

Putin's Test for the West

Written by Steve Wood

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STEVE WOOD, MAY 16 2024

A central international political feature of the post-Cold War epoch is the evolving contest between two sets of competitors. One is a loose, though formidable, alliance between the nationalist People's Republic of China (PRC) and a Russian state controlled by Soviet-era apparatchiks. These authoritarian powers confront a group of comparatively 'like-minded' states and societies which, notwithstanding diverse challenges to its existence, persists as the 'West' (Cf. Hellmann et al. 2014). This article contends that while Russia, under its current regime, presents a serious military and economic test, the West has sufficient material capacities to cope. More critical are intangibles of political will and character, along with the functional competence of cohesion. Across this spectrum of attributes, countries of the greater Baltic Sea region (Henningsen 2011; Westgaard 2023) demonstrate individual credentials and commitment. All 'Norden' (Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland) has joined the hyper-vigilant Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland in NATO. Germany, the Kremlin's chief external target of psychological and cyber warfare, shifted from a posture that for decades exhibited traces of wishful thinking and even appeasement.

The article addresses different components of its topic in five sections. First, it outlines the ethos and internal discontents of Western liberal democracy. Second, it describes the motives and methods of Russia's rulers. The third section considers Ukraine, the blazing epicentre of the contest. The fourth assesses the Baltic region. The fifth reviews Germany. The article then presents some remarks on how International Relations theory might appraise the topic.

Liberal Democracy and its Discontents

The contemporary West is partly defined by the political philosophy and system of liberal democracy. Its structures and institutions include a separation of powers, multiple parties, free and fair elections, the rule of law, and civil freedoms (V-Dem 2023). Copious evidence can be assembled to demonstrate the ideal type's deficiencies (Cf. Klein 2016). Its scope for recurring crises is expanded by the 'information age' and the economic upheavals, cyber criminals, propagandists, terrorists, and other extremists it enables or exacerbates. A full list and analysis of liberal democracy's flaws, or the fragmentation and polarisation occurring in states with variants of that system, is not the purpose of this article. Despite the defects, policy failures, and controversies, for most people who reside in one, liberal democracy is preferable to theocracies, juntas, and other authoritarian regimes of nominally 'left' or 'right'. A cogent empirical indicator of relative desirability is the millions voting with their feet (WEF 2017; IOM 2021).

A paradoxical element in this type of polity is the freedom of opinion and critique that differentiates them from autocracies and simultaneously permits expression by sympathisers, apologists, and even devotees of such regimes (Cf. V-Dem 2023: 37). Some discontent in the West transmutes into empathy or overt advocacy for Russia, manifesting in organized parties to which its regime offers 'trans-ideological' appeal and funding (Braghiroli and Makarychev 2016). The initial zenith of these parties has passed though they may rise again. At a social level, supporters include: (i) persons disillusioned, in recent years, with western institutions, processes, and culture. Issues of specific individual importance may be added to a general dissatisfaction; (ii) persons who ideologically reject the state and society in which they reside. They defend certain authoritarian regimes whose rhetoric and image appeals. Some believe a narrative about Vladimir Putin being a 'conservative'. Others positively associate him with Soviet values and mythology; (iii) persons who see themselves as 'realists' or 'rational' and oppose involvement in the Russia-Ukraine war on that basis. Some identify with and condone the Russian leadership's behaviour, stretching

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conceptions of objectivity; (iv) others feel an affinity with Russia, regardless of its political structure or actions. These types inhabit societies of the alliance that opposes Russian belligerence and are targets of Kremlin propaganda (Makarychev 2021; Hoffeler 2022; Garner 2024).

Russia's ruling clique: motives and modus operandi

The main source of problems between Russia and the West is not purported threats to Russian sovereignty, NATO enlargement, an alleged Nazi takeover of Ukraine, and so on. It is Russia's political culture, or lack of it. A kleptocratic clique rules the country as a fiefdom (Ålsund 2019). It fears 'democracy promotion' because that implies the end of one-party states and the removal of autocrats. After acceding to the Presidency, opportunist Putin operated a compact with the (satirically titled) Liberal Democratic Party and the Communists, ostensibly more extreme than his vehicles. The President is styled as resolute and above politics while representatives of legal pretend parties, television provocateurs, and other stooges (Kiselev, Medvedev, Rogozin, Dugin, Karaganov) maintain an attack on Russia's supposed enemies (Sykes 2023; Stoner 2023; Wood S. 2023a).

The clique tries to partly camouflage its interests (survival, power, wealth) behind assertions and prescriptions about international law and order. A 'Charter' liberalism (Clunan 2018), emphasising sovereignty and the privileged role of UN Security Council members, is 'pluralist', meaning it notionally tolerates all domestic political systems, and thus is consonant with Moscow's preferences. A 'humanist' version of liberalism that could in some circumstances transcend state sovereignty is denounced. Yet Russia transgressed the sovereignty principle by annexing Crimea, interfering in Ukrainian territory (Allison 2017), and then invading and attempting to occupy most of the country.

Strategic calculation, duplicity, and politicised emotion co-exist for people able to preserve power in the Russian state. Three decades after the Soviet Union's demise they transmit feelings of depreciation despite their own elevated positions. They resent western predominance in some fields and the reduced flow of energy money from Europe. Putin understands Stalin's thinking and methods. Besides brute force, his regime deploys 'plausible deniability', disinformation, fear inducement, assassination, political theatre, and elaborate imagery against a background of manipulated 'history' and religion. Tropes of 'greatness' and 'humiliation' are stage-managed to generate popular support. The power holders admit no responsibility for the calamitous condition of Russia-West relations or Russia's decay (Cf. Vázquez Liñán 2010; Wood E. 2011; Allison 2014; Pearce 2020; Wood and Cox 2021; Tolz and Hutchings 2023).

Flash Point Ukraine

Putin's war against it threatens Ukraine's existence. It is also the core of a multi-dimensional test for the West. Ukraine cannot win without sufficient western support and Russia cannot win if Ukraine receives that support. The direct military antagonists each declare the other's leadership to be criminal and propose its arrest and trial. These gestures alone ensure that the conflict continues.

Some analysts claim that western governments and institutions adopted unwise policy towards Russia and the rest of the 'post-Soviet space'. These actors and Ukrainians opposed to Russian intrusion contributed to a deteriorating atmosphere, they say (Cf. Charap and Darden 2014). Most non-Russian observers do not consider that the West or Ukraine caused the present war. Russians outside the Kremlin orbit also attribute responsibility to the Putin regime, where some saw the conflict germinating years ago (Cf. Shevtsova 2010; Kasparov 2013; Pomerantsev and Weiss 2014).

Ukraine is hardly a model of good governance. It has a history of corruption, energy dependency, and inefficient public administration. The Soviet legacy is onerous. A common discursive practice effectively placed Ukraine in the 'Russian sphere'. The casual use of 'Russia' as shorthand for the 'Soviet Union' conflated them and diluted or elided recognition of other nations, some of which attained their own states. Germans were prone to this, inadvertently, or otherwise, condoning Putin's assertions. A recent critique argues that having constructed a suitable discursive framing the West is living vicariously through Ukraine in the throes of conflict with Russia (Browning 2022). It may be correct that the West is regenerating itself, not by design but as a real-time consequence of war. The Ukrainian

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government intones the country's nascent liberal democratic qualities and intended future. A credible and durable political system is integral to Ukraine and its allies justifying what has been invested (Cf. Zakaria 2022).

The (Greater) Baltic Region

If Ukraine is to succeed, it will require sustained assistance from more than the USA, EU, and UK. The importance of countries around the Baltic Sea has vastly increased. The region is at an 'inflection point' (Crowther 2022) galvanized by the intensification of war. It extended to include Ukraine (Cf. Bogdanova and Makarychev 2020) strategically and ideationally. Conversely, Russian policy has made Russia the regional exception. The Baltic 3 (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) and Poland have powerful historical, emotional, and existential reasons to resist an authoritarian Russia and to support an aspiring Ukraine. Denmark, Finland, and Sweden had to adapt more. For generations they opted-out of two major international institutions, Finland and Sweden from NATO and Denmark from the EU's CSDP. Exigencies motivated big changes and, to some extent, resolved recurrent issues of inter-Nordic defence and diplomatic cooperation (Cf. Mouritzen 2019; Wood S. 2024). Recent developments signalled a more unified, resolute, and expanded security and value community (Cf. Bosse 2022). The states and societies concerned have an exemplary function for Ukraine, in the present and through a long post-war phase.

Germany

Change in Baltic region state Germany is even more important. It is not institutional, *per se*, but attitudinal. Dispositions among sections of the population and political class assisted Putin. Now publicly expressed 'understanding' for Russia has almost evaporated from the mainstream parties, if still occurring among 'left' and 'right' extremes (Cf. Wolfskämpf 2023; Decker 2021; Wood 2021; Gloger 2017). Under Defence Minister Boris Pistorius, Germany has responded to a realised threat to itself and its neighbours. The initial deployment of a permanent stationing of Bundeswehr troops in Lithuania is a 'strong signal to allies, before all the Baltic states' (Nagel 2024: 1).

It has, though, taken several years of escalating Russian aggression, including against Germany in non-military forms, to stimulate a strong reaction. Forsberg (2016: 37) suggested that German foreign policy towards Russia was a case of the 'initial problem' being replaced, specifically that 'values rather than economic interests came to shape the policy response and define the goals'. That transition did not happen so quickly or completely. One notable exception was the Nord Stream 2 project – for which other Baltic region states also bore some responsibility (Wood and Henke 2021) – whereby German governments persisted with the promotion of an 'essential' new conduit of gas from Russia despite sanctioning it (Wood S. 2023b). Discussion on how seriously Germany attempts to combat Russia under Putin continues (Cf. Mello 2024).

What can or does International Relations theory say about this?

The world is again more complicated than it was a decade ago when scholars ruminated on the capacity of 'International Relations Theory' to understand or reflect what was happening in it (Dunne, Hansen, and Wight 2013). Several perspectives could contribute to framing or illuminating the present topic with different schools prioritising different factors. An eclectic approach is needed to arrive at an inclusive summary, which cannot be completed here.

Three years ago, International Political Economy was very relevant to comprehending Russia-West relations. It had provided abundant analyses on pricing, supply, transit, and agreements related to energy. A side effect of the intensification of hot war in Ukraine is the reduced prominence of IPE. Proponents of various realisms offer plausible explanations, on their own terms, of the course and current nadir in Russia-West relations. They would likely contend that Russia's leaders perceived a power imbalance in favour of the West, whose support for a Ukraine seeking independence from Russia constituted an intolerable encroachment. Military capacity and geopolitics are accentuated and clearly important. Other factors and avenues may be underestimated or overlooked. A function of employing material power or 'strategic interests' as predominant explanatory criteria is that states are viewed as morally equivalent. Non-material considerations have little or no role.

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One stream of realism, the neo-classical variety, draws on history, identity, and culture. It is closer methodologically to historical sociology, constructivism, Foreign Policy Analysis, and domestic politics approaches, which place more emphasis on features and developments, shorter and longer-term, within states. This might include emotions, which in Russia manifested as indignation and resentment at its (wrongly) assumed 'mistreatment' and loss of status. As the state became more autocratic, its manufacture and denouncing of enemies magnified. Political rights and civil freedoms faded. In the West, party politics, business, or social forces could influence foreign policy. Some pundits, interest groups, and other partisans find reasons, related to dissatisfaction with western governments or society, to empathise with or agitate for the Kremlin. That reveals myopia about genuine threats, from actors prepared to take political antagonism to an entirely different level.

War in Ukraine is the epicentre of a conflict entailing more than a clash of militaries. Aggravated tension, and the spectre of a security dilemma, derive from the Putin clique's egoistic rejection of an authentic multiparty system, free and fair elections, a separation of powers, and other components intended to promote political competition and the rule of law. The imprisonment or murder of real or imagined opponents exemplifies a worsening authoritarianism. These behaviours exacerbate the rulers' anxiety about their lack of legitimacy (Charap and Darden 2014: 10) and potential personal consequences (Wood 2019). Anxieties oscillate between the geopolitical sphere (Eberle and Daniel 2022) and a bunker mentality in the Kremlin.

The normative dimension, rather than strategic differences, is the key locus of contrast between the West and Russia. This claim does, however, raise some questions. Why did it take so long for a western value community to identify and aptly respond to Russian behaviour? If Finland and Sweden shared the same values as the rest of the Euro-Atlantia, then why not, until the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, membership of the same fundamental institution? When will the EU fully exert itself? Collectively, the West was complacent. Some governments and corporations were complicit in sustaining the Putin clique and its lifestyles (Transparency International 2022). Subsequently, the effects of sanctions against Russia on western countries are a relatively minor sacrifice. Germany survived an energy crisis that in 2022 was presented as apocalyptic.

Ukraine is bearing the existential impact of the Russian assault. The concurrent challenge for the West incorporates political, financial, economic, psychological, intellectual, social, normative, electoral, media, and military dimensions. Russian nuclear posturing will amplify as Putin fails to achieve his objectives by 'conventional' means.

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