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Why the United Kingdom's New Prime Minister Could Help Russia's War Aims in Ukraine

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Summary

It is more than six months since Russia invaded Ukraine and the United Kingdom has continued to be among the most vocal and committed supporters of Ukraine in the ongoing war. With a new prime minister in London, there is little expectation that the UK's foreign policy position will alter. Paradoxically, though, the new prime minister's other policies may help Russia's longer-term goals.

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From King Charles Street to Downing Street

Prior to becoming the UK's prime minister on 6 September, Liz Truss had served nearly a full year as the country's foreign secretary. In that role she adopted a hardline approach to Russia, evident long before 24 February, and firmly and repeatedly supported the expansion of sanctions on Russia in the wake of the invasion. She boasted about the UK's hardline policy and proclaimed the UK a lynchpin of western Russia policy.

All of this marked her out as a particular target of anti-western rhetoric within Russia. Truss's poor attention to detail, not least the debacle of her meeting with her Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov in early February when she appeared not to know the names of the two separatist regions of Ukraine, made her an easy target. Her erroneous endorsement of Britons travelling to Ukraine to fight alongside Ukrainians, contrary to the UK government's official position, also rankled with officials in Moscow.

When Truss claimed that Ukraine should push to retake Crimea, a few days after Dmitry Medvedev asserted that such an action could start World War III, her comments could have been better timed.

> The reality is that Truss's public remarks as foreign secretary were always aimed at domestic audiences.

Her visits to eastern Europe as foreign secretary were more interested in photo ops than diplomacy, whether posing on a tank in Estonia or donning an *ushanka* in a mild-weathered Russia. She already had one eye on the premiership.

More of the same?

Truss has already appointed a new cabinet. Appointments to the key decision-making roles in foreign and security policy should ensure continuity. Her replacement as foreign secretary, James Cleverly, enjoys playing war games in his spare time and appears to share many of Truss's views on world politics. Meanwhile Truss has kept Ben Wallace, the UK's defence secretary under Boris Johnson, in post. Wallace has long matched Truss's hawkishness and, while less likely than her to find his foot in his mouth, has also ruffled feathers in diplomatic circles, such as when he commented that Vladimir Putin had gone 'full tonto' and it was time 'to kick Russia's backsides' as during the Crimean War. Consequently, under Truss, with the key foreign and security policy posts occupied by like-minded politicians, the UK position on the Russia-Ukraine war is unlikely to change.

To see why the Truss government's policies could still benefit Russia's war goals, however, requires revisiting the reasoning behind the UK's support for Ukraine.

> Truss has clearly expressed the view, widely shared, that were Russia to triumph in its war with Ukraine this would represent a threat to the liberal rules-based global order.

If Russia's challenge to the liberal order, by which I mean its challenge to the patterns of rules-based behaviour that sustain all or most states' fundamental goals, then it is assumed that Russia will push further to expand its influence (a reasonable assumption given that Russian officials have explicitly said their goals extend beyond Ukraine) and that other states will be emboldened to challenge liberalism.

Proponents of the liberal order usually assert that it is based on the institutions established after World War II. These proponents rightly point out that most states benefit from the predictability and relative stability the liberal order has brought, though they often finesse the fact that the Soviet Union and its allies stood outside of the liberal order during the cold war and that post-Soviet Russia has been withdrawing its consent to it over many years.

The fact that Russia does not consent to that order betrays its wider revolutionary aims and Putin believes Russia is powerful enough to challenge the liberal order. The only real test of power is war: Russia's dissent is inconsequential if it cannot back up its position by material force.

> Many in the west have concluded since 24 February that Russia is less powerful than they thought, occasionally remiss to the threat of a nuclear war, but still, were Russia to succeed in Ukraine this could indeed presage a major structural change in the international system. Hence the UK foreign policy position.

And yet, Truss's new job allows her scope in other policy areas which have ramifications for the liberal order.

Or unintended consequences?

There are at least two reasons to think Truss's government could help Russia. The first concerns UK relations with EU member states under Truss's leadership. Differences between the UK and the EU risk undermining west European unity on Ukraine and divisions were already apparent between the hawks, where the UK can reasonably claim a leadership role, and the more dovish voices in Germany and France where the diplomatic culture is inclined to promoting peace negotiations.

Under Truss such differences could well deepen. While campaigning for the premiership she was asked if France's Emmanuel Macron was 'friend or foe', to which she replied that the 'jury's out'. Hardly the kind of offensive remark one would expect to hear from a politician who was at the time Britain's serving foreign secretary. Moreover, one of Truss's first policy announcements in the UK has been to increase domestic hydrocarbon production, very much at odds with the energy policy of most EU member states, particularly grating with Germany's efforts to reduce energy consumption in response to its dependence on Russia. Future clashes between the UK and EU are also possible, even likely, owing to Truss's threats of drastic action on the Northern Ireland protocol – an agreement between the UK and EU stemming from Brexit.

The second reason pertains to the UK's commitment to the institutions of the liberal order under Truss. In place of the populism of Boris Johnson, the new government is likely to offer unwavering conviction to a number of illiberal positions. The UK has already left the EU, which pictures itself as the embodiment of a liberal values-based international actor, and the UK's new home secretary advocates un-signing the European Convention on Human Rights. If realised, this would potentially foreshadow the UK's exit from the Council of Europe to which all European states belong except Belarus and Russia. Truss has also appointed several 'anti-woke' voices to her cabinet, all of whom rail against the critical liberalism that Putin himself routinely mocks.

> Through such steps the UK risks inadvertently weakening the liberal order for the sake of which it is supporting Ukraine.

Moreover, UK policies will prospectively help Russia. The human cost of the war in Ukraine has already been horrific and will only worsen, but other costs to Russia are harder to assess. A recent think tank report suggests that the financial costs to Russia have been mitigated by high energy prices and Russia was earning more from energy sales to Europe in the summer of 2022 than it was a year earlier. As a result, if fatigue sets in among Ukraine's liberal supporters, something Russia is almost certainly counting on, Truss may find her government playing an enabling role in respect of Russia's revolutionary aims towards the global order.

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