

OPINIONS

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WHILE UKRAINE FIGHTS, THE WORLD IS WATCHING

24 February 2022 has gone down in history as the day Vladimir Putin launched his war machine. The numerous expressions of surprise among commentators gave the wrong impression that the Russian leader had made a spontaneous, ill-considered decision. Russia, however, had been preparing for this war for a long time. It had scrupulously accumulated foreign exchange reserves as a financial cushion for the anticipated Western sanctions. It had gradually been escalating the energy crisis in Europe, lowering the readiness of some EU countries to firmly object against the increasingly audacious Russian actions.

The demands issued to NATO in December 2021 concerning security guarantees were only a masquerade aimed at delaying the delivery of Western weapons to Ukraine as much as possible. Russia shrewdly used the Western soft spot for dialogue, fully aware that the machine had already been set in motion. The attack was only a matter of time, as the decision to invade had been made in early autumn 2021 at the latest. Putin's address on 21 February announcing Russia's recognition of the independence of the puppet republics in Donetsk and Luhansk was essentially a military briefing. On the very next day, one of the fighters from the Wagner Group, a Kremlin-linked private military company, sent a private message to Christo Grozev, an investigative journalist from Bellingcat admitting that his comrades had already left for Kyiv. The official invasion was to be taking place two days later.

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WAR ON THE HORIZON

Clausewitz was right when he stated that war is politics by other means. Putin has never accepted Ukraine's independence from Russia and has revealed on many occasions his ambitions for territorial expansion. Referring to the archives of the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, former Ukrainian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Olena Zerkal revealed in an interview that Putin, as early as in the year 2000, right after becoming president of Russia, told a Ukrainian delegation headed by the then-Prime Minister Viktor Yushchenko that Ukrainian Crimea is a historical injustice yet to be corrected.¹ Three years later, in September 2003, Russia tried to take control of the Ukrainian Tuzla Island located in the middle of Kerch Strait (the infamous Crimean Bridge runs across it today). And in the autumn of 2006, a little-known local organisation under the non-accidental name Donetsk Republic was already organising pickets using the slogan "NATO—killer of the Slavs" and was collecting signatures for the separation of Donbas from Ukraine. All of that had already been taking place before Putin allegedly explained to U.S. President George Bush that "Ukraine is not even a state" at the NATO summit in Bucharest. In fact, the possibility of Ukraine joining NATO was never a real reason for Putin's aggression. This argument had always been a mere excuse, intended to fool Western isolationists susceptible to the Russian bluff. Putin has always regarded Ukraine solely as Russian territory that must be regained.

Therefore, the Russian goal was quite clear, and furthermore, widely known, which was to yet again bring Ukraine to heel. For years, it was not achieved through political or economic pressure, the attempts to corrupt Ukrainian politicians and oligarchs, numerous attempts to destabilise it from within, and not even through two invasions of Donbas. Putin regarded Ukraine as "unfinished business", as Eugene Rumer and Andrew Weiss of Carnegie aptly put it.² No compromise with Ukraine was ever truly considered. After using all the alternative options, war was Putin's last resort. All that was left was to find the right time.

¹ "Lana Zerkal propozytsii na „normandskii zustrichi”, kroky vlady do myru ta ryzyky vid rozpadu Rosii,” interview for Ukrainian TV channel ATR, serving Crimean Tatars, 2 December 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=o8Dd6VW3JJ0.

² E. Rumer, A. Weiss, "Ukraine: Putin's Unfinished Business," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 12 November 2021, www.carnegieendowment.org.

Such a peculiar window of opportunity opened at the turn of 2020 and 2021 when the whole world focused mainly on fighting the COVID-19 pandemic, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky was gradually losing public support, and Joe Biden, ridiculed in Russia for his age, became the new American president. The chaotic withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan led Putin not long after to believe that the new American administration was incompetent. Another such occasion might have never arrived, given that the Kremlin considered the United States the only force in the world that could have thwarted their plans. From this vantage point, Putin was not insane, rather he took a calculated risk.

CONQUER OR DESTROY

Before the invasion, Russian intelligence conducted a number of surveys of Ukrainian opinion, reaching the right conclusion that Ukrainian society held deep mistrust towards the state and administration, and cared predominantly about economic difficulties. For years, Ukrainians trusted only their armed forces. It is probably from this interpretation that the idea to attack Kyiv appeared, as well as the Russian military's *modus operandi* in the first days of the invasion. Russian planners developed the straightforward assumption that quick annihilation or neutralisation of the institutions supported by the population (namely the armed forces) would allow for an easy replacement of the socially despised institutions (president and administration). The most important thing was not to expose the local population to excessive costs so as not to alienate it. And indeed, at the beginning Russian troops did not *en masse* target civilian infrastructure, or at least not intentionally. At the beginning, Ukraine was supposed to be conquered, not annihilated.

It is not entirely clear how Russia was going to hold onto Ukraine. The Russian leaders must have expected that they would meet resistance and social disobedience, which would have to lead to temporary or even permanent occupation of parts or the whole of Ukrainian territory. For this reason, the Ukrainian dissident element was supposed to be literally annihilated. “De-Nazification” has never been just an empty threat for Putin, but a specific operational goal meant to eliminate the part of Ukrainian society that would be most likely to oppose the Russian rule—politicians, intellectuals, journalists and activists, active military and veterans. We now

know about at least a few Russian “blacklists” with Ukrainian names. At the same time, according to Russian intelligence documents intercepted by Ukraine and shared with the British Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), Russia planned an occupation administration only for the left bank of Ukraine and Kyiv.³ It is therefore conceivable that from the very beginning a partition of Ukraine into eastern and western was assumed, if domination over the entire country would turn out to be impossible.

The failed attempt to take control over Kyiv forced Putin to resort to the dismemberment of Ukraine much earlier than he had previously planned. In mid-March, the invasion of Ukraine turned into a punitive expedition in which the declining empire decided to punish its former colony for insubordination and resistance. It was then that the Russian troops made the Ukrainian civilian population their target. Instead of the original conquest and bringing Ukraine to submission, Russia decided to physically destroy the Ukrainian nation and state. Putin finally revealed his deeply hidden “dog in the manger” syndrome. In his eyes, Ukraine should either be his domain or cease to exist entirely. And he is now more determined than ever to make that happen. If Russia manages to consolidate control over the currently occupied southeastern regions of Ukraine, it will carve off another part of the country, much to the outrage and surprise of the world, once again. By no means will this mean resigning from the plans to conquer all of Ukraine, but only temporarily postponing them until Russia replenishes its forces and finds another window of opportunity.

NO GOING BACK

The possibility of a Russian frontal attack on Ukraine had been considered for years. In 2017, experts with the National Institute for Strategic Studies, the main state research institution in Ukraine, wrote in their extensive monograph⁴ that there “is a growing, disturbing sense of calm before the storm. [...] We should clearly understand that the Russian military threat will never disappear. While the possibility of this threat increasing (and moving into active phase) will be the higher the

³ N. Reynolds, J. Watling, “Ukraine Through Russia’s Eyes,” Royal United Services Institute, 25 February 2022, www.rusi.org.

⁴ V. Horbulin, “Svitova hibrydna viina: ukrainskyi front,” Kyiv 2017, my (D.Sz.) review of this monography is available in issue 3/2017 of *Polski Przegląd Dyplomatyczny*.

less effective are Russia's actions to destabilise Ukraine by other means". In November heading into December 2021, the head of the Ukrainian military intelligence, Kyrylo Budanov, in interviews for American media, was already able to frame, quite accurately as it turned out, the Russian plans; for example, he mentioned the attack from Belarus.⁵ He was certainly already equipped with information given to him by U.S. intelligence. But President Zelensky was not to believe in a Russian invasion until the very end, as stated by the head of his administration, Andrii Yermak.⁶ For a long time, Zelensky was even convinced that he had become a pawn in some American government game, which in his opinion purposefully fuelled hysteria to force on him concessions to Russia. It's probable that he only realised the scale of the threat on the evening of 23 February when no one in the Kremlin would take his calls.

Ironically, Zelensky was willing to compromise with Russia from the beginning of his presidency, but Putin personally prevented any agreement from being reached, raising the stakes so high that he almost completely deprived the Ukrainian president of any room for manoeuvre in domestic politics. Inside Ukraine, Zelensky was constantly criticised and accused of willingness to betray the Ukrainian national interest; he never fully resigned from solving matters diplomatically, changing only the potential terms of compromise. It is therefore not surprising that after the Russian military invaded Ukraine, the Ukrainian side tried negotiating with Russia yet again, with a potential Russian-Ukrainian compromise gaining steam already at the beginning of 2022 when Zelensky commented that Ukraine joining NATO may prove impossible due to a veto by some of its members. In the first weeks of the war, the Ukrainian side was ready to make a number of concessions, including accepting neutral status in exchange for international security guarantees and postponing any resolution concerning Donbas and Crimea. Kyiv, however, quickly realised how pointless talks with the Russians were, as they only pretended to be negotiating.

What the Russian delegation put on the table in Istanbul at the end of March was essentially an act of Ukraine's unconditional surrender, assuming disarmament of the country, recognition of the independence of the puppet

⁵ H. Altman, "Russia preparing to attack Ukraine by late January: Ukraine defense intelligence agency chief," *Military Times*, 21 November 2021, www.militarytimes.com.

⁶ "Andrii Yermak: Taku viinu, yak zaraz, my bachyly tilky u filmakh," interview with *Ukrainska Pravda*, 10 March 2022, www.pravda.com.ua/articles/2022/03/10/7329989/.

republics in Donetsk and Luhansk, and relinquishment of Crimea. Putin was again playing *vabanque*, and Zelensky was unable to accept such far-reaching Russian demands. Even more so as the Ukrainian troops at that time were rallying and pushing the Russian forces farther and farther away from Kyiv. A few days later when the Ukrainian forces entered Bucha, near Kyiv, they saw and made public the scale of the Russian crimes against civilians, and the Ukrainian-Russian negotiations finally collapsed. Zelensky once again came under pressure from his compatriots, who, shocked by the images of Russian cruelty, firmly rejected the possibility of any agreement with the invader. He became a slave of this opinion. At the end of May, the Ukrainian authorities were willing to talk to Russia only on the condition of the complete withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukrainian territory. This prospect was, however, becoming more and more distant with the growing Ukrainian losses in Donbas.

SHAKY CONSENSUS

I dare to say that, strategically, Russia has already failed—Ukraine has defended its statehood, although its actual territorial shape will be decided on the battlefield in the southeast of the country. The thesis presented here is subject to the condition that Ukraine's foreign partners continue to provide it with military support sufficient to keep the Russian army from reaching the critical mass necessary to break down the Ukrainian resistance and resume an offensive towards Kharkiv or Odesa. However, this assumption is not so obvious. Putin may have lost the first battle, but he still intends to win the war, and, to Ukraine's misfortune, it is still a valid possibility. He will consistently tighten the military and economic loop around Kyiv's neck, counting on the eventual collapse of internal and international consensus around Ukraine. And he has reasons for this belief.

The Ukrainian political elite has so far passed the maturity test, rising above its own personal interests and reaching their own informal political ceasefire since the start of the invasion. Even though Ukraine had entered the war with a growing conflict between President Zelensky and his predecessor, Petro Poroshenko, who in mid-January was almost arrested on politically motivated charges. The former disputes have faded into the background for the time being, but are not completely forgotten. At the end of May, this internal compromise was broken by Zelensky himself when the

Ukrainian Security Service published testimony by Viktor Medvedchuk, one of the leaders of Russia's "fifth column" in Ukraine, accusing Poroshenko of shady deals with Russia. It is only a matter of time before Zelensky, who is preparing for re-election, will face many uncomfortable questions, especially about the preparedness of Ukraine for the invasion and the not-so-secret betrayal in Kherson that opened the way for Russians to enter southern Ukraine from Crimea. His political position is not as strong as commonly believed. Especially since he will have to face a particularly strong opponent, as military circles in Ukraine, enjoying special recognition by the public, will gain more and more political power.

Even more shaky is the international consensus regarding support for Ukraine. The unity of the transatlantic community's rhetoric hides the increasing divisions between NATO and EU countries as to when and under what conditions Ukraine should strive to end the war and what kind of military aid it should be given. The peak of European public interest in the Russian invasion has passed, so the willingness of European governments to sacrifice for Ukraine will also gradually diminish. As Ukraine will need more and more military and financial support from foreign partners, the importance of the U.S. leadership is only growing, but at the same time, the dialogue camp, led by Germany, France, and Italy will gain more influence, putting pressure on the Ukrainian authorities to resume negotiations with Russia. Sooner or later, President Zelensky will face the dilemma of whether to prioritise maintaining the relatively broad international support for defending Ukraine and—for its sake—restarting talks with Russia rather sooner than later, or whether to form a smaller, but more durable coalition of countries strongly supporting the idea of full Ukrainian victory.

Possibly, Putin himself will help Zelensky in this choice, by announcing a unilateral ceasefire at a time convenient for him. Many of Ukraine's foreign partners, deluded by the prospect of Ukrainian-Russian negotiations, will hastily treat this as a reason to limit their support. Especially those still secretly hoping to play the role of mediator.

THE MYTH OF COMPROMISE

Assuming that generals prepare for wars that have already happened, then diplomats strive to solve past dilemmas. In Ukraine, there is no return to the fragile *status quo ante* of 23 February. Putin broke the Normandy Format

with one decision and discredited the ridiculous mantra that there was no alternative to a diplomatic solution. The fate of this war, as well as the future of Ukraine itself, will be decided on the battlefield. At the negotiation table, both sides will agree on a temporary ceasefire, at most. After which, they will resume their arms race, knowing that a large-scale war will inevitably break out again. For as long as the source of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict is present, as long as Russians are incapable of accepting an independent Ukraine, reaching any permanent agreement between the two countries will not be possible. In a few weeks, a dozen at most, the Ukrainians and Russians will resume talks, both fully aware that they are just stalling.

The delusion of compromise, common among European decision-makers, has contributed significantly to the fact that Russia has achieved territorial gains in Ukraine for the fourth time in a decade. Putin is by no means a brilliant strategist, but ruthlessly seizes opportunities. He is not a chess player, rather a street hooligan. Thus, Russian politics is also not a chess match but a common chicken game. In this game, you only win or lose, because any possible draw is one in which both sides lose at the same time anyway. This is exactly the parallel noticed back in 2017 by Samuel Charap and Timothy Colton, who, looking at the region from the other side of the ocean, wrote that in fact everyone is losing out on the tensions around Ukraine, both the West and Russia, as well as, of course, Ukraine itself.⁷ Yet, from the correct diagnosis they drew an erroneous conclusion. In a chicken game, someone always has to lose. The alternative to the current lose-lose situation is therefore not a mythical compromise with Russia, but Russia's defeat. Russia should emerge from this war weakened enough not to regain its ability to attack Ukraine again in the foreseeable future.

Within the NATO community, however, there is no appetite for weakening, let alone defeating Russia. Furthermore, in the European public debate, especially in Germany, which is the most detached from reality today, you can hear more and more often that it is Russia that needs help to overcome the current situation. The Western soft spot for dialogue with Russia and the delusion of a potential compromise are still so powerful that Putin does not have to rush to end the war and can slowly bleed Ukraine out. To ensure a relatively stable coexistence between Ukraine and Russia in this

⁷ S. Charap, T. Colton, *Everyone loses. The Ukraine crisis and the ruinous contest for post-Soviet Eurasia*, Routledge, 2017.

situation, it is necessary to build up Ukraine's military potential to the point that it prevents Russia from gaining further territorial gains. It is exactly this scenario that President Zelensky had in mind when he spoke about the Israeli model for post-war Ukraine. The Russian invasion has in fact affirmed the decision to build a "fortress Ukraine" on the Dnipro, although due to the now bone-dry Ukrainian budget, it will not be possible without the help of foreign partners.

The upcoming militarisation of Ukraine will, for obvious reasons, shift the directions of Ukrainian foreign policy, which will turn more towards the U.S. and the UK, but also towards Central Europe, particularly towards Poland. This will not appeal to the dialogue camp in Western Europe, yet it still will be a reasonable price to pay for a big collection of errors in their policies towards Ukraine and Russia.