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COMMENTARY

Would Putin’s Own People Punish Him for Invading Ukraine?

By Henry E. Hale (George Washington University, Washington, DC)

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Many now believe Russia will launch a major new invasion of Ukraine, dramatically expanding the war that has been raging (largely behind Western headlines) since 2014. Western leaders want to ensure Russia’s president, Vladimir Putin, pays a price if it does. Recent studies suggest that Russia’s own people could also make him pay, though exactly when or how is less clear.

There is good reason to worry that Putin may be putting the squeeze on Ukraine, possibly to the point of attempting to conquer most if not all of the country, in partial response to his own flagging domestic support. Even if domestic politics is not his central concern, he

may still hope his people would reward him for a new invasion. Populations frequently “rally around the flag” for a while when their countries go to war. Putin himself was one of history’s biggest beneficiaries of such rallying in 2014, when his approval ratings shot through the roof after Russia swiftly seized and annexed Ukraine’s Crimean peninsula. The lure of rallying may be motivating Putin to try it again. He may also be attempting to distract an increasingly unhappy public from problems they blame him for, like corruption and a stagnating economy.

Recent studies, however, reveal that there is also the potential for a new invasion to backfire on Putin

domestically, and that this potential is greater than we often think in the West. It may even be greater than Putin himself thinks.

For Russians, Crimea Is Not the Rest of Ukraine

For Russians, the rest of Ukraine is not Crimea. Clear majorities had supported “returning” Crimea to Russia prior to 2014, but Russians feel no such attachment to other Ukrainian lands. Swayed by derisive coverage on Putin’s state-controlled media, Russians have also long seen Ukraine as a basket case of a state that is riddled with corruption. This does not exactly make it an object of desire in their eyes.

Polls in recent years indicate that if Putin could unite Ukraine with Russia peacefully and voluntarily, this might get the support of something like two-fifths of Russia’s population. This is far fewer than Putin wants for his domestic base of support, where supermajorities are the goal. And Russians have never shown strong support for active Kremlin efforts to break up Ukraine, much less take it over militarily.

A Militarily Overrun Ukraine as a Time Bomb for Putin

If Putin does plot an invasion, another big problem he faces is that this will cost Russian lives. And the prospect of their sons and daughters dying in combat does not sell well in Russia. Surely this is why Russia has criminalized publishing any information about Russian war dead in Ukraine.

But information has a way of getting out even in dictatorships like Russia’s, and risks for the Kremlin are already evident in the hot war Moscow has been waging in eastern Ukraine since 2014. One recently published study found that Russians with private information about what was really going on in Ukraine through direct contact with war refugees were significantly less likely to feign support for Putin in 2015. That Russian military operation is far smaller than what Putin is believed to be contemplating now, and casualties from much larger conflicts will be much harder to hide.

In this light, a militarily overrun Ukraine could become a time bomb within Russia itself, much like the Baltic states were within the USSR, which had much greater control over its population than today’s regime in Moscow has ever had. Polling in Ukraine makes clear that the Kremlin has consistently misunderstood Ukraine, failing to recognize (or at least take seriously) its citizens’ support for independence and the fact that this support is strong even among people who primarily speak Russian.

Even if Russia’s military victory is overwhelming and swift, a possibility on which Moscow cannot count

given Ukraine’s own military buildup in recent years, it has been reported that some Ukrainians are preparing to fight a guerrilla war. Russian casualties thus appear quite likely should Russia invade, and over time this could significantly erode the Kremlin’s support.

Butter Over Guns

Russians are also well known these days for supporting “butter” over “guns,” to borrow the terms used in a recently published study by Maria Snegovaya. Her clever survey experiment confirms Russians become much less supportive of assertive foreign policy when exposed to economic costs.

Because Western leaders have made clear that strong economic sanctions would likely be the immediate response to any Russian action, and because research has found that even the much more limited sanctions imposed on entities within Russia since 2014 have damaged Russia’s economy, it seems clear Putin would also bear political costs stemming from the economy should he invade. Putin did not mind as much in 2014 because the “rally effect” of Crimea was so powerful. But if the rally-around-the-flag effect from the currently contemplated invasion were to be smaller, as many expect, the sanctions’ hit on Putin’s support over time could be much greater.

Pyrrhic Victory

If he is thinking long-run, however, perhaps most worrying for Putin should be findings from a recent study of mine: As many as three-quarters of the new supporters he gained from the Crimea annexation were likely faking it as of 2015, cowed into professing public support in the face of great social pressures to appear patriotic.

To be sure, autocrats may not mind much whether people are faking it so long as they abstain from outright opposition, as many Russians appear to have done for several years after 2014. Hollow political structures can survive for a long time when media control is tight, levels of repression are high, and the issue of succession is not acute.

But when they collapse, the end can come unexpectedly, quickly, and spectacularly. Just ask the dictators who fell during the 1989 collapse of communism and the 2011 Arab Spring, nearly all aging and concomitantly facing increasing speculation about succession like Putin. In this light, recent large-scale unrest in Belarus and Kazakhstan—countries with political systems very similar to Putin’s and leaders getting on in years like he is—should be cause for serious concern in the Kremlin. Not to mention persistent outbreaks of protest in Russia itself despite the regime’s growing crack-down on opposition.

Blame-Shifting

If Putin is determined to invade despite the risks to his own stability, we can expect him to do everything he can to minimize these risks by making it look like he is not the one who “started it.” While he could try to claim Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky attacked first, much as Russia blamed Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili for striking first in the August 2008 war, this is quite unlikely to be credible, in part because Zelensky is best known in Russia as a Russian-language comedy actor rather than a hot-headed Ukrainian nationalist.

More consistent with resonant narratives in Russia today would be for Russian forces to “support” some kind of force claiming to be “restoring constitutional order” in Ukraine after what Russia has called the fascist “coup” of 2014. This is because this line would be consistent with Putin’s longstanding self-presentation in Russia as a cooperation-supporting moderate rather than a hardline invader. There is still little reason to believe that ordinary Russians would be very happy to spill their own children’s blood or sacrifice their own

standards of living for the sake of Ukraine’s “constitutional order.” But the US and its partners should nevertheless be careful to avoid actions that would help make this scenario more credible within Russia. Unfortunately, the movement of U.S. troops closer to Ukraine but (crucially) still not actually into Ukraine might actually help Putin in this way, without providing any significant deterrent effect.

Conclusion

If Putin understands all this, as one hopes he does, perhaps he will not invade after all. He could easily back down and lose little in domestic political standing even without a deal, perhaps coming out stronger for having shown the West how serious he is about Russia’s concerns. So he may very well be bluffing. But it remains possible he does not understand. Leaders frequently take actions that undercut their own support in the longer run. In that case, he may yet pay a price.

Submitted on 15 February 2022

About the Author

Henry E. Hale is a leading specialist on Russian public opinion, the author of the book *Patronal Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), and the recipient of two prizes from the American Political Science Association for his research. He is Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at George Washington University’s Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies (IERES) and co-director of PONARS Eurasia.

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COMMENTARY

War Optimism in the Russia–Ukraine Conflict: A Cause for Pessimism?

By Olena Lennon (University of New Haven)

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Russia’s military buildup around Ukraine—which has triggered the most serious tensions between Russia and the West since the end of the Cold War—has moved to a critical phase in recent days. Citing new intelligence, the White House warned that Russia was preparing to “mount a major military action in Ukraine any day.” While the Ukrainian leaders have finally acknowledged the threat of a large-scale offen-

sive, they have continued to downplay its imminence, appealing for calm even after the U.S. government and other countries ordered most of their personnel to leave Ukraine immediately.

Since the start of the escalation, the Ukrainian leadership’s calm disposition has been simultaneously lauded and criticized: lauded for preventing a (costly) premature mobilization and attempting to protect Ukraine’s