

This is not only Putin's war – a psychological analysis of toxic leadership

There is probably agreement across the globe and across political camps that Wladimir Putin wanted the war with Ukraine and, with his dominant position in the Russian government, also made the decision when it began and how it is being waged (to this day). But can and shall we call it *Putin's war*? Do the explanatory approaches that invoke Putin's personality alone, or his past in the Russian secret service, or his being personally insulted from the collapse of the Soviet Union as the main causes of the war, hold up? We believe that this is only partially the case and that the situation must be seen in a more nuanced way.

Putin is undoubtedly a master at creating a sense of shared identity among his supporters - and according to recent surveys, this is still the majority of the Russian people - through his identity-based leadership. He tries to embody the Russian soul, allows himself to be shown in church, and is unreservedly supported by the Russian Orthodox Patriarch. He shows himself bare-chested or in a judo suit, trying to symbolize Russian strength. He obviously wants to create a vision for a future reinstatement of the "old" Great Russian Empire. He visibly champions Russian interests at all international events where he has found a platform in the last 20 years and where he has been courted, not least by German chancellors. And he has shown that he does not just talk, but acts - in Chechnya, Georgia, Crimea. The shared identity of Putin as a leader and the Russian people seems so strong that critics are hardly heard. In the eyes of the population, dissenters are no longer seen as part of their own people, but as controlled from abroad. All of this is massively reinforced by a homogeneous media environment in which criticism does not occur or will be punished.

Putin has been trying for years to present himself as the prototype of the Russian leader. Psychologically, this is clever. Research shows: Prototypical leaders are particularly influential among those they lead. They are able to set standards and significantly influence what one has to think in the group, what is right and what is wrong. If, in addition, such a leader has the power to control the media, the institutions of law enforcement (police, courts), his or her influence seems to be at a maximum. This influence can only be increased by leading one's nation into conflict with others. This is also one of the basic psychological insights: external conflict unites people internally – at least in the short run.

Putin embodies a leadership style called toxic leadership. He is immensely influential with regard to Russian interior politics, but he is destroying the basic values of the people of Russia and beyond, violating their basic needs and ultimately the foundations for a peaceful life for his own people and the world by inciting them to supposedly pursue Russian interests - even when this means war.

Is the invasion of Ukraine therefore Putin's war alone? Did Putin sentence Alexei Navalny to nine years in a penal camp? No, Navalny was charged by prosecutors and the sentence was pronounced by a judge. Does Putin read the news and personally edit the content? No, it is the media people: Reporters, editors, camera and sound technicians, and many others who are responsible for educating the Russian people about the situation in Ukraine - or not. Is Putin pulling the triggers on the missiles that are hitting apartment buildings in Kiev, or is he flying the planes that are dropping bombs over Kharkov? Is he driving the tanks, carrying the guns, and pulling the triggers?

Most people will have heard of the famous experiments conducted by Stanley Milgram or Phil Zimbardo in the 1960s, which showed people to be cruel creatures. In Milgram's experiments, perfectly normal test subjects administered supposedly lethal electric shocks to other people (who were actually allies of the experimenter and who were not harmed). In Zimbardo's simulated prison, male students randomly assigned by the experimenter to a group of guards humiliated and tortured another group, who had to assume the role of prisoners. However, new analyses show that such inhumane behavior is not inevitable, but comes primarily because the torturers received precise instructions and believed that their actions contribute to the necessary maintenance of the system. The less people identified with the experimenters, the less they were willing to follow what were actually immoral and inhumane instructions.

Putin's influence at home is fading, his nimbus as a charismatic leader is eroding. He is retreating more and more into an ever smaller bubble of associates to ensure his own security, which amounts to narrowing his own worldview more and more. Putin will remain a pariah in world society, regardless of the outcome of this war. He knows this, and that is what makes him so dangerous; he has nothing left to lose.

Without the cooperation of supporters, followers and "subordinates", no leader anywhere in the world can achieve anything. One way out of the current situation would be for Putin to lose his supporters - as people in Russia increasingly notice how their standard of living is collapsing under economic repression. People will start to wonder why this is happening. They will begin to care. There will be increasing protests, which will result in more repression. And more and more will Russian citizens distrust the propaganda of their own government. All this, the improvement of the information situation for the people in Russia, their self-empowerment for active political participation, in summary the strengthening of the Russian civil society, are promising components to put an end to such a toxic and deadly leadership as Putin's.

Police officers in Moscow or St. Petersburg need to learn that they are not representing Russian interests when they bludgeon demonstrators. Judges and prosecutors must understand that they are not serving justice, but an illegitimate system. Media professionals must be encouraged to report critically, however small and hidden. And finally, if Russian women learn what is actually happening in Ukraine to their husbands, sons and brothers, if Russian men learn what their Ukrainian colleagues, with whom they had connections, are currently suffering in Mariupol, then perhaps something good can be achieved.

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