

Political accountability in Russia

In the United States, our political leaders can't continue to pursue extremely unpopular policies for an extended period of time. When our government does initially implement a very unpopular policy, one of two things happens. One possibility is that when the next election comes around, voters replace the misguided politicians with a new set of politicians

Joe McGarrity



who will adopt a different, more popular policy. The other possibility is that the incumbent politicians will fear losing their positions in the next election. This fear will cause them to ditch the unpopular policy before they

have to face voters again. Either way, the voters exert enough influence to ensure that the government stops implementing widely unpopular policies.

It is tempting to believe that only representative democracies, like we have in the United States, have governments that are willing to repeal policies just because of citizens' opinions. But even authoritarian governments, if they want to survive, have to respond to their citizens' concerns, at least on major issues. We just saw such responsiveness in China. Chinese leader Xi Jinping temporarily adopted an unpopular policy. It was a strict zero-COVID policy that included forced quarantines

and required frequent testing for COVID-19. No doubt, Xi believed this policy was good for China. The Chinese people thought otherwise. Once Chinese citizens started to demonstrate against the policy and even against the government, Xi decided to abandon his zero-COVID policy. Of course, the Chinese government ignores its people's desires on many issues; but on this major issue, it decided to reverse its policy, no doubt as a means of self-preservation. The government did not want the protests to spiral out of control and eventually threaten the regime, so it gave in on this one issue.

China's policy reversal may give us hope that a similar reversal will occur in Russia. Putin, Russia's leader, routinely ignores the wishes of his people. But most Russians do not care passionately about most of these issues, so Putin has been able to get away with being unresponsive. His war on Ukraine may turn out to be an issue that Russians care about deeply, so deeply that Putin had better pay attention to their preferences if he wants to stay in power. Putin may need to quit his war in Ukraine, much like Xi needed to quit his zero-COVID policy.

If the Russian war continues and if it goes badly for Russia, the Russians will demand change in either the policy or the leader. According to tradingeconomics.com, Russia's economy is shrinking; GDP will decrease

by 4 percent this year. The same source reports that Russia has a 12 percent inflation rate. Both of these statistics suggest the Russian economy is performing poorly and this performance will irritate the Russians. Russians will be annoyed because there is less output to divide among themselves for two reasons: 1) because GDP decreased (as just mentioned) and 2) because the war is diverting so many resources away from private consumption. The Russians will also be unhappy because the high inflation rate will reduce the purchasing power of their savings.

While the economy's performance provides fuel to feed the fire of Russian discontent, the war casualties are like sticks of dynamite that can fuel an explosion. I have seen estimates of Russian casualties that range between 100,000 and 370,000. These are big numbers. Once Russian families see their members killed or injured in a war, they will become angry, blame Putin and seek revenge.

If the West continues to support Ukraine, and if the Russians feel the pain in human losses and in economic adversity, the Russian people will have an intense desire to put an end to the war. Putin will either have to listen to his people (like Xi did) or see unrest spiral out of control.

Joe McGarrity is a Professor of Economics at UCA. He can be reached at joem@uca.edu.