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## **Putin Needs to be Weakened – but How Much?**

**After more than three months Russia's war in Ukraine has blurred the Western objectives of war and peace**

(870 words)

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After the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the West showed a great deal of **unprecedented unity**. The EU and the G7 countries imposed harsh sanctions. Many of them delivered heavy weapons and ammunition to Ukraine and NATO sent multiple signals of determination toward Moscow.

But more than three months after the Russian attack, **fissures have arisen** in the Western front. How long will the war last? Could the war escalate beyond Ukraine? Should and can the West cut itself off from Russian energy sources? How much military support should Ukraine get? Above all: has the moment arrived for Presidents Volodymyr Zelensky and Vladimir Putin to negotiate at the top level? The **Western objectives of war and peace have become blurred and ambiguous**.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz once again emphasized in his speech at the Davos World Economic Forum: **"Putin must not win this war. And I**

am convinced: He will not prevail!" However, it remained unclear what precisely Scholz meant.

**What exactly does Scholz and the other Western leaders mean when declaring that Putin's victory must be prevented?** Is it tantamount to all Russian troops having to leave the totality of Ukraine's territory? Or does it imply that they can stay in the annexed Crimean peninsula and in the People's Republics of Luhansk and Donetsk, which were recognized by Moscow on February 21, 2022, three days before the Russian invasion of Ukraine?

U.S. President Joe Biden has adopted a tougher approach toward Russia, but his policy also lacks clarity. On the one hand, the **United States helps Ukraine militarily like no other country**. Washington is even thinking of delivering Multiple Launch Rocketed Systems (MLRS) and *High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems* (HIMARS) with a range of several hundred miles. Obtaining these top-notch rocket launchers would considerably strengthen the Ukrainian forces, which have come under heavy fire in the Donbass region due to Russian supremacy.

Yet, on the other hand, President Biden has **drawn clear boundaries regarding American military engagement**. From the outset of the war Biden rejected the establishment of a no fly zone over Ukraine. He has also repeatedly declined to be pushed into other scenarios, which would risk a direct confrontation between the U.S. and Russia. "That's called World War III", Mr. Biden explained.

Nevertheless, there are hints that the **administration wants to inflict a military blow on Russia and teach Moscow a political lesson**. "We want to see Russia weakened to the degree it cannot do the kinds of things that it has done in invading Ukraine", Defense Secretary Lloyd J.

Austin III outlined on April 25. U.S. ambassador to NATO, Julianne Smith, put it in a similar frame: "We want to see a strategic defeat of Russia."

This approach is right. The West has to provide sufficient military equipment to Ukraine so that it can stand up to Russia and prevent the conquest of the country. The whole Ukrainian nation is fighting for maintaining a free, democratic society and for values, which are upheld in Washington, London, Paris or Berlin. **If western leaders let down Ukraine, the West would expose itself as a community of hypocrites.** It would be a declaration of moral bankruptcy.

There are some considerations within the German and the French government to provide a **"face-saving" solution for Putin.** French President Emmanuel Macron stated before the European Parliament in Strasbourg at the beginning of May that the West has to resist the temptation to "humiliate" Putin. **This, however, would be a mistake.**

After the multiple war crimes in Bucha, Borodianka or Mariupol and the many deliberately targeted attacks on civilian infrastructure in Ukraine, a "face-saving" exit for the Russian President would be pure cynicism. **Would it not also tell all autocrats and dictators around the world that military aggression pays off?**

Putin will only negotiate if he cannot win anything militarily. As long as his troops are able to move forward, he will continue his campaign of destruction. The man who once characterized the collapse of the Soviet Union as the "biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20<sup>th</sup> century" would **not stop with the conquest of Ukraine.**

The heads of state and government of Poland and the three Baltic states, which have very fine sensors due to their historical experiences with Moscow and geographical proximity to Russia, caution against Putin's "imperialistic hunger". **They should be taken seriously.**

Nonetheless, the **West should not aim for regime change in Moscow.** In the same vein, a direct military intervention of NATO in Ukraine would be counterproductive. If Putin feels pushed into a corner, it cannot be excluded that he may escalate dramatically, including perhaps resorting to the use of tactical nuclear weapons. The war could get totally out of control.

Therefore, **the West has to help Ukraine to help itself.** Not least Germany – which has lagged behind in the delivery of heavy weapons – has to pick up its pace. The pressure on Moscow has to be kept up. **Western policy toward Russia is a careful balancing act, which requires prudence, strength, unity – and Western clarity.**

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