**Vladimir Putin, Ukraine and the Court of Public Opinion**Richard A. Gershon, Ph.D.   
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**Introduction**

As Russia’s war on Ukraine enters its fourth month, the reality of the situation has become quite clear. Russia’s present effort to seize Ukraine is a throwback to earlier centuries when a European monarch, dictator or Russian czar would simply decide that they wanted to expand and seize control over a neighboring territory. In the past, such neighboring territories had limited options and there was no global community to stop them. As *New York Times* writer Thomas Friedman writes, “Our world is not going to be the same again because this war has no historical parallel. It is a raw, 18th-century-style land grab by a superpower, but in a 21st-century globalized world.”[[1]](#endnote-1) If Marshall McLuhan once described the world of electronic media as the global village, today’s supercharged world of social media makes the availability of such news information immediate and in real time. This is the first war that is being documented and livestreamed by both professional journalists and street reporters alike. The lessons of the Arab spring have shown us the power of smartphones and social media to describe the ravages of war and street conflict. As Friedman writes, this is the “Cossacks meet the World Wide Web.”  
 Russia is in the process of forcibly taking over a free country with a population of   
44 million people, which is a little less than one-third the size of Russia’s population. His justification is that Ukraine has always been a part of Russia. This is a very similar argument used by Hitler when the German army seized control of the Sudetenland in 1938 which represented the southern and western areas of the former Czechoslovakia. Putin has never fully accepted the political dismemberment of the once great Soviet Union. He wants to reshape the balance of power that he feels was imposed on Russia in the aftermath of the cold war.   
Think of it is Russia’s version of the Versailles Treaty and the sanctions imposed on Germany after World War I. In Russia’s case, it has meant having to accept NATO’s expansion to include several Eastern European countries like Poland that had previously been part of the Soviet Union’s sphere of influence. Worse still, are territories that were once part of the Soviet Union itself. Ukraine, for its part, had already made a formal request to become part of the European Union and had been in talks with the US to join NATO. More to the point, the E.U. (not Russia) is already Ukraine’s biggest trading partner. Vladimir Putin has had 30 plus years to simmer and resent the loss of Russian influence following the collapse of the Soviet Union. His goal is to recreate the old Soviet Union; first Crimea and now Ukraine.  
  
**Controlling the Flow of Information**It is interesting to note that in the old days, when an advancing army seized control of a major city, one of the important tasks was to take control of the local radio and television stations and cut off the primary source of news and communication. Not so in today’s digital world. There are simply too many people with cellphones capable of uploading real-time information and visuals to the world-wide-web. More challenging, still, are the number of Russian citizens who had previous access to much of that same information. It is not surprising, therefore, that Russia’s leadership is experiencing a high level of backlash from its own citizens. Already, there have been ongoing protests in the streets calling for an end to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.[[2]](#endnote-2) To offset public discontent, Putin and Russia’s senior leadership have intensified a crackdown on media outlets and individuals who don’t adhere to the Kremlin’s line on Russia’s war in Ukraine. Already, the government has blocked Facebook and Twitter and signed into law a bill that would criminalize the intentional spreading of what Moscow deems “fake news.”[[3]](#endnote-3) By that, they mean anything that is critical of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Russian authorities have repeatedly and falsely decried reports of Russian military setbacks or civilian deaths in Ukraine as “fake news.” The same Russian authorities have banned words like *war* or *invasion* to describe what they want to call a “special operation” in Ukraine.[[4]](#endnote-4) They have imposed news bans on the BBC, the U.S. government-funded Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, German broadcaster Deutsche Welle and the Latvia-based website Meduza.   
**The Global Response**

The decision to impose economic sanctions on a country can vary significantly in terms of the

level of effectiveness. A lot depends on the country, types of sanctions being imposed as well   
  
as the powers of enforcement. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has created an altogether new   
  
and different global reaction that is being shaped by both social media as well as the power

of individual business enterprises to engage directly and take matters into their own hands.   
  
What’s different in the Russia case, is how comprehensive the international response to Russia’s   
  
actions are.

One of the important roles of social media is to inform, but also to mobilize public and business reaction in a time of crisis. Companies like Meta (parent company to Facebook), Google, You Tube and Twitter, have been clear and decisive in their decision-making. They have worked jointly to minimize Vladimir Putin’s heavy handed political rhetoric in various parts of the world. At the urging of both Ukraine and European governments, they have restricted posts and accounts run by Russian state media. Facebook has blocked advertising from Russian-backed media. Twitter has stopped showing Russian ads. and Snap has blocked ads. from Russian businesses entirely.[[5]](#endnote-5) Both government and the business community have been equally vigilant in their response. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has resulted in the country’s airlines being banned from European, American and Canadian airspace. This, in turn, makes   
it virtually impossible for Russian citizens to travel abroad to any of these countries or regions. Moreover, airline manufacturers Airbus (Europe) and Boeing (U.S.) have agreed to stop supporting and supplying parts for Russia’s aviation industry. Gas and oil companies BP, ExxonMobil, Shell and Equinor have suspended business operations with Russia until further notice.[[6]](#endnote-6) And credit card companies Visa and Mastercard have blocked multiple Russian financial institutions from their network. Similarly, McDonalds, Coca Cola and Starbucks have suspended operations in Russia. One final indication of the power of economic sanctions has been a decision to partially ban Russian banking institutions from SWIFT, the global routing and messaging system for financial transactions. On March 2nd, 2022 the E.U. announced that it was barring seven Russian banks from the network as part of a broader package of sanctions.[[7]](#endnote-7)

**The Court of Public Opinion**

And while government, business and the live streaming of war cannot stop the advancement

of Russia’s tanks, they can put a 24/7 unfavorable spotlight on Vladimir Putin and the Russian

army. Vladimir Putin is being judged in the Court of Public Opinion. The Court of public opinion

is a space that delivers reputational justice; that is, a final verdict on legacy. Think of it as cancel

culture made practical and real. The term “cancel culture” has to with public shaming; albeit, electronically via the Internet and social media. And while putting the spotlight on a bad actor is not a new idea; the combination of forces have mobilized international political and business leaders to think twice about continued trade and professional dealings with Russia and by extension have made Vladimir Putin a global outlaw.  
 China, of course, is the one nation that is standing on the sideline watching. On the   
one hand, they would like nothing better than to see the U.S. fail in its efforts to rally the world community against Russia. And China is the one nation that knows how to restrict public discussion and debate faster than you can say Hong Kong. On the other hand, China is practical enough to know the economic calamity that will be caused by an unstable Russia. China is looking to the future and is well-positioned to compete with the U.S. in such areas as commercial trade, innovation and technology.[[8]](#endnote-8) Consider, for example, that as of 2020, China overtook the United States as the European Union’s biggest trading partner.   
 Vladimir Putin, on the other hand, is fully prepared to undermine Russia and the world economy to satisfy his grievances. While Russia is quite likely to prevail militarily, it will come   
at great cost to the Russian people. Russia has already lost 25,000 plus soldiers in the field as well as the untold misery that has been brought upon the people of Ukraine. It will be a long time   
before they forget. And if Putin had concerns about the intentions of NATO before, his actions have amped up NATO so that the weaponry of NATO’s 30 participating nations are fully trained on Moscow. After 22 years in power, Vladimir Putin has overreached and underestimated worldwide reaction. He has isolated his nation from the world economy that was steadily in full development since the founding of the new Russian republic in 1991. As Ukraine President, Volodymyr Zelensky said in a video address: “What do we hear today? It’s not just rocket explosions, fighting and the roar of aircraft. This is the sound of a new iron curtain lowering and closing Russia off from the civilized world.”[[9]](#endnote-9) Putin’s name will live in infamy. He has been canceled both now and forever more.

**Endnotes**

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   *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/06/opinion/putin-ukraine-china.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. “Ukraine Special Report,” (2022, March 7). *Bloomberg Business Week*, p 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)