Antti Rautiainen
What Does Putin Want?
The Russian autocrat is not crazy, war is simply a necessity
for his power and economic system
11 July 2024

Retrieved on 11th July 2024 from freedomnews.org.uk
The original Russian text was published by Autonomous
Action. Translated into English for *Freedom* by Sean Patterson.

theanarchistlibrary.org

What Does Putin Want?

The Russian autocrat is not crazy, war is simply a necessity for his power and economic system

Antti Rautiainen

11 July 2024

ing Transnistria from tiny Moldova, annexing Belarus (virtually already occupied by Russia), wresting away Kazakhstan's northern regions with Russian majorities, and participating in wars in the Middle East and Africa. If Putin wins in Ukraine, he will have no reason not to do all of the above.

Repeated wars are also the only means to preserve Russia's neo-feudal system. Without an external enemy, it is impossible to justify Russia's bloated security services and bureaucracy that have taken over the rest of the economy. In this respect, the Russian system is similar to fascism, although its historical origins, the composition of its ruling class, and the role of its subjects differ from fascism. Someday I will return to this comparison.

Therefore, the possibility of achieving peace must be evaluated based on whether the attack was a mistake from Putin's perspective. If answered in the positive, then peacekeeping with territorial concessions on Ukraine's part would not necessarily lead to a new war. However, there is no reason to suppose Putin's actions were anything other than rational and calculating or that he regrets anything. Putin is not crazy, there is simply nothing wrong with war in his world of values. War is a necessity for his power and economic system. Therefore, any territorial concessions, or recognition of annexed territories from 2014–2015, will only lead to a new war.

a liberal-bourgeois perspective, this could, in principle, be considered a "victory."

However, thus far, Ukraine is unwilling to make territorial concessions, the reasons of which are easy to understand. All of the regions occupied by Russia are home to people who identify with Ukraine — such as the majority of the Tatar ethnic minority in Crimea. In some regions, like occupied Kherson, the share of pro-Russian citizens is minimal. In the opinion of Ukrainians, if millions of pro-Ukrainian citizens end up in Russia or are forced to leave their homes forever, there can be no talk of victory.

Moreover, Russia's territorial pretenses are not founded on any historical boundaries. Putin does not consider Ukrainians to be a real people but simply Russians possessed of a false consciousness. Thus, any territorial concessions will only encourage Russia to attack again in the future.

What will be the Consequences if Putin is Victorious?

This is not Putin's first war. The Second Chechen War ended in Russia's victory without any negotiations. In 2008, South Ossetia's Russian-backed leadership provoked Georgia's president Mikheil Saakashvili into an attack with disastrous consequences. Putin's 2014 conquest of Crimea is one of his most popular achievements. By contrast, Russia's intervention in Syria's civil war to save Assad's dictatorship was hardly noticeable in Russian society and, consequently, did not especially affect Putin's popularity. Putin already has four victories on his resume, and his appetite grows the more he consumes.

Putin's previous four wars were significantly less complicated than the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Subsequent wars could also be easier — possibilities include, for example, seiz-

Contents

eternal fate, having been only recently formed via a synthesis of Soviet bureaucracy and capitalism in the last twenty years.

Although Putin's theories are based on the Slavophiles of the 19th century and Ivan Ilyich's fascist philosophy of 20th century, these ideas and their corresponding neo-feudal values only made a breakthrough with the formation of Russia's neo-feudal economic system. The Soviet Union also pursued imperial politics but the economic system, ruling class, and its values were completely different from those of contemporary Russia.

What Does Victory Mean in Putin's Value System

In summary, the definition of victory in war is as follows: it is a situation in which the weight of achieved goals is greater than unachieved goals from within the framework of a given value system. Thus, victory is a value-dependent concept. It therefore follows that both sides of a war can be victors from the viewpoint of their respective values.

With a clear definition of victory, one can also evaluate Putin's sanity. Just like victory, reasonableness is not an absolute concept but hinges upon the values of a given person. War is a reasonable venture if victory can be achieved according to a specific value system. Putin cannot win within the framework of liberal-bourgeois values premised upon a respect for human lives and capital. However, "victory" is possible within the framework of his own values.

Such a Russian victory is not necessarily mutually exclusively from a Ukrainian victory if Ukrainians, at some point after conceding territories, interpret their own victory as securing independence, national unity, and economic success as a result of integration into the Western free trade system. From

and mental movements of the *nomenklatura*, because Putin is a product of his own caste, and his thinking corresponds to the mindset and values of this caste. Although Putin is a dictator, he needs the support of his own class. If Putin dies or is overthrown, it is not certain that anything will change in Russia, because his successor could be a representative from the same class with the same values.

Defining Victory Within the Framework of Neo-feudal Values

In the conservative neo-feudal world of Putin's values, such bourgeois values as money and human life are of secondary importance, while land is of first-rate importance. Even for the bourgeoisie, the value of human life was very relative when they fought for political power or felt the threat of losing it. Nevertheless, the bourgeois revolutions are to be thanked for the concept of human rights. For neo-feudalism human rights are poison.

Neo-feudal values have a definite logic. Capital and population lost in war can be replenished within a few decades, but conquered lands can remain in possession for thousands of years. Lands offer revenue and a security buffer zone far into the future. Medieval knights thought similarly as they were more interested in possessing land than capital or human lives.

In Putin's view, all governments and international agreements are but fleeting flashes of history compared to territories. He may well sell these values to the Russian people when the guns fall silent. The desire for people to consider themselves winners, despite all the losses, should not be underestimated.

Here is not the place to further discuss Russia's neo-feudal economic system, its formation, and its derivative values. I wrote on this theme thirteen years ago and will return to it in the future. This new system, of course, is not Russia's

Shortly after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Putin outlined five goals for his war: Ukraine's non-alignment with NATO; a change in Ukraine's government; a severe limitation of Ukraine's defence capacity; the seizure of Ukrainian territory (with international recognition); and the lifting of Western sanctions on Russia.

In the first weeks of the war, Putin also had a maximalist agenda: the quick occupation of Ukraine, the installation of a puppet government, and possibly the annexation of the entirety of Ukraine. However, the failure to achieve these maximalist goals did not signify a loss if the five smaller goals were at least partially fulfilled. Most likely, Putin understood the situation in this manner even before the attack. Putin was hardly confident that Kyiv would fall, but he was sure that some of his minor goals could be achieved.

All five lesser goals are achievable if Ukraine loses the war. Nevertheless, Russian opposition, and Western and discourse continues to be characterized by speculations about Putin's possible secret intentions, about whether his stated goals can be believed, and about whether he is insane. Additionally, one can still encounter statements that "Putin has already lost the war"— a product of wishful thinking. Putin's words and actions are quite consistent and reasonable if we remember that Putin's values differ from those of democracy's supporters.

Prognosticating Russia's actions does require assessing whether Putin is crazy. I personally thought that war was unlikely until it began because I believed Putin understood how difficult it would be to conquer the whole of Ukraine. I was mistaken because I did not guess that Putin had more modest goals; that is, Putin was not crazy and did not underestimate his capabilities. I was not the only one wrong — even in Kyiv, Biden's warnings were only finally believed once Russian missiles were already in the air. In this way, the 2022 attack was in many ways simply a repeat of the 2014 attack; both times, Putin sought a complete victory, but more limited

goals were also acceptable to him. Currently, we can safely assume that Putin's declared goals are genuine, since his more ambitious goals are no longer within reach.

The Concept of Victory Depends on Values

Victory is perhaps the most central concept of military science, but it is not easy to define. On Wikipedia, edit wars sometimes break out over who won this or that historical battle or war. A tactical victory can lead to a strategic victory and vice versa. If a battle or war has only one objective, the definition is simple: the victorious is the side that moves toward or achieves its objective. However, if there are several goals, then they need to be compared against each other.

Putin's first three goals appear unattainable, but the seizure of territory (at least without international recognition) is possible. It will be very difficult for Ukraine to regain all its territories occupied by Russia since 2014 by military means.

It is quite possible Ukraine gains NATO membership, while Putin succeeds in occupying more Ukrainian territories. In such a situation, one of Putin's goals fails, but another, to the contrary, is more closely attained. In any case, Russia's losses in terms of human lives and the economy are enormous. Will this be a victory or defeat for Putin?

Ultimately, Russia's victory will depend on what the majority of Russians consider a victory, or more precisely, what the Putinist propaganda machine can sell to the Russian people as a victory. It is quite possible that even small territorial gains can be sold to Russians as a victory since all Putinist propaganda is directed at shifting Russian values away from liberal republicanism to conservative neo-feudalist values.

Putin's Neo-feudal Values

Neo-feudalism is a fashionable word misused in every conceivable context. This is related to the fact that after actually existing socialism, feudalism is the closest economic system that is not capitalism. The temptation, therefore, arises to label any economic system that deviates from conventional capitalism — but based on the private ownership of the means of production — neo-feudalism.

Putin is not nationalizing all the means of production in Russia; the collapse of the USSR was a traumatic experience for him, which he does not want to repeat. Neither is Putin's goal to stop the accumulation of capital and transition to a subsistence economy based on serfdom. Consequently, Putin does not seek to destroy capitalism but rather to create a different type of capitalism. Therefore, calling this "neo-feudalism" is somewhat misleading, but it will have to suffice for lack of a better term.

In Putinist neo-feudal capitalism, the hegemon is not the bourgeoisie and its bourgeois-liberal values. Rather it is a special caste of the security and military forces called the *siloviki* and their supporters within the bureaucracy, who keep the bourgeoisie under control. This caste is something akin to medieval knights and priests, who also tried to keep the bourgeoisie and other lower feudal estate groups under control. Hence the name "neo-feudalism." This modern caste of bureaucrats may also be called the *nomenklatura*, just like in the Soviet Union, since it is the direct heir to this ruling caste — although it is true that in the 1980s the rulers of modern Russia were not in the *nomenklatura*'s top ranks of the of those times. Volodymyr Ishchenko talks about "political capitalists," but the values of political capitalists differ from the values of the bourgeoisie, that is, "ordinary capitalists."

I am commenting here a lot on the values and mental movements of Putin, but I could just as easily refer to the values