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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Orttung, R. (2022). The Nature of the Political Regime and Responsibility for the Invasion. *Russian Analytical Digest*, 278, 2-4. <https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000534972>

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The Nature of the Political Regime and Responsibility for the Invasion

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DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000534972

Abstract

Russia's poor prospects as a power that depends on fossil fuel sales are undermining Putin's power at home and Russia's standing on the global stage. The country's economic stagnation and sluggish improvement in living standards in recent years provide the backdrop for Putin's decision to launch war in Ukraine. Despite the centralized nature of Russia's power system, blame for the attack extends throughout the system of enablers and members of the population who do not oppose the leader.

Russia Is a Declining Power

In the face of a rapidly changing climate and the necessity for global consumers to curtail their use of fossil fuels, Russia is in a losing position (Gustafson, 2021). While demand for its natural gas supplies is likely to grow for the next decade, the world is inexorably seeking to replace oil and gas with renewables. Russia's main export is fossil fuels and it is betting these exports will continue to be in demand, prompting it to develop new supplies in Siberia and the Arctic.

Despite his centralization of power, Putin has not implemented the kinds of economic reforms that would make it possible for Russia to move away from a reliance on fossil fuels and seek a competitive edge in the new high-tech economy. Russia has prowess in software development but has not been taking advantage of it. In the last few years, Russia has been growing slowly, with the consequence that living standards for most people are not improving as they did during the first eight years of Putin's rule.

The future drop in demand for Russia's energy exports and its failure to invest in alternative sources of economic prosperity mean that Russia is slowly dropping in the ranking of countries. Without a change in course at the top, the decline will be inescapable.

The Nature of Authoritarian Regimes Like Putin's

Russia suffers from a political resource curse (Ross, 2015). Selling energy for a substantial profit on the world commodity markets requires only a small workforce and is amenable to government control. Developing a high-tech sector, by contrast, necessitates extensive academic and media freedom to support a creative class of programmers, designers, and engineers. The Kremlin fears that such a class could lead to social instability (Miller, 2018); Putin therefore chose a different path (Aslund, 2019). Putin's efforts to eradicate Russia's political opposition and many aspects of civil society make creative economic development difficult.

Russia's authoritarian system is one in which the rulers are self-appointed and there is no legal procedure for removing them (Wintrobe, 2000). Putin's authoritarian regime can be broken down into the essentials, the influentials, and the interchangeableables (Buono de Mesquita & Smith, 2012). Despite his extensive personal power, Putin needs to maintain the support of crucial state agencies such as the police, secret police, and military. Belarus's Aleksandr Lukashenka has demonstrated the ability to stay in power by relying on the use of measured but sufficient force despite strong popular mobilization against him.

Why Launch a War Now?

The first source of Putin's foreign aggression is his deteriorating position at home. During his first two terms, rising oil prices lifted Russia's economy and made Putin a popular ruler even as he slowly tightened control over Russian society. As Russia's economic fortunes sank following the economic crash in 2008/9 and with volatile commodity prices, Putin slowly began to lose support among the population. His quick and easy annexation of Crimea provided an initial boost, but the on-going war in eastern Ukraine and continuing economic struggles, combined with on-going Western sanctions, meant that Putin needed to find new sources of legitimacy (Hale, 2021). Putin likely felt a quick victory in Ukraine—coupled with an intensified crackdown on all forms of political opposition—would boost his stature at home and abroad.

Given his declining status at home as the economy stagnates and Russia finds itself unable to compete with a surging China and the still growing Western powers, Putin likely sees the current moment as the height of his own power and every day that goes by a weakening of his position. Putin probably views the Western alliance as weak given the divisions among NATO countries, which have been exacerbated by the Trump administration's America First policies, the retreat of the U.S. from Afghanistan, and the uncertainties plaguing domestic

politics in the advanced democracies as they deal with the rise of populism and intense polarization. By contrast, Putin currently has as much control of Russia as he is likely to achieve (setting aside challenges posed to his rule by Chechnya's Ramzan Kadyrov) and benefits from current energy sales.

If Putin wanted to make his mark as a leader at the height of his power, he knew he would have to act quickly. That would explain his demands that the West roll back NATO and the post-Cold War system and his calculation to invade. If he did not do it now, he faced the prospect of a slow decline into irrelevance both at home, as a weak president, and abroad, as few countries paid much attention to Russia. The early failures in prosecuting the war suggest that Putin miscalculated how strong Russia actually was compared to its neighbors and the West. Yet while Putin made the decision to invade, he is not alone in its implementation.

Who is Blameworthy?

Every individual is morally responsible for his or her actions. Even in the most extreme circumstances, when making a choice risks the life or well-being of oneself or one's loved ones, an individual can make a choice. This freedom of action is central to each person's humanity. Not recognizing this basic fact makes it impossible to acknowledge and celebrate the extraordinary sacrifices some make to defend their rights and expose the realities of tyrannical regimes. Acknowledging freedom of action makes it possible to assign blame to those who enable wrong-doing and hold them accountable.

Putin deserves the most blame for starting the war and for its brutal prosecution. Putin had an array of options (Dawisha, 2014), and opted for one of the most cruel and violent choices. He is a war criminal and responsible for the deaths that the fighting is causing. His claims in his speeches on the eve of the assault—that Ukraine is not a sovereign country and that its leaders are Nazis—reflect his delusional and morally bankrupt thinking.

Putin's inner circle also deserves blame for the war and its consequences. He is surrounded by a small group of people whose access to the leader could have changed the course of events. While we can only speculate who is in this group and what kind of information they feed the leader (Guriev & Treisman, 2019), they bear direct responsibility for the harms they abet and indirect responsibility for all of the brutal actions of the regime to which they dedicate themselves.

Beyond that, the oligarchs and their immediate family members are also culpable. They benefit directly from the regime and work to prop it up because they wrongly judge that the benefits to themselves outweigh the far more significant costs to others. While one can

argue that these individuals do not control policy (Hagel, 2020), the oligarchs' resources give them a strong responsibility to engage or, at the very least, to disentangle themselves from this callous regime.

The agents of the state also carry some blame. While Putin gives the orders, somebody has to carry them out (Goldhagen, 1997). Putin's generals could refuse his orders. Soldiers can refuse to fight and some have apparently surrendered to the Ukrainians in order to avoid killing innocents. The secret police and their collaborators also have made choices. The argument that "I was simply following orders" does not stand up to scrutiny because orders from above do not compel an individual to take action. One always has the ability to refuse, even in the face of exceedingly high costs.

As for the population, if millions of people came out into the streets in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and other Russian cities, the war would end (Chenoweth, 2021). However, such organization faces a collective action problem and many are simply afraid to speak out (Rosen, 2014). The authorities have systematically destroyed the opposition by blocking their access to free elections, open media, and organizational structures, while killing, imprisoning, or forcing into exile its leaders. Nevertheless, Putin and the people co-create power (Greene & Robertson, 2019). If the population can be divided into active Putin supporters, passive Putin supporters, passive opponents, and active opponents, only the individuals who take action against their regime bear no responsibility for its actions. A small number of people do stand in the street, sign petitions, issue statements, write letters to their representatives... Acknowledging their heroism requires the recognition that all who fail to follow their example are acting wrongly. Acting wrongly is precisely what renders an individual blameworthy for resultant harms. We cannot morally praise these heroes without simultaneously regarding their silent counterparts as blameworthy.

What is the responsibility of people outside the battlefield? First, they must prevent Russia's war of aggression from escalating into one that destroys all of humanity. Second, they must take action to stop the assault and turn back the aggressors to ensure that the initiator of the conflict does not benefit from its violent attacks. Additionally, they must help develop solutions to the conflict that address its underlying causes, so as to prevent the outbreak of similar conflicts in the future. Finally, they must signal their opposition to Russia's message that "might makes right" and their commitment to certain standards of international peace.

What Type of Sanctions?

This analysis of blame provides a roadmap for sanctions. Sanctions on Putin, his inner circle, the oligarchs, and

state agents are appropriate and clearly morally justified to deter their action. While it is possible to debate how effective such sanctions are, in the current case they will make it harder for Russia to benefit from its aggression and therefore make sense to apply.

In theory, the West can apply “smart” sanctions that target those responsible while minimizing damage to innocents or those opposed to the war. Drawing on the logic above, the Russian population should suffer from sanctions if it does not actively oppose the illegal aggression launched by its leader. Since their failure to oppose his actions is itself blameworthy, they have rendered themselves legitimate targets of sanctioning. Those who actively speak out deserve all the support that can be provided to them to ensure that they suffer as little as possible for their heroic stand.

About the Author

Robert Ortung is Research Professor of International Affairs at the George Washington University’s Elliott School of International Affairs and Research Director for the GW Sustainability Institute

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Should Western universities cut off ties with Russian universities? Doing so makes sense if the Russian universities are simply recreating the status quo power structure of an authoritarian society. If, however, the Russian university is promoting a more critical approach, then it deserves support and continued integration into international academic networks.

Conclusion

This article examines the central question of who is to blame for Russia’s unprovoked attack on Ukraine and its use of lethal force against Ukrainian cities. It implicates all members of Russian society, from the leader to the implementers, in this crime. Only those who actively speak out deserve no blame.