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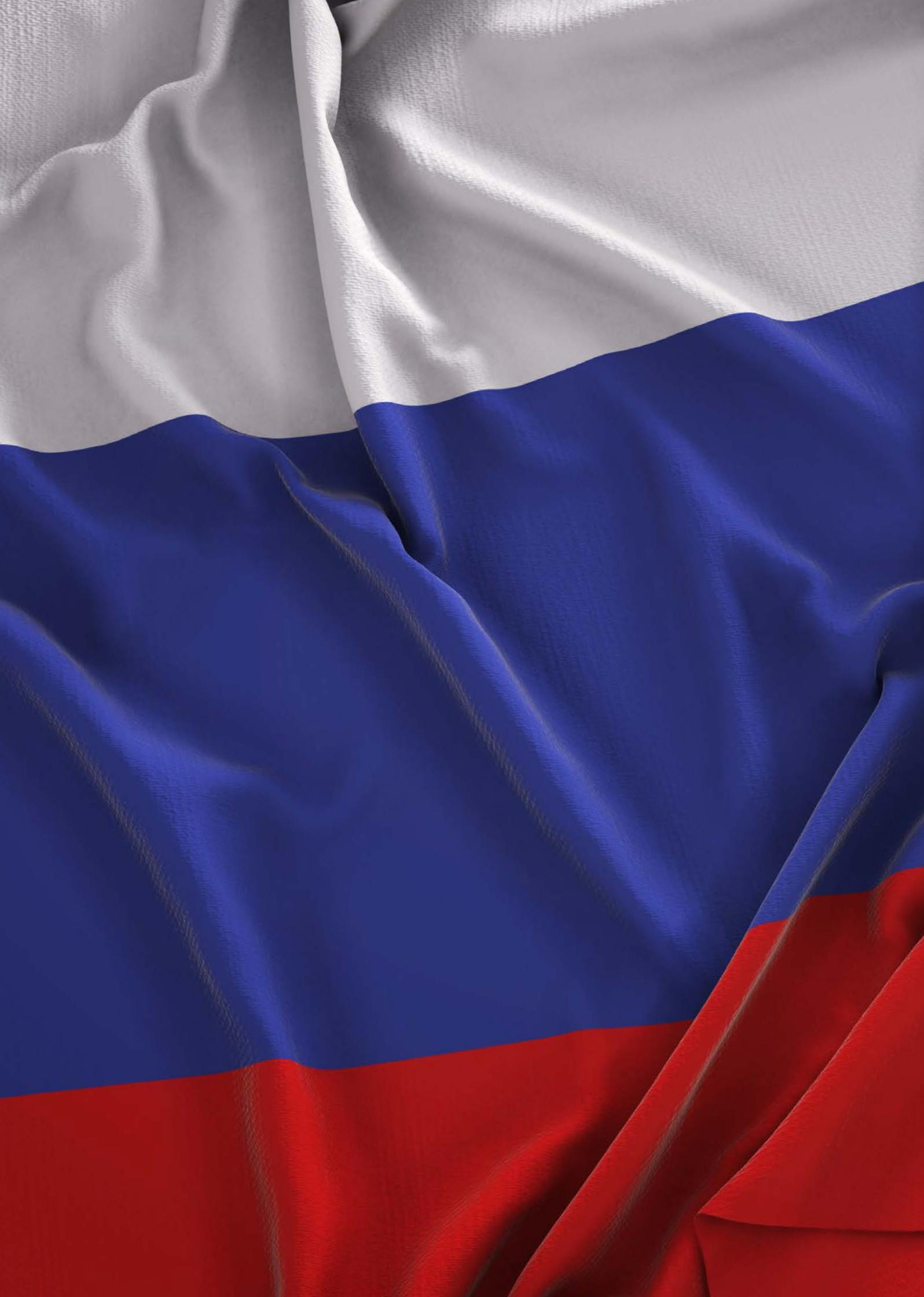
ARES & ATHENA

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19 (RE)THINKING RUSSIA







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FOREWORD

Brig John Clark
Head of Army Strategy

The response to President Putin's 'Special Military Operation' has been swift and resolute. The UK, together with a united and purposeful NATO and wider international community, has drawn on all its levers of national power to challenge Russia's behaviour and impose significant consequences for its actions in Ukraine. The mobilisation of diplomatic, information, economic and military instruments to this end has been impressive. While yet to be fully realised, the impact across the world has already been profound and will certainly be long lasting and far reaching; there are currently and likely to remain few net winners. So, the motives behind the Russian invasion, events on the ground and the international response to a land war in Europe warrants our professional consideration. As such, the work forged and cohered by the CHACR, both in this publication and in its wider contributions both pre and post the invasion of Ukraine, is rich, timely and powerfully relevant. As the title of this edition aptly indicates, we must seize the opportunity to reflect on history and on current events in order to shape our future approach to Russia.

In the context of 'Great Power Competition', Russia's size, influence and current behaviour is challenging to the 'Rules Based International System' and so it matters to us and our interests. We have a professional responsibility to not simply observe but to seek to understand Russia in the broadest sense through an informed perspective. As the British Army, we cannot limit ourselves to questions as binary as 'what and why has this happened?' (we should already know this as a result of situational awareness and innate understanding) but must conceptually operate in an area that seeks to understand threats and motivations (including our own) and how this should guide our future responses; this will inform both our choices and the military advice we give to senior policy and decision makers. Without knowledge of precisely how or why decisions were taken in Moscow, at this early stage it appears that Russia overestimated its military capabilities and underestimated the motivation and capability of Ukrainian resistance. More honest and better understanding might have changed decision calculations and avoided war in Europe.

Of course, in terms of military operations, we are being reminded of many of the deductions underpinning the design of Future Soldier that we announced late last year: warfare is visceral; information is critical and information warfare is all pervasive; resilience in every area of our systems – in particular Combat Support and Service Support – is essential; the ability to operate efficiently and effectively in urban environments is a vital part of land capability; dispersed networked capabilities must achieve critical mass with lower signal and signature of intentions to prosecute target, as opposed to becoming targets by massing too early;

combined arms training and warfighting competence is key; and all of the above must be delivered by informed, aware, trusted and empowered people at every level and at every stage. Some further thoughts. First, we must never take our eyes off the requirement to be 'masters of our craft' – physically and conceptually; as Russia has found to its cost, strategic ambitions for a 72 hour 'Special Military Operation' cannot be delivered without deep operational competence integrated across all warfighting domains, well-founded confidence and total commitment. This is equally applicable at the tactical level. It is also in this visceral arena that the moral component, *why we fight and how we choose to fight*, is relentlessly tested, and most starkly assessed by those who will judge our actions. In short – physical and moral courage and conviction counts. Second, as professionals we must not focus on judging how Russia has performed but rather make our assessments, test our thinking and apply ourselves to learn from what Russia learns from this experience; failure to do so will see us be

poorly pitched as a history-facing, not current and future threat-orientated army – something Dr Meral compels us to guard against in his introduction to this edition of *Ares & Athena*.

The articles that follow have been carefully selected to promote and provoke thought on and across Russia as it is, as well providing insights into the history that explains elements of why it acts as it does. You will note that none of the perspectives considers Russia in isolation or through a singular lens, rather blending past, present and future, and across the diplomatic, information, security and economic domains – as well as a few select others. The tapestry they present is very informative and thought provoking.

Dr McGlynn's paper addresses the **societal and historical context for Russia**: the enormous sacrifice in the 'Great Patriotic War' coupled with geography and security concerns

provides a compelling narrative and sense of moral authority for the 'right to employ might'. Dr Ben Noble furthers the discussion on the power of this narrative through **a vision of foreign interference**. Binary alliances, ambiguous threats, and allegations of externally projected internal-security concerns generate a powerfully cohesive vision, albeit one that forces fear, based on historical narratives, rather than future-facing optimism for Russia and Russians. Natia Seskuria then examines the perceived **spheres of Russian influence** in the context of a modern state retaining the former USSR's perspective of NATO as an enemy encroaching closer towards the Russian border. The responding pursuit of Russian 'great power' status by Moscow with absolute control on their neighbours and near-abroad merely drives an ever-greater divide and instils a desire for divorce from those whom they seek to influence. Through actions such as Georgia, Crimea and Ukraine this gulf between perception and reality, and ambition and achievement grows deeper and more polarised. In turn, this has potentially profound implications not only for Russia's foreign policy aims but also its domestic and internal security as a result.



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Dr Buchanan's piece on the **Arctic Frontier** offers a respite and an opportunity to reflect on the potential benefit of adopting a very different approach to Russia as a key member of the Arctic Council where engagements are currently frozen but could thaw. This speaks to the need to maintain political and strategic clarity and suggests that our engagement with Russian interests across the globe should be as varied as the environments in which we encounter them. It also argues that, despite conflict and confrontation, the need for communication with adversaries remains an absolute necessity. Similarly, Dimitar Bechev's article examines the relationship between **Russia and the Western Balkans** based on historical influence and camaraderie. Here a similar Russian logic, justification and approach (resulting from territorial, cultural, ethnic, religious, and historical grievance) could be played out in a very different theatre and one far deeper inside continental Europe. We would be remiss to discount or be distracted from the potential of a second front here; one in which Russia has strong support built through history and a shared narrative.

CHACR's Director, Dr Sharpe offers his insights on the **Russian value of (and values in) War** as illuminated by its historical approaches and contemporary actions. Here, 'winning' is absolute and to be pursued at higher costs than would be accepted by the West (perceived as both a weakness and an opportunity); and winning provides victories which support narratives of legitimacy, righting the grievances, re-writing the history and exploiting the spoils. This licence to fight ('right'), coupled with the commitment and vast forces to win ('might') present a sobering challenge. Bettina Renz and Kirill Shamiev examine the **state of the Russian military** and warn that questions over its operational performance must not detract from its fundamental military power; although poorly applied so far in Ukraine, it remains powerful and capable of adapting and transforming through necessity and the hunt for victory. There are warnings here of the modernising of military means having had primacy over the skill (and judgement) of the ways they are employed: technology cannot be a substitute for poor human skills and associated behaviours; once combined with a questionable set of values and a determination to win irrespective of the cost, the results are likely to be far more damaging for all concerned – including Russia, Russians, and the society to which the combatants will return.

The impact for **Russia's economy** and prosperity are considered by Dasha Afansieva whose analysis warns of a consequential greater level of isolationism and a brain-drain (the early signs of which are already evident). It contends that prosperity is not about money but financial mobility and asset accessibility – freedoms now largely denied to



Picture: vic_b-6314823/pixabay.com

“““
Russia presents unique challenges – both to its rulers and to the global system that has made the world safer and more prosperous since the end of the Second World War

Moscow. All of which begs questions of the cost and actual longevity of the currently compelling narrative of legitimacy and existential threat to Russians and their society. Finally, Keir Giles reflects and projects as to what happens in **Russia after the conflict ends** and when those who have fought under that false narrative return home, damaged (if not defeated) and having experienced the prosperous realities of a future-facing Ukraine. The article contends that there are three outcomes: greater grievance and a more insular Russia; that grievance being turned inwardly and upwards towards the Kremlin resulting in internal security issues and instability; or the realisation that those who exist outside of Russia do so for good reason and that moderation, communication and collaboration are now necessary. It concludes that it must be made clear to Russia that it must co-exist with others; and that any perception of success from the 'Special Military Operation' must be denied – this is the vital moral high ground.

Reflecting on these excellent and multi-faceted articles I am reminded of George Orwell's contention that '*who controls the Past, controls the Future: who controls the present controls the past*'. If, as it is posited in the pages that follow, the Russian narrative of external intervention and conditions matters most to Russians then we must deny this asset to Putin's Russia.

Russia presents unique challenges – both to its rulers and to the global system that has made the world safer and more prosperous since the end of the Second World War. Current events have again brought these into stark relief and to the forefront of our consciousness. The threat-based approach taken by the recent Defence Command Papers and our Future Soldier transformation programme has set the conditions for us to respond to such challenges effectively as an army. Ensuring that we do so with a coherent blend of the physical, conceptual and moral components of fighting power can only be achieved through deep understanding, awareness and vigilance. Doing so will enable us to continue to best inform Defence and National debate on our capabilities and posture now and in the future. And so, I would like to thank all of the contributors to this timely edition of *Ares & Athena* and the opportunity it affords us to (re)think Russia.

Irrespective of the outcome of current events, Russia and Russians form a large, prominent and influential element of the geo-political landscape. The British Army's response to the threat Russia poses to our security and prosperity will be all the more effective as a result of improved understanding. Although it would be folly to not remain conscious and cognisant of the other threats and challenges that currently exist globally and those that will evolve in the future, we should never stop thinking about Russia.

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INTRODUCTION

Dr Ziya Meral

Research and Programmes Director, CHACR

“In London, the intelligence – coming in from GCHQ and MI6 – was met with near-disbelief in some quarters. A common problem inside and outside government was that people simply could not believe a major land war could break out in Europe in the 21st Century.”

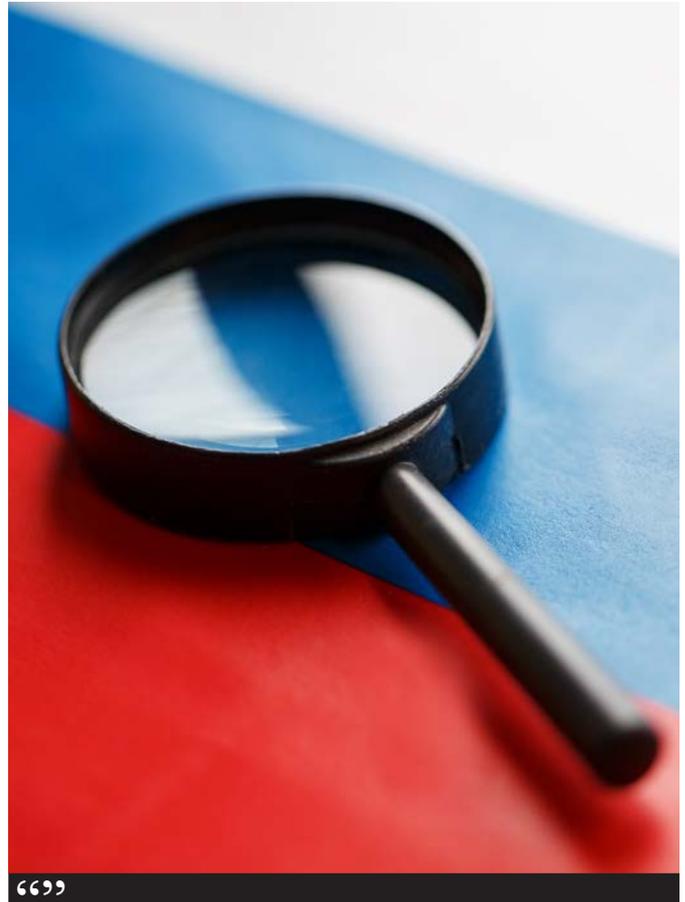
– **BBC, 09 April 2022**¹

Experts are not fortune tellers. There is a limit to what one can confidently assert about events in the future. But, experts are good at offering us insights on why and how we found ourselves where we did, and what all these unfolding events mean and what our options are now in responding to them. To that extent, it is not surprising that hardly anyone forecasted a full invasion of Ukraine by large Russian ground forces in 2022, even though like any good reader of a mystery novel, we now see the clues sprinkled all along that lead up to the crisis point in the plot line.

What is worrying, however, is how many of us both in scholarly and practitioner circles struggled to accept the incoming intelligence, clear statements by US and UK officials, direction of a military build up, the convictions and beliefs behind statements by President Putin and pumping out of particular narratives to dehumanise Ukrainians and efface their history. All of these pointed out to a clear and immediate military campaign unfolding. Looking back at the developments of the last few months, we now feel a similar sense of missing out on all the clues that were in front of our eyes.

For some, this ‘overlooking’ might have been caused by personal political views. For others, this might have been caused by disbelief towards official statements, sadly due to the legacy of use of intelligence in lead up to the Iraq war. But for many, it seemed to have boiled down to assumptions we make about other countries, their leaders and why and how they choose to go to war. These apriori beliefs we hold shape what we think constitutes definition of ‘rational’ and the judgements we make based upon them and what leads us to say; ‘it does not make sense’. We often assume that weak economy, weak public support, military shortcomings and risky outcomes ought to lead to particular choices by political and military leaders. But when we ascribe such a ‘rationality’ as a norm shared by all universally, we are often projecting our own calculations, beliefs, ways of thinking and seeing, assessing risks and outcomes, and worth or cost of a decision on to others, rather than start the analysis through the eyes and ‘rationality’ of another nation. This is why we failed, again, even in the face of clear intelligence.

Yet, before one gets carried away and declares a new era with the zeal of someone who just realised the risks posed by Russian policies, there is a lot that is not new in Russian domestic politics, foreign policy, decisions to go to war and the conduct of war, negotiation tactics and risk appetites. This



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is why languages of ‘a new Cold War’ dramatically fail in providing us with any meaningful insight. What we are seeing has been in the making for almost two decades, whether in Russian military reforms, or in campaigns starting in Georgia in 2008. One would be wise to remember that the Russian invasion of Ukraine actually started in 2014, not in 2021. We have already witnessed brutality of attacks on civilians and willingness to ignore any criticism and claims of war crimes for a decade in Syria.

In this issue of *Ares & Athena*, you will read through a broad range of experts covering a wide portfolio of topics beyond the current events, though inescapably linked or explained in conversation with them. The topics covered are neither an exhaustive list, nor all that needs to be discussed. More articles could have easily been added to this volume. The articles reflect neither the views of CHACR, nor wider British Army and Ministry of Defence. You might agree with some of the points made, disagree with others, but the wealth of information and insight found in each of the articles is enough to make one think and reflect on some key areas beyond news reports. If there is any message that runs through them, it is hopefully one that makes you (re) think your own assumptions on what drives Russian policies, how they are communicated, what limits they have and what other key areas they are focusing on and where it might all lead to.

¹BBC, Gordon Corera, “Ukraine: Inside the spies’ attempt to stop the war”, 09/04/2022 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-61044063>



THE ROLE OF HISTORICAL MYTH IN RUSSIA'S WAR ON UKRAINE

*Dr Jade McGlynn
Senior Researcher,
Monterey Initiative in Russian Studies*

“The Ukrainian authorities began by building their statehood on the negation of everything that united us, trying to distort the mentality and historical memory of millions of people, of entire generations.”
– **Vladimir Putin, 21 February 2022**

Vladimir Putin's obsession with history is not an esoteric indulgence to be mocked but a central component of the world-view that led him to order the invasion of Ukraine. The co-creation of this world-view with significant sections of Russian society explains, at least in part, why support for the war among ordinary Russians appears to be so high.² Certainly, the Russian Army's initial military strategies and expectations of taking Kyiv within 72 hours suggest that Putin, and many around him, believed the occupiers would be greeted as liberators, come to 'denazify Ukraine'. However, this same world-view is also the reason that the so-called 'special military operation' has been much more difficult than anticipated: namely, because the Kremlin's vision of history is completely detached from reality.

Understanding why this historical framing of Russia's war as a new World War Two is effective involves recognising that the 2022 invasion began in 2014. Although accusations

of Nazi collaboration were used to undermine hopes and dreams of Ukrainian independence as far back as the Soviet Union, Russian media coverage of the 2014 Revolution of Dignity applied this narrative in an especially intensive way. Rather than a flowering of civil society and democratic intent, Russian state media and politicians historically framed the Revolution of Dignity as an illegitimate putsch. According to this narrative, a gang of Nazis and their collaborators – referred to as *banderovtsy*, which denotes the followers of the far-right World War Two-era nationalist leader Stepan Bandera – seized control of Ukraine in 2014. Backed by the West, this junta represented an immediate threat to Russia and Russians, against whom they harboured an ideological and boundless hatred.

Russian media painted the ensuing conflict between Russia and Ukraine as a rerun of the Great Patriotic War, or Soviet experience of World War Two from 1941 to 1945. Since 2014, barely a day has passed without Russian media frightening audiences with tall tales of the Ukrainian authorities' discrimination towards ethnic minorities (first and foremost Russians), veneration of Hitler, and committal of atrocities towards the Russian-backed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics. Ordinary Ukrainians are depicted either as brainwashed by their state's Goebbels-esque propaganda or as living in terror under a Western-sponsored Nazi jackboot from which Russia is now coming to rescue them.

If the Ukrainians are Nazis, then Russians cast themselves in the role of Red Army. Logically, this means that Russia(ns)

²www.levada.ru/en/2022/04/11/the-conflict-with-ukraine

would at some point need to re-perform their greatest moment, the Soviet Victory of 1945, by liberating Ukraine from Nazis, just as they did in the Great Patriotic War. This concept can be encapsulated by the Russian phrase, ‘mozhem povtorit’, literally ‘we can repeat’, which refers to the nation’s ability to repeat the feats of the Great Patriotic War. This attitude is reflected in Russian television channels’ numerous reportages from fields where ‘the Red Army once fought the Nazis and now their descendants are back to do the same’. On the day Russia announced it had taken full control of Mariupol, the Ministry of Defence released a new website dedicated to the liberation of Mariupol – in 1943.

This collapse between past and present is not mere cosplay but a physical realisation of Russia’s understanding of the Great Patriotic War, which is central to Russia’s positioning of itself as a messianic great power. The Kremlin and its media have made a long-term investment into the depiction of the Ukrainian government as Nazis intent on overturning the Soviet Great Victory of 1945, on which Russia bases its claims to great power status, moral authority, and preferred (post-Yalta) world order. Following this logic, to allow Ukraine to thrive is to allow an existential threat to Russia’s survival as a great power. Through its war, Russia is trying to force its view of World War Two onto Ukraine – and the world – as an unimpeachable Soviet victory, led by Russians, that gives the Russians the perpetual right to dominate what it deems its sphere of influence.

Flattered into believing they are re-staging the Great Patriotic War, many ordinary Russians will opt to believe this appealing narrative, constructed over several years, especially in the context of painful sanctions and outbursts of Russophobia in the West. After all, the Great Patriotic War is a powerful cultural memory, with 89 percent of Russians saying the Great Victory makes them feel proud. And the Kremlin is adept at deriving maximum political benefit from this pride. To keep the war memory relevant, the Russian government has tried to make the (mythologised) events of 1941-1945 a mainstay of everyday life. In recent years, this has involved painting murals of war heroes on apartment blocks, funding an almost endless stream of World War Two blockbusters, staging history festivals, creating children’s war re-enactment camps, and even launching Great Patriotic War-themed school stationery.

Young people have often been the target of these activities and it is now their turn to re-enact World War Two battles in real life, as soldiers in Russia’s war, reasserting their country’s claims to great power status and ownership over historical truth. To make this connection between Russia’s war on Ukraine and historical truth more explicit, one need only look at the constant stream of accusations about historical falsification by Russia’s neighbours and the West. Influential figures such as Sergei Naryshkin (head of the SVR foreign intelligence service) and Sergei Shoigu (minister of defence), as well as provocateurs like Presidential Aide Vladimir Medinsky, have been central to fuelling the idea that the West is waging a war on historical truth with the aim of undermining Russian identity and Russian power. In the 2021 National Security Strategy, this challenge was depicted as an existential one.

Russian state-aligned media, politicians and diplomats have long deployed accusations of historical crimes and



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revisionism (real or imagined) to maintain memory of the Great Patriotic War as a constant talking point in geopolitical terms, always seeking to heighten the war’s relevance and potential to agitate, in both senses of the word. In particular, Russian politicians have been active spurring ‘memory wars’ between Russia and various neighbouring states, in which political actors engage in undignified contestations over their countries’ historical – especially wartime – roles. See, for example, Russian politicians’ – and the public’s anger – at the Czech Republic, Poland, Ukraine and the Baltic States over the removal of Soviet war memorials or the renaming of Soviet-era streets. It is noteworthy that Russia’s immediate reconstruction efforts in occupied territories of Ukraine have gone into re-erecting Soviet-era statues and tearing down monuments to Ukrainian soldiers.

This restoration of (what Russia perceives as) historical justice is steeped in a belief in Russia’s own historical rightness and continued moral authority – an authority that stems from the Soviet war victory as well as Russia’s defence of the memory of the Great Patriotic War. This explains why the term Nazi is used in a way that often seems incomprehensible to many outside Russia: Nazi here denotes those who do not celebrate the USSR’s victory in 1945, for whatever reason, while those who do celebrate it are heroes and the heirs to the victors over Nazism, even if they are raging antisemites.

Despite being delusional, this framing should allow the Kremlin to claim some form of victory in Ukraine by 9th May 2022, while still retaining the consistency of its message that the Russian army is re-fighting World War Two in order to save the memory of the Great Patriotic War. This is precisely what happened in 2014, when the fact Donetsk and Luhansk could host Victory Day parades on 9th May was cited as a triumph that drew a temporary line under Russian intervention in Ukraine, signalling to the Russian public not to expect direct annexation of Donbas. Tellingly, plans are already underway to host Immortal Regiment processions and Victory Day parades in Kherson and Mariupol. Yet, these Potemkin victories will most likely only signal a pause in hostilities, just as in 2014. Ultimately, Russia’s war will last much longer, because it is a war fuelled not by traditional security concerns but by a historically-infused sense of ownership over the lands of others.

THE “FOREIGN INTERFERENCE” NARRATIVE

Dr Ben Noble

Associate Professor of Russian Politics, University College London; Associate Fellow, Chatham House

“The collective West is trying to split our society by speculating on military losses, on the socio-economic consequences of sanctions, to provoke civil confrontation in Russia – and, using its ‘fifth column’, is seeking to achieve its goal. And there is only one goal, I have already spoken about this: the destruction of Russia.”

– President Vladimir Putin, 16 March 2022

The phrase “foreign interference” might seem like a Russian state euphemism for the country’s 24 February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. After all, this war is referred to by the Russian authorities as a “special military operation” – a euphemism that has come to define the Orwellian ways by which the Kremlin has constructed a parallel information universe about the Russian military’s activities in Ukraine.

But “foreign interference” is not being used to refer to the actions of Russia. Rather, it is used by Russian officials to refer to the supposed actions of the West. As Russian artillery slams into civilian buildings in Ukraine, and as Russian troops kill innocent Ukrainians, Russian politicians complain of interference by the West in Russian domestic affairs. Indeed, the State Duma – the lower chamber of the country’s national parliament, the Federal Assembly – created a “Commission to Investigate Facts of the Interference of Foreign States in the Internal Affairs of Russia” on 23 March 2022. And, before the invasion, experts linked to the Russian Security Council spoke of “unprecedented” attempts by the “collective West” to interfere in Russian affairs. According to comments released on 7 February 2022 summarising their conclusions, these experts pointed to the use of “colour revolutions” techniques – in the Russian understanding, covert Western support to bring about regime change, including the “destructive” activities of foreign NGOs.

The phrase “foreign interference” was being used in Russia before 2022, however. The State Duma had, for example, created an analogous commission in September 2019. And the Federation Council – the upper chamber of the national parliament – created its own “Ad Hoc Commission for the Protection of State Sovereignty and the Prevention of Interference in the Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation” in June 2017. The timing of this particular commission’s creation is telling. Russia was facing accusations of interference in the 2016 US presidential election. Returning the accusation was a predictable response: “The Americans have accused us of something, so we’ll just accuse them of the same thing” – so the thinking might appear to have been. But, even without this US context, the political attraction of creating such a body within the national parliament – known for its subservience and rubber-stamping executive initiatives – was clear.

There was a particular intensification of the “foreign interference” narrative in Russia in 2021. Alexei Navalny – the leading opposition figure – returned to the country in January 2021, following his recovery in Germany from poisoning with Novichok in Omsk in August 2020. Russian state media had for

a long time portrayed Navalny as a stooge of the West. Indeed, in September 2020, Dmitry Peskov – Vladimir Putin’s press secretary – claimed that Navalny was working with the US Central Intelligence Agency. This accusation followed claims by Navalny that the Russian president was behind his poisoning.

Beyond a dramatic assault on Navalny, his team, his organisations, and his movement more broadly, 2021 also saw an alarming crackdown on independent journalism. An unprecedented number of outlets and individuals were labelled “foreign agents” – a designation that imposes clear reputational costs, places restrictions on certain activities, and encumbers those labelled with debilitating bureaucratic requirements, such as financial reporting obligations.

The run-up to elections in September 2021 also saw an intensification of “foreign interference” claims. Russia’s Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, stated that Western countries were intent on casting doubt on the election results. Senator Andrei Klimov – head of the Federation Council’s interference commission – claimed that election observers from Western countries had attempted to interfere in the electoral process. And Ella Pamfilova – the head of Russia’s Central Electoral Commission – protested that a campaign had been launched outside of Russia to discredit the holding of elections over multiple days. State media asserted that Western journalists, politicians, and officials had launched a coordinated information attack in an attempt to discredit the legitimacy of the elections in Russia and to provoke Russian citizens into protesting.

Once United Russia had resecured its constitutional majority in the State Duma in the September elections, however, some might have thought that the “foreign interference” rhetoric would die down. But that wasn’t to be the case. In fact, Vyacheslav Volodin – the speaker of the Duma – has said that “foreign interference in the internal affairs of Russia [by Western countries] will be permanent, in order to stop the development of the country”. And that makes it likely that statements like those by Lavrov, Klimov, and Pamfilova will remain a feature of official narratives for a long time to come.

Why, then, is the phrase so often on the lips of Russian officials? The answer is that it is both simple and potent. By claiming “foreign interference”, authorities can whip up fears in Russian society of a West intent on undermining the country. This can then be used to justify moves to bolster “Fortress Russia”. In addition, the phrase can invoke the simplifying binary logic of “patriot vs. traitor” when Russians think about their fellow citizens. This is the case, for instance, with the “foreign agent” designation. Introduced through legislation in 2012, the label originally applied to those NGOs that both received foreign funding and that carried out “political activities” – a phrase left intentionally vague. In spite of official commentary to the contrary, the designation carries the obvious implication that those so labelled are serving the interests of foreign powers – and are not Russian patriots. The context for the 2012 legal innovation was the re-election of Vladimir Putin to the presidency following an unprecedented period of protest in the wake of December 2011 elections to the State Duma, with widespread allegations of electoral

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It is likely that a significant proportion of Russians do not actively oppose the war. And one reason for this is the media framing that chimes with the narrative of “foreign interference” – that the West has used Ukraine’s leadership as its puppet, attempting to attack Russia by proxy, and that foreign powers have been looking for any excuse to impose crippling sanctions on Russia to destabilise the country



fraud – and claims that foreign states were stoking this unrest. In 2017, the “foreign agent” label’s usage was broadened to media outlets – and then, in 2020, to individuals.

The “foreign interference” narrative is used to dismiss genuine political opposition and journalistic critiques as fabrications – as attempts by foreign governments to attack Russia. And that makes the narrative incredibly powerful – and unlikely to go away any time soon. The phrase has been used to justify the narrowing space available for critical voices in Russia, something that has accelerated dramatically following the 24 February invasion of Ukraine.

But this raises the question of whether the narrative is used purely instrumentally or whether Russian officials genuinely believe that the West is out to undermine the country. The answer, perhaps predictably, is both. Even as the “foreign interference” phrase is used to discredit and silence dissent, there is a genuine belief held by some in the country’s political elite and in the population more broadly that the West has a project for regime change in Russia and further afield. Russia’s political leadership saw the hand of the US State Department, for example, in the 2004 “Orange Revolution” in Ukraine – and has interpreted moments of popular protest in Russia through this lens since: not as the authentic expression of genuine grievances in Russian society but as the provocations of foreign powers. And this is the context for US President Joe Biden’s March 2022 comment that, “[f]or God’s sake, this man [Putin] cannot remain in power”. Even if this was an unfiltered expression of moral outrage at Russia’s illegal invasion of Ukraine, it will be interpreted by many in Russia as a clear

indication of US plans for regime change in the country.

It is unclear quite how many Russians approve of the war on Ukraine. Polling during a period of conflict in an authoritarian state – where citizens may be fearful to respond honestly and domestic propaganda is on overdrive – is notoriously tricky. But it is likely that a significant proportion of Russians do not actively oppose the war. And one reason for this is the media framing that chimes with the narrative of “foreign interference” – that the West has used Ukraine’s leadership as its puppet, attempting to attack Russia by proxy, and that foreign powers have been looking for any excuse to impose crippling sanctions on Russia to destabilise the country.

Vladimir Putin’s 16 March comments were an emotional response both to Russian military setbacks in Ukraine – in spite of claims that everything was going according to plan – and to opposition to the war by a number of brave voices across all layers of Russian society. But Putin’s remarks also tapped into longer-running grievances, including of “foreign interference”. And such fears and statements will likely persist. One clear reason why is that, by taking action framed as a response to “foreign interference”, Russia provokes a response from Western states, which is then used as evidence of “foreign interference” – and so on and so on. Without a coherent state ideology or compelling vision of Russia’s future, the mantra of “foreign interference” serves as a poor substitute – a common thread linking together calls for national solidarity in the face of a hostile world and a justification for attacking dissenters within. Putin’s vision is one informed by fear not hope.

RUSSIA AND “THE SPHERES OF INFLUENCE”

Natia Seskuria

Associate Fellow, Royal United Services Institute

The ongoing Russian aggression in Ukraine is the latest and perhaps the terminal attempt of Russian President Vladimir Putin to restore the lost Russian empire. Putin has hardly hidden his discontent with regards to the collapse of the Soviet Union, framing it as “a disaster”³ and “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century”⁴. The emergence of the young democracies in the post-Soviet space, that Russia has historically regarded as its sphere of influence, has prompted the Kremlin to use force to reverse the democratic choice of its neighbours.

Why Georgia and Ukraine?

In the last two decades Russia waged wars and occupied territories of Georgia and Ukraine. Both countries have been particularly important for Russia to keep its dominance in the region as Tbilisi and Kyiv aspire to join the European and Euro-Atlantic institutions.⁵ In his first term of presidency, Putin has witnessed how both countries went through coloured revolutions in 2003 and 2004 that led them to finally get rid of the old Soviet political elites and strive towards greater Westernisation. Despite its flaws, the process that followed the coloured revolutions have largely been regarded as successful attempts to get closer to the West, develop transparent institutions and finally break up with the Soviet legacies.

This process has been viewed by the Kremlin as a threat to its national security, with massive efforts redirected to prevent the

^{3/4}www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna7632057

⁵rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/twelve-years-august-war-georgia-still-faces-russian-aggression

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Putin’s inability to deal with the consequences of the collapse of the Soviet Union have largely defined Russia’s policies towards its neighbours

same scenario unfolding in Russia. The Kremlin acknowledged that the success stories of its neighbours that have emerged from the dark and corrupt Soviet past could have prompted Russian citizens to question the legitimacy of Putin’s regime and demand change and democratisation. In order to suppress this wave the Russian President has almost fully monopolised the media and gradually got rid of the opposition.

By using the state-sponsored propaganda, the coloured revolutions have been portrayed as a Western plot against Russia in order to weaken Russian sphere of influence, enlarge NATO along Russia’s borders and incentivise Russian people to demand regime change at home. Putin’s inability to deal with the consequences of the collapse of the Soviet Union have largely defined Russia’s policies towards its neighbours. The ongoing war in Ukraine is in many ways a logical continuation of Russian aggression that has been justified by defending Russia from the

Western intent to deprive Moscow from its privileged sphere of influence.

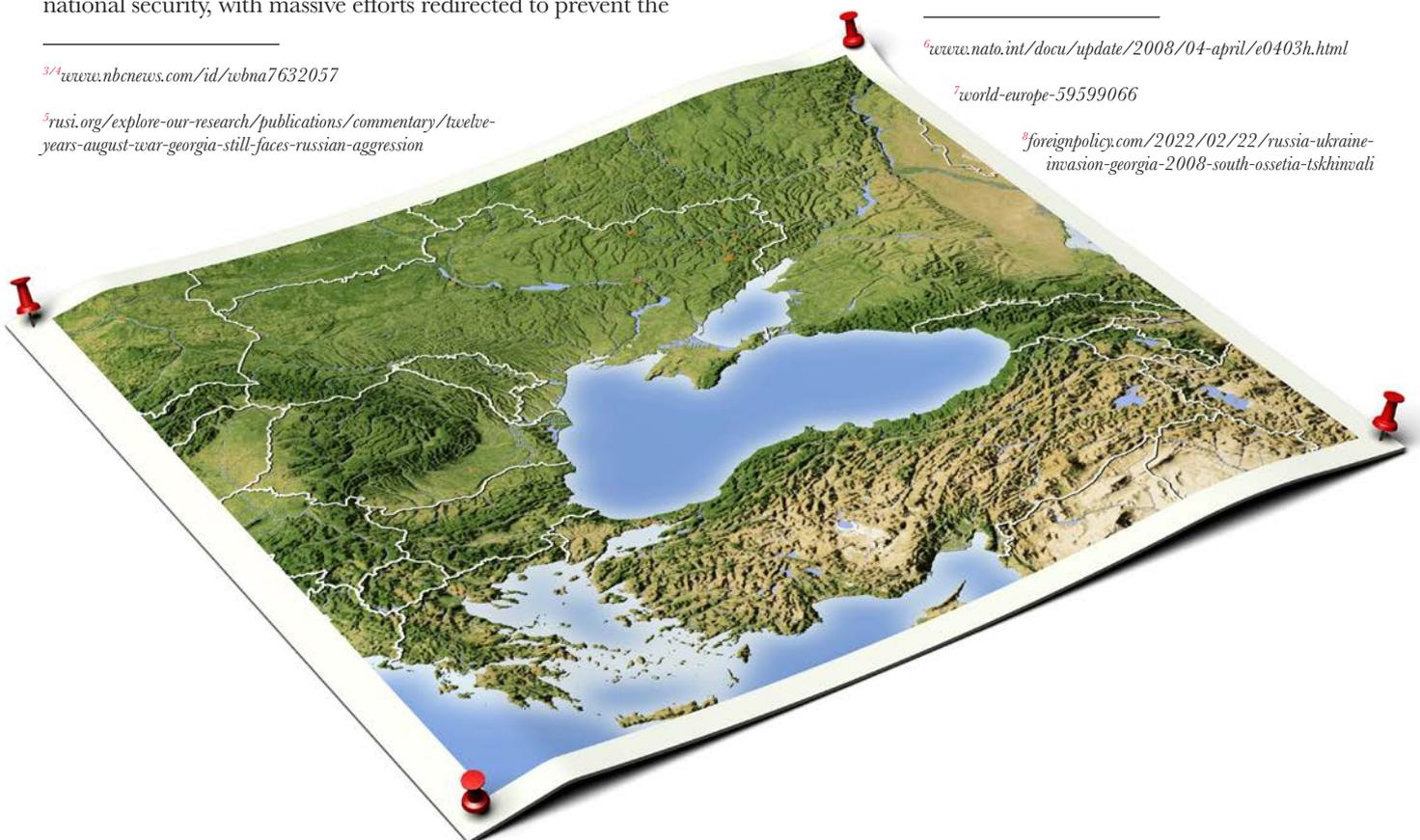
Two countries, same tools

The continuous strive for democratisation has involved paying heavy costs. In 2008, Russia punished the Georgia that came closer than ever before to receiving a Membership Action Plan during the Bucharest Summit of 2008.⁶ By launching a full-scale land, air and sea offensive and occupying 20 percent of Georgia’s territories, Moscow aimed to cement Georgia’s aspirations for European and Euro-Atlantic integration and to bring Tbilisi back to the Russian orbit. The war in Georgia also had to serve as a lesson for Ukraine.

⁶www.nato.int/docu/update/2008/04-april/e0403h.html

⁷world-europe-59599066

⁸foreignpolicy.com/2022/02/22/russia-ukraine-invasion-georgia-2008-south-ossetia-tskhinvali



Similarly to the current war in Ukraine⁷, Russia used disinformation campaigns, portraying Georgia as an aggressor that started shelling its own territories and organised genocide of its own people. By pretending to act as a humanitarian actor, aiming at protecting the local population, Russia still claims that it was Georgia that started the war.⁸ Despite the Russian aggression against Georgia, the Russian threat has remained heavily underestimated by the West. Instead of imposing sanctions, the Kremlin got rewarded by President Barak Obama's "reset" policy. Looking back, the soft approach towards Russia has led the world to devastating consequences. Russia has seen the appeasement policy as a Western weakness and a green light to treat the post-Soviet space as its backyard. The war in Georgia turned out to be a rehearsal for much more ambitious plans that the Kremlin embarked on in 2014, when it waged a war against Ukraine and annexed Crimea.

The annexation of Crimea has been portrayed as a restoration of historical justice. Putin has always regarded Crimea as an "inseparable part of Russia".⁹ The domestic approval of the 2014 military adventure in Ukraine has further increased Putin's appetite to fully erase Ukrainian sovereignty. Even though following Russian annexation of Crimea, the West imposed sanctions on Russia, Europe's dependency on Russian gas has grown in the past years and most of the Russian oligarchs could do business as usual in European capitals.

Logical continuation

In reality, after 22 years in power, Putin has nothing to offer to its citizens other than "foreign victories" and the illusion that Russia is regaining its great power status in a multipolar world. Putin may not be aspiring to restore the Soviet Union in its old shape and form, however, he clearly intends to achieve a similar level of dominance, while keeping its sphere of influence is a key part of this plan. With a struggling economy, catastrophic mismanagement of COVID-19 crisis, corrupt institutions and increased use of violence against its own citizens, Putin's regime needs to feed Russians with illusions of the "evil West" threatening Russia. The current war in Ukraine has unsurprisingly been framed in the context of Russia's confrontation with the West and primarily the Western intent to "expand" NATO.

Prior to launching a full-scale war, Russia went as far as to demand legal guarantees¹⁰ where NATO's enlargement in the post-Soviet region has been described as a "red line". By using the language of ultimatums, Moscow aimed at reversing NATO's open door policy and the decision of the Bucharest Summit of 2008, according to which Ukraine and Georgia will eventually become members of NATO. Another

⁹www.france24.com/en/20140318-crimea-inseparable-part-russia-vladimir-putin-tells-parliament-ukraine

¹⁰mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790803/?lang=en

¹¹www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2021-12-10/dont-sell-out-ukraine

¹²www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/07/shells-rain-down-on-ukraines-cities-despite-cynical-offer-of-safe-passage

request implied NATO to deploy no forces or weapons in the countries that joined the alliance after May 1997. From its outset, Russia created a hostage situation in Ukraine, understanding that the West would have never accepted the ultimatums and shifted its policy in accordance to the Kremlin's demands.

In reality, the NATO "expansion" has only served as a pretext for pursuing Russian aggression. Despite substantial progress that Ukraine and Georgia have made on their membership paths, NATO allies have no consensus with regards to offering its security umbrella to these countries. In 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea, Ukraine as a neutral country¹¹ had no intention to join NATO. Russia deemed the mass Maidan protests and outset of pro-Russian President Victor Yanukovich as a threat of losing leverage over Kyiv. Thus, the key driver of Russian behaviour in its neighbourhood has always been a threat of losing leverage and influence rather than a hypothetical NATO "expansion".

With the current military offensive in Ukraine Putin wants to play a final act in Ukraine, overthrow President Volodymyr Zelensky's government and install a puppet government that will enable the Kremlin to take full-charge of Ukraine. By waging a devastating war, Putin is pushing Ukraine to become a neutral country, recognising independence of its Russian-occupied territories as well as Crimea as Russian territory. Should Ukraine be forced to agree on Russian terms, Putin will fully destroy Ukrainian statehood. Political neutrality in Ukraine's case is a direct declaration of falling into the Russian sphere of influence and rejecting any aspirations to ever join NATO. At the same time, there is much more at stake in Ukraine. If Russia wins in Ukraine, it will kill two birds with one stone as Georgia's fate is also being decided right now in Ukraine.

Can Russia succeed?

As the world is watching the fearless fight of Ukrainian people, Russia does not intend to stop shelling the peaceful cities.¹² The fate of Ukraine is yet to be determined, however, if Ukraine survives, it will emerge as a united European nation with greater support from the West than it has ever had. The past experiences of Russian adventurism in its neighbourhood shows that following the 2008 war, Georgians became overwhelmingly supportive of NATO and EU membership; a similar trend has been identified in Ukraine since 2014. Russian military offensives have backfired by destroying its soft power efforts and increasing anti-Kremlin sentiments among the population. The more aggression Russia exerts, the more people get convinced that there is no turning back to the Russian sphere of influence.

Meanwhile Putin's nostalgic revisionism leads him to irrational decisions. As the West imposes the toughest sanctions it has ever imposed on Russia, affecting all segments of the society, Putin may risk not only losing its sphere of influence but also provoking domestic upheaval against his regime – a scenario he has feared the most. Ironically, it is Ukraine that has finally made the West acknowledge the real threats that Putin's regime poses for European security.



The key driver of Russian behaviour in its neighbourhood has always been a threat of losing leverage and influence rather than a hypothetical NATO 'expansion'

MELTDOWN? RUSSIA'S ARCTIC FRONTIER

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Russia is the Arctic's largest legitimate actor, controlling over 50% of the Arctic region, as illustrated in Figure 1. The Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation covers almost 30% of the entire Russian Federation. The Russian Arctic is by no means a peripheral pursuit for Vladimir Putin's Russia, with the region accounting for roughly 10% of Russia's GDP and 20% of all Russian exports. Around 2.5 million Russian nationals call the Russian Arctic Zone home, and the Arctic is embedded in Moscow's strategic culture, national history, and identity. Of course, the zone is also of critical strategic value given that it is the basing location of Russia's nuclear posture. Framing Russian Arctic interests with this in mind effectively reduces the scope for ideologically charged assessments of a neo-imperialist Russian Arctic agenda.

Since Putin, Russia's Arctic strategy has served two purposes: to outline Russia's national interests in the Russian Arctic Zone and to articulate the threats or challenges posed in the region to Russian national security.¹³ Of course, national security and national interests under Putin have become much broader than military might and frontier politics. Economic security, energy security and the resilience of Arctic investments in the face of external (human-induced and natural) threats are often overlooked when Western scholars contemplate what drives Putin in the Arctic.

The duality of continuity and change in Moscow's long-term priorities for the region is evident under Putin. Russia's national interests remain fixed upon ensuring sovereignty and territorial integrity first and foremost. Moscow's interest in preserving the Arctic as a zone of peace and cooperation remains a feature. However, the new framing in terms of "stable mutually beneficial" partnerships is an interesting development for the Russian strategy. Collaboration in the Arctic will remain peaceful as long as Moscow perceives its engagement to be mutually beneficial. There is still a pointed military-security agenda. Framed as defensive militarization, Russia's military modernization programme in the Russian Arctic serves to ensure that Moscow can deter foreign military aggression in the region. Russia has increased the combat capabilities of its armed forces in the Arctic Zone and has overhauled and reopened existing Soviet-era military installations along its vast Arctic border.

History tells us that the Russian Arctic has long been viewed as a vulnerable open flank for Moscow. Indeed, the Arctic region was a central component of Soviet-US tensions (and



Figure 1: Political Map of the Arctic Credit: U.S. State Department

later, cooperation) during the Cold War. Today, it remains the shortest distance for missiles to be sent directly between Russia and the US. In a domestic sense, the Russian Arctic Zone is a burgeoning region of priority for national socio-economic development. Making the far north regions (particularly the Yamal Peninsula) 'livable' for Russian nationals is a key priority for Moscow. Indeed, the future economic resource base of the Russian Federation is linked to the export potential and exploration of hydrocarbons (oil and natural gas – including LNG) located in the Russian Arctic.

Under Putin, strategic planning for the Arctic is quite pragmatic and predictable. While Moscow's agenda for the Russian Arctic Zone remains constant and unsurprising, it is also well within the agreed international norms and laws that govern the Arctic. This policy is juxtaposed today with Moscow's sustained aggression and invasion of Ukraine. At the very core of the Russian Arctic strategy is the fine balance between (or at least the quest for) cooperation and competition. Competition, of course, when not checked or diluted can and will lead to conflict. For now, Moscow's central Arctic ambitions are essentially based on a cooperative regional climate. Secure supply lines of energy to Asia require conflict-free sea lines of communication. Indeed, Russia's mega-projects in the Russian Arctic, aimed at securing the future economic foundation of the Russian Federation, are all possible only through joint ventures or capital injections from foreign partners.

This means international cooperation is important for Putin's Arctic agenda. Arctic cooperation is facilitated through the Arctic Council, a forum for regional cooperation all matters beyond that of the military-strategic realm. Tasked with managing much of the Arctic are the Arctic 'Five', those states with littoral Arctic Ocean proximity (Russia, the United States, Canada, Denmark, and Norway). Northern states with territory above the Arctic Circle (Finland, Sweden, and Iceland) join the Arctic 'Five' to make the Arctic 'Eight'. These eight states are the permanent

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History tells us that the Russian Arctic has long been viewed as a vulnerable open flank for Moscow. Indeed, the Arctic region was a central component of Soviet-US tensions (and later, cooperation) during the Cold War

¹³An overview of contemporary Russian Arctic Strategy planning documents is at: Elizabeth Buchanan, 'The overhaul of Russian strategic planning for the Arctic Zone to 2035', *Russian Studies Series*, Vol. 3, Issue 20 (2020), <https://www.ndc.nato.int/research/research.php?icode=641>

member states of the Arctic Council.

On March 3rd 2022, seven of the eight permanent member states – Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and the United States – released a joint statement outlining their intention to ‘pause’ their participation in the Arctic Council (and its affiliated bodies). While the statement noted their paused engagement would be temporary, it is likely this will continue out to early 2023 when Russia hands the Arctic Council chairmanship to Norway. Russia’s response to this decision essentially underscored plans to refocus its chairmanship on domestic Arctic interests.

As a result of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the West (primarily led by the United States and the European Union) has already enhanced its sanctions on Russia. They certainly will bite. Targeted industries already include Russia’s banking and financial sector, defence and technology, as well as Russia’s oil industry. Putin’s personal wealth and the finances of his inner-circle are also under fire. It is early days of course, but we should expect further crippling of western financial interests in Russia’s Arctic zone. Primarily when it comes to Russia’s Arctic LNG mega-projects. Likewise, the March 3 2022 decision by seven of the eight Arctic Council permanent member states to cut cooperation and freeze avenues for engagement (of the few left in any case since Russia’s first iteration of aggression against Ukraine in 2014), may isolate Russia within the Arctic theater – for the long-term. Indeed, Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova accused its Arctic partners, who Russia had designated “hostile states”, of being “blinded by the anti-Russia hysteria”.

The challenge is, there are Arctic agreements which necessitate Russian engagement. The most pressing, given China’s enhanced capabilities in grey-zone warfare using its fisheries flotillas, is the Central Arctic Ocean Fisheries Ban. With 15 years left on the clock for the Ban, Arctic states will no doubt need Russian support for holding China accountable to likely digressions on the ban. For now, no other Arctic state possess the maritime capability in the polar zones to marshal Beijing. Legally binding agreements negotiated under the auspices of the Arctic Council also remain. And they all require Russian engagement to successfully undertake. Ensuring maritime search

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There is still the potential for Russia to throw its weight around in the Arctic. Intrenched international collaboration and partnerships which are allowing Russia to deliver on its strategic resource agenda in the Arctic would be casualties of any aggressive Arctic agenda

and rescue capability when over 50% of the maritime space is ‘cut out’ of the dialogue seems self-defeating. As with environmental and marine oil catastrophes, which won’t know political ‘no-go’ zones. Likewise, Arctic scientific cooperation turns on international collaboration and has long-term significance for global security.

Russian Arctic strategy under Putin is driven mostly by routine factors which that do not necessarily reflect an expansionist agenda. Unlike Russia’s foreign policy approach elsewhere, (and as underscored by the recent Ukrainian invasion) Putin’s Russia has consistently approached the Arctic in a broadly cooperative manner. Given Putin’s foreign policy style, there is still the potential for Russia to throw its weight around in the Arctic. Intrenched international collaboration and partnerships which are allowing Russia to deliver on its strategic resource agenda in the Arctic would be casualties of any aggressive

Arctic agenda.

The unprecedented decision by members of the Arctic Council to ‘pause’ engagement with Russia in the Arctic context was ripped away any semblance of international collaboration in the Arctic. It is now the case that we might indeed expect a more assertive Russia in the Arctic, not least within the Russian Arctic Zone. While any immediate increase in the assertiveness of Russia’s Arctic narrative will be driven by a hyper nationalist, largely domestic agenda,

it is worth remembering the notion of an Arctic region that is wholly dominated by Russia is an exaggeration of Russia’s capabilities.

The problem with freezing lines of communication and engagement with Moscow in the Arctic is that the West might entirely undercut its grasp on Russia’s intentions in the region and capacity to engage in substantial Arctic diplomacy.

**Dressed for an Arctic winter:
A bull braves a blizzard on the
tundra of Yamal Peninsula**



THE WAR IN UKRAINE AND THE WESTERN BALKANS

Dimitar Bechev

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On 4 March 2022, thousands of Serbs marched in downtown Belgrade carrying Russian flags, pictures of Vladimir Putin as well as slogans “Crimea is Russia, Kosovo is Serbia”. The rally organised by several far right, nationalist organisations voiced its support to the ongoing “special operation” carried out by Moscow in Ukraine. It evoked the spirit of historic camaraderie between Serbia and Russia and the shared opposition to NATO going back to the wars in former Yugoslavia during the 1990s. Nationalist fervour in the Balkan state also highlights the close political, economic and security ties cultivated with the Russian Federation over more than a decade which have been central to “the multivector foreign policy” pursued by President Aleksandar Vucic. Indeed, Serbia has thus far refused to join Western sanctions against Russia, despite the fact it is negotiating its membership in the EU and seeks good relations with the US.

The images of fratricidal war, human suffering, refugees, and destruction have hit a raw nerve in the rest of the Western Balkans where traumatic memories of violence are still rife. Bosnia is particularly sensitive, given the challenge to the unity of the state posed by the leadership in Republika Srpska (RS), the Serb-majority entity which took shape during the war and was constitutionalised with the Dayton Peace Accords of 1995. The threat of secession posed by Milorad Dodik, leader of the Bosnian Serbs, is real. Russia, Dodik’s foremost international ally, has also ramped up its rhetoric. Its ambassador in Sarajevo Igor Kalbukhov warned Bosnian politicians that Moscow will respond in line with its interest should the country opt to join NATO, referencing the war in Ukraine too. Kosovo is similarly watching the events with concern. As Prime Minister Albin Kurti put it: “I fear that the longer the war lasts in Ukraine, the greater the chances of spillover in the western Balkans. And that is because it is in the interest of the Russian Federation to have new battlegrounds.”¹⁴ How credible is the threat from Russia, what are the likely scenarios going forward, and how should the West writ large respond?

Russian policy in the Western Balkans: disrupting the West

Starting with the Kosovo war of 1999, the Western Balkans (the successor states of former Yugoslavia minus Slovenia and plus Albania) have been gradually inserted into the Western political, economic and institutional sphere of influence. NATO is underwriting security in Kosovo and has now taken Croatia, Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia as members. It is also supporting EU’s peacekeeping operation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, EUFOR Althea, through the so-called Berlin Plus mechanism. The EU, too, has expanded, with Croatia joining in 2013 and Montenegro and Serbia engaged in accession talks for years. North Macedonia and Albania are likewise on the cusp of launching membership negotiations. More than 70% of the region’s trade goes to the

EU too. With the notable exception of Kosovo, people in the Western Balkans travel visa-free to Europe.

Faced with this reality, Russia has chosen to play the role of a spoiler.¹⁵ Its overarching strategic goal is to disrupt and undermine Western actors. That takes different shapes: from efforts to prevent or at least slow down NATO and EU enlargement to subverting the narrative of democracy, human rights and integration advanced by the West. Russia does so by exploiting the resentment against the US and Europe which dates back to the interventions in the 1990s. Its primary ally are Serbian nationalist actors across former Yugoslavia as well as a segment of nationalist public opinion in North Macedonia which likewise faults the West with the encroachment of national dignity, sovereignty, and tradition. Public opinion in Serbia overwhelmingly side with Russia in the Ukraine war, with the Z sign used by Russian forces in Ukraine displayed on social media as well as offline. Elsewhere in the region, Russia’s appeal is limited, particularly amongst Bosniaks and ethnic Albanians who favour the West and, to a lesser degree, Turkey. To achieve its goals Moscow pursues a variety of asymmetric tactics: funding anti-Western groups, spreading disinformation and fake news through media operations such as the Serbian affiliate of the Sputnik news agency, launching cyber attacks, and occasionally conducting “active measures” such as the failed coup in Montenegro in the autumn of 2016.

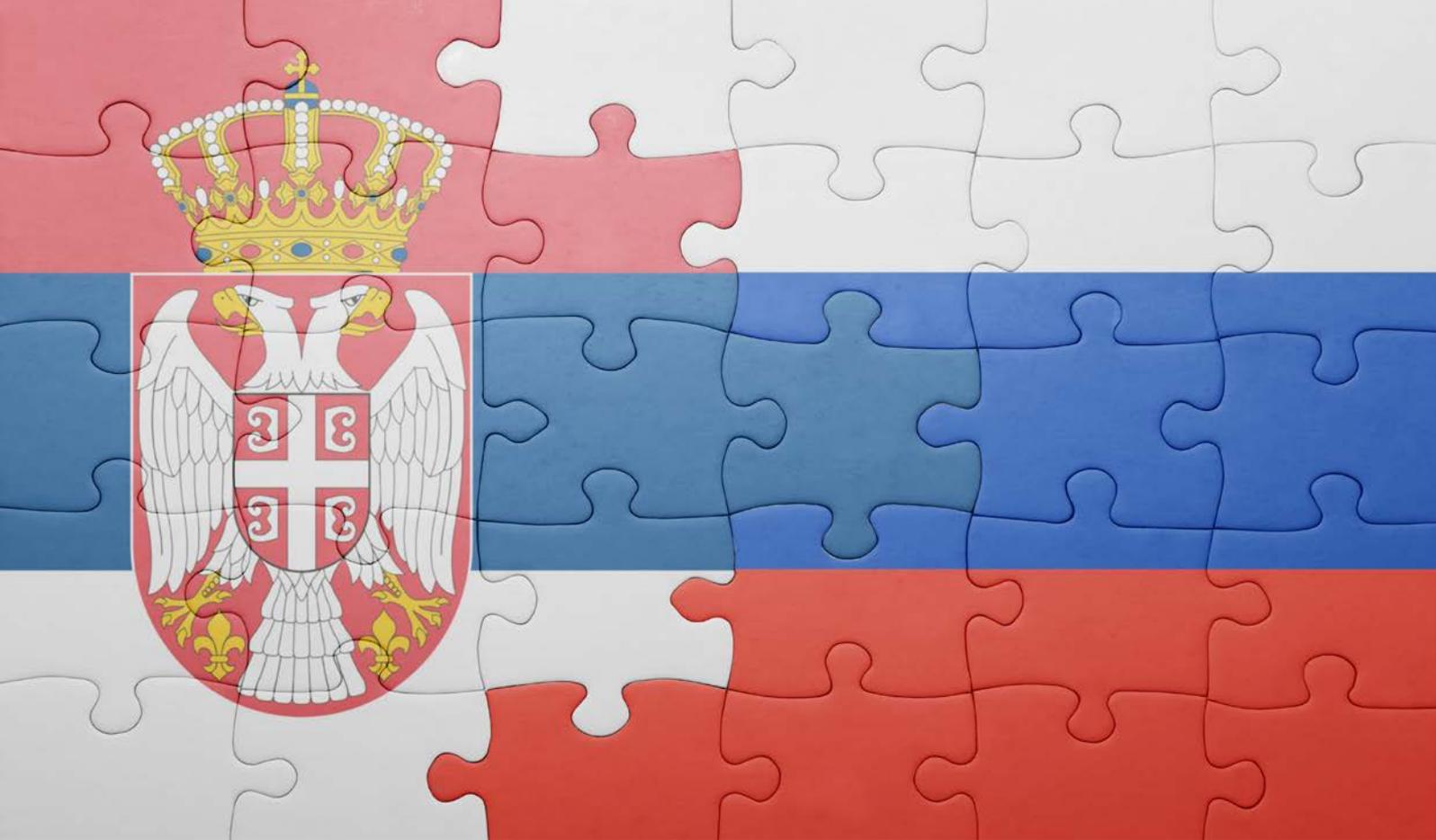
Russia’s most important partners in the region are no doubt Serbia and RS. The Kremlin has done its best to co-opt Vucic and Dodik. It has donated MiG-29s fighter jets, tanks and other weapons systems to Belgrade, armed RS police which is growingly militarised, taken control over the energy sector, rewarded Vucic with a discount on natural gas deliveries to see him through the elections this spring, provided humanitarian assistance, most recently with the COVID-19 pandemic. The Russian and Serbian Orthodox Churches have been in cahoots too, especially given the fact that the dispute concerning the ecclesiastical jurisdiction over Montenegro and North Macedonia mirrors closely the Moscow Patriarchate’s claims in Ukraine. Russian diplomacy backs Serbia in Kosovo and gives cover to Dodik as he emasculates Bosnia’s central state institutions such as the army and the judiciary. Returning the favour, Dodik – like Vucic – makes sure that Bosnia and Herzegovina is not joining the sanctions. In other words, it is a mutually beneficial relationship for both parties, the Kremlin and Balkan political leaders.

Russia’s next move

Essentially, Moscow has two options in the Western Balkans. One is to escalate, as Prime Minister Kurti noted. This scenario would involve a formal secession declaration by Dodik in Banja Luka, possibly backed by a referendum in RS. Russia and its clients such as Belarus will then extend recognition and provide additional material support to Dodik through Serbia. In the extreme case, Russia could send security operatives to Banja Luka. Moscow has no military personnel deployed in the Balkans, since Putin terminated the peacekeeping missions in Bosnia and Kosovo in 2003. Sending forces will be virtually

¹⁴www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/11/russia-may-pressure-serbia-to-undermine-western-balkans-leaders-warn

¹⁵See Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe* (Yale University Press, 2017).



impossible as any putative airlift has to go through NATO airspace, not to mention that EUFOR's presence in Bosnia. However, embedding "advisors" and "instructors" as well as "volunteers", as in 1992-5, could happen. Russia could also aid Dodik with a disinformation campaign. In the extreme case, Moscow's agents and proxies can open a second front in the Serb-populated northern Kosovo. As in the past, locals would set up checkpoints and barricades challenging the Prishtina authorities and EULEX, the EU's rule of law mission.

The second option is to stick to the status quo. Russia won't need to take any extra risks but rather continue to do its usual thing: rally public opinion, present itself as a patron of Orthodox Slavs and protector against the West, co-opt political and business elites, use the Western Balkans as a safe haven not affected by the Western sanctions.

Which way Russia heads in the region is dependent on Serbia. An escalatory scenario will not work unless Belgrade is onboard. Dodik's putative declaration of independence, for instance, will be meaningless if Serbia does not follow up with recognition. Likewise, whatever influence Russia wields in the north of Kosovo, it cannot bypass the Serbian government, security services as well as the cross-border criminal networks which are there on the ground. If Vucic is ready and willing to raise the stakes and disrupt the political and territorial status quo then Russia will have a freer hand.

To be fair, there is no indication that the Serbian leadership wants to go in this direction. Serbia supported the UN General Assembly resolution condemning the invasion of Ukraine. The trip to Belgrade by Nikolay Patrushev, the head of the Russian Federation's Security Council and Putin's pointman for the Balkans, got postponed. Vucic, who is gearing up for a presidential, parliamentary and local elections, is taking a cautious tack. To maximise support, he is appealing to fears and portraying himself as a guarantor of

peace and stability in tumultuous times. Other members of his cabinet, like Interior Minister Aleksandar Vulin, are swearing Serbia would never implement sanctions. The tabloids, a pillar of Vucic's rule, are running both pro-Russian but also neutral headlines covering the Ukraine war.

What should the West do?

The West should prepare for the worst but hope for the best. Beefing up EUFOR with 500 troops as well as reinforcing EULEX is the right thing to do. These decisions send a clear message that any attempt to destabilise the region would be met with resistance. The West should invest in various forms of deterrence. NATO should similarly consider increasing its presence in Kosovo through KFOR as well as signalling its support to Montenegro and North Macedonia as well as to Croatia and Albania. The EU likewise needs to up its game, facilitating a compromise between North Macedonia and Bulgaria, and launching membership talks with Skopje and Tirana this year.

Western actors should double down on diplomacy. The regional tours in early March by German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock and the EU High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy Josep Borrell are a good start. A high-ranking US official, potentially State Secretary Anthony Blinken, would be welcome too. The UK should do its bit as well, now that it has appointed Stuart Peach as a special envoy to the region. The private message to Vucic but also Dodik, who recently reassured the European Parliament of his good intentions, has to be unambiguous: any radical step would entail great costs, all the way up to freezing Serbia's negotiations with the EU. Ideally, Western diplomacy should be able to convince Belgrade to adopt some of the sanctions against Russia, a symbolic blow against Putin. Once the Serbian elections are over and Vucic has likely won a fresh term in the presidency, there will be a window of opportunity. The West ought to make the most of it.

RUSSIA AT WAR

Maj Gen (Retd) Dr Andrew Sharpe
Director CHACR

It's perhaps no coincidence that Carl von Clausewitz spent 1812 and 1813 in the service of the Russian Army as he developed his thinking on war. Russian generic thinking on war has not changed a great deal in the two and a half centuries since Alexander the First (the Czar when Clausewitz served Russia) came to the throne in 1777. Thus, much of what he had to say would, surely, resonate with the Kremlin decision-makers of modern Russia. In seeking to understand how and why Russia might fight, one can read up on Russian tactical doctrine, or pore over the so-called Gerasimov Doctrine; one can count tanks and armoured vehicles, aircraft and ships; all of this, for sure, tells us something. But underlying these studies of the past, present or projected future detail of the character of how Russia uses her armed force, there are, it seems, perhaps two constant themes that are worth noting. They tell us much.

The Use of War

First, Russia (like Clausewitz) believes that the use of armed force, of state-organised and state-directed violence, is a perfectly logical and legitimate tool of national policy. If 'might' can be shown to be 'right' for the purposes of the Russian government (and, therefore, with paternal certainty, for the Russian people), then it is perfectly legitimate to use it. The Twentieth Century liberal aversion to the use of violence to achieve political aims is seen as an illogical and naïve view of the realities of the world. War is a tool in the national tool-box – so why not use it if the circumstances merit it? And, like war itself, each implement of war, be it an individual soldier or a nuclear weapon, is just a tool, to be used for national effect as required (without the same careful escalatory imperative of others' thinking). The strange diversion of logic that says that it is perfectly OK to make people suffer over a protracted period by depriving them of their wealth, health and welfare (by the imposition of sanctions for example), yet it is not OK to make them suffer briefly but brutally by the application of physical violence is seen as illogical. And it's seen as weak. So, first, the use of war, and, by association, all of the tools of war, is legitimate if it is deemed necessary.

Second, Russia (like Clausewitz) believes that the purpose of war is to force upon your competitors a set of circumstances in which they have no choice but to do what you want them to do. In other words, in the most basic of terms, the purpose of war is to win; and, having won, to do what you will with the spoils of victory. Russia understands that the winners tend to be those who write the histories, and the winners also tend to be the only ones who hold the power to judge others (and, importantly, to hold them to account). Winning is seen not in nuanced terms, but in absolutes. And, by reversing that logic, losing must not be an option. So, second, having decided to use war you must win, and thus, importantly, how you conduct yourself in war, no matter how brutal, does not matter – so long as you win.

Third, regardless of imaginary and sanctimony-driven 'rules-based orders' or global governing bodies, it is no one else's business what Russia chooses to do in its near abroad. Russia has a right to hegemony. History and geography dictate where Russia's hegemonic boundaries naturally lie. Those who wish to influence events within those boundaries are doing so at the expense of Russia. Such actors are hostile to Russia. Thus, if Russia wishes to use war as a tool of policy on the periphery of Russia in order to secure the heartland of Russia it has every right so to do. Those who act against Russia, from their distant capitals, are doing so not out of (feigned) outrage at a breach of the so-called rules, but because it suits them to use Russian behaviour as a further excuse to act against Russia for their own nefarious national, strategic and political ends. So, third, Russia has a right to conduct war in her near abroad without others' interference.

If one accepts these three statements as being reasonable, then they enable one to begin to understand not only why Russia might use war, but also, importantly, to begin to understand how Russia conducts herself in war.

People

Russia does not, and has never, seen people in the same light as the liberal-minded democracies of the west. The Emancipation of the Serfs (the stated end of people being seen and treated as other (wealthier) people's livestock) occurred in England under King Richard II in 1381 as a result of the Peasants' Revolt. The emancipation of the serfs in Russia occurred nearly 500 years later in 1861 during the rule of Alexander II – nephew of Alexander I of Clausewitz's Russian service. Alexander II's reforms, perhaps as a result of his assassination in 1881 by a group known as the 'People's Will', were largely reversed by his son Alexander III. In the Russian census of 1913, some 80% of the population was still recorded as 'rural peasant'. Geography, history, culture and necessity have combined to give Russia a very different view of 'people' from the views held in the individual-focussed west. (And here is not the place, but a consideration of how people are seen in China, or India, or the Middle East, or in many other places across the world, would show that the 'certainties' about the right of every human to be treated in exactly the same way are by no means universal certainties.)

One can tell a great deal about how a nation conducts itself in war, and about how it sees and motivates its soldiers, by spending time studying their war cemeteries. Go to Treptower Park in Berlin. Contemplate the gigantic twelve-meter-tall Soviet soldier in heroic pose that dominates the park, the spartan layout, the stylised friezes of intrepid soldiers and workers, and the 16 mass graves containing the tumbled bodies of around 5,000 nameless Russian soldiers (we are not sure, even, exactly how many are buried there). Compare this with the very individual feel of a British, or American, or French, or German war cemetery. The messaging in Russian war iconography, from the 85-meter-high Motherland Calls memorial in Volgograd [pictured right] to the vast

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Russia believes that the purpose of war is to force upon your competitors a set of circumstances in which they have no choice but to do what you want them to do. In other words, the purpose of war is to win; and, having won, to do what you will with the spoils of victory

number of never-accounted-for (let alone buried, named or commemorated) individual bodies, is very clear. Mother Russia is much bigger than any individual. The Motherland matters, individual people matter much, much, less.

Russian military life remains pretty spartan. Discipline is harsh. The mobile crematoria of the Ukrainian war have reminded us that bodies are not to be counted, commemorated and returned to their grieving families. All of these things give us an insight into how Russia treats its own soldiers, with the concomitant effects on their performance and morale, and their behaviour once discipline is gone. But this also gives us a very important insight into how Russia might see others' people, and thus how she might choose to wage war for advantage. Here is, arguably, a simple and brutal logic chain: I do not care about my people (they are a tool to be used); but others do care about their people (their care is a weakness); in war it is a universal truth that one should apply one's strength against your enemy's weakness; others' values suggest that so-called collateral damage is to be avoided (this constrains them); I see collateral damage as having a very useful effect on the decision-making process of those who care about their people – conclusion: demonstrably harming other peoples' people is an application of my strength against their weakness, so I should exploit that ruthlessly for advantage.

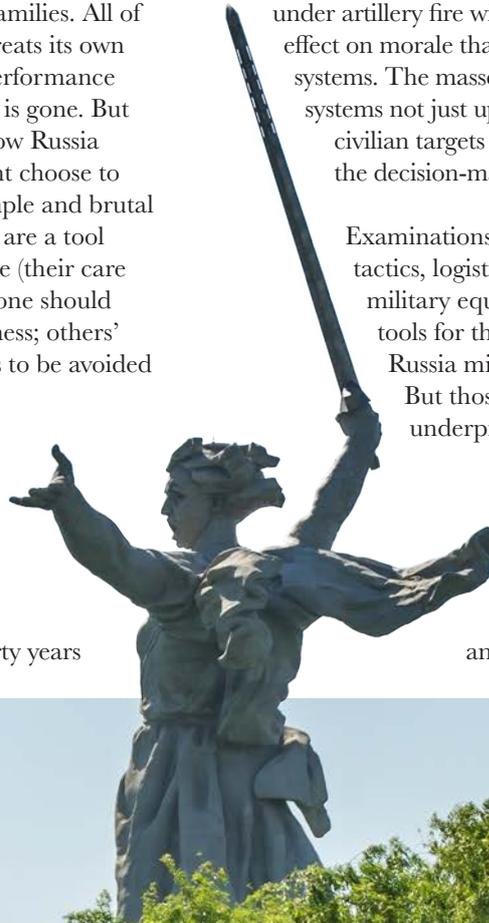
By way of practical illustration – over the last thirty years

the trend in NATO countries has been to reduce the numbers of artillery pieces in their armies, and to make those weapons that they have retained more and more accurate (examining and regretting any lapse of accuracy in the targeting or impact of those weapons). In the Russian Army, by contrast, artillery, in all of its accurate or indiscriminate forms, has remained a dominant arm. Relative inaccuracy, apparent randomness against which one cannot act, as anyone who has ever been under artillery fire will tell you, has an extraordinary effect on morale that is hard to replicate in other weapon systems. The massed application of those weapon systems not just upon the enemy's army, but upon civilian targets too, will have a very useful effect on the decision-makers who care about their people.

Examinations of changing or evolving Russian tactics, logistics, strategy, operational art and military equipment trends are very useful tools for those seeking to understand how Russia might wage each war that it faces.

But those inconstant details are likely to be underpinned by these two basic factors:

Russia considers war to be a legitimate tool of statecraft and if she chooses to use war in her near abroad it is nobody else's legitimate business; and, when it wages war, it will do so brutally and to win.



THE STATE OF RUSSIAN MILITARY

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Russia's military performance in the war against Ukraine has become a surprise for most military analysts and Russia watchers. The Russian forces lost thousands of service members, numerous vehicles and pieces of equipment in the first weeks of the war. Despite these losses, the Russian military should not be dismissed as a 'paper tiger', as some observers suggested. Its failures in Ukraine resulted from a combination of political and military factors, some of which are systemic problems, but the others the Kremlin could have avoided. This article shows how the Russian military has developed in the last decade and what has predetermined its performance in the war against Ukraine.

Serdyukov reform

Even during the 1990s, the Russian political and military leaderships were aware of the need for systematic reforms of the armed forces. The newly established Russian Federation in 1992 had inherited the bulk of the Soviet Army, with up to 2.8 million military personnel, a substantial amount of equipment, and the former superpower's nuclear arsenal. Although sizeable, this legacy force was ill-suited to the post-Cold War threat environment with its altered state borders and 'new' security challenges. Russian troops performed badly in the various small wars at the country's periphery they fought throughout the 1990s, including a humiliating military defeat during the first Chechen war. The leadership under Boris Yeltsin regularly discussed the requirement for various military reforms, including permanent readiness rather than mobilisation, professionalisation, and the need for modern equipment, but a lack of political will and economic weakness meant that they never implemented them.

This changed in 2000 with the election of Vladimir Putin, who prioritised military modernisation as a matter of national security from the outset. The first reform in 2001-2003 was largely unsuccessful and made only minor changes in Russia's military. New systematic reforms were prepared and announced in 2008 after the war with Georgia. The reforms' central aims were to make the Russian military useable for wars of the 21st century and more cost-effective. Under the aegis of Defence Minister Anatolii Serdyukov, a former tax official, the reforms were pushed through with impressive speed and determination. Central command bodies were streamlined, the top-heavy officer corps was reduced, the number of military

units was cut in favour of a smaller number with permanent readiness status, and the recruitment of professional soldiers was driven up. The reforms included a costly rearmament programme intended to increase the percentage of modern equipment available to the armed forces from around ten per cent in 2008 to 70 per cent by 2020. The ambitious procurement plans at the time were based on the expectation of continuing economic growth, which would allow Russia to keep defence spending under three per cent of the GDP for the lifetime of the programme.

The 2008 modernisation programme undoubtedly led to fundamental change and considerable improvements in the Russian armed forces, especially compared to the poor state they had been in during the 1990s. The reforms did not mean, however, that all problems were overcome or that Russia yet again was a competitor to the world's most advanced militaries when it comes to conventional capabilities. Better service conditions meant that improvements were made in the recruitment and retention

of professional soldiers. However, manpower problems persisted, and Moscow continually had to revise down its targets in this area and continue to bolster its ranks with poorly trained conscripts. Although reportedly the target of 70 per cent of modern equipment was met by 2020, 'modern' for the most part meant recently made or updated legacy systems rather than the successful production of high-tech, 21st-century equipment. Moreover, the global economic crisis in 2008 and decreasing energy prices meant that defence spending ballooned and quickly became costly to the declining economy.

Shoygu's changes

After Putin was re-elected in 2012, Serdyukov, despised by many, became a toxic figure in his government. Serdyukov was charged with corruption and had to step down. In November 2012, Putin appointed Sergei Shoygu as the new minister of defence. Shoygu is Putin's old political partner and one of the most popular Russian politicians. Putin tasked him to lean on the military's expertise in defence development – a clear step back from Serdyukov's civilian and often conflicting approach.

The MoD under Shoygu relied on the three pillars of the military development: intrusive presidential control with advanced technological systems; significant rearmament efforts, particularly, in the Air Force, Airborne Forces (VDV), and the Navy; and the development of military science. The other two sectors lagged behind: filling in personnel holes in the composition of units and formations; the development of UAVs, and military education. The reversal of the military education reform and the recentralization of military command were strategically detrimental to Russia's military development. Shoygu began to rearm the military to achieve presidential demands. However, the gap between the delivery of new technologies and the human capital of soldiers and officers has only been growing. Poor C2 skills, lack of



Shoygu began to rearm the military to achieve presidential demands. However, the gap between the delivery of new technologies and the human capital of soldiers and officers has only been growing



initiative, toxic masculinity culture, weak NCOs and military police roles, and modest awareness of the contemporary socio-economic and political environment among the officers have been delaying Russia's military development.

Instead of developing the organisational system of oversight and control, Shoygu emphasised the installation of CCTV surveillance and sensors at most military facilities, vessels, UAVs and aircrafts to conduct real-time monitoring and evaluation. It goes in line with the general belief in the Russian government that technologies can substitute poor human skills. The most critical development in this sector was the establishment of the National Defence Management Centre (NDMC) in 2014. Its purpose is to maintain the real-time situational monitoring and assessment of the politico-military developments and rapid command and control over the military organisation. Any operation in the military is reported to the NDMC, which coordinates the overarching support for the troops and develops possible responses to the senior command. It is yet unclear what sources, data gathering and analysis techniques the NDMC uses for its predictions and situational assessment.

Under Shoygu, the Ministry of Defense has made its public relations a priority. It invigorated the military TV channel "Zvezda," social network presence, created or reformed international military forums, and revitalised early military education ("syvorovtsy" and "kadety") and socialisation (patriotic military youth movement YunArmiia). His daughter Kseniia organised mass sport and cultural events with active military involvement. Public relations and the militarisation of Russian foreign policy brought unprecedented praise for the military. The military officers were reluctant to support these PR services as they knew the reality did not correspond

to the TV image. They even nicknamed Shoygu "Firefighter" (Pozharnik) with an implicit derogatory meaning.

In spite of the ongoing problems, the Kremlin's confidence in its modernised armed forces has continued to grow. Since 2009, the shiny new Russian military was showed off regularly in widely publicised large-scale exercises practising large combined-arms operations and in annual military parades.

Russia's Military Victories

The Russian military conducted several successful operations that were credited to Shoygu though they would not have been possible without the reforms under Serdyukov. These are the annexation of Crimea, interventions in Eastern Ukraine and Syria, peacekeeping operation in Nagorno-Karabakh, and the regime support operation under the CSTO mandate in Kazakhstan. Rapid and decisive deployment played a crucial role in these operations. However, none of them was a regional war with an extensive engagement of ground forces as it is in Ukraine today. Russia largely controlled the operational environment either through overwhelming military dominance (Crimea, eastern Ukraine) or through the political support of the receiving authority (Nagorno-Karabakh, Kazakhstan), or both (Syria). Some observers already highlighted in 2014, it would be difficult to replicate this success in a different context and even combat operations elsewhere in Ukraine would run the risk of military-strategic overstretch.¹⁶

In particular, the annexation of Crimea in 2014, which was seen as a stunning operational success domestically and

¹⁶J. Norberg and F. Westerlund, 'Russia and Ukraine: Military-strategic options and possible risks for Moscow', FOI, April 2014, foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI%20Memo%204904

internationally, did much to restore the country's pride in its military might. Problems that had hampered previous operations seemed decisively to have been overcome. The annexation was a well-coordinated effort leading to the swift achievement of objectives and standing in stark contrast to past campaigns that were poorly executed and relied on excessive force and bloodshed.

Airstrikes in support of Assad's regime since 2015 further bolstered the image of a revived Russian military. The operation involved the Air Force, Navy, selected infantry units and the special operations forces. Syria became a playground for the Russian military to test its combat capabilities and all aspects of support. All Russian senior commanding officers had at least one tour to the country that increased Russia's pace of military development. It was also Moscow's first foray into global power projection since the end of the Cold War. Many observers were surprised at the availability of sea- and air-lift capabilities required for out-of-area operations, which Russia lacked before the modernisation programme in 2008.

When necessary, the Kremlin uses private military companies, such as Wagner, to support the operation on the ground. PMCs are formally illegal in Russia, making contractors potentially criminally liable for mercenaryism. This setting is beneficial for the Kremlin as it has an unofficial fighting force in control, which actions can always be denied, and human losses can be discounted. If the mercenaries go out of control, they will be declared criminals and repressed by the state security agencies. The PMCs have become an "invisible hand" of the Kremlin that can support its influence abroad, for example, in Syria, without any political repercussions at home or abroad.

Restored pride and confidence in the country's military power was an important component in the Russian public's support of the Putin regime and in the belief that the President had restored the country to its rightful place in the world, following the humiliation of the Yeltsin years. Internationally, too, the image of the Russian military was transformed within a matter of a few years. The West had paid little attention to developments in the country's armed forces up until 2014, primarily because of the perception that incomplete reforms had left them close to ruin. The above mentioned developments revolutionised this perception. Lack of attention turned into awe as some observers went as far as to suggest that Russia was on course for overtaking NATO

and the West in conventional war-fighting capabilities. At home, Russian victories in Ukraine and Syria made it impossible to criticise or even question military developments. Successes in wars, significant rearmament efforts and masterful public relations made the Russian armed forces the most trusted institution surpassing the president. The patriotic political hysteria following the annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the war in eastern Ukraine disincited any political opposition from criticising the military or Putin's foreign and defence policy. The military bringing "the lost territories" back is victorious and cannot be critiqued.

Overconfidence and the War against Ukraine

Russia's poor operational performance in its war against Ukraine since February 2022 demonstrates that both the Kremlin's confidence in its armed forces' capabilities and some of the more extreme Western estimations were unwarranted. According to Risa Brooks¹⁷, military effectiveness is embodied in four core attributes: integration, responsiveness, skill, and quality. After a decade of reforms, Russia's war against Ukraine has demonstrated that the Russian military lacks sufficient internal cohesion and integration with other armed formations. Some Russian soldiers also reportedly lacked the necessary tactical skills and motivation to fight against the Ukrainians in an urban setting. Having lost numerous service members, equipment pieces and vehicles, the military slowly adjusted its efforts to the realities on the ground. However, early mistakes have already irreparably reduced the quality of its capabilities.

Problems with military cohesion, integration, and motivation could have been reduced if the Kremlin properly prepared its troops instead of concealing the intentions from its own soldiers, even after U.S. intelligence publicly disclosed it. However, the Kremlin had overlooked such systemic flaws as poor tactical skills and agility of Russian service members and weak equipment maintenance in some units. They cannot be solved immediately and require rigorous efforts to change the Russian defence sector at large. The roots of these problems lie in the backwardness of Russian military education, weak monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, and the kleptocratic nature of Putin's regime. Scripted military exercises, even if impressive in scale, were not a good predictor of actual war-fighting capabilities. Putin's overconfidence in the country's military capabilities already has caused unspeakable loss and damage to Ukraine. It will also come at a high price ultimately to his regime and to Russia.

¹⁷Brooks, Risa. *Creating military power: The sources of military effectiveness*. Stanford University Press, 2007.





RUSSIAN ECONOMY AND SANCTIONS

Dasha Afanasieva

Reuters Breakingviews columnist focusing on Russia

The West has turned the clock back on Russia's economy. By sanctioning its two biggest banks in response to the Ukraine invasion while kicking others out of the world's biggest payments system SWIFT, Washington and Brussels have made it very difficult for businesses to deal with Russia without risking accidentally busting sanctions. They also effectively froze much of Russia's foreign exchange reserves and the funds it built up to cushion against economic blows. That means Moscow will find it harder to compensate businesses or prop up banks without just printing more money, letting the rouble fall and stoking inflation. A block on U.S. technology imports will stifle economic development in the medium term. The economic pain will be severe and long-lasting.

The unexpected severity and geographic breadth of these measures may have caught Moscow off-guard, but Russia's response won't help much. In a bid to prop up the currency and a vain attempt to control inflation, the central bank more than doubled the interest rate to 20%. This will slow down economic activity. Meanwhile capital controls will undermine domestic investor confidence for the long term, even as foreign capital has mostly fled. The World Bank expects the economy to contract 11% while Institute for International Finance think tank has projected a 15% plunge. If sanctions remain in place, there's little reason to hope for a rebound after that.

Frozen "war chest"

Russia had built up a cushion of around \$640 billion in gold and foreign exchange reserves at the central bank and almost \$200 billion in a National Wealth Fund – a rainy-day stash which grows when oil prices are high. It did all this in the wake of the annexation of Crimea in 2014, when the illegal takeover led to the U.S. restricting how the state and some companies raised debt.

Those reserves were capital that could be used to prop up banks like Sberbank and VTB, even if they're sanctioned by the West and there's a bank run. Russia exported more than it imported and spent less than it received in taxes. It looked like so long as the west kept importing its oil and gas, it would have a trade surplus, while ample tax and dividend incomes could finance the war and support sanctioned businesses.

The European Union on March 2 said it was excluding seven Russian banks from the SWIFT, the dominant messaging system facilitating payments. It stopped short of including those handling energy payments and technically, there are plenty of workarounds that would still allow for trade to be unaffected. In practice, though, it spooked everyone doing business with Russia.

SWIFT is merely a messaging system for payments and there are other ways for banks to make transfers. So technically speaking it would just make it more expensive to transact with those Russian banks. But in practice it undermines the confidence of any international business in dealing with Russia. With Russia unable to use much of its reserves while

being hamstrung by restrictions on international payments it can make, it will default on its sovereign debt repayments. Domestically, it could do is print more money to help support banks and companies but that would stoke inflation.

The United States also blocked certain technological exports into Russia including microchips used in laptops and smartphones, leading to multinationals like Apple and Microsoft to make a quick exit. But this will also restructure the economy in the long term because sophisticated and efficient production methods rely on computerised systems which require U.S. chips. China hasn't even managed to produce all of these high-end chips, a challenge made greater for Russia by brain drain. Multiple waves of immigration, including a rush right after the February 24 invasion, have diminished skills in the Russian economy.

Some of the current supply disruption will be temporary. Lada maker AvtoVaz, which is controlled by Renault, suspended production of some models but not others. But a few months down the line the impact of western companies leaving and laying off staff will multiply through the economy as those people spend less or fail to make mortgage repayments. Even if sanctions were lifted tomorrow, the existing ripples would still tip the economy into recession.

End of Putinomics

President Vladimir Putin's hybrid model of state companies backed by foreign capital has been dismantled for good. Russia's biggest companies like lender Sberbank or gas group Gazprom are majority state-owned. But a flurry of listings in the 2000s in London have meant they also have a high proportion of western funds among their shareholders. That way Russian state coffers have received high dividends – often half of company profits – while the businesses themselves benefit from western capital. The Russian stock market was closed for several weeks, but London-listed shares collapsed. Sberbank is now worth around a fifth of the \$100 billion market value it held in October.

Sanctions have transformed the role of oligarchs in the economic system, too. The likes of Mikhail Fridman who owns Alfa Bank and Chelsea football club owner Roman Abramovich, who got rich in the nineties, are frantically trying to save their jets and yachts from being seized because of UK and European Union sanctions.

Putin's solid macroeconomic policy track record was quickly dismantled. Under Central Bank Governor Elvira Nabiullina, Russia has won plaudits for keeping inflation subdued with ultra-conservative monetary policy. Even during the pandemic, Moscow kept a lid on government spending too to preserve state finances. That approach is already going

out of the window. Having hiked rates she skipped a regular press conference, fuelling rumours that she tried to resign.

Consumer pain

Life will look very different for Russians in the coming months. Days into the war, western brands such as Apple, McDonalds and IKEA said they were pulling out. Consumer goods companies like Nestle, Unilever and Procter & Gamble, sharply reduced operations in the country but were planning to continue supplying some products. Sanctions are bound to make those more expensive.

The Kremlin wants Russians to believe they can do without western products. Indeed, Russian food production has grown sharply since 2014 and it is now the biggest wheat exporter. That's partly down to government policy in the wake of Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. In what appeared to be a counter-intuitive retaliation, Russia banned food imports from Europe, forcing domestic companies to step in. The aim was to make the economy as self-sufficient as possible. Import substitution, however, will be far from seamless. Firstly, even domestic production relies on foreign raw materials or equipment. Russia is hoping China will step in, but even if that happens it will be costly.

Russia's isolation and economic decline will undoubtedly put pressure on President Vladimir Putin, but it will not be enough to force him to change course. Declining living standards even before the invasion were a major concern. Before the pandemic Russia was embarking on a \$400 billion development programme to improve the country's dire infrastructure and boost indicators in education and healthcare. The plan was delayed by the Covid-19 crisis and now seems almost forgotten. Arguably, Putin tried to build a more balanced economy and get a grip on corruption. Having failed, he turned to fuelling nationalist fears.

In 2020, Putin used a major address to bemoan the price of pasta while the effort to lift people out of poverty featured prominently in many of his domestic speeches since. Russians have put up with severe economic pain and regression in the past and may continue to do so if they believe it's part of a greater plan to protect them from a threat. Putin pointed out that the Soviet Union was constantly under sanctions but it “developed and made colossal achievements”.

That was an early admission of how painful this could get. On the one hand, he is right, Russians accepted the Soviet Union and endured hardships. On the other, one day it collapsed.



Donbas debris: A Russian tank damaged by Ukrainian troops in Mariupol



Credit: Mss.gov.ua

THE DAY AFTER THE WAR

Keir Giles

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Throughout its history, Russia has repeatedly faced the challenge of armies returning from campaigns abroad posing a potential threat to its leadership and political system. At times this has been because the armies are disaffected, after incurring horrific casualties exacerbated by generalship which was indifferent both in its competence and in its attitude to the suffering of its troops, as in 1905 following the Russo-Japanese war and 1917 during the First World War. At other times, it is because those armies have been exposed to life outside Russia, and have realised how much better it is to live in a country that is not run by Moscow, both in personal freedoms and in material welfare. The roots of the Decembrist revolt in 1825 were laid when Russian officers saw Europe during the Russian advance and occupation of Paris at the end of the Napoleonic wars. In 1945, the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin was not willing to take any similar risk and consequently murdered or imprisoned on a mass scale soldiers who had seen Europe, even if they had only seen it from the dire conditions of the inside of a German prison camp.

The conflict in Ukraine risks presenting Russia with both of these challenges combined. Not only do Russia's forces appear to have suffered remarkably high and in many cases unnecessary casualties, but they have also been startled by the propaganda with which they had been indoctrinated suddenly colliding with a reality that turned out to be entirely different. Russian troops have been shocked not only by the realisation that Ukrainians are not just frustrated and slightly inferior Russians yearning for liberation and Russification, but

also by the much higher standard of living that they have encountered among the rural Ukrainian population. This will have engendered an ongoing battle for the minds of Russia's soldiery in Ukraine – to maintain the core fictions of Russia's propaganda about its war and the country it was being fought against, in the face of evidence and lived experience.

Taken together, these factors have the potential to sow new political dissent within Russia itself. The traumatic exposure of large numbers of young men to the fact that they have been consistently lied to and that others live better simply because they live outside Russia would, under many political systems, lead to a disaffected and angry political movement driving for change.

Fortunately for Russia, there are indications that where that battle for the mind is taking place at all, the propaganda and ingrained belief of Russia's soldiers are winning out. Mass organised atrocities and murder in the occupied territories appear driven at least in part by the assumption that anybody who believes in an independent Ukraine is by definition a Nazi who needs to be exterminated.¹⁸ And, as on repeated previous occasions, the reaction of Russian soldiers to encountering a much higher standard of material welfare in the territories they are invading has been not to envy it, but to steal or destroy it. The patterns of mass looting of occupied territories, both on a personal and on an organised scale, are fully recognisable from the behaviour of Soviet troops in eastern Europe during and after the Second World War.

¹⁸“The Azov Battalion: How Putin built a false premise for a war against “Nazis” in Ukraine”, CBS News, 22 March 2022, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/ukraine-russia-war-azov-battalion-putin-premise-war-vs-nazis>

And the wanton destruction that accompanies it also follows a consistent pattern. The first instinctive reaction to Europe by many Soviet soldiers seems to have been not to admire European material benefits and seek improvements at home, but to destroy them in order to bring Europe down to the level of Russia.¹⁹ The same response was more recently encountered during Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008. And consistent reporting from Ukraine indicates that Russian troops have been simply astonished at the material benefits enjoyed by ordinary Ukrainians – things that are taken for granted in Europe but apparently completely alien to Russians recruited from rural areas. In one account these were summarised as simple facts like houses made of brick, ownership of laptops, and Nutella in the cupboard.²⁰ Indoor sanitation appears to have been a particular surprise.²¹ In fact the patterns of copious and indiscriminate defecation encountered by Ukrainians returning to their homes in liberated areas – also a practice demonstrated by Russian troops in Georgia in 2008²² – seem in some cases to be as much the result of Russians' perplexity when faced with an indoor toilet as their urges to destroy what they cannot have for themselves.²³

Perversely, once again, the realisation that foreigners live better appears in many cases to have fuelled resentment against those foreigners, rather than against Russia's own leaders. Nevertheless Russia and in particular its counter intelligence services cannot but be concerned that a significant sector of the population suddenly being presented with a reality that challenges their beliefs poses a potential political threat. As in previous centuries, Russia would be prudent to take countermeasures in order to avoid any potential challenge to its political system that results. This may be one explanation for the hurried manner in which at the time of writing mauled units withdrawn from the north of Ukraine are being thrown piecemeal into the fighting in the east of the country, rather than adding to a methodical build-up for the planned late April offensive.²⁴ Alongside all the other factors driving this counter-intuitive approach may be a desire to eliminate sources of disaffection within the army as rapidly as possible, through death or distraction.

¹⁹“The Front-Line Diary of a Soviet Officer”, CIA, 4 December 1950, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80-00926A002800020001-0.pdf> See also Alexander Solzhenitsyn's “Prussian Nights” for a memoir of rape, casual murder and senseless and self-defeating destruction driven by envy during the advance into Germany.

²⁰Tweet by @expatua, 9 April 2022, <https://twitter.com/expatua/status/1512701296796700676>

²¹Shaun Walker and Andrew Roth, ““They took our clothes”: Ukrainians returning to looted homes”, *The Guardian*, 11 April 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/11/ukrainian-homes-looted-by-russian-soldiers>

²²Video of the reaction of Russian troops arriving in Georgian barracks is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ped0ddLxNU>, and of the condition of the same buildings after they had departed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lGaP-gyxcag>.

²³Tweet by @turkmenbagz and replies, 10 April 2022, <https://twitter.com/turkmenbagz/status/1513211634407415813>

²⁴Mason Clark, George Barros, and Karolina Hird, “Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment”, *Institute for the Study of War*, 18 April 2022, <https://www.understandingwar.org/background/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-april-18>

Russia's almost total control of the information reaching large sectors of its population has allowed it so far to determine their attitudes to internal and domestic events, including the nature and progress of the war on Ukraine.²⁵ This is also because a large part of the audiences for Russia's domestic propaganda about the outside world have no objective reality against which to measure it. Most Russian citizens enjoyed



Russia's almost total control of the information reaching large sectors of its population has allowed it so far to determine their attitudes to internal and domestic events, including the nature and progress of the war on Ukraine

almost complete freedom to travel outside the country for nearly three decades. But despite perceptions abroad, the proportion of Russians that have actually done so is still small, and concentrated among urban residents. A 2018 poll suggested that while more than half of people living in Moscow possessed a passport allowing foreign travel, across Russia as a whole that proportion dropped to less than a quarter.²⁶ But it will be impossible for Russia fully to control the experiences and conclusions that its soldiers are bringing home from Ukraine. By doing so, they puncture the protective bubble Russia has built over two decades to protect against “breaches in national information space”.²⁷ And the challenge for the Russian authorities will be all the greater in an age of social media where not only are returning soldiers able to communicate among themselves without supervision, but also their attitudes and experiences can be shared on a mass scale, whether publicly or privately within their own networks of friends and family.

Russia's security and intelligence structures are therefore likely to be fully prepared for ensuring that disaffection does not manifest itself in a new political movement, or if it does, that that movement can be suppressed. Russia's National

Guard (Rosgvardiya) is a primary tool for controlling public expressions of discontent, and it is fully equipped to inflict mass casualties on Russia's own population as well as those of invaded territories.²⁸ But the system of repression will be of only limited value against changes of attitude not amongst Russia's conscripts but its leaders.

Many of Russia's actions against its neighbours stem from an inability to adjust to the idea that Moscow no longer rules over lands beyond its borders. In effect Russia is a former imperial great power that has not yet accepted and internalised the important qualifier of “former”.²⁹ In contrast to other European imperial powers, for Russia the end of empire was postponed. It came not at the end of the First World War,

²⁵Emma Burrows, “In Putin's heartland, Russian mothers mourn their sons killed in Ukraine”, *ITV News*, 20 April 2022, <https://www.itv.com/news/2022-04-19/in-putins-heartland-russian-mothers-mourn-their-sons-killed-in-ukraine>

²⁶“Поездки за границу” (Travel abroad), *Levada Center*, 13 June 2018, <https://www.levada.ru/2018/06/13/poezdki-za-granitsu-3/>

²⁷Keir Giles, “Handbook of Russian Information Warfare”, *NATO Defense College*, November 2016, <https://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?code=995>

²⁸Jolanta Darczewska, “Rosgvardiya: A Special-Purpose Force”, *OSW*, May 2020, http://aei.pitt.edu/103306/1/PV_ENG_Rosgvardiya_net.pdf

²⁹Keir Giles, “Putin's speech harked back to Russia's empire – the threat doesn't stop at Ukraine”, *The Guardian*, 22 February 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/feb/22/putin-speech-russia-empire-threat-ukraine-moscow>

or of the Second, but at the end of the Cold War. And since then, successful military adventurism both close to home and further afield has meant Moscow has not faced the need to adjust to its new status. Success in small wars in Chechnya and Georgia, and projecting power more recently in Syria, Kazakhstan and across Africa, have supported Russia's belief in its power and its right to dominate others.

But if Russia were to suffer unambiguous defeat in Ukraine, the first experience of failure would be an even greater shock for Russia's leaders than the material well-being of Ukrainians was to its soldiers. If Russia follows the pattern set by other former empires in the 20th century after realising the new limits of their power, this in turn could lead – over time – to a re-assessment of Russia's place in the world, and the kind of

relationship Moscow needs with its neighbours in order to avoid once again spending itself into state collapse through engaging in perpetual conflict.³⁰ Failure is an essential precondition for Russia to start the long, difficult transition from a frustrated former great power to a normal country that can coexist with its former imperial dominions. For this reason, among many others, ensuring that Russia cannot persuade itself that its operations in Ukraine have been successful are an essential investment in the future security of Europe.³¹

³⁰Keir Giles, "The west has a duty to help defend Ukraine – and to help Russia by ensuring its defeat", *The Guardian*, 25 February 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/feb/25/ukraine-russia-defeat-military-putin>

³¹James Sherr, "The Fear of Victory", *ICDS*, 21 April 2022, <https://icds.ee/en/the-fear-of-victory/>

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