

The West Must Drive a Wedge Between Putin and Russia's Elites

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Putin's Russia has now been at war with Ukraine for a year. During this time, it has become obvious to many that even the return of Donbas and Crimea to Kyiv won't automatically lead to the end of the conflict, just as it is increasingly clear that the threat of war in Europe will not recede as long as Vladimir Putin remains in the Kremlin.

Even if he is defeated, Putin will continue his nuclear saber-rattling (or possibly even use nuclear weapons), increase his intrigues against the West, seek to destabilize Europe in every way possible, and, in the end, resume military aggression against Ukraine or one of his other neighbors.

Thus, to end the war and establish a lasting peace in Europe, the single most important task must be to bring about regime change in the Russian Federation, which, for now, is by its very nature doomed to aggression against other countries.

To the surprise of many observers, the Russian elite continues to show great cohesion around the president. Well-known "liberally" minded figures such as former finance minister Alexei Kudrin, Central Bank chair Elvira Nabiullina and Sberbank CEO German Gref, as well as some of Putin's most effective managers such as Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin and Moscow mayor Sergei Sobyanin, all demonstrate loyalty to the dictator and actively work to preserve his regime, though they almost certainly realize that he is leading the country into the abyss and that his economic achievements of the past 20 years have already been undone by his reckless actions in Ukraine.

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Many suggest that a Putin defeat in Ukraine would lead to elite discontent and, potentially, a coup. Such an outcome may seem plausible, but anyone instigating a coup is in need of a vision for Russia's post-Putin future. And that is obviously far less simple than it sounds.

Even if the Russian elite is not enamored with Putin's policies, they currently see no alternative to his reign. The West has cut all ties, their European investments and properties are being seized and there appears to be no letting up of sanctions.

At the same time, Russian opposition politicians in exile either ignore the potential role that Putin's elites might be able to play in rebuilding the country or actively lobby for yet more sanctions to be imposed on its members for supporting Russia's aggression. Their actions send a clear message to these pillars of Putin's regime: you are our enemies, we are not going to engage with you and when we come to power after the fall of the regime, you will all be punished.

This is why the Russian elites look to Putin as their sole chance to retain their high status, enormous wealth, and some kind of future. What kind of oligarch would risk everything to overthrow a dictator so that their wealth and power could then be stripped from them by a group of returning revolutionaries?

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However unpleasant it may be, a more flexible and realistic approach must be adopted. The Russian elite needs to become divided. It must be made clear that after Putin's fall, only the central figures in his regime will be held accountable and punished for the illegal invasion of Ukraine and the regime's crimes against its own citizens.

Members of Putin's elites who actively oppose the regime, whether that be through acts of open defiance or in less obvious forms, such as the sabotage of defense procurements, should be given guarantees they won't face jail time or the confiscation of their assets, and that even some political prospects will remain open to them. If that is made clear, they will realize that they do indeed have a viable future without Putin.

Adopting such an approach would be a far-sighted move for a united Russian opposition, emphasizing the West's readiness to negotiate with those members of Putin's elite instrumental in his eventual overthrow. If Ukraine and the West were also to acknowledge the

validity of such an approach, a clear signal would be sent to Russia.

This form of subversion could become a significant aspect of the battle to rid Russia of Putin. Should one of the main opposition groupings support such a move, it would subsequently find itself well-placed to act as an intermediary between Putin's opponents within his power vertical and Putin's opponents abroad. When the time comes, this would ensure that the Russian opposition had a seat at the table, making it much easier for Russia's exiled politicians to participate in the future political processes of a post-Putin Russia.

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