

Campaign against reason

The heavy defeat in southern Ukraine means a caesura for Putin. Even India and China are turning away from him. But there is no turning back for the man in the Kremlin. By Eric Gujer

There are victories that are quickly forgotten and there are victories that change the war. The reconquest of Cherson and the territories west of the Dnipro belongs to the second category. The Ukrainians have thus finally blocked the way to Odessa for the Russians. Mikolayiv, centre of the navy and shipyards, is also out of danger. Above all, Moscow must give up a strategic wartime objective: control of the Ukrainian coast and domination of the Black Sea. Nothing is more unsuccessful than unsuccessfulness. At the G20 summit in Bali, the Kremlin was isolated because even India and China turned their backs on it.

The defeat in the south and the expulsion of his forces from large areas in the east represent a caesura for Putin. He, who sees himself as Russia's saviour and challenger of the West, has shrunk to the size of a military dilettante. The Ukraine war is his war, and now at the latest he knows that he will not win it. So how long can he continue his campaign against all reason?

Putin's manhunt

The answer is sobering. If the tsar has his way, the killing will go on for a long time. If a thousand shells don't help, two thousand will. Russia has always fought its wars with confidence in its almost immeasurable resources: so much space that the enemy spent itself to exhaustion; so many bodies that the Red Army, despite huge losses, stopped the Wehrmacht before Moscow and destroyed it in Stalingrad.

Russia is a master of attritional warfare, of controlled retreat and holding out. Moreover, by straightening the front at Kherson, it created a favourable starting position for the second year of the war. The Dnipro now forms a natural bulwark. Putin's forces can concentrate on the Donbass and aim for the conquest of the entire Donetsk oblast as a realistic goal. It is therefore not entirely implausible to assume that Moscow, with its reserves, will maintain the upper hand against an enemy that depends entirely on the help of third parties - on arms supplies as well as financial transfers.

In the hope that victory will belong to the Ukrainian weapons, the West sees above all Moscow's losses and the difficulties in finding supplies and soldiers. The manhunt, dressed up as a "partial mobilisation", actually paints an unfavourable picture of Russia's defence capabilities.

Putin, on the other hand, is likely to consider how long his opponents' coalition will last. He will hope that in the next elections in America the cards will be reshuffled and a Republican president will support Kiev less enthusiastically than Joe Biden. It would not be the first confrontation in which an alliance gives in because the allies change their stance. Historically, the examples of successful coalition wars are not too numerous. Such considerations may be wishful thinking, but that is

ultimately irrelevant. What matters is that such fantasies in the Kremlin can considerably prolong the bloodshed.

Time and again, the West underestimates opponents because it is unable to put itself in their imaginary world. In the Pentagon, no one believed that the Taliban would not give up despite total inferiority, but would turn their weakness into strength. With willingness to suffer and strength of will, they defeated a high-tech army. The West talks a lot about resilience, others practice it.

The differences between societies are evident in the way they wage war. The USA goes to immense lengths to care for wounded soldiers. In Iraq or Afghanistan, an infantryman had a high chance of survival even with serious injuries because he was flown out and given the best possible care. In the societies of the West, the individual has a high value. This is not the case in Russia.

Russian officers plan their battles with widespread disregard for their subordinates. Reports of reservists being asked to buy their own bandages are credible, if only because in former credible because in earlier campaigns even the simplest medicines, sterile injections and bandages were in short supply. This is not only due to inadequate logistics, but also to indifference towards human life. A society that suffers from endemic violence in peacetime, especially in state institutions such as the army and prisons, also conducts its wars with brute force. This is not sustainable, but it works for a surprisingly long time.

Social networks mean that even soldiers from the farthest reaches of Siberia can make it known at lightning speed how their unit is being burned at the front. What would cause an outcry in Western Europe is met with a smouldering resignation in Russia. Everyone expects the state to behave bluntly and brutally because that is how it has always behaved. So the reports of neglect and cruel treatment of its own soldiers are not new.

Some observers cling to the scenario of a second October Revolution. The First World War swept away the Tsarist Empire; why should Putin not suffer the same fate? Three considerations argue against this.

The war in Ukraine will not end with the collapse of the state order and the occupation of Russian territory as it did in 1917. Nato is only supporting Kiev in liberating Ukrainian soil; it rejects an advance into Russian territory. A collapse of Putin's rule through an external shock is therefore unlikely. Secondly, no oppositional or even revolutionary force can be identified that could topple the ancien régime. Putin, the admirer of the Soviet Union, does not have to fear any new Bolsheviks. Many Russians may now reject the "special operation". But their protest remains silent or is expressed in a way that is not dangerous for the clique in the Kremlin, for example through emigration.

Thirdly, Putin's top priority even before the war was to retain power. For him, the war is only one of many threats. In contrast to the Bolshevik and Chinese party dictatorships, rule in post-Soviet Russia is purely personal.

Russia is purely personal. Without the man at the top, it collapses. There is not even a line of succession. The ruler must be vigilant at all times lest he fall victim to palace intrigue. Boris Yeltsin spent his second term looking for a successor who could guarantee him and his clan immunity. He found him in Putin. He is now solving the problem in his own way by massively expanding the repressive apparatus.

The Stalin Variant

In peacetime, the flaying of an authoritarian regime into a dictatorship would have provoked resistance, but in war it is easier to impose. The invasion of Ukraine allows Putin to cement his rule. It is something of a collateral benefit. He no longer has any regard for popular opinion, as the Cynical spectacle of partial mobilisation shows.

So it does not seem absurd to assume that Putin is striving for the Stalin option - sole rule for life. There is no going back for him, not even a carefree retirement in the Crimea. Anything is possible, especially in a country that produced Potemkin and his villages. It would be premature to bet on an early end to the Putin era. That means, however, that one day we will have to negotiate with him. As unbearable as the thought of a post-war Russia with Putin seems, it is realistic.

George Bush put Saddam Hussein in his place after the invasion of Kuwait, but did not topple him. That was wiser than the second Iraq war started by his son. There is a double lesson in this: the West must support Ukraine in every way possible to repel the invaders. Without military strength, there can be no ceasefire. At the same time, it should be ready for an order based on the then current course of the front. Moscow's security interests deserve recognition, but this must not be at Kiev's expense as in 2014. There can be no lasting peace without far-sighted diplomacy.