



# Why Russia's elites have tolerated Putin's intolerable behavior

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"The temptation of our day is to accept the intolerable, for fear of still worse to come," wrote German politician Hermann Rauschning in his prescient 1939 book, "The Revolution of Nihilism." Today, this formulation is useful in understanding the reaction by Russia's elites to President Vladimir Putin's war on Ukraine, as well as the West's response to it.

Almost all of Russia's senior administrative, political and military elite had several days' notice of Putin's pending decision to invade Ukraine. Of those who did, very few publicly warned Putin about the folly of his plan. The overwhelming majority remained silent then and continued to do so after the ill-fated invasion took place.

As the war progressed, the list of seemingly "intolerable" things grew, but each was accepted in turn by those who could collectively decide Russia's future. That sordid list is exceedingly long.

It includes first the consequent sanctions against Russian elites, which have reduced their fortunes and prevented them and their families from enjoying a life of luxury in the West. It includes the irreversible loss of Russia's petroleum market share in Europe and the political influence that came with it.

It includes the loss of European hearts and minds, as a large majority of Europeans turned against Russia. This has resulted in a larger, better-funded, and more united NATO on the one hand, and weakened Russian economic and military capabilities on the other.

It brought about the triple humiliation of relying upon North Korea and Iran for weapons and ammunition; the failure to gain territory as Putin planned and to defeat Europe's poorest country; and the resulting negative reputation earned by Russian arms, with collateral effects on future arms sales.

Finally, for many of Russia's elites, it has resulted in many of their personal acquaintances, both Ukrainian and Russian, being tortured, maimed, or killed as a result of the conflict.

The acquiescence of Russia's most prominent citizens to these deeply adverse outcomes can be explained in a number of ways. Perhaps they thought that if they stayed on the sidelines or publicly supported the war then problems with Russia's "special military operation" would resolve themselves. Perhaps they expected some kind of face-saving outcome that would allow the Kremlin to declare victory.

Or maybe they believed that if Russia were seen to lose the war, then independence movements and perhaps even civil strife could threaten the Russian Federation and Russia's standing in the world.

Whatever the reasons, their collective silence has been deafening. It has also been a boon to Putin, who views it as approval of his neo-imperial agenda of conquest in Ukraine and possibly beyond.

But such tolerance is not infinite. Should it ever become apparent that the West will neither tire of supporting Ukraine nor make it impossible for Putin to declare victory, Russia's elites (or some of them) may conclude that Putin must go. They may choose to stop the war to prevent further damage to their country and to their own personal interests.

Putin, for his part, understands this state of affairs very well, and has been waging a concerted campaign of growing domestic repression in order to avoid such a fate.

Western powers, in turn, are engaging in very much the same mental exercise. To be sure, Ukraine would not have survived to this point without western aid. But by failing to provide Kyiv with sufficient arms to protect its citizenry and regain its territory in a timely fashion, the U.S. and Europe have raised Russia's hopes that its rogue behavior — including nuclear blackmail, the killing, torture and rape of civilians, and the kidnapping and relocation of children — could become normalized in some fashion.

That is a very dangerous situation. Holding back support of aid to Ukraine for fear of worse to come from Russia is a surefire way to ensure that Moscow presses its advantage and engages in still more rogue behavior.

To the contrary, the West now has the opportunity to teach Russia's too-passive elites an important lesson: If something is truly intolerable, one must oppose it aggressively.