

Russia's war plan: subjugate Ukraine, intimidate Europe, buy off the US

Marek Menkiszak

Russia is preparing to escalate its aggression against Ukraine and launch a new phase of its so-called hybrid war against Europe. The Kremlin is pursuing this course because it remains unable to achieve its objectives and faces mounting domestic challenges. At the same time, it remains confident of victory, basing this assessment on the perceived weaknesses of its adversaries – Ukraine and the West.

Russia's first objective is to continue devastating Ukraine and force its de facto capitulation so as to subjugate the country. Second, Moscow is striving to weaken and intimidate European countries in order to curb their support for Ukraine, undermine sanctions pressure on Russia and foment domestic instability. This would create conditions for dismantling the existing European security order and expanding Russian penetration of the continent. Third, it aims to manipulate and 'buy off' the Trump administration by offering the prospect of lucrative business deals, seeking to induce Washington to end all support for Ukraine, lift sanctions against Russia and resume cooperation with Moscow, thereby strengthening Vladimir Putin's regime.

For these reasons, further Russian escalation is inevitable, although Western countries could seek to limit its scale by strengthening both their resilience and their capacity to deter Moscow, including by significantly raising the costs of its aggressive policies through retaliatory measures.

Stalemate in the war and the Kremlin's mounting difficulties

Russia faces a problem: it has so far failed to achieve the objectives that would bring it closer to victory in its war against Ukraine. Its military operations have proved ineffective, with successive waves of attacks failing either to break through the front line or shift it significantly. Despite mounting losses, after four and a half years of war Russian forces have been unable to capture even the entire Donetsk Oblast, the annexation of which Moscow proclaimed in the autumn of 2022, citing the need to 'defend' it as the formal pretext for launching its full-scale aggression. Similarly, Russia's air campaign against Kyiv, other cities and numerous infrastructure facilities across Ukraine has failed to produce the intended results.

Moreover, the growing intensity and effectiveness of Ukrainian strikes on critical infrastructure deep inside Russia – primarily refineries, but also storage facilities, ports and vessels used to transport fuel – have caused serious economic problems. This summer, Russia's refining capacity fell by around half from 2025 levels, and the country is

experiencing a new phase of a fuel crisis. The attacks have also produced political and psychological effects, with signs of war fatigue emerging among the Russian public and the broader elite, alongside growing frustration with the Russian government and armed forces over their inability to provide a sense of security.

Despite the gradual escalation of its so-called hybrid warfare below the threshold of overt armed aggression, Russia has also failed to dissuade European countries from continuing to support Ukraine, particularly through military assistance, which Moscow regards as the main obstacle to victory. Contrary to the Kremlin's expectations, these efforts have neither triggered internal crises in individual European countries or within organisations such as the EU and NATO, nor led to changes of government or shifts in policy towards Russia and Ukraine in line with Moscow's intentions. Sanctions against Russia have remained in place and have even been gradually expanded, while NATO has stepped up its military activity near Russia's borders.

Furthermore, Russian efforts to persuade the Trump administration to pursue one of Moscow's two preferred scenarios have so far proved unsuccessful. The first of these would involve Washington forcing Kyiv to freeze the conflict on terms dictated by Russia, amounting in practice to Ukraine's conditional capitulation. The second, more realistic scenario would involve severing the current link and conditionality between settling the Russia-Ukraine conflict and normalising Russia-US relations. This would entail a complete withdrawal of US support for Ukraine, including intelligence and communications assistance, and possibly even the suspension of the PURL programme, through which European countries purchase US weapons to supply Ukraine. To this end, the Kremlin has sought to 'buy off' the US administration with offers of lucrative business deals aimed primarily at Trump's associates, with the broader aim of normalising relations, securing the lifting of US sanctions and restoring US cooperation with Russia, even without an end to the war.

Moscow's response: escalation rather than a freeze

Russian strategic culture, the neo-totalitarian character of the country's political regime and the composition and mindset of the narrow ruling circle around Putin **prevent Moscow from fundamentally changing course**. Putin and his closest associates from the security establishment believe that Russia is at war not only with Ukraine but also with NATO and the entire 'collective West'. They also remain confident of victory in this confrontation, seeing their chances of success less in the strength of the Russian military than in political developments that they interpret as evidence of growing weakness among their adversaries.

Russia has been deliberately exacerbating disruptions to Ukraine's critical infrastructure. It has also taken note of deteriorating public sentiment in the country, rising political tensions and successive scandals that are destabilising Ukraine and damaging its image in the West. Moreover, Russia has closely followed a gradual decline in public support for Ukraine across Europe, growing political polarisation and the rise of populist and nationalist forces that are open to changing their countries' policies towards Ukraine and Russia in ways that align with the Kremlin's intentions.

Furthermore, Russia has been actively engaged in destabilising activities, seeking to influence election campaigns in major European countries, including France, Germany, the United Kingdom and Poland, primarily through large-scale disinformation operations. The

Kremlin is also aware of the mounting difficulties facing the Trump administration, declining public support for both Trump and the Republican Party and the adverse economic and political consequences of US entanglement in the conflict with Iran, which is draining military resources, driving up fuel prices and exacerbating tensions between Washington and its allies and partners.

All this means that, despite mounting domestic difficulties, Russia has no incentive to freeze the war against Ukraine or scale back its aggressive actions against Western countries, particularly in Europe. Signs of willingness by the White House and some European governments to engage in high-level political dialogue with Moscow, along with statements by some Western politicians questioning the rationale for maintaining sanctions against Russia and support for Ukraine, are interpreted by the Kremlin as signs of weakness and evidence that its aggressive actions are proving effective. It therefore sees escalation as the best way to advance its objectives. Consequently, further Russian escalation should be expected regardless of any initiatives undertaken by Ukraine or the West.

Russia's approach to Ukraine: devastate in order to subjugate

Moscow's plans for Ukraine are fairly clear. Russia intends not only to continue but to intensify its air strikes on Ukrainian cities and key elements of the country's critical infrastructure. To this end, it is deploying new technologies, including jet-powered drones and ballistic missiles with multiple warheads. In the coming months, Russia may mobilise hundreds of thousands of reservists (not necessarily through an overt, one-off decree, as in September 2022) to widen the front in Ukraine and increase military pressure on Kyiv.

Through these attacks, the Kremlin intends to cripple Ukraine's electricity, heating and water and sewage systems, particularly in major cities, and to destroy key railway hubs and border crossings in the west of the country, thereby hindering the delivery of supplies from the West. The aim is to trigger a humanitarian crisis in Ukraine during the winter that could spill over beyond its borders, with new waves of refugees potentially undermining domestic stability in European countries. In the most favourable scenario for Moscow, this would raise the costs of the war for Ukraine to the point of triggering a domestic political crisis and forcing the Ukrainian government to enter into negotiations with Russia on terms dictated by the Kremlin.

Russia's approach to Europe: intimidate to weaken and penetrate

With regard to Europe, Moscow's objective is to intimidate governments, political elites and, above all, societies, particularly in countries that are crucial to European policy and support for Ukraine, by escalating its increasingly aggressive and kinetic hybrid warfare. This will include large-scale propaganda and disinformation campaigns conducted through social media, waves of sabotage and terrorist attacks, and cyberattacks targeting defence plants and critical infrastructure facilities and networks, including power plants, water systems, electricity grids, oil and gas pipelines, railway networks, airports, storage facilities and other sites – all designed to create an impression of chaos and provoke panic.

At the same time, an escalation of airspace violations and attacks involving drones, alongside supposedly accidental missile strikes and overflights by combat aircraft, is highly likely. These actions could result in material damage and casualties. In addition to testing defence systems and response procedures and seeking to reduce the willingness of NATO

member states to supply air-defence assets to Ukraine, Russia's aim is to signal its readiness to raise the costs of the war for Western countries and to weaken them internally by undermining public trust in state institutions, the armed forces and alliances.

The Kremlin's preferred outcome would see the collapse of European support for maintaining the sanctions regime against Russia and, crucially, for providing further assistance to Ukraine, particularly military aid. New European governments would be expected to engage in dialogue with Moscow, halt support for Ukraine and, most importantly, fuel tensions that would leave NATO paralysed and the European Union weakened, thereby paving the way for further Russian penetration of the continent.

Russia's approach to the US: buy off to gain leverage and power

Moscow has welcomed the Trump administration's renewed efforts to bring about a swift end to the conflict after a six-month hiatus in US peace mediation, stemming largely from US political and military involvement in the war with Iran. The Kremlin recognises that Washington, with congressional elections approaching in early November, is seeking at least a semblance of success – in the form of a framework for a peace agreement and/or business deals with Russia – while also aiming to ease pressure on energy and food markets and, above all, to curb Russian cooperation with Iran and China, particularly in the military sphere.

Moscow therefore accuses Ukraine and European countries of obstructing the 'peace process' and maintains the appearance of readiness for dialogue while simultaneously threatening to escalate the conflict and expand its scope beyond Ukraine. It has also likely offered Washington a reduction in support for Iran, including intelligence assistance, in exchange for similar US steps with regard to Ukraine.

Most importantly, however, Russia has intensified its efforts to 'buy off' the Trump administration with supposedly lucrative business offers aimed primarily at the US president's business associates, hoping to persuade Washington to lift its sanctions against Russia and, over time, to enable transfers of capital and technology that would strengthen the country.

Response: deterrence and active defence

In light of the Kremlin's calculations outlined above, **further escalation by Moscow is inevitable. The only viable approach to limiting its scale is to strengthen the credibility of deterrence against Russia.** Moscow's calculations can be influenced only by raising the current and future costs of its aggressive actions. Western countries possess the tools required to pursue this policy.

First, this entails **assertive strategic communication directed at Moscow**: refraining from publicly expressing fears and concerns or offering dialogue and concessions, and instead explicitly identifying Russia as the party responsible for aggressive actions and warning that retaliatory measures will follow.

Second, this involves **asymmetric political measures**, such as expelling Russian diplomats, closing borders and restricting Russian nationals' entry into European countries, as well as economic measures: further sanctions, including shifting from the price cap on Russian oil towards an energy embargo, detaining 'shadow fleet' vessels and using frozen Russian

assets to support Ukraine.

The third component of this approach is to **increase NATO's military activity in Russia's vicinity and bolster the presence of allied forces on NATO's eastern flank**. There is also a need for covert symmetric measures against Russia, drawing on the offensive capabilities of the cyber forces and intelligence services of selected Western countries and Ukraine, which has long been conducting similar operations on Russian territory.

Russian decision-makers tend to engage in wishful thinking, overestimate their own strength and underestimate their adversaries, and frequently resort to excessively radical and brutal methods which can produce outcomes contrary to their intentions, as has been the case in recent years. **It is therefore likely that Moscow will fail to achieve its objectives, although this will also depend on whether the Western community as a whole adopts an assertive stance.**