

Putin has no good way out, and that really scares me

IF YOU'RE HOPING that the instability that Vladimir Putin's war on Ukraine has wreaked on global markets and geopolitics has peaked, your hope is in vain. We haven't seen anything yet. Wait until Putin fully grasps that his only choices left in Ukraine are how to lose — early and small and a little humiliated or late and big and deeply humiliated.

I can't even wrap my mind around what kind of financial and political shocks will radiate from Russia — this country that is the world's third-largest oil producer and has some 6,000 nuclear warheads — when it loses a war of choice that was spearheaded by one man, who can never afford to admit defeat.

Why not? Because Putin surely knows that "the Russian national tradition is unforgiving of military setbacks," observed Leon Aron, a Russia expert at the American Enterprise Institute, who is writing a book about Putin's road to Ukraine.

"Virtually every major defeat has resulted in radical change," added Aron, writing in *The Washington Post*. "The Crimean War (1853-1856) precipitated Emperor Alexander II's liberal revolution from above. The Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) brought about the First Russian Revolution. The catastrophe of World War I resulted in Emperor Nicholas II's abdication and the Bolshevik Revolution. And the war in Afghanistan became a key factor in Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms." Also, retreating from Cuba contributed significantly to Nikita Khrushchev's removal two years later.

In the coming weeks it will become more and more obvious that our biggest problem with Putin in Ukraine is that he will refuse to lose early and small, and the only other outcome is that he will lose big and late. But because this is solely his war and he cannot admit defeat, he could keep doubling down in Ukraine until... until he contemplates using a nuclear weapon.

Why do I say that defeat in Ukraine is Putin's only option, that only the timing and size is in question? Because the easy, low-cost invasion he envisioned and the welcome party from Ukrainians he imagined were total fantasies — and everything flows from that.

Putin completely underestimated Ukraine's will to be independent and become part of the West. He completely underestimated the will of many Ukrainians to fight, even if it meant dying, for those two goals. He completely overestimated his own armed forces. He completely underestimated President Joe Biden's ability to galvanize a global economic and military coalition to enable Ukrainians to stand and fight and to devastate Russia at home — the most effective US coalition-building effort since George H.W. Bush made Saddam Hussein pay for his folly of seizing Kuwait. And he completely underestimated the ability of companies and individuals will all over the world to participate in, and amplify, economic sanctions on Russia — far beyond anything governments initiated or mandated.

When you get that many things wrong as a leader, your best option is to lose early and small. In Putin's case that would mean withdrawing his forces from Ukraine immediately; offering a face-saving lie to justify his "special military operation," like claiming it successfully protected Russians living in Ukraine; and promising to help Russians' brethren rebuild. But the inescapable humiliation would surely be intolerable for this man obsessed

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with restoring the dignity and unity of what he sees as the Russian motherland.

Incidentally, the way things are going on the ground in Ukraine right now, it is not out of the realm of possibility that Putin could actually lose early and big. I would not bet on it, but with every passing day that more and more Russian soldiers are killed in Ukraine, who knows what happens to the fighting spirit of the conscripts in the Russian army being asked to fight a deadly urban war against fellow Slavs for a cause that was never really explained to them.

Given the resistance of Ukrainians everywhere to the Russian occupation, for Putin to "win" militarily on the ground his army will need to subdue every major city in Ukraine. That includes the capital, Kyiv — after probably weeks of urban warfare and massive civilian casualties. In short, it can be done only by Putin and his generals perpetrating war crimes not seen in Europe since Hitler. It will make Putin's Russia a permanent international pariah.

Moreover, how would Putin maintain control of another country — Ukraine — that has roughly one-third the population of Russia, with many residents hostile to Moscow? He would probably need to maintain every one of the 150,000-plus soldiers he has deployed there — if not more — forever.

There is simply no pathway that I see for Putin to win in Ukraine in any sustainable way because it simply is not the country he thought it was — a country just waiting for a quick decapitation of its "Nazi" leadership so that it could gently fall back into the bosom of Mother Russia.

So either he cuts his losses now and eats crow — and hopefully for him escapes enough sanctions to revive the Russian economy and hold onto power — or faces a forever war against Ukraine and much of the world, which will slowly sap Russia's strength and collapse its infrastructure.

As he seems hellbent on the latter, I am terrified. Because there is only one thing worse than a strong Russia under Putin — and that's a weak, humiliated, disorderly Russia that could fracture or be in a prolonged internal leadership turmoil, with different factions wrestling for power and with all of those nuclear warheads, cybercriminals, and oil and gas wells lying around.

Putin's Russia is not too big to fail. It is, however, too big to fail in a way that won't shake the whole rest of the world. ■

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A horrific situation

Putin has been accused of committing war crimes in Ukraine. Adam Durbin of BBC News wrote a few days after Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the invasion of Ukraine that British Prime Minister Boris Johnson had accused Putin of committing war crimes.

BBC News noted that at the Prime Minister's *Question Time*, Johnson said bombing innocent civilians "already fully qualifies as a war crime." Johnson was responding to the Scottish National Party's Ian Blackford, who called for Putin to be prosecuted.

In a television interview and also reported by Durbin, International Criminal Court (ICC) prosecutor Karim Khan said "he was now investigating possible war crimes and crimes against humanity in Ukraine."

Some 39 countries acted to refer the situation to the ICC prosecutor which reacted by saying that "collection of evidence has started." Durbin states that "the UK government described the referral as the largest in the history of the court which relies on cooperation with countries worldwide for support, particularly for making arrests."

Putin is accused of giving the orders to conduct indiscriminate bombing of schools, hospitals, civilian infrastructure, and Ukraine's nuclear power plant, and for targeting civilians traveling in civilian corridors who want to flee to other countries. Russian troops are heavily bombarding thickly populated cities like Kharkiv. Russia has accused Ukraine of using civilian infrastructure to shield weapons of war. Russia has been charged with bombing the same corridors for escape which were identified as part of a so-called ceasefire but Russian bombing resumed after a lull of two hours and 45 minutes when it was supposed to be part of a 12-hour ceasefire.

The *Economist* says that Russia does not recognize the authority of the ICC. But the court, Mr. Khan argues, has jurisdiction over war crimes committed on Ukrainian soil because the government of Ukraine had twice accepted — once in 2014 after Russia's annexation of Crimea, and again in 2015, when it recognized the court's jurisdiction for "an indefinite duration."

As things now stand, Putin now has the dubious and dangerous distinction of being the world's biggest pariah. Being a pariah and isolating Russia from the rest of the world will certainly create economic difficulties for the porous Russian economy and could lessen the effectivity of Putin as a leader. How long will it be before the ordinary Russian starts to feel the effects of worldwide sanctions (which Putin says is equivalent to a declaration of war)? How long can security forces quell unrest and discontent brought about by economic and political difficulties? How long can Putin's military and his KGB, the Committee for State Se-

curity, Foreign Intelligence and Domestic Security, prop up Putin before the military establishment itself feels the economic pinch?

And being a pariah has extended beyond Putin's person but has extended to Russian businesses, citizens, and recently to athletes and performing artists like sopranos, ballerinas, and conductors. It is not only countries taking action and putting together economic sanctions against Russia and, most likely, Belarus, for providing access to Russian troops to facilitate the invasion. The United States,

the United Kingdom and other countries have announced that they will go after the "ill gotten wealth" of Russian oligarchs and Putin cronies who have dishonestly profited from Russian government projects or projects dependent on government permits and regulations.

In sports, which is important to Putin, World Athletics, the international governing body of the sport of Athletics, the centerpiece event of any Olympic-type sports competition, has banned the participation of athletes and support personnel of Russia and Belarus in international competitions such as the world indoor championship to be held in Belgrade, Serbia from March 18 to 20, 2022 and the world outdoor championship at Eugene, Oregon in August this year. Both countries have also been banned from international gymnastics and figure skating.

The ban and actions taken against Russian citizens involved in non-political endeavors — and who therefore claim not to have anything to do with Putin's decision to invade Ukraine and harm its population — has spawned the familiar debate on the propriety of mixing sports with politics and holding accountable citizens of a country for the aggression committed by its government.

Artists and athletes claim their purpose is to perform before the public and to avoid commenting on political and social issues and to help create peace. The question is: Should influential parties use their fame and platform to comment on the toughest and thorniest social and political issues? Tennis star Naomi Osaka won the US Open title in New York in September 2021, using black masks to honor Black victims of violence. Each mask she wore each day bore the name of a different victim over the years. Osaka justified her activism by saying that the "point is to get people talking about it (these issues)." Basketball superstar LeBron James has no problem with expressing his views on social and political issues, making public his preference for then candidate Joe Biden as president of the US, to the chagrin of eventual loser Donald Trump.

Years earlier, the US boycotted the 1980 Moscow Olympics in protest over the then USSR's invasion of Afghanistan. The Soviets returned the favor by boycotting the

1984 Los Angeles Olympics. And much earlier, South Africa was banned from international tournaments because of its racist apartheid policy.

In the Philippines, then street parliamentarian Nikki Coseteng (subsequently elected Congresswoman and Senator), then owner of PBA team Mariwasa, and later, Galerie Dominque, pleaded with PBA management and the competition director to hold a minute of silent prayer before the tip-off of her team's game at Araneta Coliseum with another squad, for former Senator Ninoy Aquino who had been executed a few days earlier, on Aug. 21, 1983, at the Manila International Airport. Ninoy was killed in broad daylight and despite a security cordon thrown around the tarmac, the terminal, and in the airport premises. The PBA rejected the request on the grounds that it did not want to get sucked into politics, especially mindful of the brutality of the Marcos regime.

Certainly, sport is an opportunity provided to the public to unwind and spend time with friends and family away from all daily concerns — including politics. The reality however is that people are confronted with the horrors of war daily in living color, seeing corpses of elderly men and women, children and babies. People are horrified by the brutality and indiscriminate bombing by an invader of a neighbor which is militarily inferior but is ready to defend every inch of its territory.

As the invasion enters its second week, casualties mount. As worldwide condemnation of dictatorial Russia grows (with the exception of former members of the USSR, among others), the Ukrainians and international volunteers vow to continue the fight for freedom. In the meantime, millions of Ukrainians find it difficult to imagine Russian troops out in Ukrainian streets. Everything is surreal.

There are concerns about how much more is NATO willing to do as millions of Ukrainian refugees stream into neighboring countries. But Ukraine, which Putin calls a manufactured country, vows to fight for as long as it will take, raising the specter of a guerrilla war which Russia might not be able to justify to its citizens as body bags and coffins come back from Ukraine.

Ukrainians ask, "What does Putin want? To bring us down to our knees?" Ukrainian President Zelenskyy, now the newest face of freedom, defiantly says that "Ukrainians should fight at every opportunity." In the meantime, the humanitarian crisis worsens despite the world's generosity. ■

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The end of the Marlboro Man

As early as July 2021, with COVID-19 in full force, Philip Morris International announced that it was quitting the cigarette business in the United Kingdom in 10 years. This shouldn't come as a surprise to anybody, considering the general decline in cigarette smoking worldwide in the last 50 years.

Cigarette smoking's heydays were in the 1960s and 1970s. In a report by Hannah Ritchie and Max Roser titled, "Smoking," published online at *OurWorldInData.org*, they noted that sales data from 1875 to 2015 indicated worldwide sales of cigarettes to adult smokers in wealthy countries peaked from around 1962 to 1974. Since then, sales have been falling.

And this decline in sales is the result of several factors: bans on tobacco advertising; increasing taxes on cigarette or tobacco sales; more smoking-related cancer deaths, etc. "The rise, peak then decline of smoking in rich countries took around a century. A long trajectory with severe health impacts," wrote Ritchie and Roser.

"The positive news is that... smoking is already falling in most countries today... the share of adults who smoke has declined in most countries in the world over the past decade. This is a surprising fact to many, since it means smoking prevalence is not only falling in high-income countries, but also at low-to-middle incomes," they wrote.

They noted that "low-to-middle income countries have effectively 'leapfrogged' the century-long rise-peak-decline pathway of rich countries. Almost everywhere, smoking is on the decline." As a result, "in poor countries, where fewer people were smoking in the past, tobacco is responsible for a much smaller fraction of cancer deaths... Globally more than one in five cancer deaths (22% in 2016) are attributed to smoking... In most richer countries the share is higher — the average in high-income countries is 28% in 2016."

This, in a way, partly explains why "the iconic Marlboro cigarette brand will disappear from

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UK shelves within 10 years," as reported the *Financial Times (FT)* in July 2021 through Jonathan Eley, quoting Philip Morris International tobacco group CEO Jacek Olczak. The tobacco executive was also quoted by *FT* as saying that "the 'problem of smoking' could be solved in the UK within '10 years maximum'... as part of a broader effort supported by regulation."

He was also quoted as telling the UK-based news website the *Daily Mail* that the company strategy "absolutely means stopping selling traditional cigarettes in the UK," and that the Marlboro brand of cigarettes would "disappear" from that market. Company revenues from the UK were estimated at about \$800 million a year.

To date, Philip Morris is already invested heavily in nicotine alternatives, including electronic cigarettes that heat rather than burn tobacco. "Globally, the company derives almost a quarter of its revenue from alternative products, a much higher proportion than rivals such as Altria and Imperial Tobacco," *FT* reported. The company has also

"committed itself to earning half its revenue from non-smoking products." Quoting Philip Morris Chief Financial Officer Emmanuel Bebeau, "We believe in, and we are going to contribute to, cigarettes being phased out." *FT* noted that the "commitment to phase out traditional cigarettes in the UK is also partly driven by consumer and investor behavior, and government policy. Smoking rates in the country are already comparatively low while cigarettes are heavily taxed and, since 2016, are sold in plain packaging."

Hannah Ritchie's and Max Roser's "Smoking" report in *OurWorldInData.org*, noted that "tobacco smoking has already been one of the world's largest health problems for many decades. Over the course of the 20th century, it killed around 100 million people, most of them in today's rich countries. The health burdens of smoking are now moving from high-income to low-to-middle income countries; some estimates have suggested that one billion people could die from tobacco over the 21st century."

Let's form a task force to see what really happened. Sure, you saw me on video clips making the rounds and seeming to bat away a fan trying to shake my hand too vigorously. Those video clips are misleading — I was trying to do a fist bump and hit the fan's head instead. Also, I had a stigmata on my right hand and it's still healing. I apologize that it looks like a contemptuous gesture on my part. It wasn't meant to be. (Too much information?)

A spokesperson is appointed, preferably one who is not involved in the controversy. This allows the frontline (reputation nurse) to start his briefing with a disclaimer — I was in Sydney when this thing broke out, I'm still gathering the facts and people have been so cooperative in putting the puzzle together for me. As soon as I have something, you'll be the first to know. Please don't tiptoe too long.

All these strategies are variations of postponing an inevitable admission of wrongdoing. The hope is that the public will forget about the whole matter and move on to a new crisis. There's always one around the corner waiting to distract everybody from the current preoccupation.

As the entanglements multiply and the story falls apart, a confession becomes inevitable. It is curiously devoid of any admission of guilt. Phrases like "inappropriate conduct" and "subordinates eager to help but unaware of the

consequences" and "it's the fault of the computer that exercised its delete functions on the footnotes" are invoked.

So, there is a school of thought that adheres to the belief that the best way to avoid mistakes like misstatements and ineffective apologies for past regimes to which one is inevitably linked (as if to an umbilical cord) is to simply avoid public discussions altogether.

Damage control can also refer to future mistakes. Isn't it better to avoid the possibility of error rather than defending it afterwards? The likelihood of being confronted and blubbering in reply to a pointed accusation or question is best evaded.

Does steering away from conflict rather than meeting this head on work? Brand managers of political personalities are willing to stake their reputations on conflict avoidance as a strategy for avoiding errors and having to apologize for them later.

The call for unity and the careful avoidance of conflict can be beguiling as a political strategy. (We don't want to make enemies) But isn't engaging in discourse and resolving conflicts part of the job description? Clearly, one of the job applicants doesn't agree... to disagree. ■

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growth in the sale of tobacco alternatives. Philip Morris decision to end Marlboro sales in the UK in 10 years should be viewed positively, but also seen as indicative of the industry's shift. As such, policies and regulation of tobacco and its alternatives like electronic cigarettes deserve further study and scrutiny, especially in the areas of taxation, advertising or marketing, support for smoking cessation, and shouldering healthcare costs for smoking-related illnesses and diseases.

Regulation of tobacco and tobacco alternatives should not just adjust to the times. For once, maybe regulation can be ahead of the curve rather than always playing catch-up. Instead of calibrating to industry trends, perhaps regulators can actually set the path and thus make the industry follow its lead to a smoke-free environment and a healthier population. ■

I hope our policymakers, legislators, and regulators are taking note of worldwide trends and developments in the tobacco industry and global tobacco consumption, as well as the obvious

growth in the sale of tobacco alternatives. Philip Morris decision to end Marlboro sales in the UK in 10 years should be viewed positively, but also seen as indicative of the industry's shift. As such, policies and regulation of tobacco and its alternatives like electronic cigarettes deserve further study and scrutiny, especially in the areas of taxation, advertising or marketing, support for smoking cessation, and shouldering healthcare costs for smoking-related illnesses and diseases.

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Damage control

By Tony Samson

MISTAKES HAPPEN. Sometimes these are what are called "unforced errors" in basketball, like stepping on the line or double dribbling. In public life, miscalculations are first dismissed as glitches.

The admission of fault, especially arising from a wrong sense of priorities or thoughtlessness, is not the automatic reaction to mistakes made. The default response is a process of cover-up, which PR practitioners call "damage control." Often, the damage being controlled involves the possible derailment of a career.

Media that receive letters to their editors (or now more frequently blogs) pointing to mistakes like misidentifying a person in a photo or attaching a wrong (often lower) title like a corporate Vice-President for a newly promoted Senior Vice-President routinely print a section called "erratum" or "errata," for plural mistakes — wrong name and wrong title. That such a correction section is buried in the inside pages of the obituary section (missing the irony in this placement), or

may be in the classifieds beside an advertisement for cough drops or promo motel rates in Cebu, does little to promote the sincerity of this act of contrition.

In digital media, however, fake news or "intentional errors" promoted by those hired for this specific purpose are just too routine. There is no effort to correct such planted land mines to reputations as their object is to blow these up to smother them. The effort of the would-be sinned party is almost futile as the troll attacks

come fast and furious — start Phase 2 of the attack.

Readily admitting mistakes is not the automatic human reaction. Apologies are issued after other options like denials and blame-passing fail. The first thoughts that come to mind before an admission of guilt or incompetence involve deferring action or making a definitive statement. Dilatory tactics are employed.

