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# Why Russia needs to be humiliated in Ukraine

*Sergey Radchenko*

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## Too little was learnt from the collapse of the Soviet Union

Red Square (Photo: Getty)

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As Putin's war against Ukraine drags on, Russia now faces the very real prospect of defeat. There are still difficult weeks and months ahead for Ukraine, and you cannot wholly discount the possibility of a dangerous escalation still in the war. But Putin has failed to attain his initial aims (the capture of Kyiv) and now looks likely to fall short of his secondary and much more modest aim of capturing Donbas. The war has turned into a protracted affair. That in itself is a defeat for the Russians.

Russia's humiliation in Ukraine has untold benefits, not least for

Russia itself. We have heard it said for years that Russia must be indulged and humoured because, if not, it will resent having lost its great power status. The Soviet collapse, we were told, was a terrible catastrophe from which aggrieved, embittered Russians never recovered. So they need to be respected. They need to stand tall and proud. God forbid if they are humiliated because who knows what they will do.

I witnessed the Soviet collapse first-hand. It was, without doubt, a traumatic experience. There was poverty and misery and chaos and a far-right backlash. Rabid nationalists rallied under their revanchist banners. And then Russia invaded Chechnya in a brutal attempt to recover its tainted pride by bringing defiant separatists in the region to heel. And we watched and commiserated because, you see, the Russians had a good reason to be resentful: they lost the Cold War!

Yet in 1991 there was a sense among many Russians that the USSR was not so much defeated as it folded under its own weight. Too many refused to accept that the Soviet collapse was the outcome of years of economic mismanagement and imperial hubris – and so they looked for traitors instead. Mikhail Gorbachev, in particular, was singled out for his naïveté, if not malice. In the blame-shifting game of the 1990s, someone had to be assigned responsibility for Russia's woes: the traitor Gorbachev, the drunkard Yeltsin, the rapacious oligarchs, and of course the devious western advisers who had always sought Russia's demise.

Out of the chaos and weakness of the 1990s arose Vladimir Putin who promised to deliver order and strength. Putin's abuse of power, corruption, violation of human rights and erosion of

democratic institutions were all tolerated in the name of that promise of strength. Russia may have been poor, corrupt, and authoritarian, but Putin was seen as investing in the military and restoring Russia's 'greatness'. And some Russians have always been suckers for greatness. They would sell their last shirt for its elusive promise.

Every year Putin's Russia holds Victory Day parades. These used to be grandiose affairs. Tanks would roll. Planes would fly. And soldiers would goose-step in unison across Red Square as the ageing dictator looked on. I detested these militaristic displays, which had so little to do with the remembrance of the Second World War, and so much more to do with state-sponsored 'greatness'. And yet I am certain I speak for many Russian liberals if I were to admit that somewhere in the depth of my 'humiliated' conscience I, too, was stirred by the sound and fury. It took a conscious effort to purge the poison of militarism – an effort too many Russians were simply unwilling to make even if they recognised the problem. And they didn't.

Now Ukraine has punctured a big, gaping hole in the narrative of Russia's 'greatness'. Russia is poor, corrupt and authoritarian, and now we also know that it is weak and pathetic. Russia's 'greatness' has crumbled in an orgy of murder and rape inflicted by brutal occupiers in Ukraine. Tainted by the blood of the innocents, and beaten in honest combat, the bully has been reduced to size. It's about time. Thank you, Ukraine, for serving this bitter medicine. Russia needed it badly.

Russia needs proper humiliation. It needs a humble recognition of its diminished status, an acceptance of guilt, and a slow, painstaking effort to rebuild the trust of those it has wronged.

Russia did not learn this lesson in the 1990s. It must learn it now.

True greatness lies not in hideous military parades, nor in promises to unleash a nuclear Armageddon. True greatness lies in acceptance of the past, and a willingness to make amends. It lies in the commitment to build a better future, in a country that could become known for its schools and hospitals rather than its tanks and missiles.

The real source of Russia's humiliation has always been Russia itself: its arrogant, autocratic rulers and the chauvinistic populace that slavishly worship them. Russia's defeat in this unjust, criminal war against Ukraine may help shift the domestic narrative in Russia towards accepting the country for what it really is, rather than what it has vainly pretended to be. It is only then that Russia can, finally, be at peace with itself and with its neighbours.

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