

Mr. Wladimir Putin
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Open letter

Mr President,

We are contacting you to share with you our academic and practical knowledge about the consequences of initiating a war for the instigator, and to offer a glimpse of a possible way out of such a perilous situation. We believe that we can all agree about the sad and dramatic consequences that war has for innocent citizens in the countries involved, as well as for soldiers conducting it: physical injury, psychological trauma, death. Despite that, for political leaders the instigation of a violent fight with external forces often offers the attractive perspective that such a situation of insecurity and feelings of threat increases one's own citizens' national identification (Sherif et al., 1961) and admiration for a powerful leader. Such effects of increased national identification and leader admiration are, however, of a short-term nature: They are usually then replaced by mid-to-long-term negative effects for political leaders who are perceived to be responsible for the war. This letter informs you about some of these effects:

- Citizens on both sides in a war suffer from national isolation. Human beings are dependent on an appropriate mixture of the familiar and the novel; they simultaneously look for inclusion and differentiation (Brewer, 1991). National isolation creates unsatisfied identity developments that strive for change.
- Wars create severe economic problems, up to full-blown crashes, on both sides. Citizens typically compare their current economic situation with the situation before the war began and soon recognize that they are losing out. Feelings of deprivation are usually the basis for resistance, protest and revolution against existing state institutions (Foster & Matheson, 2012). These effects hold true both for ordinary people as well as for elites.
- The conduct of war often involves active misinformation about the success of one's own troops and losses of the enemies, about the moral 'superiority' of one's own group and the 'damnable' motivations of the opposite side (Tajfel, 1977). The creation of such a world consumes resources and leaders end up in isolation within a bubble of yeasayers, always endangered by the threat of being unmasked.
- Finding oneself in a situation of maximum insecurity about what is right and wrong and uncertainty about the future activates citizens' desire for explanations (Festinger, 1954). This will ultimately end up in a perception of reality as it actually is: People will discover who is responsible for starting the war, and for all the consequent suffering, injuries and death.

- The processes described above often generate an increasing application of state power and brutal repression (French & Raven, 1959).
- However, such repression also ends up with the increased rejection, isolation and physical endangerment of the political leaders perceived to be responsible.

What can be done to mitigate against such a predictable disastrous development? From our psychological point of view the primary recommendation is to immediately stop shooting, stop bombarding, stop fighting and stop killing. Think again about the reasons for your decision to go to war and what can ultimately be achieved with this violence, for the Russian people as well as for you personally. Think again about the alternative of a peaceful co-existence with neighbouring countries. Think again about the minimal conditions for ending up in a durable peace agreement and, above all, remain open for negotiations.

Yours faithfully,

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