## Putin's Progress: how will the war in Ukraine play out?

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Vladimir Putin's massive invasion of Ukraine has yielded a number of surprises. The first was that many analysts did not believe Putin would have the audacity to launch such a full-scale operation. Another has been the spirited resistance of the Ukrainian armed forces. Although the conflict is still in its early stages Ukraine has put up stiff opposition. This has no doubt been assisted by some puzzling operational choices by Russian commanders, such as the botched attempt to seize Hostomel airfield close to Kiev with only a small group of special forces.

Perhaps the biggest surprise has been the extent to which Ukraine's resistance has not only emboldened the West to go harder on Russia than many anticipated, but it is also increasingly suggesting that Putin has misjudged the war in key respects: the quality of his forces; the weakness of the US and EU; and the implications for his own political fortunes. In this edition of the *Looking Glass* we take a deeper dive into what the likely outcomes of Putin's invasion might be, in the context of Kremlin war aims. We find that every scenario is potentially damaging for Putin domestically. Geopolitically, while Putin may well succeed in expanding Russia's sphere of influence, he will face a more united (and possibly enlarged) NATO, as well as a more robust EU: the very outcomes he has been seeking to prevent.

### Putin's war aims and the initial phase of hostilities

It is obvious from the scale and disposition of Russian invasion forces that the Kremlin sought to achieve far more than its stated aim of protecting its enclaves in the Donbas region of Ukraine. It has attacked from the east, from Belarus in the north, and from Crimea in the south – including a concerted drive against the north-eastern city of Kharkov and the capital Kiev. Putin's statement that Russia sought to 'demilitarise' and 'de-nazify' Ukraine speak to two main objectives: to completely destroy Ukraine's military; and to achieve regime change.

For those unfamiliar with Russian politics, the reference to 'de-nazification' refers to a common false perception in Russia, amplified by the Kremlin and state media, that since the Euromaidan protests of 2013 that toppled the pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovych Ukraine has been led by far-right fascists in league with NATO and the US. In a bizarre and angry speech justifying Russia's recognition of the rebel provinces of Luhansk and Donetsk, Putin also claimed that Ukraine had never existed as a country, that Lenin created it, that Stalin should be praised for his leadership of the USSR, and that Ukraine was seeking to develop nuclear weapons. In a subsequent speech effectively declaring war on Ukraine (evidently filmed at the same time, but aired a couple of days later), Putin announced a

'limited' military operation, and threatened any nation that tried to intervene with 'consequences they had not seen before'.

The initial part of the war revealed an attempt to decapitate the Ukrainian leadership by seizing the capital in a [lightning raid](#), and either capture the President Voldomyr Zelinsky or force him to flee. US intelligence reports just prior to the Russian invasion pointed to ['kill lists'](#) of prominent Ukrainian politicians and civil society leaders that would have been primary targets of Russian forces. However, Ukrainian forces defeated an attempt to secure airfields near Kiev and [reinforce them](#) with airborne troops. Four days into the conflict Kiev continues to hold out, and Zelinsky's regular [video messages](#) have been instrumental in rallying both Ukrainian morale and international support.

In other parts of Ukraine, Russian forces have made substantial advances in the south, and pushed the Ukrainian military out of the [Chernobyl](#) zone in the north. But they have failed to destroy the Ukrainian air [defence network](#), and the Ukrainian Air Force remains viable, albeit severely depleted.

**Unintended consequences**

It is therefore apparent that Putin sought a quick victory that yielded minimal casualties and allowed him to swiftly install a puppet regime in Kiev, reinforcing his image at home and abroad as a master strategist. Yet he has been unable to accomplish this, and [now must consider alternatives](#). Typically Russian [doctrine](#) calls for sustained and indiscriminate fires into urban areas to spread terror, depopulate cities and destroy enemy morale. It is possible that he will revert to this aspect of his [military playbook](#), in spite of the fact that doing so will cause extreme destruction and loss of civilian life. Russian [hardware](#) in Ukraine includes thermobaric missile systems, Grad MLRS, cluster munitions and large amounts of armour and artillery. If these are used against Kiev and other cities they will doubtless hasten Ukraine's defeat, but they will irrevocably poison his standing internationally, even potentially amongst allies.

The Western response seems also to have caught Putin off-guard. A combination of [sanctions packages](#) now includes full blocks against many major Russian banks; excluding Russia from the SWIFT system for financial transactions; export controls on various industries from mining to aerospace; personal sanctions against oligarchs, members of the Kremlin inner circle as well as Putin himself; and sanctions against Russia's central bank where much of the elite's money sits. It is true that Russia has a sovereign wealth fund estimated at US$620 billion which would allow it to ride out sanctions for around a year. However, some 70% of this is stored in G7 nations, and is vulnerable to asset freezes.

Putin's war has also strengthened NATO's resolve, and it seems to have animated EU states that had previously been reticent to challenge Russia directly. [Finland and Sweden](#) are now actively considering joining NATO. Kremlin statements that relations with the West are 'at the point of no return' seem to have been accepted by the EU, which will now need to maintain unity over sanctions as well as explain to their publics why increased defence spending and energy insecurity will be necessary to avoid threats and overdependence on

Moscow in future. Germany, for instance, has virtually reversed course on two decades of foreign policy in respect to Moscow, pivoting from 'Wandel durch Handel' (change through trade) to a much more assertive posture.

Domestically there have been a number of protests, which although small in size are nonetheless significant given the costs of voicing disapproval in Russia (arrest, imprisonment, beatings, loss of employment and income, and loss of schooling and childcare – amongst other punishments). There have also been reports that virtually no planning has gone into how to manage regime change in Ukraine, with very few key ministries briefed about the war outside of a select inner group. Unhappiness with Putin is therefore starting to slowly germinate at both the top and lower echelons of society. And while there is no serious threat to his power, autocracies are acutely vulnerable to such pressure.

**Potential outcomes**

What are the potential outcomes of the war in Ukraine? Below we survey those scenarios we consider to be most likely.

- Russian forces swiftly take Kiev with minimal bloodshed. Ukrainian resistance crumbles, Zelinsky is captured or sent into exile, and a strong pro-Russian puppet government is installed which prevents large-scale insurrections from the population.
    - We consider this scenario the least likely. Ukraine's armed forces have blunted Russian attacks thus far, suggesting that Moscow will need to use much more violence to achieve its ends. This is unlikely to be tolerated by a civilian population that has already shown itself more than willing to take up arms.

- Stalemate: Kiev is contested and the Russian military makes gains elsewhere, but is bogged down by harassing attacks by remaining Ukrainian armed forces and civilian resistance, forcing Moscow to deploy additional resources and both bear and inflict an increasing human toll to prosecute the war effort.
    - We consider this scenario to be possible, although it will depend significantly on how effectively the Ukrainian armed forces are able to hold on - especially given that Russian forces have begun to target infrastructure, supply lines and fuel centres.

- Russian forces are unable to make significant further headway. Lines of advance are halted and turned back in some places. Under a weight of international and domestic pressure, the Kremlin is forced to sue for peace and withdraw.
    - We consider this scenario unlikely. The Ukrainian armed forces have put up a surprisingly stubborn resistance yet are qualitatively overmatched, and Russia will soon likely achieve full aerial supremacy over the battlespace.

- Russia is forced to use heavy armour to take Kiev and other major population centres, which it achieves after about two weeks to a month. There is widespread destruction and loss of civilian life. A pro-Russian puppet government is installed, but an ongoing insurrection is mounted against the regime, increasing the costs to Moscow.
  - Regrettably, we consider this outcome to be the most likely of those we have presented. Speed is clearly important in the Kremlin's war plans, and Putin has shown himself previously to respond to challenges by doubling down rather than considering his options.

**Conclusions**

We should note that these scenarios are by no means all-encompassing, and nor is our assessment a comprehensive one. Other outcomes are possible which may combine elements of each of those we have suggested, or potentially even be completely new. But given the trajectory of the conflict so far, and what we know of both the domestic and international pressure points, it is noteworthy that under each outcome it is more likely that Putin's political position will be weakened – either due to international or domestic pressure, or both. Much will also depend on how quickly and effectively the US and its allies can maintain solidarity on sanctions, as well as other deterrence instruments linked more closely to hard power.