

## The West Is Overestimating Putin's Fear of Losing Power, Researcher Warns

Anna Skinner

November 30, 2022

As Russia's war on Ukraine stretches into its ninth month, many have wondered what impact Russia's military setbacks have on President Vladimir Putin's leadership. One researcher warns that even if Putin were to lose the war, it might not signal the end of his presidency.

Putin has faced various setbacks in his war against Ukraine after invading Russia's neighbor in late February.

In recent months, Putin's forces have withdrawn from Kherson—the only regional capital they had maintained since the start of the war—and faced staggering losses at the hands of the Ukrainian military, bolstered by supplies from other countries including the United States.

Many countries have feared what actions Putin may take to preserve his power as defeat looms closer, which some speculate could be as serious as unleashing a nuclear attack.

John Mueller, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, an American libertarian think tank headquartered in Washington, D.C., anticipates Putin may not struggle to remain in power even if he loses the war.

In an article published in *Foreign Affairs*, Mueller said that several times in history, rulers have lost wars, sometimes even embarrassingly so, but remained in office despite the impact, or lack thereof, on their reputation.

In his article, Mueller references Egyptian leader Abdel Nasser's "humiliating defeat" in a 1967 war against Israel and Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, who survived through several wars.

Even the United States has seen similar outcomes, with Ronald Reagan soaring to reelection in 1984, only two years after he sent troops to aid in the Lebanese civil war before almost immediately withdrawing them after a terrorist bombing killed hundreds of service members.

Bill Clinton's political future also wasn't hindered after the U.S. "suffered a devastating setback in Somalia" in the 1990s, according to Mueller's article.

Putin could see similar political fortune, despite the outcome of the war, Mueller said.

"Overall, history provides numerous examples of politicians, especially in autocracies, who can survive military debacles," Mueller said.

"This staying power may be partly a result of the fact that autocrats who engage in risky foreign adventures tend to do so, as Putin has, when they are already secure in office and can undercut and defeat efforts to remove them when the adventure goes awry—they tend to have a substantial and effective security apparatus in place that is populated by people whose fate depends on them," he added.

Mueller warns that history may repeat itself and Putin could remain in office through the Ukraine war and after, despite who wins.

And it could mean Putin will escalate the war catastrophically without fear of it impacting his political reign, according to Mueller.

Putin's decision to escalate the war "carries implications" for the United States, according to Mueller, especially as the U.S. and other Western countries believe Putin will try to preserve his power.

"But if the West continues instead to base its calculations on the expectation that Putin's power is at stake and that it may need to furnish substantial accommodation to a desperate, defeat-fearing Kremlin to avoid a radical escalation by the Russian leader, it might ultimately undermine the very goal it seeks—bringing the war to a rapid and successful end," Mueller said.

Newsweek reached out to Mueller for comment.