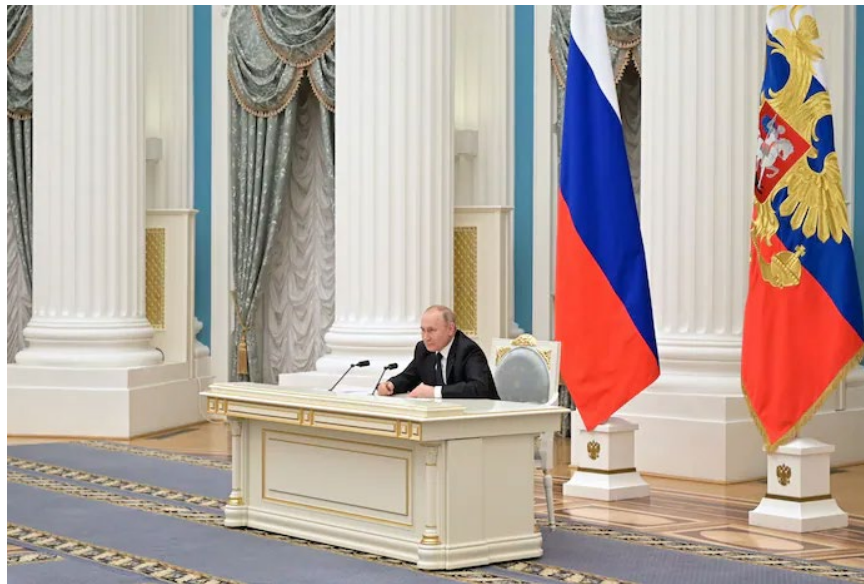


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## Putin's rule depends on creating foreign enemies — and domestic 'traitors'

He initiates conflict abroad to bolster support at home. But has he overreached this time?



*President Vladimir Putin chairs a meeting with Russian business executives at the Kremlin in Moscow on Feb. 24.  
(Aleksey Nikolskyj/Kremlin Pool/Sputnik/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock)*

By Samuel A. Greene and Graeme B. Robertson  
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To most outside observers (and many [Russian experts](#), too) Vladimir Putin's [actions](#) this past week look shockingly reckless — from his speech denying Ukraine's right to exist to the [recognition](#) of two breakaway regions of eastern Ukraine to an all-out invasion on multiple fronts. So [irrational](#) does his behavior seem to some that they have suggested that pandemic-induced isolation has unhinged him, heightening his paranoia and aggrievement.

Putin's actions seem at cross-purposes with his goals. He says he wants to keep [Ukraine out of NATO](#), and NATO out of Ukraine; although Ukraine is no closer to joining the alliance than it was, the Russian president has galvanized the West into opposing Russia and supporting Kyiv. He says he wants to bolster Russian security, but he has dragged his nation into a war that no one but Putin seems itching to fight. Many [analysts believe](#) that Putin wants a veto over Ukrainian foreign and domestic policy, but tearing up the Minsk Agreement, which had kept a fragile peace in eastern Ukraine since 2015 — and which would have increased the clout of the breakaway regions — deprived him of exactly that veto. And while the sanctions announced by the United States, the European Union, Britain, Canada and Japan may not bring his regime crashing down soon, they will certainly make Russians poorer and unhappier.

Put bluntly, what Putin did makes little sense to most Western policy analysts and security officials, even though it presumably makes sense to Putin. That the benefits in Russia's cost-benefit calculations are evident only to its president presents a problem both for understanding the current situation and predicting Putin's next move. To solve this puzzle, it's helpful to take the Ukraine crisis out of the realm of foreign policy and put it into the world in which Putin spends most of his time: that of Russian domestic politics. Viewed in that light, the war represents a continuation of Putin's efforts to govern by presenting himself as the only leader who can successfully oppose malign external forces bent on the destruction of Russia.

While we're used to thinking of Putin as an autocrat, and he does wield an extraordinary amount of power, the moniker can [mislead](#) in some ways. He still has to deal with business executives, politicians, bureaucrats and security officials — including those who wantonly steal from the state — as well as a public whose mistrust has fatally undermined his attempts to get the coronavirus pandemic under control. Worse, neither the elite nor the general public has any real faith in Putin's ability to reverse nearly [eight years of economic decline](#).

To maintain and consolidate his power in the face of such challenges, Putin has spent much of the last decade restructuring Russian politics around the idea that the nation faces existential threats from outside its borders — aided by traitors within. That framing tars all domestic opposition as tools of foreign powers and justifies the evisceration of independent media, civil society and political parties besides his own; it calls on ordinary Russians to make seemingly endless sacrifices for the greater good. Putin appears to have hit upon the idea that anyone who opposes his rule is a puppet of foreign interests when he saw public protest [upend Georgian and Ukrainian politics](#) from 2003 to 2005; he concluded (cynically or sincerely) that such unrest could not possibly be authentic. He made that theme [central](#) to his reelection campaign in 2012, and he has run with it ever since. He has used restrictive laws against [“foreign agents”](#) and [“undesirable” organizations](#) to hound and imprison hundreds of journalists, activists and opposition politicians.

Over the same period, Putin has made the purported external threat more concrete for Russian citizens by throwing the country into wars and confrontation on a regional and increasingly global scale. Grabbing Crimea in March 2014 and sponsoring separatist revolt in eastern Ukraine later that year led to mounting Western

sanctions and a cycle of geopolitical escalation that led directly to the current crisis. An intervention to prop up a Syrian regime that the West was working to topple fits into the same narrative. So, too, does using Russian arms to defend regional strongmen — Alexander Lukashenko [in Belarus](#) and Kassym-Jomart Tokayev [in Kazakhstan](#) — against popular protest portrayed by Russian state television as instigated by the United States and Europe.

When we see his pursuit of domestic control and his foreign policy as part of the same strategy — each catalyzing the other — what Putin has done in recent days begins to make more sense. From the standpoint of domestic politics, he doesn't necessarily need an end to NATO expansion, or the ability to interfere directly in Ukrainian politics, though he would be happy to achieve these goals. What he does need is a geopolitical confrontation sufficient in scale to justify his domestic repression and, ideally, with no end in sight.

That still leaves many unanswered questions. While the logic of domestic politics justifies creating international crises, does it really support all-out war against one of Russia's largest neighbors, which is being armed and supported by the West? In making this choice, Putin is taking a gamble on his ability to shape and even direct Russian public and elite opinion. It's a risky one. The [story](#) the Kremlin is telling about rooting out Nazis who supposedly run Ukraine is, after all, utterly absurd.

Moreover, while polls show that large majorities of Russians support recognizing the breakaway regions and agree with Putin in placing the blame for the conflict on NATO, Russians rank the crisis over Ukraine and relations with the West as Putin's two biggest foreign policy failures. Meanwhile, marginally more Russians have a positive opinion of Ukraine than a negative one, and most feel that Russia and Ukraine should have friendly and equal relations.

Putin's gamble is that a combination of military success, a powerful propaganda machine and widespread repression will keep domestic discontent under control and, crucially, keep the elite on his side. It is possible that the gamble will succeed, that the fusion of domestic dictatorship and imperial ambition may prove effective. Nevertheless, there are good reasons to be skeptical.

Surprisingly large protests ("solo pickets," as the Moscow Times [puts it](#), are the only lawful form of protest in Russia) have appeared on the streets of Russian cities. These are likely to be easily suppressed — the Russian nongovernmental organization OVD-Info reported that [more than 1,700 people](#) were arrested on Thursday — but unease is mounting. The Committee of Soldiers' Mothers, a grass-roots group that emerged to oppose Russia's destructive war in Chechnya in the 1990s, has publicized harrowing [pictures](#) of the poor conditions in which soldiers are being housed and fed along the border with Ukraine and launched a video campaign against the war. Any combat deaths on the Russian side are likely to feed this nascent movement.

Discontent is likely to be fueled, too, by Western sanctions that will have both targeted and widespread effects. We simply do not know what price Russian elites are willing to pay for a war that few of them may actively support. While moving against the president from the inside is extremely dangerous, impatience with the costs to the elite of Putin's rule, and the sense that something should be done about it, may grow rapidly behind the scenes.

If that happens, a war Putin started to solidify his position at home could prove to be his undoing.



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