

BRIEF

THE KREMLIN'S AIMS AND
ASSUMPTIONSRUSSIA'S WAR IN UKRAINE
SERIES NO. 1

| KALEV STOICESCU |

Despite the political, economic, and military pressure that Russia applied to Ukraine from March 2014, Kyiv demonstrated no willingness to give up its territory, sovereignty, and Western orientation, and return to Moscow's orbit. Russia's demands—neutrality (i.e., giving up the quest for NATO membership), reintegration of occupied territories in the Donbas only as Russia's Trojan horse, and recognition of Crimea as part of Russia – were totally unacceptable to Ukraine. Putin's regime thus made the extensive preparations for decisive action that materialised in the unprovoked and brutal invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022.

Russia had, since 2009, spent colossal sums to modernise its military, and made a range of non-military preparations domestically, as well as those needed to deal with Ukraine and third countries.¹ Putin and his closest advisors were convinced that Russia would quickly overwhelm Ukraine, overcoming both relatively weak Ukrainian resistance and limited Western reaction. Russia's initial aim was to install a pro-Kremlin puppet government and to carry out the 'demilitarisation' and 'denazification' of the country. This course of action failed and the goal transformed, after late February 2022, into one of the total obliteration of Ukraine's statehood, and of the Ukrainian people and culture – as demonstrated by massive, barbaric and indiscriminate destruction, killing, arrests and deportations, and by preparations to further conquer and annex Ukrainian territory.

Russia's ambition is by no means limited to the annihilation of Ukraine. The list of demands presented by the Kremlin to NATO and to

the US on 17 December 2021, which Russia packaged as an agreement on security measures and a treaty on security guarantees, clearly indicate Moscow's actual objectives.² These aims could be summed up roughly as a return to the security situation that existed in Europe in 1997. They would leave Europe's eastern half at the Kremlin's (non-existent) mercy.

Russia also made several key assumptions at the outset of the invasion that most likely indicated very good chances of success and manageable risks. However, some critical judgements and estimates rapidly proved to be false or largely inadequate.³ Others continue to hold – to varying degrees, but enough for Russia to be able to continue its 'special military operation' and to bear its economic and social consequences.

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RUSSIA'S AIMS

Russia began, in April 2021, to amass large forces around Ukraine, along a front of about 4 000 kilometres, from Belarus to Crimea and the Black Sea. Given the insufficient number of troops, their uncoordinated actions, poor logistical support, and other indicators, Russia probably had no plans to wage a lengthy all-out war of conquest and the occupation of much of Ukraine.⁴ Instead, Putin and a small number of cronies plotted, and launched on 24 February, what was meant to be a swift decapitation attack against Kyiv, betting on the dispersal of Ukrainian forces around the entire perimeter and the

element of surprise. A combined air assault and ground attack was considered more likely in the Donbas region.

Russia's long-term goal – the destruction of Ukraine – will not change while Putin remains in power, but its short-term objectives have been reshaped by the poor performance of its armed forces. Plan A, taking control of the Hostomel airfield and Kyiv in a matter of hours or days with about 7 000 paratroopers and special forces, accompanied by air and missile strikes throughout Ukraine, failed. Plan B, the deployment of huge, armoured columns to encircle and defeat Kyiv (and Kharkiv), in parallel with invasion from other directions around the perimeter, was also unsuccessful. Plan C, the conquest and likely annexation of the so-called Novorossiia, Ukrainian lands from the Donbas to Transnistria is, at the time of writing, under way.⁵ The Kremlin's immediate concerns are to gain the initiative in military operations both on the Donbas front, and in the direction of Odesa and Transnistria, to replenish its financial reserves, and to mitigate the effects of Western economic sanctions. i.e., to preserve the impression of 'normalcy' in Russia.

DOMESTIC PREPARATIONS

Domestically, the Putin regime has, over many years and particularly since 2014, created an increasingly hysterical atmosphere of war fuelled by anti-Ukrainian and anti-Western propaganda and disinformation. It has cemented false narratives, based on the multiple conspiracy theories and lies that the Kremlin uses to justify its aggression. The state's total control over Russia's media, its surveillance of social media, the banishment of 'foreign agents', and the harsh punishment for spreading information deemed false by the state are meant to brainwash and intimidate the population, limit its access to other sources of information and suppress dissent and opposition. The National Guard (Rosgvardiya), a riot police force about 340 000 strong, stands ready to crush anti-war protests in Russia, but also to operate in occupied territories in Ukraine.

Russia started a process in 2014 that would allow it to adapt to Western economic sanctions.⁶

Moscow seeks not only to circumvent sanctions, but also to create domestic and to find foreign alternatives for banned goods and commodities, and to attract foreign direct investments. Europe's reliance on Russian gas, oil and coal – projected to have been even further increased by the completion of the Nord Stream 2 pipelines in September 2021 – ensured both Europe's economic vulnerability and huge cash flows to the Kremlin's war coffers. These cash flows will continue until Europe – having declared its willingness to do so – will finally be able to terminate its imports of energy from Russia.

Russia's long-term goal – the destruction of Ukraine – will not change while Putin remains in power

A third important aspect of Russia's domestic preparations was the build up and modernisation of its armed forces. Foreign (and Russian) experts assumed that Russia would learn lessons from its rather poor performance against Georgia in 2008, and also in the Donbas region since 2014, and not be blinded by the unopposed takeover of Crimea. Putin made the financing of the military sector Russia's undisputed top priority, with an aggregate spending officially exceeding 900 billion US dollars from 2009 to 2021 (estimated by some experts to be far bigger in terms of purchasing power parity).⁷ Russia's operational experience and weapons testing in Syria were supposed to add important value, as were the annual large-scale strategic military exercises and more tactical snap exercises.

UKRAINE, THE WEST, AND OTHERS

Ukraine, Moscow's primary target, has been subject to Russia's mounting political, informational, economic and military pressure since 2014. The obvious aims were to weaken Ukraine, discredit its democratic order, elected leaders and institutions, and demonstrate that it has no other choice but to give up Western values and aspirations and, like Belarus, become Russia's ally. The Kremlin bet on pro-Russian political forces and certain leaders and oligarchs, such as Putin's close associate Viktor Medvedchuk (former co-chairman, together with Yuri Boiko, another pro-Moscow politician,

of the 'Opposition Platform – For Life' party, and chairman of 'Ukrainian Choice', a Russian sponsored NGO). Russia's agents of influence were active all over Ukraine, physically and in the information space, seeking to split society, foment dissent and conflict, and cultivate the Kremlin's narratives.⁸

Russia also spared no efforts to convince the West to either offer only symbolic, face-saving support or to stop helping Ukraine altogether. The Kremlin did everything it could to test and undermine Western unity in NATO and the EU, and to exacerbate political discords between and within Western nations. Putin's undeniable goal is a West unable to mobilise in solidarity to stand up for Ukraine, and ultimately for itself. Supporting Brexit and Donald Trump's election, laundering massive amounts of money in Western banks, buying top European politicians, trolling on social media, opening new gas pipelines, even threatening nuclear holocaust have all been used in the service of this goal. Russia wants a weakened, vulnerable and intimidated West that would be both unwilling and unable to stand against the Kremlin.

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At the same time, Moscow built a strategic partnership with China, its most important partner in the confrontation against the West, crowned by a joint political declaration adopted on 4 February 2022.⁹ China has vested political and economic interests in Russia, including the Kremlin's political support for the integration of Taiwan, and the supply of energy and natural resources. Russia has also been very active in its relations with the other countries of the so-called BRICS format (Brazil, India and South-Africa), and has taken every opportunity to influence anti-American and anti-Western governments in Asia, Africa and South America.

RUSSIA'S SCORECARD

The Kremlin estimated correctly that Russia's population and ruling elites would be under sufficiently tight mental and physical control so as not to seriously challenge the regime and Putin's special military operation'. The collective Putin has worked hard to preserve normalcy in Russia, particularly by preventing shortages of goods and massive unemployment and poverty, as Putin's high ratings of support depend on the preservation of domestic stability.

Moscow also counted rightly on China's political support. Beijing, initially unwilling to openly take sides, has gradually moved towards the Kremlin's rhetoric, blaming the West for provoking the conflict and even opposing NATO's open-door policy in Europe. It cannot be excluded that it was China that emboldened Russia to take military action against Ukraine, assuming – as Putin and his small circle of plotters did – that the conflict would be quickly won, and would administer a serious blow to the US and the entire West.

Putin was also correct in assuming that NATO, and the US in particular would not – as they themselves have persistently made clear – intervene directly in Ukraine's defence for fear of starting a war between Russia and the Alliance. Russian forces have been countered in Ukraine by local forces only, albeit partly equipped with Western weapons and other materiel. The weapons provided to Ukraine by the West before the invasion started were qualitatively and quantitatively not much different from those provided to the mujahedeen in Afghanistan, in the 1980s – but this was for guerrilla warfare, not conventional warfare.

Russia failed totally, however, in its estimation of the willingness and capacity of Ukraine's leadership, armed forces and people to resist and fight. Russia had made extensive preparations since 2014 but so, with Western support, had Ukraine. The Kremlin also failed to assess the West's reaction to the invasion, particularly as Russia's armed forces moved speedily to atrocities, war crimes and indiscriminate destruction. Putin must have been sure that Europe would not risk losing Russian gas, oil

and coal supplies, and would be paralysed by his nuclear threats. Meanwhile, Russia grossly overestimated the fighting capacity and spirit of its own armed forces, whose performance cannot solely be attributed to poor planning and political miscalculation.

Russia has proved effective at exploiting opportunities, but poor at learning lessons from the past

Russia has proved effective at exploiting opportunities, but poor at learning lessons from the past.¹⁰ Putin's regime is still capable

of making major miscalculations that would result in catastrophe both for itself and others. His latest military adventure has not yet directly affected the NATO and EU member states, but it might. His willingness to take revenge on the Allies for the defence support that allows Ukraine to stand against the aggression should not be underestimated. Furthermore, his regime has an inclination for miscalculation and apparently an appetite for future adventures. The risks are far from over.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Siemon T. Wezeman, "[Russia's military spending: Frequently asked questions](#)", SIPRI, 27 April 2020.
- ² "[Treaty between The United States of America and the Russian Federation on security guarantees](#)", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 17 December 2021. "[Agreement on measures to ensure the security of The Russian Federation and members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization](#)", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 17 December 2021.
- ³ Mykola Kapitonenko, "[Russia's war in Ukraine: How it started and where it could lead](#)", European Leadership Network, 4 April 2022.
- ⁴ Zack Beauchamp, "[Why the first few days of war in Ukraine went badly for Russia](#)", Vox, 28 February 2022.
- ⁵ "[Why Putin needs a landing force in Transnistria](#)", IStories, 2 May 2022.
- ⁶ Richard Connolly, "[Russia's Response to Sanctions: How Western Sanctions Reshaped Political Economy in Russia](#)", Valdai Club Papers, November 2018.
- ⁷ "[Russia Military Spending/Defense Budget 1993-2022](#)", Macrotrends, accessed on 1 May 2022; Michael Kofman, "[Russian defense spending is much larger, and more sustainable than it seems](#)", DefenseNews, 3 May 2019.
- ⁸ Dmitri Teperik, Dmytro Dubov, Oleh Pokalchuk, Iliia Miroshkin, Oksana Iliuk, Anastasiia Apetyk, Larisa Snihur and Grigori Senkiv, "[Resilient Ukraine – a Delicate Mosaic? Society, Media, Security, and Future Prospects](#)", ICDS, 8 November 2021.
- ⁹ "[Joint Statement by the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development](#)", Administration of the President of the Russian Federation, 4 February 2022.
- ¹⁰ Tracey German, "[Analysis: Is Russia repeating mistakes of past wars in Ukraine?](#)", Al Jazeera, 5 March 2022.

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