

Russia's Ukrainian dilemma: Moscow's strategy towards Kyiv

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Recent weeks have brought further displays of Russia's escalating aggressive rhetoric and actions towards Ukraine, including troop movements near its border, as well as use of energy as leverage. This raises questions about Moscow's intentions. Both the statements of Russian leaders and the policy of the Russian Federation in recent years indicate that it has not abandoned attempts to achieve one of its main policy objectives: restoring control over Ukraine. This is despite the fact that its actions to date – both limited military aggression and political, economic, and propaganda pressure – have only moved it further away from this goal. In the current conditions, with the stalemate in the Donbas conflict continuing, the Russian Federation is faced with a choice of its future strategy towards Ukraine. It has two main options: to escalate the armed conflict in the Donbas in order to achieve a rapid breakthrough, or to intensify long-term pressure, i.e. to play for Kyiv's gradual exhaustion. The choice of strategy depends on the Russian perception of the situation, the attitude of Ukraine itself, and the behaviour of key Western actors.

The failures of Kremlin policy towards Ukraine

Ukraine has been and remains a key state for the Russian Federation in the so-called post-Soviet area (a term which is inadequate, but which reflects the Russian point of view), in relation to which the re-establishment of strategic control, understood as the ability to influence policy – foreign, security, but also partly internal – in accordance with the Kremlin's interests remains Moscow's objective. Ukraine's crucial importance for Russia is determined by a number of factors, including its key geostrategic position. From Moscow's perspective, Ukraine is an indispensable buffer between Russia and NATO. Ukraine's demographic and economic potential has also led the Russian Federation to make several unsuccessful attempts (in the early 1990s, at the beginning of the 21st century, in 2003–2004 and in 2010–2014) to include it in the Eurasian integration structures it controls. These efforts have also been justified by the idea, promoted by Kremlin propaganda, of a "Russian world" and a three-part Russian nation (White, Small and Great Russian – meaning Belarusians, Ukrainians and Russians), of which Ukraine and Ukrainians remain the key elements for Moscow. The Kremlin has perceived, and continues to perceive, the potential success of Ukraine's democratic transformation, its adoption of European standards, and its political and economic integration with Western structures as a serious threat, not only to the security of the Russian Federation, but also to the stability of Putin's authoritarian regime.

The fundamental problem for Putin's Russia was that all its previous efforts to subjugate its neighbour, to include it in Eurasian integration, and to block the process of strengthening its cooperation with Western states and structures had failed. This was also the case in 2014, when Russia's aggression against Ukraine resulted from the failure of attempts to include it in the Moscow-initiated Customs Union (later the Eurasian Economic Union) and the victory of the Ukrainian democratic revolution. The annexation of Crimea brought the Kremlin significant internal political benefits (several years of high public support for Vladimir Putin) and geostrategic gains (a change in the balance of power in the Black Sea region in Russia's favour), while the occupation of part of Donbas created a permanent flashpoint generating chronic political, economic and security headaches for the authorities in Kyiv. Yet both of the benefits that Moscow accrued were, firstly, disproportionate to its ambitions, and secondly – burdened with serious costs in the form of the greatest crisis in relations with the West since the end of the Cold War, involving a partial freeze on cooperation and above all the imposition of Western sanctions. The restrictions – which were too weak to destabilise Russia's economy or lead to Moscow's complete political isolation from the West – have nevertheless deepened the country's economic crisis and rendered it unable to fulfil a number of its foreign and security policy goals. The Kremlin's moves have resulted – contrary to its interests – in an increase in the military presence of the U.S. and its allies on NATO's eastern flank, an increase in Western political, economic and security support for Ukraine and certain other post-Soviet states, and the destruction of the chances for the Russian Federation to expand its influence on the continent through the gradual implementation of the Russian idea of a Greater Europe (creating a model for the selective integration of Russia and the EU, directed against the United States).¹

Russia's policy towards Ukraine has had the opposite effect to that intended – it has led to a serious rise in anti-Russian sentiment in the country, a consolidation of society around the idea of state defence, and an increase in support for Ukraine's membership of NATO and the EU. Moreover, despite forcing Kyiv to sign (in 2014 and 2015) the so-called Minsk Agreements on the regulation of the conflict in Donbas, Moscow has not managed to bring about the implementation of the provisions of this document that are beneficial to its interests – in particular, on the 'autonomy' for Donbas, which it intends to ultimately lead to the federalisation of all of Ukraine, and to use this as leverage to influence the political situation in the country, including guaranteeing its effective 'neutralisation' (non-allied status). Ukraine has achieved significant successes in terms of European integration: it has signed an association agreement with the EU, including establishing a deep and comprehensive free trade area, and has also achieved visa-free travel with the EU, reoriented its trade towards the EU, and freed itself from dependence on Russian natural gas imports.²

» All Russian efforts to date to subjugate Ukraine have failed. Russia's policy has been counterproductive.

Russian attempts to weaken Ukraine

After 2015, when the phase of expanding the area of Russian occupation in Ukraine ended, the Kremlin hoped that the economic crisis and expected political upheaval would lead to a serious weakening of the country, a wave of public disillusionment with the policies of its pro-Western authorities, and mutual fatigue and disillusionment between the West and Ukraine, resulting in reduced Western support. This was expected to trigger a political turning point, opening the way for a takeover in Kyiv by 'pragmatic' forces advocating a *modus vivendi* with Russia at the expense of political concessions and a relaxation of cooperation with the West.

¹ See more extensively M. Menkiszak, *A strategic continuation, a tactical change. Russia's European security policy*, OSW, Warsaw 2019, osw.waw.pl.

² For more information see K. Nieczypor, 'Gra pozorów. Impas w sprawie wojny w Donbasie', *Komentarze OSW*, no. 370, 23 December 2020, osw.waw.pl; S. Kardaś, T. Iwański, 'From vassalisation to emancipation. Ukrainian-Russian gas co-operation has been revised', *OSW Commentary*, no. 263, 7 March 2018, osw.waw.pl.

To this end, Moscow has taken a number of measures: it has introduced successive economic sanctions against Ukraine, and has periodically applied pressure through the use of energy as leverage, including pushing forward infrastructure projects (TurkStream, Nord Stream 2) aimed at eventually eliminating the transit of Russian gas through its territory to EU states, which would deprive it of significant revenues. Russian propaganda has also conducted campaigns aimed at discrediting its neighbour in the eyes of Western states, painting a false picture of a permanently unstable country dominated by extreme nationalists. The instruments used included the use of aggressive methods; Russian hackers, for example, have attacked Ukrainian state institutions and critical infrastructure facilities (power plants). The Russian armed forces have consistently expanded and modernised their potential near the borders of Ukraine and in occupied Crimea, organised military demonstrations, and blocked shipping through the Kerch Strait and in the Sea of Azov, severely hampering the operation of Ukrainian ports.³

In the Donbas, Moscow-controlled ‘separatists’ have periodically organised an escalation of shelling, causing casualties among both Ukrainian soldiers and civilians. At

¶ The Kremlin hoped that the economic and political crisis in Ukraine would lead to its weakening and the seizure of power in Kyiv by ‘pragmatic’ forces ready to negotiate a *modus vivendi* with Russia.

the same time, the Russian side has been exerting political pressure on Ukraine and European mediators (Germany and France) to ensure the effective legitimacy of the ‘separatists’ by forcing Kyiv to conduct direct negotiations with them (primarily through the use of the Trilateral Contact Group). It was hoped that the intermediaries, tired of the conflict and fearing a serious escalation of the situation, would force the Ukrainian government to make concessions – first and foremost by organising elections in the occupied territories and recognising their new authorities, combined with granting them limited autonomy (under the so-called Steinmeier formula). However, this has not happened.⁴

Zelensky: Russian hope and disappointment

New hopes for breaking the stalemate were raised in Moscow by Volodymyr Zelensky and his Servant of the People party, which came to power in Ukraine in 2019. Zelensky, a TV celebrity with no political experience, came from the country’s Russian-speaking southeast and had previously been active as an artist and businessman in Russia, among other places. His campaign was centred around accusing the post-revolutionary ruling elite of corruption. Importantly, one of the main slogans of his election campaign was to bring about peace in Donbas, and he also declared readiness for direct talks with Russia.⁵

Moscow decided to take advantage of this and test how far Zelensky would go in making concessions to it in order to gain at least limited success in the peace process. In exchange for Kyiv’s overt agreement to the so-called Steinmeier formula and a de facto increase in the role of the trilateral working group, it agreed to exchange the majority of prisoners and detainees. However, both the growing political opposition and backlash within Ukrainian society against any concessions to Russia, and the Russian Federation’s lack of readiness for a real and lasting ceasefire before the implementation of the political terms of the Minsk agreements, served to discourage the authorities in Kyiv from pursuing this line. Thus, Moscow failed to catch Zelensky in a political trap.

Moreover, in 2021, the Ukrainian side took a number of steps which the Kremlin saw as a direct challenge to it. These included: a ban on the domestic broadcasting of Russian television channels

³ See in more detail: W. Górecki, ‘Pakiet rosyjskich sankcji wobec Ukrainy’, OSW, 13 January 2016, osw.waw.pl; K. Nieczypor, ‘A closely watched basin. The Russian–Ukrainian tensions in the Sea of Azov’, OSW Commentary, no. 279, 8 August 2018, osw.waw.pl.

⁴ See K. Nieczypor, ‘Gra pozorów...’, *op. cit.*

⁵ See J. Strzelecki, ‘Russia on Zelenskiy’s victory’, OSW, 23 April 2019, osw.waw.pl.

purveying state propaganda; the initiation of criminal proceedings and house arrest against the pro-Russian Ukrainian politician Viktor Medvedchuk, Putin's personal friend, who treated him as a kind of informal representative in Ukraine; activities in the realm of the politics of memory, which runs counter to Moscow's neo-Stalinist narrative; the organisation of the so-called Crimean Platform (a forum for an international debate on the liquidation of the Russian occupation of Crimea).⁶

Moscow has been particularly irritated by Kyiv's closer cooperation with the West (mainly the US, the UK and Turkey) in the security sphere. This has manifested itself in the delivery of military equipment, exercises with NATO member states organised in Ukraine and on the Black Sea, the British navy's freedom of navigation mission off the coast of Crimea (June 2021), the agreement on security co-operation with Washington (August 2021), and US defence secretary Lloyd Austin's visit to Kyiv in October 2021. These events provoked a sharp reaction from the Russian side in the form of rhetorical attacks and armed demonstrations.

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Russian policy perspectives and conditions: armed escalation...

Given the failure of Moscow's attempts to achieve its key objectives with regard to Ukraine using the various tools at its disposal, and the stalemate over the situation in Donbas, Russia is faced with a choice as to its future strategy and attitude towards its neighbour. In the light of past experience, Russia's *modus operandi* and external circumstances, it appears that it may take one of two routes: seeking a sudden turning point through the escalation of the armed conflict in the Donbas (with the prospect of it spilling over into other regions of south-eastern Ukraine), or continuing long-term multi-faceted pressure in anticipation of a weakening of the country and possible internal political changes.

The Russian Federation's military potential and its potential escalation dominance (its ability for multi-stage escalation by introducing more and more serious capabilities into the conflict area), as well as the fear of most Western states of the consequences of an outbreak of another major armed conflict in Eastern Europe, mean that the use of the army remains the strongest instrument Russia can use to influence Ukraine.

Such a scenario could take various forms. The minimal – and most likely – scenario would probably involve a local offensive by "separatists" in Donbas (with the support of regular Russian forces), the aim of which would be to shift the front line significantly. Such an operation would, according to Moscow's intention, humiliate the Ukrainian authorities and alert Western states into initiating diplomatic action to stop the fighting. The price for their success would be concessions from Kyiv – at least an actual consent to the implementation of the political terms of the Minsk agreements as interpreted by the Kremlin. At the same time (in Moscow's distorted perception), this would provoke internal disputes in Ukraine under the slogan of holding those responsible for the defeat accountable, and – ideally – lead to a political breakthrough which would open the way to power to more 'pragmatic' forces ready to negotiate a *modus vivendi* with Russia.

Such action could be accompanied by simultaneous cyberattacks, an economic and energy blockade (elements of which are already present today – see further), and possibly sabotage, subversion and terrorist acts carried out in Ukraine. The scope of such an escalation would be flexibly adjusted, on the one hand to the neighbour's military and political resistance capabilities and will (and its own losses),

⁶ For more see: S. Matuszak, K. Nieczypor, 'Ukraine: Zelensky's anti-Russian move?', OSW, 24 February 2021, osw.waw.pl; K. Nieczypor, 'Inauguration of the Crimea Platform: a successful start to a difficult process', OSW, 24 August 2021, osw.waw.pl.

and on the other hand to the reaction of the West, its diplomatic moves, and the scope of sanction pressure. If Moscow saw the situation developing in its favour, it could (though this seems unlikely) increase the scale of its aggression, occupying further areas (especially in the south-east of the country, which would perhaps lead to connecting them with occupied Crimea). This would involve a land invasion in other border regions besides the Donbas. The most radical option, albeit highly unlikely, would be an attempt at military occupation of the entire Ukrainian territory, which would, however, radically increase Moscow's potential human, material and political costs (among other things, occupying such a large country would require huge forces to fight the Ukrainian insurgency).

There are several arguments in favour of the escalation scenario. Firstly, Moscow is apparently impatient with the lack of results from its previous policy of pressure on Kyiv.⁷ Secondly, the longer Ukraine

II Russia is faced with the choice of its subsequent strategy towards Ukraine: seeking a political breakthrough via the escalation of the armed conflict in the Donbas, or using sustained pressure to weaken it and trigger intra-political changes.

remains outside Moscow's strategic control, the further it distances itself from Moscow in all respects, and the stronger its independent existence becomes. Third, the Kremlin may see the current international situation as conducive to the implementation of such a plan.

The first important factor here is Moscow's likely perception of the relative weakness of the US – a key actor that could prevent it from pursuing aggressive action against Ukraine. The Kremlin's initial fear of "retribution" from the new Joe Biden administration for its interference in the 2016 presidential election seems to have given way to the belief that Washington is focused on domestic problems and the challenge from China, so it is seeking to improve relations with the Russian Federation. This may be evidenced by, among other things, decisions to drop further restrictions targeting the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, a rather mild response to dangerous Russian cyberattacks on the United States (including on elements of its critical infrastructure), and an intensification of political and security (including arms control) dialogue with Moscow.

Another important element of the international situation is the political changes in the European Union. This concerns in particular the parliamentary elections in Germany and the departure of Chancellor Angela Merkel, whom the Kremlin considers co-responsible for the EU's sanctions against Russia. According to Moscow, the new German government will be politically weaker and, although it will probably not lead to a positive breakthrough in relations with Germany, it will continue the policy of dialogue and attempts at selective positive engagement, seeking to reduce tensions between the two countries. In addition, under the leadership of Emmanuel Macron, who faces presidential elections in spring 2022 and competition from pro-Russian candidates, France is maintaining its efforts to improve relations with the Russian Federation and would like to avoid another deep crisis in its relations with the EU.

The third factor is the energy crisis, manifested by a sharp rise in the price of energy, especially on the European market. There are many factors underlying this, but it has been intentionally exacerbated by the harmful actions of Russia, which seeks to exploit it for its own political and economic objectives. What matters in this case, however, is that in Moscow's perception this situation reduces the risk of a harsh reaction from the European Union to its other aggressive moves, for fear that it will make greater use of its 'energy weapons'.

The fourth element of the international situation is the growing migration crisis on the border of Belarus with Poland and Lithuania, artificially provoked – as a form of hybrid war with Warsaw and

⁷ For more details see K. Nieczypor, A. Wilk, P. Żochowski, 'The Donbas crisis: between bluff and war', OSW, 6 April 2021, osw.waw.pl.

Vilnius – by Alyaksandr Lukashenka's regime with the support of Russia. Fear of its escalation may result in EU restraint in reacting to the situation in Ukraine.

Finally: the fifth element is the persistent tensions in the Taiwan Strait related to China's increasingly aggressive actions against Taiwan, which could lead to a local crisis drawing away U.S. attention

and involving its military forces, and potentially hinder Washington's rapid and robust response to a new crisis in Eastern Europe.

¶ The scenario of a long-term exhaustion of Ukraine is supported by the fact that an armed escalation could entail serious costs and risks for Russia, with these being directly proportional to the scale of aggression.

The fact that Moscow is considering the implementation of a scenario of armed escalation can also be inferred from the clear sharpening of Putin's rhetoric. In an article published in July 2021, the president of the Russian Federation not only once again promoted the thesis of the historical unity of Ukraine and Russia, and of the two peoples, but also actually suggested that Ukrainian statehood was transitory, as an allegedly artificial creation created on the initiative of its western neighbours. He also threatened that the Ukrainian state may cease to exist if Kyiv continues its current policy, which is considered hostile by the Kremlin. He pointed to its neighbour's return to cooperation as the only alternative. Putin's article should be seen as an element of rhetorical deterrence, addressed not so much to Kyiv, but primarily to the US and the EU; it is in fact a demand that they recognise Moscow's special interests in Ukraine, the need to restrict its sovereignty, and in particular stop supporting it in the sphere of security.⁸

Russia also tested the West by making demonstratively large force movements in the border area with Ukraine in April 2021.⁹ The response – mainly in the form of a declaration of concern – on the one hand did not provide Moscow with the political advantage of trying to get Kyiv to make concessions, but on the other hand it may have suggested that in the event of an actual invasion their response would remain limited. In this context, the subsequent actions of this kind, launched by the Russian military in October and November this year, should be treated either as another test and warning to Ukraine and the USA, or as a prelude to an escalation scenario.

...or a game of exhaustion

A major military operation in Ukraine is not the only scenario Moscow is considering, especially since it carries a number of risks. Russia can count on the cumulative effect of the various instruments it uses. These include applying pressure in the economic and energy spheres, an element of which is the very serious consequences for the Ukrainian economy of a sharp increase in the price of energy sources, which has been fuelled by the Kremlin. New sanctions have also been added, including the interruption in recent weeks of coal supplies, which its neighbour needs before the winter season, and the refusal to sell electricity.¹⁰ In the longer term, the transit of Russian gas through Ukraine is expected to be further diminished, and eventually stopped altogether, after Nord Stream 2 becomes operational in 2022, which will incur significant financial losses for Ukraine (approximately US\$2 billion a year), and may lead to serious impediments to the use of the Ukrainian gas transmission system (including for internal purposes), or even its permanent damage.

⁸ See 'Статья Владимира Путина «Об историческом единстве русских и украинцев»', Президент России, 12 July 2021, kremlin.ru.

⁹ See M. Menkiszak, A. Wilk, 'Russian pressure on Ukraine: military and political dimensions', OSW, 14 April 2021, osw.waw.pl.

¹⁰ See S. Matuszak, 'Ukraine on the verge of an energy crisis', OSW, 10 November 2021, osw.waw.pl. Belarus has acted in a similar way.

The Russian Federation has at its disposal not only a continuation of the current low-intensity armed conflict in the Donbas (with the possibility of a periodic increase in the scale of shelling), but also further military provocations on the Azov and Black Seas, posing security risks and striking at Ukraine's economic interests. Finally: further cyber-attacks are possible, including on Ukrainian state institutions and critical infrastructure, as well as subversion and terrorist operations organised by Russian special forces on its territory. The Kremlin may hope that, as a result of the use of the above tools over a sustained period of time, they can cumulatively destabilise the political and economic situation in Ukraine, increasing the chances of a political breakthrough and concessions from Kyiv.

The scenario of Ukraine's long-term exhaustion is supported in particular by the fact that choosing the option of military escalation could entail serious costs and risks for Russia, and these would be directly proportional to the scale of the aggression. Among other things, it could increase pressure to limit the use of, or even block the launch of, the Nord Stream 2 pipeline – a priority project for the Kremlin – as a result of new U.S. sanctions and/or EU political and regulatory decisions. Another possible consequence would be the freezing of dialogue between the new U.S. administration and the Russian Federation on various security issues, the continuation of which is important to Moscow, which sees it as an opportunity to obtain certain concessions from Washington. The most serious consequence, however, would be further Western sanctions. Some of them, such as a total ban on trading in Russian treasury bonds, the exclusion of the Russian Federation from the SWIFT payment settlement system, or the sanctioning of the majority of its key companies (including energy companies) and oligarchs, would have major adverse consequences for the Russian economy, and could in the longer term contribute to the destabilisation of the political situation in the country.

» Moscow's policy towards Kyiv will depend on Russia's assessment of the situation in Ukraine and the Ukrainians' will to resist, as well as its perception of the stance of the US, NATO and the EU.

In this context, the sharpening of Russian rhetoric towards Ukraine and the previously mentioned aggressive hybrid actions may in fact be an alternative to the military scenario. This intention may also be suggested by Dmitry Medvedev's article, published in October this year. The offensive criticism of Zelensky and his administration by the former prime minister (and now deputy chairman of the Security Council of the Russian Federation), referring among other things to anti-Semitic clichés, not only directly reveals the Kremlin's disappointment and "dashed hopes", but also ends with recommendations that can be summarised as a postulate to "wait out Zelensky" and an act of faith in a future political change in Ukraine in line with Russian interests. It openly advocates applying long-term pressure to its neighbour.¹¹ While it is true that Medvedev does not currently belong to the key representatives of the establishment, it should be recognised that his opinion reflects the views of at least some members of the Russian elite.

In practice, Moscow's policy towards Kyiv will depend on the Russian perception of the situation and its dynamics. This will include, on the one hand, an assessment of the internal situation in Ukraine, including its economic circumstances, and the cohesion, resilience and political will of the Ukrainians to resist Russian aggression. On the other hand, a perception of the main international factors, especially the attitude of the USA, NATO and the EU will influence Moscow's decisions. While the appearance of signs of weakness and division on their part, and expressions of fear of a deterioration in relations with Russia, will encourage the Kremlin to take increasingly aggressive action, the opposite attitudes – signs of determination and an intention to increase the costs of such Russian policies – will act as a deterrent for Moscow.

¹¹ See Д. Медведев, 'Почему бессмысленны контакты с нынешним украинским руководством', Коммерсантъ, 11 October 2021, kommersant.ru.