



Institute for International Business
Center for International Business
Education and Research (CIBER)

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Back in the USSR: What Does Putin Want and How Should the West Respond?

CU Denver's Institute for International Business and Center for International Business Education and Research (CIBER) hosted an International Executive Roundtable on March 10th, 2022 featuring Dr. Christoph Stefes, Professor of Political Science at the University of Colorado Denver. Dr. Stefes' research and teaching areas of specialization include democracy and democratization, stability of dictatorships, corruption, and post-Soviet studies.

Dr. Stefes traced Vladimir Putin's path from a mid-level KGB officer, during the disintegration and collapse of the economic and social system of the Soviet Union, to despotic president. Putin's Russia has been one of political repression, military expansion, the rise of *siloviki* (strongmen), and, for a while, strong GDP growth. He centralized power by changing the constitution, assassinated critical journalists and political opponents, and masterminded the country's transition from a semi-democracy to a consolidated autocratic and personalist regime. Putin has conducted foreign forays—invading Georgia in 2008, annexing Crimea in 2014, invading eastern Ukraine in 2014, intervening through military force in the Syrian civil war in 2015, formally recognizing the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic in 2022, and invading all of Ukraine in 2022.

Putin's aim may be threefold: (1) strengthen Russia's security by weakening Western alliances—NATO in particular (his invasion of Ukraine has, however, achieved the opposite); (2) rally around the flag to placate the domestic audience (while Putin is more or less immune to popular opinion, which has historically been

high, he might need to placate regime elites); and (3) legacy-building and securing status as "Putin, the Great" by rebuilding "Noble Russia" as a rival to the US and EU, re-creating its sphere of influence to some version of that of the USSR, and clearly delineating Russia culturally, politically, and economically from the West.

Putin's playbook for invasion is almost always identical. He uses similar, specious justifications for incursions into neighboring countries—a defensive security argument, a historical argument (such as denying nationhood and statehood status of Ukraine and other countries), and a humanitarian protection argument (claiming ethnic Russians are under imminent attack from "Fascists," used in Georgia, Crimea, and Ukraine). Until 2022, Western countries did not do enough to punish Putin for his bloody forays.

The current Ukraine crisis is not a "special military operation"; it is an unprovoked war of aggression, and it is wholly Putin's war—not Russia's war. Most of Russia, including some of the Russian elite, is opposed to the war. Putin's war is not proceeding according to plan. The international community has united in an unprecedented way—141 countries have condemned the invasion, stringent and increasing economic sanctions are crippling the Russian economy and affecting the Russian elite, Russia is being isolated from cultural, sports, and international organizations, and countries are providing defensive arms to Ukraine. Russian allies, like Belarus, are attempting to stay on the sidelines, and Armenia and Kazakhstan have allowed pro-Ukrainian

protests. China, India, and Brazil, while not following Western sanctions, remain largely neutral.

Is the current crisis the West's fault? Political scientist John Mearsheimer and some Russian analysts say that the presence of the US and NATO in Russia's "backyard" and NATO's eastward expansion are to blame. This would make sense only if that is Putin's key concern, which is doubtful. Until a few years ago, Russia and NATO worked cooperatively. Russia signed the 1994 Budapest Memorandum respecting the independence, sovereignty and existing borders of Ukraine. NATO did not push eastward—sovereign states independently decided to join NATO. An area of potential culpability is during the post-Cold War era when the West did not unite, negotiate, and secure a New World Order, naively believing that Russia could be normalized.

Putin made several miscalculations. He was isolated in his decision making and did not consult advisors well-versed in Ukrainian culture, society, and politics. It is posited that Putin assumed that the Ukrainian people would welcome being part of Russia again. Putin underestimated the ability of the Ukrainian military, which is Western-trained and has proved a tough adversary, and ordinary citizens have taken up the fight. This war has brought stronger unity to eastern and western Ukraine.

How will it end? Not well. Putin will likely not back down—it's not in his nature, and doing so would undermine his legacy building. Enduring the economic sanctions will strengthen the image of "tough" Russians. The war will be drawn out, with aerial bombardments increasing, along with high civilian casualties and mounting evidence of war crimes. But for many reasons, including his self-aggrandizing dream, Putin is not inclined to start a nuclear war. Ukrainian leadership may be forced, in one to two months, to surrender due to the increasingly high civilian cost. A puppet

government will be installed in Ukraine, but Russia will not win peace. The fight will then likely become one of non-violent resistance against Russia.

Will Putin be toppled? It's unlikely. While the Russian populace is suffering economic hardships and most oppose the war, popular uprisings do not weigh at all in Putin's decisions. Only a coup d'état with united members of security forces, the military, and oligarchs could remove him from power, but the military has never played a role in domestic politics, leaders of security forces were handpicked by Putin, and oligarchs are entirely dependent on state-controlled companies.

What can the West do now? Stefes believes we cannot enter the war in any direct way—neither through establishing a no-fly zone nor through sending troops. We can provide Ukraine with defensive weapon systems. We can try to build a "firewall" by admitting countries most at risk of Russian invasion—Moldova, Georgia, Sweden, and Finland—into the EU and/or NATO. We can train Ukrainians in the tactics of non-violent resistance to counter the puppet regime. We can force Russia to pay a very high price for Ukraine by sustaining the economic sanctions and western companies' pullouts from the Russian market that hurt Russia's political/economic elite (and, unfortunately, common Russian citizens). If the West tires of the economic hardship—minor in comparison to what the Ukrainian people are enduring—and eases the sanctions, Putin will be emboldened to push into other countries.

Please consider donating to Ukrainian refugees. Every dollar helps. Here are three credible organizations to which you can donate:

<https://www.care.org>

<https://www.icrc.org/en/donate/Ukraine>

<https://razomforukraine.org/donate/>

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