

How do we solve a problem like Putin? Four leading writers on Russia have their say

Extract #1 (Adapted from) Tom Burgis: ‘To confront his kleptocracy, we must first cease our complicity in it’

Tom Burgis is investigations correspondent at the *Financial Times* and author of [Kleptopia](#) (William Collins)

Growing up with rats and abysmal toilets, Putin dreamed of a place in the Soviet empire’s boss class as an officer in the organisation that protected its power, the KGB. Posted to Dresden, Putin lived with his young family in a serviced apartment. There was a driver, good beer, hotdogs in the countryside at weekends. Then the Berlin Wall fell. Angry crowds massed outside the KGB station. He contacted his commanders and was told: “Moscow is silent.” The old order had fallen; he needed to join the new one. He went home to St Petersburg and secured a position in the local government with powers to decide who was allowed to make money by dealing with western capitalists. Naturally, he decided that this should be him and his cronies. He rose. Within a decade, he was president. He took his gang of kleptocrats with him to the Kremlin. (Some of them are now on sanctions lists.)

The rulers of the west wanted to buy commodities so they pretended the kleptocrats were legitimate leaders with whom they could do business. They kept this up when he murdered exiled dissidents abroad, when he stole South Ossetia in 2008 and Crimea in 2014, all the while developing a tribal imperialist spiel to stir fealty (=fidélité) at home. After 22 years of this, Putin evidently believes his own propaganda that he is a statesman, rather than a character from *The Godfather*. As his forces devastate Ukraine, I asked a Russian former intelligence officer what Putin wants. “Respect,” he said. “It’s all about respect.”

As well as accepting that we have so emboldened him that we may well have to meet him on the battlefield, to confront Putin’s kleptocracy, we must first cease our complicity in it. What do we think happens to the money we pay for Russian gas? How do we imagine western multinationals secure oil-drilling rights dispensed by a regime we know to be corrupt? Who do we think is behind the companies of anonymous ownership, registered in places like Guernsey, Cyprus and the British Virgin Islands, that we continue to allow to participate in our economies?

We have known the answers to these questions for a long time but it was just too lucrative to tell ourselves we didn’t. Twin pipelines of money sustain Putin and his fellow kleptocrats. One carries western money into kleptocracies to pay for natural resources; the other carries money back out again, after it’s been stolen, for safekeeping in the west’s property markets and universities and political parties. If we wish to weaken him and his system of corrupt power, we must disrupt both pipelines. That means increasing and sustaining the reduction in our consumption of Russian oil and gas. If we do not wish merely to switch our support for one kleptocracy to others, we must replace this energy supply with something other than the fossil fuels that are the lifeblood of kleptocrats everywhere. As for the second pipeline, our noisy declarations that we are turning it off – that, as Boris Johnson put it, “[there is no place for dirty money in the UK](#)” – are laughable.

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Extract #2 (Adapted from) Catriona Kelly: ‘We must try to understand the complex history of Russian imperialism’

Catriona Kelly is honorary professor of Russian and Soviet culture and senior research fellow at Trinity College, Cambridge and the author of *St Petersburg: Shadows of the Past* (Yale)

When Putin first started talking about the historic unity of Russia and Ukraine, in the spring of 2014, this too seemed expedient, an attempt to justify post factum the impromptu [annexation of Crimea](#). The first anniversary of the annexation once past, the rhetoric died down. But in the summer of 2021, Putin’s “[historical unity](#)” talk surfaced in deadly earnest. A precipitating factor seems to have been the [2020 election protests](#) in Belarus. If that could happen in a country whose loyalty to Russia seemed absolute, where would “external powers” (Putin doesn’t believe in dissent without them) get to work next?

The first difficulty in solving “the Putin problem” is thus that Putin is determined to defeat and purge independent Ukraine. Peace talks have been an iteration of certainties by Russian delegates set on a no-compromise position. Typical is [Vladimir Medinsky](#), the former culture minister, an ideologue of Russian supremacism supported by bad history.

It is tempting to think that if Putin and his allies were to disappear, a rational solution would emerge. Yet substantial sections of the population [still support Putin](#): those who share his prejudices about Ukraine; those convinced the west is out to destroy Russia; those for whom things have got better since 1991; those terrified things may get worse.

Push for proper peace talks, accompanied by a full ceasefire, and with participation in the talks of observers trusted by both sides. As the war drags on and casualties mount, and the economic costs begin to bite, there could be a change of heart on the Russian side. There are some signs of disunity at the top even now.

Listen to voices from the region. A good place to start is Ukrainian activist and historian Taras Bilous’s essay, [A Letter to the Western Left from Kyiv](#) (published recently on openDemocracy), which corrects many of the British media clichés about insuperable linguistic, cultural, historical and geographical divides and the influence of the far right.

Recognise the efforts, at great personal cost, of the Russians who oppose the war: the demonstrators exposed to [police beatings](#); the artists and administrators who resign from their jobs; the priests who speak up in their sermons when the hierarchy is silent; a few members of the business elite. Don’t organise blanket boycotts by citizenship.

Keep up the remarkable outpouring of support for Ukraine. Make sure the media caravans and flashmobs don’t just gallop on to the next sensation. After the campaign for peace with honour, there must be generous aid from the west to help Ukrainians rebuild their devastated cities and the democracy that they are fighting so hard to preserve.

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Extract #3 (Adapted from) Ruth Deyermond: ‘Closing contact will confirm Putin’s narrative that the west wants to destroy Russia’

Ruth Deyermond is programme director for the MA in international relations at King’s College London and author of *The US and Russia after the Cold War*

Whatever happens in Ukraine, it seems likely that Putin will remain in power for the foreseeable future. Nothing about his behaviour in the past decade has indicated that he would be willing to give up power voluntarily, and it seems unlikely that those in the best position to remove him will do so, not least because they are themselves closely tied to Putin and his crimes.

This raises the question of how western states respond to a Putin-led Russia and how they organise their relationships with one another. First, European states and the US need to recognise that there is no going back to the world before February 2022. On issues of strategic stability, cooperation, energy security, and indulgence towards the oligarch money that has corrupted their politics, there has to be a commitment to permanent change.

Some of this is already happening, but there will be pressure from other governments, lobbyists of various kinds, and from public opinion in an era of rising living costs, to undo many of the recent changes as quickly as possible, particularly in relation to sanctions. This would be a mistake, not least because Putin would be likely to see it as further confirmation of western weakness and disunity – a longstanding assumption in his foreign policy, and one of the factors that seems to have led to his huge miscalculation in Ukraine.

Western states also need to acknowledge how badly they miscalculated both their relationship with Russia and the international significance of Russia’s relations with its post-Soviet neighbours. Too often in the 30 years since the collapse of the USSR, the US, the UK and others have treated Russia as little more than an irritating obstacle to getting on with the more serious business of world politics in the Middle East or east Asia. At the same time, some European states clearly prioritised energy relations with Russia over questions about where Russian foreign policy was heading.

As a result, and because of a shameful view that what was happening in Ukraine or Belarus or the South Caucasus was not really a significant concern for Europe and the US, they failed both to properly respond to the [first wave of Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014](#), or to think seriously enough about the implications for wider European security.

Those implications can hardly be overstated. The reaction to the war in Ukraine has shown that despite the repeated claims of the past two decades, it is only now that a line has been drawn under the post-cold war period. For the first time since the late 1980s, western states are being forced to confront the fact that a wider European war is possible (though still unlikely), and that it would involve conflict between states with nuclear weapons.

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Extract #4 (Adapted from) Peter Pomerantsev: ‘Solving the problem means confronting the psychological grip he has on people’

Peter Pomerantsev is the author of *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia* and *This Is Not Propaganda: Adventures in the War Against Reality* (Faber)

Last Monday, a senior producer at the primetime Russian state news programme ran on to the set as it was being broadcast live and waved a [placard protesting against Russia’s invasion of Ukraine](#) and encouraging the audience to disbelieve her own channel’s propaganda.

Some have called her a hero, others say it is too little too late. But whatever your take, ultimately solving the Putin problem and creating change in Russia means confronting the psychological grip he has on his own people. The mental model of Putinism is built on several foundations: it appeals to nostalgia; it projects a conspiratorial perspective and it insists that Putin can get away with anything, that there is no alternative to Putin.

Let’s start with Putin’s uses of nostalgia. His mission has always been to “bring Russia off its knees”, the Kremlin version of “make America great again”. This has now reached a climax: in his rambling historical speech validating the invasion of Ukraine he invoked his mission to restore the Russian empire, and framed his war in terms of a second world war redux (=revisit   (r  interpr  t  )) to battle (utterly mythical) Nazis.

The most important humiliation Russians experience, both historically and currently, is of course internal. But the nostalgia narrative allows the Kremlin to transfer its own brutality on to a shadowy outside “enemy”, and then help people relieve their pent-up anger through aggression.

This nostalgia propaganda also exists to cover up Putin’s great achilles heel: his lack of a vision for the future. The future has long disappeared from Russian political discourse. Thinking about the future means concentrating on political reforms, cleaning up the courts, abolishing corruption – all things Putin cannot achieve, as they will put his own system in danger. With the new economic reality post-invasion, any hope for the future has been eradicated completely. But people will still think about it. What do the sanctions, which are yet to properly kick in, mean for their children’s futures?

Media and communication with the Russian people needs to focus on these questions about the future. Both on the personal level, but also in terms of the future of the country. What, ultimately, should the future role of Russia be in the world? One of the most resonant phrases on Russia media runs: “What’s the point of the world if there’s no place for Russia in it?” The “Russia” this invokes is imperial, its identity tied to crushing others. Is there another way?

To further open up such questions, a group of Russian academics propose to create a university in the Baltics that will bring students from Russia and its neighbours to work on common challenges such as the environment. Projects like these are of course long-term aims, but without the language and ideas with which to talk about the future we can’t even start to chart the way towards it.

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