrastructure. There is no need for major territorial gains nor taking Kyiv, Ukraine's capital (even if he dreamt about it in the beginning). Even the annexation of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions, which Moscow sees as only a matter of time, is an auxiliary, local goal to make Ukraine pay for incorrect, pro-Western geopolitical choices over the last two decades. In Putin's eyes, he is not losing this war. In fact, he likely believes he is winning—and he is happy to wait until Ukraine concedes that Russia is here forever.

**Assumption 2: The West should find a way to help Putin save face, thus decreasing the risks of further, possibly nuclear, escalation.**

Imagine a situation where Ukraine accepts most of Russia's demands: It recognizes Crimea as Russian and the Donbas as independent, commits to a slimmed-down army, and promises to never join NATO. Will that end the conflict? Even if, to many, the answer appears to be an obvious "yes," they are incorrect. Russia may be locked in a battle with Ukraine, but geopolitically, it sees itself as waging war against the West on Ukrainian territory. In the Kremlin, Ukraine is seen as an anti-Russian weapon in Western hands—and destroying it will not automatically lead to Russia's victory in this anti-Western geopolitical game. For Putin, this war is not between Russia and Ukraine—and Ukrainian leadership is not an independent actor but a Western tool that must be neutralized.

So, whatever concessions Ukraine could make (regardless of how politically realistic they may be), Putin will continue escalating the war until the West changes its approach to the so-called Russian problem and admits that—as Putin sees it—the roots of Russian aggression are the result of Washington ignoring Russian geopolitical concerns for 30 years. This has been Putin's real objective for a long time, and it remains unchanged. Unrealistic Russian demands rejected by Kyiv are even a way for the Kremlin to increase the stakes in a Russia-West confrontation, testing the West's ability to stay united and consistent. The West today is looking at the problem in the wrong light: In seeking to stop Russia's war, it focuses on Moscow's artificial pretexts for its invasion of Ukraine and overlooks Putin's obsession with the so-called Western threat as well as his readiness to use escalation to coerce the West into a dialogue on Russian terms. Ukraine is only a hostage.

**Assumption 3: Putin is not only losing militarily but also domestically, and the political situation in Russia is such that Putin could soon face a coup.**

The opposite is the case, at least for the moment. The Russian elite have become so worried about how to guarantee political stability and avoid protests that they have consolidated around Putin as the only leader able to firm up the political system and prevent disorder. The elite are politically impotent, scared, and vulnerable—including those portrayed in Western media as warmongers and hawks. To make a move against Putin today is tantamount to suicide unless Putin starts to lose his ability to rule (physically or mentally). Despite new splits and cracks within the ranks and unhappiness with Putin's policies, the regime stands firm. The main threat to Putin is Putin himself. Although time may be against him, the waking up of the elite is a process that will take much longer than many people expect. It will depend on how present Putin remains in day-to-day government.

#### **Assumption 4: Putin is afraid of anti-war protests.**

The truth is that Putin is more afraid of pro-war protests and has to take into account the eagerness of many Russians to see the destruction of what they call Ukrainian Nazis. Public mood could drive escalation, prompting Putin to be more hawkish and resolute, even if it is a result of the Kremlin's own propaganda. This is extremely important: Putin has awakened a dark nationalism he is more and more dependent on. Whatever happens to Putin, the world will have to deal with this public aggression and anti-West, anti-liberal convictions that make Russia problematic for the West.

#### **Assumption 5: Putin has been deeply disappointed in his entourage and greenlit the criminal prosecution of senior officials.**

This is an intensely discussed issue in the West. It arises from speculation about the arrest of Putin's former Deputy chief of staff Vladislav Surkov; the detention of Sergey Beseda, a top security officer responsible for Ukraine; and purges among Putin's inner circle. All these rumors should be viewed with extreme skepticism. Firstly, there has been no confirmation of any of them. (Rather, high-placed sources suggest that neither Beseda nor Surkov have been arrested.) Secondly, Putin is likely upset and disappointed with his staff, but it's not his style to purge his inner circle unless serious crimes have been committed. Intentions are all that matter to Putin, and if Russia's secret services miscalculated or even misinformed him without malign intentions, there will be no prosecutions. Finally, the military campaign in Ukraine has been closely managed by Putin from the outset with very little room for subordinates to show any initiative.

All this means that the Western dilemma—to double down on support for Ukraine because Putin is losing or to appease Putin because he is desperate and dangerous—is fundamentally misguided. There can be only two possible outcomes. Either the West changes its approach to Russia and begins to take seriously the Russian concerns that led to this war or Putin's regime falls apart and Russia revises its geopolitical ambitions.

For the moment, both Russia and the West appear to believe that their counterpart is doomed and that time is on their side. Putin dreams about the West suffering from political upheaval, whereas the West dreams about Putin being removed, overthrown, or dropping dead from one of many diseases he is regularly rumored to be suffering. No one is right. At the end of the day, a deal between Russia and Ukraine is only possible as an extension of an agreement between Russia and the West or as a result of the collapse of Putin's regime. And that gives you an idea of how long the war could last: years, at best.

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