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### **This is what a post-Putin Russia should look like**

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What does a desirable and realistic end to the criminal war unleashed by Vladimir Putin against Ukraine look like?

If we examine the primary things said by Western leaders on this score, the bottom line remains: Russia (Putin) must not win this war. Ukraine must remain an independent democratic state capable of defending itself.

This is correct, but it is a tactic. The strategy should be to ensure that Russia and its government naturally, without coercion, do not want to start wars and do not find them attractive. This is undoubtedly possible. Right now the urge for aggression is coming from a minority in Russian society.

In my opinion, the problem with the West's current tactics lies not just in the vagueness of their aim, but in the fact that they ignore the question: What does Russia look like after the tactical goals have been achieved? Even if success is achieved, where is the guarantee that the world will not find itself confronting an even more aggressive regime, tormented by resentment and imperial ideas that have little to do with reality? With a sanctions-stricken but still big economy in a state of permanent military mobilization? And with nuclear weapons that guarantee impunity for all manner of international provocations and adventures?

It is easy to predict that even in the case of a painful military defeat, Putin will still declare that he lost not to Ukraine but to the "collective West and NATO," whose aggression was unleashed to destroy Russia.

And then, resorting to his usual postmodern repertoire of national symbols — from icons to red flags, from Dostoevsky to ballet — he will vow to create an army so strong and weapons of such unprecedented power that the West will rue the day it defied us, and the honor of our great ancestors will be avenged.

And then we will see a fresh cycle of hybrid warfare and provocations, eventually escalating into new wars.

To avoid this, the issue of postwar Russia should become the central issue — and not just one element among others — of those who are striving for peace. No long-term goals can be achieved without a plan to ensure that the source of the problems stops creating them. Russia must cease to be an instigator of aggression and instability. That is possible, and that is what should be seen as a strategic victory in this war.

There are several important things happening to Russia that need to be understood:

First, jealousy of Ukraine and its possible successes is an innate feature of post-Soviet power in Russia; it was also characteristic of the first Russian president, Boris Yeltsin. But since the beginning of Putin's rule, and especially after the Orange Revolution that began in 2004, hatred of Ukraine's European choice, and the desire to turn it into a failed state, have become a lasting obsession not only for Putin but also for all politicians of his generation.

Control over Ukraine is the most important article of faith for all Russians with imperial views, from officials to ordinary people. In their opinion, Russia combined with a subordinate Ukraine amounts to a "reborn U.S.S.R. and empire." Without Ukraine, in this view, Russia is just a country with no chance of world domination. Everything that Ukraine acquires is something taken away from Russia.

Second, the view of war not as a catastrophe but as an amazing means of solving all problems is not just a philosophy of Putin's top brass, but a practice confirmed by life and evolution. Since the Second Chechen War, which made the little-known Putin the country's most popular politician, through the war in Georgia, the annexation of Crimea, the war in Donbas and the war in Syria, the Russian elite over the past 23 years has learned rules that have never failed: War is not that expensive, it solves all domestic political problems, it raises public approval sky-high, it does not particularly harm the economy, and — most importantly — winners face no accountability. Sooner or later, one of the constantly changing Western leaders will come to us to negotiate. It does not matter what motives will lead him — the will of the voters or the desire to receive the Nobel Peace Prize — but if you show proper persistence and determination, the West will come to make peace.

Don't forget that there are many in the United States, Britain and other Western countries in politics who have been defeated and lost ground due to their support for one war or another. In Russia, there is simply no such thing. Here, war is always about profit and success.

Third, therefore, the hopes that Putin's replacement by another member of his elite will fundamentally change this view on war, and especially war over the "legacy of the

U.S.S.R.,” is naive at the very least. The elites simply know from experience that war works — better than anything else.

Perhaps the best example here would be Dmitry Medvedev, the former president on whom the West pinned so many hopes. Today, this amusing Medvedev, who was once taken on a tour of Twitter’s headquarters, makes statements so aggressive that they look like a caricature of Putin’s.

Fourth, the good news is that the bloodthirsty obsession with Ukraine is not at all widespread outside the power elites, no matter what lies pro-government sociologists might tell.

The war raises Putin’s approval rating by super-mobilizing the imperially minded part of society. The news agenda is fully consumed by the war; internal problems recede into the background: “Hurray, we’re back in the game, we are great, they’re reckoning with us!” Yet the aggressive imperialists do not have absolute dominance. They do not make up a solid majority of voters, and even they still require a steady supply of propaganda to sustain their beliefs.

Otherwise Putin would not have needed to call the war a “special operation” and send those who use the word “war” to jail. (Not long ago, a member of a Moscow district council received seven years in prison for this.) He would not have been afraid to send conscripts to the war and would not have been compelled to look for soldiers in maximum-security prisons, as he is doing now. (Several people were “drafted to the front” directly from the penal colony where I am.)

Yes, propaganda and brainwashing have an effect. Yet we can say with certainty that the majority of residents of major cities such as Moscow and St. Petersburg, as well as young voters, are critical of the war and imperial hysteria. The horror of the suffering of Ukrainians and the brutal killing of innocents resonate in the souls of these voters.

Thus, we can state the following:

The war with Ukraine was started and waged, of course, by Putin, trying to solve his domestic political problems. But the real war party is the entire elite and the system of power itself, which is an endlessly self-reproducing Russian authoritarianism of the imperial kind. External aggression in any form, from diplomatic rhetoric to outright warfare, is its preferred mode of operation, and Ukraine is its preferred target. This self-generated imperial authoritarianism is the real curse of Russia and the cause of all its troubles. We cannot get rid of it, despite the opportunities regularly provided by history.

Russia had its last chance of this kind after the end of the U.S.S.R., but both the democratic public inside the country and Western leaders at the time made the monstrous mistake of agreeing to the model — proposed by Boris Yeltsin’s team — of a presidential republic with enormous powers for the leader. Giving plenty of power to a good guy seemed logical at the time.

Yet the inevitable soon happened: The good guy went bad. To begin with, he started a war (the Chechen war) himself, and then, without normal elections and fair procedures, he handed over power to the cynical and corrupt Soviet imperialists led by Putin. They have caused several wars and countless international provocations, and are now tormenting a neighboring nation, committing horrible crimes for which neither many generations of Ukrainians nor our own children will forgive us.

In the 31 years since the collapse of the U.S.S.R., we have witnessed a clear pattern: The countries that chose the parliamentary republic model (the Baltic states) are thriving and have successfully joined Europe. Those that chose the presidential-parliamentary model (Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia) have faced persistent instability and made little progress. Those that chose strong presidential power (Russia, Belarus and the Central Asian republics) have succumbed to rigid authoritarianism, most of them permanently engaged in military conflicts with their neighbors, daydreaming about their own little empires.

In short, strategic victory means bringing Russia back to this key historical juncture and letting the Russian people make the right choice.

The future model for Russia is not “strong power” and a “firm hand,” but harmony, agreement and consideration of the interests of the whole society. Russia needs a parliamentary republic. That is the only way to stop the endless cycle of imperial authoritarianism.

One may argue that a parliamentary republic is not a panacea. Who, after all, is to prevent Putin or his successor from winning elections and gaining full control over the parliament?

Of course, even a parliamentary republic does not offer 100 percent guarantees. It could well be that we are witnessing the transition to the authoritarianism of parliamentary India. After the usurpation of power, parliamentary Turkey has been transformed into a presidential one. The core of Putin’s European fan club is paradoxically in parliamentary Hungary.

And the very notion of a “parliamentary republic” is too broad.

Yet I believe this cure offers us crucial advantages: a radical reduction of power in the hands of one person, the formation of a government by a parliamentary majority, an independent judiciary system, a significant increase in the powers of local authorities. Such institutions have never existed in Russia, and we are in desperate need of them.

As for the possible total control of parliament by Putin's party, the answer is simple: Once the real opposition is allowed to vote, it will be impossible. A large faction? Yes. A coalition majority? Maybe. Total control? Definitely not. Too many people in Russia are interested in normal life now, not in the phantom of territorial gains. And there are more such people every year. They just don't have anyone to vote for now.

Certainly, changing Putin's regime in the country and choosing the path of development are not matters for the West, but jobs for the citizens of Russia. Nevertheless, the West, which has imposed sanctions both on Russia as a state as well as on some of its elites, should make its strategic vision of Russia as a parliamentary democracy as clear as possible. By no means should we repeat the mistake of the West's cynical approach in the 1990s, when the post-Soviet elite was effectively told: "You do what you want there; just watch your nuclear weapons and supply us with oil and gas." Indeed, even now we hear cynical voices saying similar things: "Let them just pull back the troops and do what they want from there. The war is over, the mission of the West is accomplished." That mission was already "accomplished" with Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the result is a full-fledged war in Europe in 2022.

This is a simple, honest and fair approach: The Russian people are of course free to choose their own path of development. But Western countries are free to choose the format of their relations with Russia, to lift or not to lift sanctions, and to define the criteria for such decisions. The Russian people and the Russian elite do not need to be forced. They need a clear signal and an explanation of why such a choice is better. Crucially, parliamentary democracy is also a rational and desirable choice for many of the political factions around Putin. It gives them an opportunity to maintain influence and fight for power while ensuring that they are not destroyed by a more aggressive group.

War is a relentless stream of crucial, urgent decisions influenced by constantly shifting factors. Therefore, while I commend European leaders for their ongoing success in supporting Ukraine, I urge them not to lose sight of the fundamental causes of war. The threat to peace and stability in Europe is aggressive imperial authoritarianism, endlessly inflicted by Russia upon itself. Postwar Russia, like post-Putin Russia, will be doomed to become belligerent and Putinist again. This is inevitable as long as the current form of the country's development is maintained. Only a parliamentary republic can prevent this. It is the first step toward transforming Russia into a good neighbor that helps to solve problems rather than create them.