

The cost of ceding advantage to Russia is far-reaching, Putin's attempt to replace Ukraine's leaders with a government of Moscow's choosing risks the future of European security and international democratic values.

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While negotiations do offer some hope, Russia is still bombarding non-military assets, reducing cities to rubble, and committing war crimes against civilians in Ukraine – leaving eight years of largely successful nation-building and progress in governance, the economy and society already shattered.

The consequences of any Kremlin upper hand in diplomatic or military terms is that Ukraine as the world knows it now effectively ceases to exist. Regardless of a potential Russian diplomatic or military victory, any concessions to Moscow's demands would block Ukraine's ambition to be part of an international order based on democratic values, human rights, and good governance.

In addition, the economic and social cost of regaining any progress fueled by the invasion in 2014 would be huge, while the installation of Kremlin-chosen political leaders would leave Ukraine existing only as a vassal of Moscow – and being kept in frozen-conflict limbo to destabilize Europe's eastern flank and contribute geographically to Putin's historical fantasies of 'Novorossiya'.

Russians will pay a high price for victory

The Russian army's resolve was strengthened after victories in Chechnya, Georgia, Ukraine in 2014, and Syria. Although Ukraine has put up a far tougher fight than Vladimir Putin expected, his willingness to pursue his goals by military means has been spurred by the weak international response to previous assassinations, poisonings, and other malicious activities beyond Russia's borders.

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Ukraine's defeat would encourage more of this behaviour, sabotage Western democratic ideals, and strengthen Putin's position by showing that the Kremlin's military action produces results, and that aggression – even nuclear threats – can be used to spread authoritarian values.

Already in Russia, press restrictions are tightening even further and freedom of speech appears all but extinguished as Moscow signals its intent to withdraw from the European Court for Human Rights (ECHR). Any doubts Putin's inner circle may have over the decision and execution of the Ukraine invasion are being quashed.

A victorious Putin would mean that the best chance in 22 years for the Kremlin to organically self-destruct had been lost as he would purge any remaining non-believers, promote yes-men, and dive further into a strategy where waging war – and even [committing war crimes](#) – are an acceptable means to an end.

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Ordinary Russians would also suffer because their country's emboldened leadership would continue to pursue its policy of undermining Western values, meaning the necessity to escalate sanctions would wreak continued [havoc on the Russian economy](#) – a heavy price to be paid for personally by the population.

As Russia becomes increasingly isolated through the continuing increase in the number of international businesses and organizations [cutting ties](#) with it, ordinary Russians are facing a further fall in their already long-stagnating living standards.

The international toll of a Kremlin success

The invasion of Ukraine also highlights the inadequacy of international mechanisms for dealing with these situations, and questions how they would cope with a Russian victory – such as whether Beijing will maintain its abstention policy in key United Nations (UN) [security council votes](#) or become a more disruptive actor, and how to react if other regimes, tired of democracy, rally behind a victorious Russia. Even now, Europe's fringes threaten to undermine unity against Russian aggression as Serbs march [in support of Russia](#).

To prevent this, reform of international organizations must be based squarely on principles of morality and international justice, rather than on the Kremlin's terms. It has taken the extremity of war to unite the European Union (EU) behind a common cause, which highlights the importance of self-reflection among the regional mechanisms designed to avoid this situation.



Image —

Russian president Vladimir Putin waits for a meeting with his Belarus' counterpart at the Kremlin. Photo by MIKHAIL KLIMENTYEV/SPUTNIK/AFP via Getty Images.