

PUTIN'S POLICY IN UKRAINE: A DESTRUCTIVE, UGLY, ATTRITION BASED WAR, FOUGHT AIMLESSLY, FOR THE SAKE OF WAR

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Abstract: *It is a challenge to try to draw conclusions and find the characteristics of an ongoing crisis. Even more so when it is a large-scale war, like the one fought by Russia in Ukraine, a war already defined as a war of aggression of Russia in Ukraine, unprovoked, illegal and unjustified, an invasion of Russia in Ukraine aimed at conquering new territories for Moscow to annex. But, after three months of war, some basic arguments are already in place and it is worth assessing the regularities of this war and its particularities in a way that allows us to predict the evolution of this war. And if no two wars are alike, comparisons give us hints about previous behaviors and perspectives of evolution. In this case, the 7 districts buffer zone in Nagorno Karabakh could give us a hint on the way the destruction of Eastern Ukraine will be used in the future by Russia to deny any the presence of weapons close to its borders.*

Keywords: *strange war; war of attrition; large scale war; long war; forever war.*

Characteristics of the war: Ukraine, Putin's obsession

The invasion of Russia aiming to punish Ukraine has entered a new zodiac sign. After the initial plans for victory in the short term, in a *blitzkrieg* (Harris 1995) failed, the new strategies are more destructive, more vengeful, and uglier. Putin has gone from a war of conquest to a long-term war of attrition, in which endurance and military numbers can cope with the constant fatigue and weakening of willpower, resources and prospects of a war for the sake of war, in which the sole purpose is to punish Ukraine's resilience and the physical leveling of any city, building, resistance, history. A vengeful precedent for everyone to understand that if you do not surrender and do what Putin tells you, there will be no stone left unturned by his war machine. Had he been alive, Freud would have fully validated Putin's obsession with grandeur, status, and especially his obsession with Ukraine, which is a thorn in his side, with its freedom and democracy, with everything; it is in front of him and impishly opposes him.

There have been many attempts to explain the war in Ukraine. An illogical and very costly one for Putin's Russia. But perhaps the most important explanation comes from the challenge Putin felt when the Ukrainians did not bow to his will. They chose the West. They overthrew the Yankovic regime because he did not want to follow the path that would lead to EU accession. They defied Putin, who warned them that they would pay. They did not give in to his warnings and hints coming from the Annexation of Crimea (Statement by the North Atlantic Council on Crimea 2019) and the military aggression in Eastern Ukraine (RUSSIAN AGGRESSION IN EASTERN EUROPE: WHERE DOES PUTIN GO NEXT AFTER 2015). Putin hinted others will follow, other popular republics to defend, other territories to conquer.

But most of all, they chose to be free, democratic, and also independent, escaping from any influence Russia had. And Putin can't stand this. With his training as an agent during the Soviet era, with the nationalist historicism acquired from Dughin, Arbatov, Karaganov, and Surkov, Putin could not imagine how not to dominate the territories of Ukraine and how not to rebuild the Soviet Union, the greatness of the Empire. His desire to rebuild the empire can cost Putin his country. He lost the Russian nation, unable to complete its modernization due to

imperial inclinations – the Soviet Union was, as he said, the greatest catastrophe of the 20th century. Now pan-Russian imperialism – Ruskie Mir – seems to be the latest obsession of a mind filled with contradictions, opposing ideologies, historical aberrations and the absence of logic, dominated by the will and desire to acquire global power.

Symbolism played an important role. The war began on February 24th, the day after the celebration of Soviet Army Day (Russia to celebrate Defender of the Fatherland Day on Feb 23 2022) (now, the day of the national armies in the post-Soviet space). It was originally scheduled for February 16th, the 8th anniversary of the launch of the “Little Green men” operation in Crimea and the creation of the People’s Republics, expected to be born all over Novorossia. Symbolism also directs his ambition to rebuild the former Soviet Union under the folds of Russia until December 30th, when the Centenary of the founding of the former Soviet Union (Whitmore 2022) will be celebrated, another one of Putin’s obsessions. How can you leave Ukraine independent, democratic, with European and Euro-Atlantic affinities that destroy the great dream of Greater and Imperial Russia?

Then Putin saw a new Fulda Gap (Britannica n.d.) situation in Ukraine (and Belarus). The West is advancing step by step, under the radar, towards Russia’s borders, conquering territories to be later included in NATO and the EU, and Russia is losing these territories one by one, Putin thought. Thus, the double dependence and East-West competition in the gray area between NATO/EU and Russia’s borders is no longer relevant, the West has broken the rules and is occupying everything, and Russia’s power of influence and attractiveness are too small. In other words, this gray area, transition zone, buffer zone, must be removed. He wanted to move into Europe, towards a new reinforced Berlin Wall border, this time as close as possible to the current EU/NATO borders. Hence the desire to push the frontline existing only in his mind toward the post-Cold War situation – a remake of Yalta, another Grand Bargain (Serhii 2009), but Putin respects the unification of Germany and its EU and NATO membership, so the message could not go further back in time than 1997, in his revisionist view.

Then Putin stepped into a genuine Thucydides trap (Allison 2019). He bluffed so much with the war, he resorted so much to the threat of the use of armed force, the threat of war on a large scale, that at a certain point he could no longer walk back on these threats. He fell into the trap of his own making, and the war had become unavoidable since November 2021. The conditions set out in the alleged agreements with the West were unacceptable from the start, even if there was a certain ballet with Russia and three proposed negotiating areas – bilateral with the US, at the strategic level, with NATO, and at the European defense level, with the OSCE, covering European security, guarantees and rules. But returning to the country empty-handed, after the ritualistic and angry ultimatums, was no longer possible for Putin. Not even with half measures. So Putin was forced to unleash the dogs of war.

Calculations, strategies and misperceptions: Putin’s poor choices in Ukraine

A lot has been written about how Putin approached the war. He made risky bets in many cases, he planned poorly or not at all, he improvised based on his perceptions and moods, on his expectations, ignoring the real information in the field that didn’t even reach him because he didn’t want to. That is why he divided his military force into two: the classic, the traditional, the trivial, with which he had to quickly defeat Ukraine, and the modern, high-tech, state-of-the-art, which remained in reserve for his next battle with NATO. But no plan survives first contact with the enemy.

Putin’s mistakes and poor choices in Ukraine include the assumption that Ukraine is ruled by a gang of neo-Nazis, extremists, nationalists, banderovists, who are hated by the people, or at least by Russians living in the East, who are oppressed, discriminated against, are

not allowed to learn their mother tongue; the assumption that the Russian troops/army will be welcomed with flowers as liberators of Ukraine; the assumption that the decadent West will begin to quarrel and divide, being dependent on Russian energy resources, and building interdependencies with Russia based on raw materials and privileged prices; the assumption that Ukraine and the Ukrainian army will quickly melt and surrender when facing Russia's war machine. Kharkiv will fall in a few hours, up to a day, Kyiv will be occupied in 2 days and, in 3 days, Putin will be able to salute the Triumphal March of Victory from the tribune overlooking the Maidan Square in Kyiv, when the victorious tanks will roll on the Khreshchiatik.

Well, it did not work out that way. Ukraine and the Ukrainians (even the Russian in Ukraine, in the East) put up fierce resistance against the Russian troops and even inflicted enormous damage. Western weapons and training made their presence felt, and it was painful for Moscow. The will and ambition of the Ukrainians to defend their country, to remain free, democratic, not subjugated to Putin's dictatorship, was visible in the determination with which they fought. They sent their wives and children to safe places and enlisted in the war as if their victory and resilience depended on their historical memory and legacy for eternity.

In addition, uniforms with medals were found in the luggage of the killed Russian soldiers along with the new medals that would have had to be given to them for the conquest of the major cities in Ukraine (Pavlushko 2022). However, the welcoming of the liberating heroes did not take place, as Putin expected. Instead, they were met only with deep hatred, amplified by the fierce resistance in Kharkiv, a city inhabited almost entirely by ethnic Russians, as well as the protests in the occupied cities of Kherson or Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk and Luhansk (also inhabited by mostly ethnic Russians). It showed that the accusations of genocide and discrimination against ethnic Russians could not be justified: ethnic Russians, citizens of Ukraine, came out with Ukrainian flags to ask the Russian occupation troops to go home.

Another unexpected element was the reception of refugees. In 2015, 1 million refugees from the Middle East shook Europe, threatening to tear it apart and annihilate the European project. In 2022, in 3 weeks, 2.5 million Ukrainian refugees were received and offered all the love, warmth, support and openness that the states they went through were capable of giving. More than 4 million in Poland, one million in Romania, and even Hungary was in the same situation. A major effort with the contribution of ordinary citizens, civil society, adapted and resilient institutions of these states, already stretched thin by the pandemic and the energy crisis, with its major economic effects.

Finally, we can only contemplate the "strange war" of the first 3 weeks (Booth 2022): a high-tech army, claiming to be the second strongest army in the world, with leading niche capabilities, uses on the ground chaotic destruction operations characteristic of World War II. Of course, Russia later resorted to changing its strategy, using precision hypersonic weapons (Jackson 2022) against fixed targets, and recalibrating the conflict to turn it into a destructive, attrition, city leveling, will and achievements crushing war, meant to punish Ukraine and not leave it enough resources for endurance and survival. To drive its citizens away from their homes, making them relocate internally or as refugees in other parts of the world.

What could victory mean for Putin? The strategy of destruction endgame

Any prospect of ending a war or a larger conflagration lies in determining what the enemy's goals are, in this case, what victory would mean to Putin. What would a save face solution (Gamkrelidze 2022) be for him, to be able to return home and present major achievements – unspecified, not announced at the moment, but which could be simple to present as achieved objectives. Of course, if achieving goals were easy, surely Putin would

never stop. He wants Ukraine, the whole of Ukraine. If that fails, he wants to make sure that even if Kyiv or the new legitimate capital kept relevant and large portions of the territory, it would still not be a sustainable state, but rather one that is dependent on Western funding.

If he fails to occupy Ukraine and make it part of Russian territory, adding forces and capabilities (to Moscow), Putin wants a Ukraine that will be punished, humiliated, or at least turned into piles of rubble, a no-man's-land, deconstructed and weakened, if possible, without access to the sea, without industrial capacities and with as few inhabitants as possible, unsustainable and only useful as buffer territory. Of course, that was not the initial goal but, at the very least, it satisfies Putin's ambitions and plans, as well as offers something he can present as a victory.

Of course, in the beginning, victory meant the occupation of Kyiv and installing a pro-Russian regime. With a victory parade that he would salute on the Khreshchatik. Otherwise, it's harder to claim victory with the Russian flag raised on the piles of rubble left over from Ukrainian cities. The conquest of Mariupol – which stubbornly resisted (Sands 2022) until May 20th – would be a formula for victory: the land junction between Russia and Crimean was made, the Sea of Azov was fully under Russian control, and a continuum of Russian-speaking Novorossia was built. It would be an advantageous formula for leaving the scene, with “denazification” included – the destruction of the Azov Regiment, of the nationalist resistance in Ukraine. In reality, things are not so simple: on the ground, an unavoidable and indestructible insurgency of a nation that does not want to be occupied endures.

And here is another long-term miscalculation of Putin. Since 2014, he has contributed to the formation of Ukraine as a European state, nation, identity and democratic consciousness. Indeed, while Ukraine regained its statehood in 1991, when Leonid Kravchuk signed the dissolution of the USSR and the Alma Ata Accords, democracy was truly won through the Orange Revolution and the *Tak! Yushchenko* phenomenon in 2004-2005 (Karatnycky 2005), along with the right and appetite to protest peacefully, but with major effects on the overthrow of the regime. Ukrainians have become accustomed to questioning their leaders and massively challenging their choices. And this is a deeply democratic habit.

This was followed by the Europeanization through the 2013-2014 Maidan, the only public demonstration defending the European path and in favor of the EU, with its symbolism and martyrdom of the 100 people killed by *titushki* (Katchanovski 2021), regime servants, coordinated by Russia, who shot at the crowd of protesters. The identity was created after 2014 when the annexation of Crimea was the last straw and highlighted the battle East versus West, democracy versus authoritarianism, won by the pro-European choice. In February 2014, only 17% of the population wanted to join NATO, in June this increased to 72%.

Then, the real war of independence started in 2022. Today, Ukraine is completing its development as a nation through the foundations of the myths and symbols of becoming a European, democratic and free nation. And Putin has played a key role in this process, because of his repressive actions. He also generated the coherence of the Ukrainian nation and the ethnic Russians who chose to live in the imperfect and, not infrequently, anarchic democracy of Ukraine rather than under Putin's authoritarian rule in Russia. The free Ukrainian nation was also built by Russia's forced enforcement of non-alignment during the Yanukovich era (Yanukovich signs law declaring Ukraine's non-aligned status 2010) which culminated in the loss of Crimea and Russian military aggression in Donbas.

Russia's war against the world: endurance, total destruction and the war of attrition

The way out of the war can be achieved in several ways, and they are dependent on the desire and will to fight, the available resources for each combatant, and the costs of continuing the conflict. In this sense, while the desire and the will to fight are present in both Putin and

the Ukrainians, the available resources are debatable, Depending on how soon Russia will feel the sanctions – likely in the next 3 to 6 months if it will be able to recruit new conscripts or mercenaries and replace the loss of people on the battlefield. As for Ukraine, it depends on its ability to receive weapons and Western support. Finally, the costs of the conflict are irrelevant today for the Ukrainians, they have passed the point of no return and they will fight to the end, while Putin does not seem to care about the costs and the lives of the people, his citizens, either under sanctions or on the frontlines. Apparently, at least.

There was the issue of Putin's health, mental health and long isolation (Browne 2022). All of them debated various hypotheses. After all, the frustration and ambition of the Kremlin leader cannot be denied, nor can Putin's miscalculations: neither liberation, nor rapid warfare, nor the refugee weapon and the division of the West seemed to work. On the contrary, extremely strong sanctions have been adopted and cohesion was evident. The excuse that he is defending Russians and Russian speakers against discrimination did not withstand scrutiny. Quite the opposite, there is growing talk that Putin has been tricked into believing his propaganda. It is clear from the famous scene at the Security Council that no one dares to tell him anything but what he expects to hear, in any case, not the truth. Due to this and initial setbacks, the topic of the possibility of the use of weapons of mass destruction was raised (Edmonds 2022).

In any case, Putin stepped back and reconsidered the situation. He moved the spotlight and expectations from a simple, quick victory, marked by the triumphant march in Ukraine to the option of completely destroying the state that defied him, which does not bow to his will. To set an example for everyone. Hence, the conflict became an attrition war (Khalid 1973), in which only the ability to renew one's resources remains essential. And for Russia – forced to resort to Chinese support, trade corridors and alternative consumer tastes, and also recruit fresh people, to rotate the troops on the ground – that means taking greater risks when you mass in a war with Ukraine troops from all regions, from the northern part – Finland, Sweden, Norway, the Great North – and the Baltic area, from the Southern District – Chechnya, Abkhazia, South Ossetia – and the Central Military District, going as far as Mongolia and China and the Far East. All brought to support the long war effort.

For Ukraine, this means the ability to resupply weapons. Is the window of opportunity closing? Putin's threat to any transport convoy was made openly. As well as the use of precision missiles hypersonic missiles, of cruise missiles, to hit warehouses, military units, training camps, and the soldiers' bedrooms. The attack on supply lines – weapons, ammunition, food, fuel, protective equipment, medicine, and humanitarian aid – could hint at the redrawing of Russian strategies in Ukraine, the new aim being Ukraine's capitulation or destruction.

Of course, the idea of avoiding an escalation and the engagement of NATO or its Member States in the conflict is welcomed. It's a good thing. In order to not take part in the battle of finger pointing regarding who is to blame for the prolongation of the conflict or the escalation to the level of the Third World War. However, we must be aware that this is not just about Ukraine, which has defied the Kremlin and the great visionary, Putin. It's about Russia's war with the West – with democracy, with individual freedoms, with the free choice of sovereign states, with the Western way of life. It's about his international standing and desire to obtain superpower status for Moscow (it is mentioned in Putin's latest speech at the Lujniki Stadium, referring to the two superpowers – an explicit allusion to the Cold War status). It is also about Russia's war with the world, its rules, what it considers acceptable behavior, the isolation of Putin's Russia and its indiscriminate designation of new enemies – all those who want the rules-based system in the contemporary world, not the survival of the strongest.

The Nagorno-Karabakh model of the extended strip. The perpetual war

Putin's Russia did not invent anything. It only uses what it has tried elsewhere in the world, and Nagorno Karabakh seems to be the site of perpetual war (Halderman 1975) and the never-ending threat of a resumption of the conflagration, with constant fire exchanges and the perpetuation of the conflict indefinitely. In the region of Azerbaijan cut off by Armenia – with significant Russian support in 1988, during the time of the Soviet Union, when nothing happened without the knowledge and approval of Moscow – a buffer zone was created by the destruction caused by the war.

The 7 Azerbaijani districts in the Nagorno Karabakh area have been systematically destroyed, the inhabitants have been virtually evicted, and among the large buildings completely destroyed and left like that for 34 years, only soldiers could be found, hiding in trenches, sporadically exchanging fire with the other side. A wide and uninhabited strip of border, unsuitable for any activity, without anything being rebuilt, a perpetual cemetery reminiscent of the past confrontations, where nothing happened until the Azerbaijanis regained the territory two years ago (The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: A Visual Explainer 2022).

Because this is the model that Russia is now implementing, that of perpetual war, of the constant threat of the resumption of the conflict, a 150-kilometer-wide strip at the Russian-Ukrainian border, where only Russia decides what and how much is built. A region under constant threat of conflict, where sporadic or more intense fire exchanges will take place at the line of contact in Donbas, similar to what happened between 2014 and 2022, involving the republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, supported by the Russian army, and the Ukrainian army. However, now the strip is much wider, it also covers the southern part of the de facto border with Crimea, occupied in 2014 and annexed by Russia. And the conflict can continue, slice by slice, until the ambitious takeover of the entire territory is completed and the country that did not want to submit is destroyed.

That is why Russia wants “disarmament” and “denazification”, meaning (Victory Parade on Red Square 2022) the toppling of the neighboring democratic regime and the abandonment of Ukraine, after being transformed into a dysfunctional, weak, defenseless, if possible, unviable, landlocked, Russian-controlled state; without even a bit of independence, on the contrary, the subject of the limited sovereignty that Russia has already imposed in Minsk, after the quasi-Anschluss of Belarus. A generalized, perpetual conflict zone that does not allow any long-term investment, as no investor would risk losing their money when the conflict reignites.

Ukraine would be transformed into a mere broad border strip of the Russian World, because it did not want to surrender and be part of this Russian world, “putinized”, with no future and no prospects. Sure, dependence on Russia, a country that is now the subject of a reputation deficit and the acute lack of any acceptable form of prestige in the international arena – where ethics play a growing role in the 21st century. A country under sanctions, globally ostracized, which does not explain how it will ever be able to propose a solution for the functioning and survival of its population, let alone Belarus and Ukraine, which it wants as subjects.

Scenarios for Ukraine: from capitulation to eternal war. The leveling of Ukraine

With two actors in a limitless confrontation and with the possibility to go all the way, the natural way out would be the victory of one or the other. But things are neither so linear nor so unlimited: Putin's resources are dwindling and troop morale is plummeting. Financial resources are not endless and sanctions are already having an impact. Public dissatisfaction is

boiling over. It is true that he has channeled the blame towards the West, but even this solution cannot survive in the long run. The costs will be felt.

As for Ukraine, beyond the will and ambition, the feeling that it is on the right side of history, that it teaches lessons in posterity and that it proves its strength, it's dependent on the resources coming from the West. It cannot have a no-fly zone, planes, or strong anti-aircraft defenses, but it has enough troops, volunteers, anti-tank and small anti-aircraft weapons to last a long time and inflict significant damage to Russian troops. However, another factor here is the resilience, image, and certain Western symbolic elements that mark its welcoming among the Western nations, the European and Euro-Atlantic perspectives (Marcos 2022). The manifest political will of the West to accept Ukraine in its midst. With relevant and encompassing gestures.

Accepting a European prospect for Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia is the first step. Then the recognition as a democratic state, which fights for shared principles and values. The symbolic gestures of Zelenski's speeches hosted in Congress, the British Parliament, the German Parliament, etc. can all play a role. Likewise, the nomination and possibly the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to President Zelensky (Volodimir Zelensky Nominated for the Nobel Prize. The European Parliament has nominated the president and people of Ukraine 2022) (Parliament 2022) can also help. Other symbolic elements are added, elements that can underline Western support in various ways – Eurovision, positions within the UN, for example, that of non-permanent members of the UN SC – as well as other symbolic gestures, such as the investigations of the International Criminal Court or the International Court of Justice, not to mention the relevance of a Special Court for Ukraine and Russian war crimes.

The scenarios are not that simple. Russia can win, but only through the total destruction of Ukraine: it cannot rule over a people who sincerely hates it and to whom it has done so much harm. There will always be blood between Putin's Russia and Ukraine, lots of innocent blood, killed civilians, children, destroyed buildings, hospitals, homes, theaters, industry and ruined everyday life. And this cannot be forgotten and forgiven. And Ukraine can only win through selflessness and stubbornness, but it will be much harder to regain the territory already occupied by Russia. Going to the negotiation table too early can expose Ukraine even more, despite the situation on the ground, and it risks missing the peace agreement, namely the international public support that appreciates its efforts to defend its existence.

The intermediate, gray, undefined variants remain: cessation of the acute, explosive phase of the war, in a few weeks/1-2 months, with the achievement of some objectives by Russia, but without the desire to end the formal war, without any agreement, without any negotiation, with the expectation to resume hostilities at any time. It is a slow destruction and impoverishment of Ukraine as a state because no one will invest in what can become a war zone at any moment (Lawson 2022.) (Gallo 2022). An actual razing of the Ukrainian state and of its will to defend and survive, a mass expulsion of the people of Ukraine, left in ambiguity, without perspectives, a gray area between the West and the so-called Russian World. At least as long as Putin and his regime exist.

Of course, there can be a ceasefire agreement. One that is difficult to achieve, which, in fact, will formalize the theft of Ukrainian territories and the establishment of popular republics to administer the Russian-occupied territories in the East (Giles 2022). A Ukraine left with or without access to the sea – depending on the prospect of Russia occupying Odessa – with a more viable or less viable Ukrainian state. With the lingering fear of the possible resumption of hostilities at any time, but with an independent country, enjoying exceptional prestige and worth defending. A well-armed border state, enjoying international support, to stop Russia's advance towards the west. Possibly integrated into the West and its democratic

structures, regardless of the shape the state will take at that time, as long as it is under the control of the legitimate authorities. Ambiguity and its undefined status will block its development as a state. Dependence on Western supplies and a risky space for everyday life. This threatens to destroy Ukraine in the long run and turn it into a bankrupt state, with no prospects.

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