

Putin Wanted to Strengthen His Grip by Invading Ukraine. Instead He May Weaken It.

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Articles & Testimony

One potential outcome is a shattering loss that causes the Russian people to rethink what goals their state should pursue, though domestic opinion seems sharply divided along generational lines.

Since Russian President Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine (<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/russia-attacks-ukraine-cities-kharkiv-biden-putin-pay-invasion-rcna18243>) last Thursday, the fighting has taken a heavy toll on his military (<https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/russia-ukraine-war-kyiv-fighting-have-not-gone-vladimir-putin-rcna1290461>), the West has imposed steep sanctions and cultural boycotts, and Ukraine continues to resist the assault. Yet, he shows no signs of backing down.

But foreign obstacles aren't the only ones Putin needs to be concerned about in his attempt to replay the Cold War and achieve an alternate ending. Though he is not democratically elected, he worries about public opinion and protests at home (<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/russia-war-ukraine-putin-sanctions-oligarchs-protests-rcna18115>), seeing them as threats to retaining his grip on power.

Ironically, prior to the invasion, Putin had little reason to worry about losing his control. According to the Levada Center, the most trustworthy Russian pollster, his approval rating vacillated (<https://www.levada.ru/en/ratings/>) between 61 percent and 71 percent last year. Since the opposition leader Alexei Navalny was jailed, no other serious political challenger has emerged, and no massive anti-government protests have been taking place. After the Ukraine invasion, however, Putin's position appears shakier.

From the get-go, the Kremlin portrayed its actions to its domestic audience as fundamentally peaceful and defensive. State-controlled media for months told Russian audiences that the West was pushing the country toward a confrontation, while Moscow only wanted peace and was acting with the utmost restraint, though it would defend itself if necessary. When Russia did act, the public was told, it ultimately did so in self-defense because it had no other options left in the face of "genocide" committed (

After the invasion, billboards appeared in the Russian city (["We were left with no choice to act otherwise." As The Guardian reported, Russian outlets can only use \(](https://urldefense.com/v3/_https://url.emailprotection.link/?bXENo3D-6Ft04ERLH5vHk00Kcqi21cEAB2PjkBWEHkcl33WRkHwf3Vvfm41VD0d3w7clXZiuXzuGUx54K42iFR1WN1mJtyrdxS4AEs5hymZaVBiOXNud1wndvOvBL_nuA02P1PTIKjGqKz4tW1JyFfxG4LdISN8ActAei5l3YJ8FDNbdmr8S6uiKKRKSOU63IRzZckOkLgvoaGAdKCOPOKOKuHagGoem40N5F8kXQGJZCo7exTvrCq1lla9vZwxrUvBPkstrT9Rjvbg4AJQA7YeR_C7zr6pNpc-KxuEWGps-RfvYazQ1g81iqd-NP1YcsA**A_!fn4!!PIZeeW5wscynRQ!5fbV0q9hd_67hXt3pyHwth94z1lchHy1a7GRPXpWsi6BBK7T3dHGWEPEYjZbV2QhH5jo$) of St. Petersburg with the words:</p></div><div data-bbox=)

Even so, thousands of protesters have come out to demonstrate, and not only in Moscow and St. Petersburg (

5gOGRhMgOqSgu1rEa0y7m2BO6H91RkkmcdnVXqa4I6kVwzS4YaVW6hQdIbro2ikhUA9tp0YkLjkU1bnZt1pK82L8uyLj4ijYmyyAGt6p6xk-z9voqY-FmVfe7FB-1UV4bdE3Y0IGuJ74CYz0gEKFmw_umpEa6ex5SBQ_yyeHEtUvWva5Dw3_5A98LlUujvygs4WuMEVKzHvZdRGsNygaZ4ajgJAA_F6otkwTGy_!PIZeeW5wscynRQ!5fbV0q9hd_67hXt3j thousands ([reported 120,000](https://urldefense.com/v3/_https://url.emailprotection.link/?b4USO68alIXONZwxZ9xqNHkPT8slWNTok_nUZB10sLNpxPTQcN6O1FvHi4UEgOMT_UeTAF3MjM7NWFHvHJeSoV5idLLuoStUt1bzo8z5jvEUvHfhkh0lm4kMaLFDdb_G4F_CHLHWGFuv9FFY13PrxkCHDbqNIPmzIt7JgXgoYD7VRhdFfnYN860KMmw*_.fg!!PIZeeW5wscynRQ!5fbV0q9hd_67hXt3pyHwht94z1lchHy1a7GRXPwSI6BBK7T3dHGWEpyjZbV4ZzkjU$)). But protests continue as I write, even if they are far short of the <a href=) (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/feb/04/anti-putin-protests-moscow-russia>) that made up the largest protests since the fall of the Soviet Union in response to fraudulent elections a decade ago. That said, this time online petitions against the war have proliferated; one gathered [nearly a million](https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-vladimir-putin-europe-arrests-moscow-cf5dda5528937de907f8916820cfab75) (<https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-vladimir-putin-europe-arrests-moscow-cf5dda5528937de907f8916820cfab75>), signatures in four days.

Furthermore, groups that don't necessarily associate themselves with the Russian opposition have joined the protests, including a group of Russian scientists and science journalists who [. And in a remarkable step, retired Russian Col. Gen. Leonid Ivashov—no liberal and a \[vocal critic\]\(https://tvrain.ru/news/obscherossijskoe_ofiterskoe_sobranie_vystupilo_protiv_vojny_s_ukrainoi_i_obvinilo_putina_v_provotsirovanii_vojny-547252/\) \(\[https://tvrain.ru/news/obscherossijskoe_ofiterskoe_sobranie_vystupilo_protiv_vojny_s_ukrainoi_i_obvinilo_putina_v_provotsirovanii_vojny-547252/\]\(https://tvrain.ru/news/obscherossijskoe_ofiterskoe_sobranie_vystupilo_protiv_vojny_s_ukrainoi_i_obvinilo_putina_v_provotsirovanii_vojny-547252/\)\) of NATO enlargement—publicly \[But protests aren't the whole story. According to the Levada Center, many Russians have bought into Putin's narrative. When he invaded Ukraine, Levada found that the number of those who disapproved of the United States, NATO and Ukraine grew. \\[increased slightly.\\]\\(https://urldefense.com/v3/_https://url.emailprotection.link/?bV4IUfrVJJeUVJc0jnFXB1E9qCz9wk7FITxQ_4xtMphBcfhhN9ROoeKJcZs2N7epi4h7hmoQGzYmQhMcCsRmXmX6QgtrRo_e11VUB7oS4F3m0TnMnMpkCf23-oRn7qDeFkrxK8-5ccTkq85vZQeIpij_cS3G2Fdo17j8LFOU14YwNYCJ780YfZL_CjyqrG3PGL9OxbWo0JTZ_67gzcywSPalwXE5qEH9u0M9GznvP0XpG2TL1sPDtK0IuvS7UGSDd_!PIZeeW5wscynRQ!5fbV0q9hd_67hXt3pyHwht94z1lchHy1a7GRXPwSI6BBK7T3dHGWEpyjZbV4Xk728, for example, the U.S. and NATO initiators of the escalation in eastern Ukraine. And approval of Putin and the Russian parliament <a href=\\)\]\(https://urldefense.com/v3/_https://url.emailprotection.link/?bAYsNbVJruuovEJBnzMI059DgV36Pz6stUillqN4bLZy-MwnMTpjXfMKN-XTpbb-bNND04mSUMa8EB9pwMTtqWn0GgbDbZYJ7SldhCg6iT6-3mIr1A5590HJHJPMRtC3FyEXUANfvfT7ym9Qg5s_T6Tnect13SFXD9DeuaIDZS8GCMcexPdVmakKneZHRqJLOGgTLdzcUGPyfp_Ab_eCtLeIQChqL62jhEYyOwF3OPPINRsCOKwXndjFszNObnQcLk8-HVPI-TICHOAM6ezUpq-if0WeXry6h_!PIZeeW5wscynRQ!5fbV0q9hd_67hXt3pyHwht94z1lchHy1a7GRXPwSI6BBK7T3dHGWEpyjZbVrb8QJYs\$\) in the run-up to the invasion.</p></div><div data-bbox=\)](https://urldefense.com/v3/_https://url.emailprotection.link/?bOGXMM44s9iQN3sCgPHCN4EyY10iwFyMqYAFiQsNr11bbakivGDM-CUy1QKU_EHPXbxsGOWBIJ-CMPiNg4Nao26KwVsBEwdPD8pk_MNQfewJb9u8kDhT29baDraZ6ZUaxK4NNZThOcdjd0F4xL7jVT4a86z0gctchKoHRIGJjgb-gNZexd3GtNZAJaTbFG4ID_jS-JKprhI_ne3oU320koWUigZQUblMAJd_JpEUJq3sH518h1roGipQ5CisMVz0arf15R7RqblWzy8QhXnFFOQIvfnUkbJi1exEiC68F2ohW5ohmdhi1MzH4o4dwWhZ3hlltGyU3c4UixbkAxw* against the war. Prominent Russian actors, musicians and novelists <a href=)

This is not surprising, in that the older generation mostly gets its news from television, most of it state-controlled, even if it has access to the internet. On TV, it's easy for state officials to present a message of "all is well." Moreover, the older generation still associates Putin with stability after the chaos that followed the fall of the Soviet Union. Protesters by contrast tend to be younger and from urban areas.

Whatever is shown on TV, the effect of the war can be felt in Russians' pockets—but here, too, propaganda can make a difference. The biggest effect of the sanctions thus far has been the [drastic fall of the ruble](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/russia-ukraine-ruble-sanctions/) (<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/russia-ukraine-ruble-sanctions/>). The most meaningful effect of sanctions [could take years](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/russia-sanctions-are-big-deal-experts-say-effects-take-years-rcna17380) (<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/russia-sanctions-are-big-deal-experts-say-effects-take-years-rcna17380>), however, and Putin has put measures in place to counter some of the effects, including [international currency and gold reserves](https://www.bbc.com/news/business-60480904) (<https://www.bbc.com/news/business-60480904>) that are the fourth largest in the world.

Beyond that, the Kremlin will no doubt try to use propaganda to shift the blame for both the immediate and the long-term effects of sanctions to the West, as it has done in the past. Putin has survived sanctions in the past, as well as far larger protests.

Still, while Putin may have hoped that invading Ukraine would quickly expand Russian territory and help restore the grandeur of the former Russian empire, it could do the opposite. If multiple factors converge—large numbers of body bags come home, sanctions effectively weaken the ruble and Russia becomes a pariah state via [The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the then-Soviet Union's structural economic problems and the drastic fall of oil prices in the 1980s certainly played a role in the collapse of the USSR. But something else was perhaps more significant: leader Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika aimed to correct not only the economic, but also the \[moral failures\]\(https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/06/20/everything-you-think-you-know-about-the-collapse-of-the-soviet-union-is-wrong/\) \(<https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/06/20/everything-you-think-you-know-about-the-collapse-of-the-soviet-union-is-wrong/>\) of the Soviet Union. In the end, it was the Russian people themselves who rejected the communist system that failed to advance its stated promise of human dignity.](https://urldefense.com/v3/_https://url.emailprotection.link/?bJcEfvRokTwwU0RiD058LFiHKOwidLfzIQwCmYSosSq2K3NqUcCyNqZynjYe_KDWvor7tW-foDyBbRvLvlcE94RC8clcKZxV4N2ceIEdNpEabzMc5zbA3opFFKbt_hdXLTqNBhm_sXp56pxiAKM1llptKb8CBqFB8RYtE-N3Aph145zHTukOy54dp8zgCv8aMf14cC-olGFQft3sXTNOFICuuxOams5qc1BycKchHYUMQmhfJZdKpUrUPl2FGzjZRPpCyQmJ5HyZrZD8ex9UvH831bGRWHBvKwK2NGKwC7zE3vP6hLrQF9ShlSbU2NIS2Qt30XJtlzF2IOxyE:8Z3yglaBMGj1J13RjjujZpbeVlu116pEzXh3rNtcuWOZwxcz_JVdXTZdhiRA-AdQx2HcQ1RdPc55PuTbKgzUvPjzQ7JeVpwwbvwfWvEaE45v5w-xd6eCi3WaXGFPT25uveVMXzOaKaijKs9P7kIQ9oIWo4mWq2RP4T5tpD2_OXTb88LaC_rgfsp1vgDfSFD6WoBouj4-0qYo1EiTWF3M*_.fg!!PIZeeW5wscynRQ!5fbV0q9hd_67hXt3pyHwht94z1lchHy1a7GRXPwSI6BBK7T3dHGWEpyjZbVFDXVED4$)—it could prompt internal Russian soul-searching. And this really is the key question: Will the Ukraine invasion result in the kind of shattering loss that fundamentally causes the Russian people to rethink what goals they want their state to pursue?</p></div><div data-bbox=)

Which means the West has a role to play in Putin's fortunes, as well. As prominent Soviet-born British author Peter Pomerantsev has [pointed out](https://urldefense.com/v3/_https://url.emailprotection.link/?bJTT54eZSibOMFBSkS7oqrwqChWoVwjiC_XIXB9dhoEnchNTRtrjDwsDs7xP3iy36xFat01uDRyQAFkC7loqqdVJiaWajgMOpkTEjyS5G6do1xpeYJOFTEtC4QPw4bYU7_4loOWO1F) (https://urldefense.com/v3/_https://url.emailprotection.link/?bJTT54eZSibOMFBSkS7oqrwqChWoVwjiC_XIXB9dhoEnchNTRtrjDwsDs7xP3iy36xFat01uDRyQAFkC7loqqdVJiaWajgMOpkTEjyS5G6do1xpeYJOFTEtC4QPw4bYU7_4loOWO1F), during the Cold War the West engaged directly in public diplomacy with the Russian people despite a shroud of censorship that, ironically, is far less of an obstacle now. Pomerantsev recently recalled the extraordinary interview of British Prime Minister [Margaret Thatcher](https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p017m0sx) (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p017m0sx>) on Soviet television where she turned public opinion against her interviewers. President Ronald Reagan used humor and steadfast rhetoric to convey his own message. I myself remember huddling with my family over an old radio trying to catch Voice of America and Radio Liberty broadcasts when I was growing up.

Yet, for years, the West has not talked to the Russian people. Voice of America and Radio Liberty have long lacked funding. And the reporting that has continued has lost a sense of clarity and purpose with a misplaced balance that doesn't clearly differentiate right from wrong.

The Biden administration, though, has done at least one thing right in the information space in the run-up to Putin's invasion: It countered false government narratives aimed at creating a pretext for the invasion by [releasing intelligence information](https://urldefense.com/v3/_https://url.emailprotection.link/?bOuCFtCqXIYU1x18cBib-CcGRZrjdY9xDaN-) (https://urldefense.com/v3/_https://url.emailprotection.link/?bOuCFtCqXIYU1x18cBib-CcGRZrjdY9xDaN-

52R9mZkLVs63KAynJDR2EW7K7uoXsn5flUnCHiZITEFvtrU17mLJQUjWvSsJ3jN3-rBCNmCUWhuGDUFNjWG5QOye3tmbueuJonw8bAn_6a1R-TuPmr5vwHhLw8EmHOMdR8LBTRqtq5GS9oLH9fjLTftYu8qIE_56ypsVOPt9z-9QMYfQweRy7dEeDEqD39-4N74z2_dEYmvyO4Mcl-kLuhWlmdOLi5O7gj_ckCzCJz7u6tc7cCcF3kBuJPgbA25B7Hr7vw*:fg!!PIZeeW5wscynRQ!5fbVOq9hd_67hXt3pyHwth94z1lchHy1a7GRXPwSI6BBK7T3dHGWEPEYjZbVMHTtc7w\$)

. The Kremlin found itself on the defensive, and this likely delayed the invasion by weeks. When Putin ultimately intervened, his domestic standing was hurt because he'd failed to create a false-flag operation that could have helped rally support. The narrative of self-defense remained in place, but it was missing a rationale for why action was necessary.

That President Joe Biden's strategy has borne fruit makes clear that Putin shouldn't be the only one to revisit lessons from the Cold War. We don't have another Reagan or Thatcher right now, so the West needs to find other ways to talk to the Russian people.

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