

## II. War Events and Developments



## Chapter 7: Russia's Strategy in the Ukraine War: Restoring Russian Greatness by Any Means

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### Abstract

Russia's Ukraine strategy is intimately linked to its quest to retain power nationally and internationally. From the perspective of Russian rulers, Ukraine must be deprived of its statehood and cultural identity to secure Russia's great power status. For this purpose, Russia has mainly used an indirect strategy in which military power, including nuclear weapons, plays a central role. Having failed to topple the government in Kyiv in February 2022, Russia's war of aggression on Ukraine bears features of a genocidal war of extermination. In the face of Russian military failures, Russia relies on its nuclear threat potential and indirect leverage to achieve its war aims.

### Keywords

Russia, Ukraine, neo-imperialism, imperialism, multipolar world, indirect strategy, nonlinear warfare, role of military, war of annihilation, nuclear weapons

### *1 Introduction*

As an irredentist territorial state pursuing the restoration of its former Tsarist (later Soviet) realm, Russia represents an anachronism in a post-imperial, post-colonial democratic Europe. Serving as a projection surface of Russian imperial ideas Ukraine is both a precondition of Russian great power status and an obstacle in nation-state form.

### 1.1 Russia's Neo-Imperial Consolidation of Power and Systemic Competition

Ever since the great empires in Europe disintegrated after World War I and the end of European colonial dominions overseas became foreseeable, Russia has been a political anachronism: an autocratic, imperial, multi-ethnic state with a colonial past, which first rose again under Bolshevik auspices and then officially as a nation-state after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has not yet come to terms with its imperial past, which obscures its (neo-)imperial present.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, after a brief phase of reckoning in the 1990s, state authorities have suppressed critical engagement with the crimes committed by the Soviet regime against its own populations, as well as in the countries that fell under its control.<sup>2</sup> Russia's current neo-imperial project seeks security in the expansion of its sphere of influence, thereby creating sense of encirclement.<sup>3</sup> It poses a major challenge to a largely post-heroic Europe that wants to root confrontation, especially of a military nature, firmly in the past.<sup>4</sup>

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- 1 According to common definitions of imperialism, which presuppose transcolonial possessions and the ability to permanently enforce imperial interests worldwide, the Russian Empire and its successor, the Soviet Union, are considered imperialist constructs to a limited extent. Thus, even at the height of its military power, the Soviet Union was economically incapable of influencing distant economies in the long run. See Osterhammel, Jürgen/Jansen, Jan C.: *Kolonialismus. Geschichte, Formen, Folgen*. 7th rev. ed., C.H. Beck: Munich 2012, p. 28. Since the late 1990s, Russia combines its neo-imperial drive to dominate other countries through power and influence with a "classical" imperial policy of territorial expansion, e.g. in Ukraine.
  - 2 On December 28, 2021, the Russian human rights organization "International Society for Historical Clarification, Human Rights and Social Welfare Memorial", which had taken on the task of documenting state crimes and political persecution in the USSR from the October Revolution to the end of the Soviet Union in December 1991, was "liquidated" (according to the wording of the ruling) by a high court decision. The human rights center "Memorial" in Moscow, which campaigns for the rights of political prisoners, minorities, migrants, and homosexuals, was also "liquidated" by local court decision the following day. Memorial received the Nobel Peace Prize on October 7, 2022.
  - 3 On this paradox, see Foucher, Michel: *Ukraine-Russie. La carte mentale du duel*. In: *Tracts*, Vol. 39, Gallimard: Paris 2022.
  - 4 The notion of "post-heroic societies" of Europe, marked by the horrors of World War I (and World War II) is closely associated with political scientist Herfried Münkler. The author points out that post-heroic need not mean unheroic. See Münkler, Herfried: *Kriegssplitter. Die Evolution der Gewalt im 20. und 21. Jahrhundert*. Rowohlt Verlag: Reinbek 2017, p. 143 ff.

Putin's Russia is striving to restore supposed past greatness. To this end, the influence of the United States, especially in Europe, must be pushed back<sup>5</sup> and the international normative and institutional framework changed to Russia's advantage. Though perhaps the central one, the Russian war against Ukraine, is only one arena of a systemic confrontation with the Western community of states under American leadership over the very nature of international relations.

### 1.2 Ukraine as the Key to Russian Great Power Politics

Ukraine, together with Belarus, occupies a central position in the illusory world of current Russian rulers as part of an imaginary, linguistically, religiously, and culturally homogeneous, Russian-dominated East Slavic space (*Russkiy Mir*).<sup>6</sup> On the one hand, the vision of Russia as a Eurasian power, dominating Europe, counter-model to and adversary of the U.S., could not be realized without the territory, economy, and population of Ukraine.

On the other, as a political alternative, a democratic, prosperous Ukraine anchored in Western institutions poses a threat to an autocratic system that siphons national wealth into the pockets of an elite tied to Vladimir Putin. Russia's ideologues not only oppose Ukraine's westernization, they reject an independent Ukrainian cultural identity as such.<sup>7</sup> The aim is to destroy

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5 See the two draft agreements published by the Russian Foreign Ministry on 17 December 2021, the "Treaty between the United States and the Russian Federation on Security Guarantees", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 17 December 2021, and the "Agreement on Measures to Ensure the Security of the Russian Federation and the Member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO]", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 17 December 2021, which would divide Europe into Russian and U.S. zones of influence.

6 Autocratically-run Belarus had tried to chart its own independent course despite the existence of the 1997 Russian-Belarusian Union. From 2020 onward, it increasingly came under the influence of its neighbor as a result of the protest movement against the presidency of Alyaksandr Lukashenka. In the fall of 2021, Lukashenka and Putin agreed on a common economic space and greater military cooperation. It has since become an important base in Russia's war against Ukraine. See Rác, András: Becoming a Military District. Deepening military Cooperation between Russia and Belarus, European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), 14 March 2022.

7 By rejecting Russian cultural domination, Ukraine has set a precedent not only for other states that are considered by Moscow to belong to the Russian "cultural space", but also for the multinational regions (*kraj*) of the Russian Federation.

Ukraine as a nation-state and cultural entity and to return a “denazified” Ukraine, deprived of its cultural specificity, to the Russian fold.<sup>8</sup>

## 2 Strategic Implementation of Russian Objectives

In order to consolidate its sphere of influence and to transform the international system, Russia’s rulers mainly use an indirect strategy in which military power is a decisive factor.

### 2.1 Russia’s Domestic and Foreign Policy Dual Strategy

While on the domestic level, the regime freezes power relations suppressing any credible form of political opposition, internationally, Russia strives to break up the structures of a rule-based state system perceived as constraining.<sup>9</sup> A “multipolar world” in which power can be exercised without restraint is closely linked to the goal of maintaining control at home.

Russia justifies its policy of “hard diplomacy and soft coercion”<sup>10</sup> since President Putin’s inauguration by the alleged threat from Western influence to Russian interests in its near-abroad. Domestically, the system that has emerged around President Putin nationalized criminal control of the economy and consolidated state security organs, all the while using the pursuit of Russia’s greatness as a basis for legitimacy.<sup>11</sup> The power structures, which carry pseudo-feudal features with the Russian Orthodox Church as one of its pillars, make use of a mixture of chauvinistic Russian resentment, religiously dressed-up geopolitical visions, and sympathy for Stalinism.<sup>12</sup>

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8 Thom, Françoise: “Russian Ideologues Aim to Liquidate the Ukrainian Nation”, Desk Russie, 8 April 2022.

9 See Covington, Steve: *Putin’s Choice for Russia*. Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. Harvard Kennedy School: Cambridge MA 2015.

10 Sherr, James: *Hard Diplomacy and Soft Coercion. Russia’s Influence Abroad*. Chatham House: London 2013, p.119.

11 On the dual criminal and intelligence services nature of the Russian state under Putin, see, for example, Belton, Catherine: *Putin’s people. How the KGB took back Russia and then took on the West*. William Collins: London 2020.

12 In his essay “Putinism is not to be treated as a political regime. It is banditry with ideas”, historian Yaroslav Shimov describes the current Russian regime as organized crime within an ideological shell. Shimov, Yaroslav: “К путинизму не относиться как политическому режиму. Это бандитизм с идеями”, Medusa, 15 June 2022.

Russian strategists openly acknowledge the expansionist nature of the Russian state, as well as its repressive nature.<sup>13</sup> The glorification of World War II, as well as the active preparation of the Russian population for a military confrontation with the West, including nuclear weapons with the help of an extensive propaganda machine is part of this approach.<sup>14</sup>

## 2.2 Permanent Confrontation by Indirect Means

On a spectrum of influence ranging from legal to illegal measures, Russia applies both non-military and military elements selectively and in combination, simultaneously and in different geographic theaters. This indirect strategy finds its inspiration both in the tradition of Tsarist intelligence and military services, as in the experience of Soviet security agencies. From the 1920s onwards, operating from a position of relative weakness, the latter used subversion as a foreign policy tool openly and covertly, with or without the use of force against their opponents. As the existence of nuclear weapons made direct confrontation unadvisable, the approach decisively shaped the systemic conflict between East and West after 1947.<sup>15</sup> At the beginning of the new century, Putin reactivated this strategy, which avoids direct military confrontation whenever possible to achieve political goals. For two main reasons: the influence of the security organs in the Russian governmental structure, including in Russian military circles, as well as the

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13 See, for example, the February 2019 article published in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, "Putin's Long State", by Vladislav Surkov, deputy prime minister from 2011 to 2013 and presidential adviser from 2013 to 2022. Surkov is considered a Kremlin ideologue and one of the architects of the annexation of Crimea and separatist movements in the Donbas. Surkov, Vladislav: "Долгое государство Путина. О том, что здесь вообще происходит", *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 15 February 2019.

14 See, for example, Courtois, Stéphane/Ackerman, Galia (Eds.): *La Seconde Guerre Mondiale dans le discours politique russe à la lumière du conflit russo-ukrainien*. L'Harmattan: Paris 2016. It was no coincidence that in May 2008, shortly before the war with Georgia, Vladimir Putin again let weapons roll across Red Square for the May 9 parade celebrating the victory over Nazi Germany in the "Great Patriotic War".

15 Analysis and evaluation of Soviet, now Russian so-called "active measures" is difficult: firstly, because the archives of the Soviet security organs are not accessible, and secondly, because the information circulated after the end of the Cold War, partly through purchases of material and with the help of "defectors", may also have had the purpose of presenting Soviet influence abroad and intelligence capabilities in a particularly favorable light. See Knight, Amy: *The Selling of the KGB*. In: *The Wilson Quarterly*, Winter 2000.

realization of Russian weakness, especially given the impossibility of catching up economically with the West. Add to this the Russian interpretation of the “color revolutions” as orchestrated by the U.S., as well as the desire to beat the West at its own game of soft power (or influence) to make up for the defeat of the fall of the Soviet Union.<sup>16</sup> Russia sees its indirect strategy as a mirror response to Western approaches to harm Russia’s interests.<sup>17</sup>

Russia uses Europe’s willingness to cooperate and the openness of its political systems, economies, and societies to exert harmful influence. Financing extremist political parties and fanning existing social conflicts with the help of disinformation occupy a central place in the Kremlin’s confrontation strategy.<sup>18</sup> In addition to cyberattacks, Russia banks on Europe’s dependence on Russian raw materials, especially in the energy sector.<sup>19</sup>

The conceptual description and classification of this form of hybrid confrontation is a source of debate.<sup>20</sup> Western democracies still struggle to recognize this multifaceted attempt at subversion as a confrontation and as a threat, as it remains largely below the threshold of military force.<sup>21</sup> Russian security agencies test the resilience of Western societies persistently, resourcefully, and simultaneously in multiple geographic contexts. Russia may not be able to provide a credible alternative to the current interna-

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16 Minic, Dimitri: *Pensée et culture stratégiques russes. Du contournement de la lutte armée à la guerre en Ukraine*, Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l’homme, April 2023.

17 Klein, Margarete: *Russlands neue Militärdoktrin: NATO, USA und “farbige Revolutionen” im Fokus*. In: *SWP-Aktuell* 12/2015.

18 Yablokov, Ilya: *Russian disinformation finds fertile ground in the West*. In: *Nature Human Behavior*, Vol. 6, 2022, pp. 766–767.

19 In this context, the French historian Françoise Thom speaks of “parasitic coexistence”.

20 Conceptually, the term “hybrid warfare” is not without controversy, and it is also up for debate whether it is a novelty, or rather about a classic continuum of warfare, including in the Russian tradition. Russian analysts use the term “*nelinejnaja vojna*” (nonlinear warfare) to describe alleged hybrid attacks by NATO and the United States. See, for example, Galeotti, Mark: *The mythical ‘Gerasimov Doctrine’ and the language of threat*. In: *Critical Studies on Security*, Vol. 7, Issue 4, February 2018, pp. 1–5.

21 While former Soviet republics and former Warsaw Pact states warned of this type of confrontation as early as the 2000s, it took some time for more “western” NATO members to seriously address this issue. Since NATO’s collective defense is only activated in the event of an armed attack on a NATO member, it has deployed a “Hybrid Strategy” since 2015, to prepare for hybrid attacks, prevent them through deterrence, and should that fail, to defend NATO states. See *NATO: NATO’s Response to Hybrid Threats*, 21 June 2022.



tional order with its existing economic and military resources, but it can pressure, wear down, and thus destroy what exists through a “strategy of disorder”.<sup>22</sup>

### 2.3 The Strategic Role of the Russian Military

Russian rulers see the armed forces as an important power factor. Internationally, they allow Russia to implement its indirect strategy by using the Russian army as a deterrent “shield” that allows the “sword” of Russian intelligence to strike, in a variation of the motto of the former Soviet intelligence agency, the KGB.<sup>23</sup>

To restore its military to its former greatness following the collapse of the Soviet Union, over the past two decades, Russia has invested significant resources to modernize and reform its armed forces, focusing on weapon systems, readiness, and personnel (on the success of these reforms, see Section 4.1). In doing so, care was taken not to repeat the Soviet Union’s mistake of weakening itself economically through disproportionate military spending. Likewise, Russia revised and adapted the conceptual foundations of its military strategy to the new security environment as seen from a Russian perspective. This resulted in a strategic approach that “combines nuclear, conventional, and informational (cyber) instruments of influence into an integrated coercive mechanism”.<sup>24</sup>

Nuclear weapons are an important element of this strategy internationally, but also regionally (for more on this, see Section 4.2.). From a conventional point of view, the Russian armed forces fulfill several tasks: firstly, they are intended to deter an attack on Russia, and secondly, to demonstrate Russia’s power and operational readiness to an internal and external audi-

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22 Vladislav Surkov, the Kremlin’s former chief ideologue had called for exporting chaos around the world. See Surkov, Vladislav: “Куда делся хаос? Распаковка стабильности” [Where has the chaos gone? Unpacking stability], Actual Comment, 20 November 2021. For an inventory of subversive actions by the Kremlin against Western allies, see Mandraud, Isabelle/Théron, Julien: *Poutine, la stratégie du désordre*. Tallandier: Paris 2021.

23 This image is by Christopher N. Donnelly, British expert on the Soviet and Russian military. Both shield and sword adorn the coat of arms of the KGB, founded in 1954 and officially disbanded in 1991, which was resurrected as the FSB.

24 Adamsky, Dmitry (Dima): From Moscow with coercion: Russian deterrence theory and strategic culture. In: *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 41, Issue 1–2, 2018, pp. 33–60.

ence. To this end, Russia has been organizing large-scale maneuvers since 1999, including the involvement of its nuclear forces.<sup>25</sup> In addition, the Russian military is supposed to be able to conduct missions outside the country, to support friendly regimes or to project influence, whether in the “near neighborhood” or at a greater distance.<sup>26</sup> In this regard, private security and military companies operating in a legal gray zone play an important role. Chief among them the infamous *Wagner Group*, whose core of mercenaries has been recruited from the Russian armed forces benefitting from logistical support from the Russian military intelligence service GRU and the Russian army, as well as from financial subsidies from the Russian state.<sup>27</sup>

Regarding the informational element of Russian military strategy, it must be noted that the idea of subversion has a long tradition in Russian strategic thinking, going back to the Imperial Russian school of military strategy.<sup>28</sup> Among other things, it involves approaches and considerations that Western armies which fought in colonial wars should be familiar with. As for nonlinear warfare, the Russian military has developed concepts of “psychological-informational confrontation” that are used in both peacetime and wartime, e.g. in Ukraine and Syria.<sup>29</sup>

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25 On the utility of military exercises, see, for example, Heuser, Beatrice/Heier, Tor-mod/Lasconjarias, Guillaume (Eds.): *Military Exercises: Political Messaging and Strategic Impact*. NATO Defense College NDC Forum Papers Series, Rome 2018, p. 9.

26 Russia currently has a military presence in Armenia, Abkhazia, Belarus, the Central African Republic, Libya, Mali, South Ossetia, Sudan, Syria, Transnistria, Ukraine and Venezuela, among others, either permanently with military bases or on an ad hoc basis, whether with official soldiers or with Wagner troops.

27 On Wagner and its relations with the Russian state, see, for example, Østensen, Åse Gilje/Bukkvoll, Tor: *Private military companies – Russian great power politics on the cheap?* In: *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, Vol. 33, Issue 1–2, 2022, pp. 130–151. After its aborted march on Moscow in June 2023 led by its then head, Yevgeny Prigozhin, Vladimir Putin stated that Wagner had received 86,26 billion rubles (around 930 million euros) in state support between May 2022 and May 2023 (27 June 2023, meeting with service members at the Kremlin).

28 This school of thought was also maintained by military thinkers in exile, whose writings were received in Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In this context, Ofer Fridman particularly highlights Evgeny Messner’s “The face of Contemporary War”, which was published in Buenos Aires in 1959. On the roots of Russian military art, see Fridman, Ofer: *Strategiya: The Foundations of the Russian Art of Strategy*. Hurst & Company: London 2021, p.13 ff, p.235 ff.

29 Minic, Dimitri: *La guerre informationnelle psychologique dans la pensée militaire russe et ses applications en Ukraine et en Syrie*. In: *Annuaire français des relations internationales*, Vol. 22, 2021, pp. 523–533.

### 3 Russia's Indirect and Direct Strategy to End Ukrainian Statehood

Ukraine's central place in the geopolitical and spiritual conception of Putin's Russia explains why, at least since the "Orange Revolution" in 2004, the Kremlin has not limited itself to determining Ukraine's political and economic orientation. Rather, it has used indirect and direct means to destroy a Ukrainian nation-state as a functioning political and cultural entity.

#### 3.1 Preventing Western Integration through the Annexation of Crimea and War in Eastern Ukraine

The Russian approach of binding Ukraine to the East with the help of Russia-friendly forces in politics and business faltered as a result of the planned EU Association Agreement and the 2013–2014 "Euromaidan" protest movement in response to Russian pressure not to turn toward Europe. In response, Russia opted for a strategy of indirect confrontation, which combined kinetic elements, such as the use of paramilitary troops and the undercover deployment of Russian military forces, with non-kinetic elements, such as economic, diplomatic, cultural, psychological-informational, and cyber operations.

Spring 2014 saw the annexation of Crimea by Russian soldiers without troop insignia as well as the start of a war in eastern Ukraine. Russia provided training, equipment, guidance, and direct military support to separatist forces, and launched disinformation campaigns to discredit Ukraine's political institutions at home, in Russia, and in other European countries.<sup>30</sup> As a result, Ukraine accepted the 2014 and 2015 *Minsk Agreements* under the aegis of France, Germany, and Russia, which were never fully implemented. *Minsk I* and *II* established a negotiating format that allowed Russia (officially not a party to the conflict) to exert pressure on Kyiv. In almost entirely dependent on Russia separatist "people's republics" of Donetsk and Luhansk, dictatorial, quasi-state structures emerged, and Russian passports were distributed. The contact line in the Donbas remained relatively

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30 Lange-Ionatamishvili, Elina: Analysis of Russia's information campaign against Russia. Examining non-military aspects of the crisis in Ukraine from the strategic communications perspectives. NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence: Riga 2015.

static despite permanent fighting. Together with Crimea, Ukraine had lost approximately seven percent of its territory.<sup>31</sup>

Even if it had failed to provoke open conflict between Russian-speaking and non-Russian-speaking segments of the Ukrainian population, and the dysfunctional Ukrainian state structures had withstood the combined kinetic and non-kinetic Russian onslaught, Russia had achieved an important objective. As a theater of war for the foreseeable future, Ukraine's integration into Western structures seemed illusory, despite international support for Kyiv.

### 3.2 Genesis of a "Regime Change by Military Means"

As negotiations in the *Normandy Format* and continued application of its indirect strategy failed to improve the *status quo* achieved in Ukraine in 2014/15 further, Moscow sought a new approach. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian president, living in seclusion, reportedly engaged in intensive personal studies of Ukraine.<sup>32</sup>

Domestically, the constitutional reform orchestrated in 2020 had cleared the path for Putin to remain in office until 2036, with presidential elections scheduled for 2024. Externally, the conditions for a "liberating blow" seemed favorable: Western counterparts appeared weak and divided in light of the disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 and the imminent completion of the controversial *Nord Stream 2* pipeline. Putin's calculation that he could succeed with an open attack on Ukraine, however, can be traced primarily to longstanding failures by the West to act against the Kremlin's numerous activities undermining its interests. Russian leaders simply did not seem to have anticipated that Europe and North America would view the renewed attack on Ukraine as a direct threat and provide decisive political, financial, intelligence, and military support to Kyiv.

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31 This represent about 44,000 km<sup>2</sup> of the total 603,000 km<sup>2</sup> of Ukrainian territory. By early 2019, an estimated 13,000 people, including more than 3,000 civilians, are also believed to have died in fighting in eastern Ukraine. See RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty: "Death Toll Up To 13,000 In Ukraine Conflict, Says UN Rights Office", 26 February 2019.

32 See, for example, Vladimir Putin's article published in July 2021, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians", in which he invokes, among other things, the "trinity" of Great, Little (by which he means Ukrainians), and White Russia. Putin, Vladimir: Об историческом единстве русских и украинцев, 12 July 2021.

The Russian assault on Ukraine in February 2022 can also be explained by underestimating the Ukrainian military, especially its willingness to learn and to adapt, as well as by disregarding the resistance and resilience of the Ukrainian population.<sup>33</sup> From massive support to their government, to spontaneous engagement in, for example, disaster relief and medical services, to attacks primarily on supply convoys and weapons and gasoline depots of Russian units – Russian planners seemed instead to have expected to be greeted as liberators with bread and salt by large segments of the population.<sup>34</sup>

This underestimation of a genuine Ukrainian will to survive met its equivalent in an overestimation of Russia's real military capabilities.<sup>35</sup> Decision-makers took past successes of Russia's indirect strategy, e.g. during the Crimean annexation or in Syria, in which only limited forces were deployed as proof that Russian troops would perform as well against Ukraine in 2022 as in scheduled large-scale exercises against an imaginary NATO enemy.

Another reason that may have motivated President Putin to attack Ukraine is domestic. Even if the war objectively entails negative consequences for Russia in the form of sanctions, among other things, it has the advantage of mobilizing the Russian population in the period leading up to the next presidential elections in 2024, beyond conquest and the course of the war. War becomes a goal in itself, as the systematic destruction of social values and the demoralization of the Russian population as a result perpetuates the need for simple truths and clear instructions.<sup>36</sup> It also contributes to the growing isolation of Russian society in Europe.<sup>37</sup> However, continued "partial mobilization" ordered in the face of military defeats could shake the Russian social consensus not only regarding the war against Ukraine.<sup>38</sup>

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33 On the importance of resilience in wartime, see, for example, Braw, Elisabeth: The UK's Integrated Review: The Centrality of Resilience Concepts, RUSI Commentary, 6 April 2020.

34 Antonova, Natalia: "Argument: Russians Believe Ukrainians Want to Be 'Liberated'", Foreign Policy, 2 December 2021.

35 Putin's overestimation of the Russian armed forces was matched by erroneous Western assessments of Russian military power.

36 See Medvedev, Sergey: "Мать родна. Сергей Медведев – о войне как национальной идее" [Mat' rodna. Sergey Medvedev on War as a National Idea], Radio Svoboda, 18 July 2022.

37 See Krimer, Ksenia: "Die Gesellschaft der Gewalt", Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 31 July 2022.

38 Kremlin: Address by the President of the Russian Federation, 21 September 2022. Mobilization is supposed to be limited to a Russian reserve of 300,000, but can *de*

#### 4 The Russian “Special Military Operation” in Ukraine

What was promised was a quick victory, with an airborne operation aimed at Kyiv and the “denazification” and “demilitarization” of the whole of Ukraine. Faced with fierce Ukrainian resistance, Russia’s “special military operation” has concentrated on the “liberation” of the Donbas instead, a battle it is neither winning nor losing. Russian combat operations bear signs of a genocidal war of extermination. In the context of the “special operation”, the nuclear element is omnipresent.

##### 4.1 The Failure of Russian Warfare

After Putin recognized the independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk “people’s republics” on February 21, 2022, Russia’s military assault on Ukraine began on February 24 with a combination of artillery and air force bombardments of strategic and civilian targets, cyberattacks on Ukrainian army command structures, the deployment of elite airborne forces around Kyiv, and the entry of approximately 120,000 of the 190,000 Russian ground troops massed on the border, which advanced into Ukraine from the north, north-east, south-east, and south.<sup>39</sup> The attack was preceded by a Russian campaign of infiltration of Ukrainian defense, security, and law enforcement agencies.<sup>40</sup>

Beginning in late March, after suffering heavy losses, the Russian army withdrew from the north and northwest to concentrate its offensive on increasing Russian separatist-controlled portions in the east of the country.<sup>41</sup> In late August and early September 2022, the Ukrainian army managed to recapture territory in the northeast and south of the country through counteroffensives. Ukrainian reconquests continued despite Russia’s sham

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*facto* be extended at will. Often carried out chaotically, it triggered a mass flight of men fit for military service from Russia. A disproportionate number of Russia’s ethnic minority have been mobilized.

39 This is an estimated seventy percent of Russia’s operational land forces. The 190,000 troops include separatist units from the Donbas as well as Russian security forces for manning.

40 See Saito, Mari/Tsvetkova, Maria: “The enemy within. How Russia spread a secret web of agents across Ukraine”, Reuters, 28 July 2022.

41 See Utz, Tobias/Serif, Moritz/Hoppe, Constantin/Akkoyun, Nail/Stör, Christian/Neumeyer, Sarah: “Schwere Verluste für Russland: 44.700 Soldaten gefallen, 1900 Panzer zerstört”, Frankfurter Rundschau, 21 August 2022.

referenda in violation of international law and annexation of the Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson regions. In the summer of 2023, a Ukrainian counteroffensive planned over many months was launched.

What explains the bad performance of Russian troops? To be sure, reforms undertaken during the past fifteen years have created better trained and more operational Russian armed forces than those of the 1990s. However, after reform efforts beginning in 2007 under Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov, followed in 2012 by further reforms under the aegis of Sergei Shoigu, Russia has neither a streamlined professional army nor Soviet-style armed forces capable of mass mobilization. The asymmetric weapons systems developed exist in too small numbers to be decisive in war. Likewise, endemic corruption in the armed forces could not be brought under control.<sup>42</sup>

The serious logistical deficiencies in planning, the replacement of virtually all commanders of the “special operation”, the lack of coordination between units, and the almost complete absence of combined arms operations speak a clear operational language.<sup>43</sup> It is Wagner troops which lay claim to the only recent battlefield success, the Pyrrhic victory at the town of Bakhmut in May 2023. Also striking are the low combat morale, and the high casualty rates among Russian soldiers, including senior officers, which cannot be compensated for by reserves and recruitment in the short and medium term. In addition, there is lack of military equipment, including communications technology and supplies for troops. The rapid consumption of ammunition and wear and tear on military equipment, for which adequate replacements are not available, are also a Russian cause for concern. Russia also lacks military satellites for reconnaissance, the Russian air force can only be used to a limited extent, and the Russian navy is completely marginalized in the Black Sea.

Although the Russian military performance in Ukraine has been anything but stellar, Russia has made some progress toward its goal of weakening Ukraine as a national entity with its “special military operation”. At the time of writing of this chapter, close to one-fifth of Ukraine’s territory is still occupied by Russia, including high-value agricultural land. Ports on the Black and Azov Seas, the North Crimean Canal, and the Zaporizhzhia

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42 Donnelly, Chris N.: Ukraine Update. Renova Associates Report, Private Briefing Paper, 22 May 2022.

43 Kofman, Michael/Lee, Rob: “Not Built for Purpose: The Russian Military’s Ill-Fated Force Design”, War on the Rocks, 2 June 2022.

nuclear power plant, the largest plant in Europe, remain under Russian control.

In the absence of military subjugation of Ukraine, Russia is focused on destroying the country. Civilian energy and water infrastructure, hospitals, rail networks, roads, and factory facilities are being targeted by bombardment. The Russian siege and shelling of Ukrainian cities suggest comparisons with Russia's strategy of terror in Chechnya and Syria, a situation partly remediated by deliveries of Western air defense systems towards the end of 2022. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), more than 5.5 million people, mostly women and children, have fled the country.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, nearly one million Ukrainians are believed to have been deported to Russia against their will from occupied parts of the country, including more than 19,000 children separated from their parents.<sup>45</sup> The withdrawal of Russian troops reveals systematic human rights abuses and war crimes against Ukrainian civilians and Ukrainian soldiers in liberated areas.<sup>46</sup> Russia stands accused of destroying the Kakhovka dam in Southern Ukraine in June 2023 causing long-term environmental devastation. All of this suggests the classification of Russian combat operations in Ukraine as a war of extermination with genocidal features.

#### *4.2 The Russian War against Ukraine in the Shadow of Atomic Weapons*

After a “long decade” of their marginalization after the end of the Cold War, nuclear weapons returned to the strategic conversation of Europe with Russia's war in Georgia in 2008, and at the very latest with Russia's annexation of Crimea. Since then, nuclear weapons again define the relationship between Russia and the members of NATO and the EU.

As for Russia's 2022 war against Ukraine, all its stages are marked by the existence and possible use of Russian nuclear weapons. Whether it is joint military exercises with Belarus with a nuclear component in the run-up to

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44 See Santos, Sofia/Pitet, Benjamin: “Deported civilians: How civilians are illegally deported to Russia”, Center for Information Resilience, 5 August 2022.

45 See the Ukrainian government website, “Children of war”, <https://childrenofwar.gov.ua/en/>. See also Tsui, Karina: “At Least 900,000 Ukrainians ‘Forcibly Deported’ to Russia, U.S. Says”, Washington Post, 13 July 2022.

46 See, for example, Koch, Matthias: “Kriegsverbrechen mit System. Das Geheimnis der russischen Grausamkeit”, Redaktionsnetzwerk Deutschland, 2 August 2022.



the attack on Ukraine in February,<sup>47</sup> nuclear saber-rattling in presidential addresses,<sup>48</sup> raising the alert level of nuclear forces at the start of the war,<sup>49</sup> and the occupation of and combat operations around the Chernobyl and Zaporizhzhia nuclear facilities – Putin operates with the nuclear threat in all forms, especially the fear of nuclear catastrophe in the broadest sense.

Nuclear armaments play a central role for Russia in the international, but also in regional and local contexts. On the international level, they classically serve to deter an attack with weapons of mass destruction on Russian territory and that of its allies, with the threat of inflicting unacceptable damage in retaliation with nuclear-tipped land-, air-, and sea-based missiles. Russian military strategies published since 2000 also envision the limited use of nuclear weapons in a conventional confrontation. For this reason, since the early 2000s, the simulation of a limited nuclear strike has been part of Russia's regular large-scale maneuvers.<sup>50</sup>

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- 47 Belarus abandoned its non-nuclear status and announced plans to allow the deployment of Russian nuclear weapons on its territory. On June 25, 2022, Putin declared that the *Iskander-M* tactical missile system, which can fire missiles with both conventional and nuclear warheads, would be moved to Belarus. It is supposed to have arrived in Belarus in June 2023. See Painter, Sandra: "Putin promises Belarus nuclear-capable missiles to counter 'aggressive' West", Reuters, 25 June 2022.
- 48 "Whoever tries to obstruct us, much less create a threat to our country, to our people, must know that Russia's response will be immediate and will lead to consequences such as you have never experienced in your history." This phrase is widely interpreted as a threat of possible use of nuclear bombs. See Kremlin: Address by the President of the Russian Federation, 24 February 2022. See also the President's address of September 21, 2022, again announcing the possible use of nuclear weapons, and Putin's speech of September 30, 2022, in which he referred to the "precedent" of Hiroshima (President's Address "Signing of treaties on accession of Donetsk and Lugansk people's republics and Zaporozhye and Kherson regions to Russia", 30 September 2022).
- 49 See Kremlin: Meeting of Vladimir Putin with Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of General Staff Valery Gerasimov, 27 February 2022, Moscow. However, this raising of the alert level appears to be limited to increasing the number of staff in the command centers of the strategic missile forces and the two nuclear fleets, Northern and Pacific, and does not appear to involve any changes as to the status of mobile intercontinental ballistic nuclear missiles or other elements of the nuclear triad. The situation regarding tactical nuclear weapons is more difficult to assess. See Faucon, Isabelle: Guerre en Ukraine: le sens du signalement nucléaire russe. In: Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, Vol. 30, 26 July 2022.
- 50 In contrast to the Cold War, the targets of a limited use of nuclear weapons of a strategic and sub-strategic nature in past military exercises were military rather than population or economic centers. See Sokov, Nikolai: "Russian military doctrine calls

The concept of limited use of nuclear weapons is explained by fears, triggered by the 1999 Kosovo war, that technologically-superior NATO states might interfere militarily in “Russian internal affairs”.<sup>51</sup> While Russian military doctrine in 2000 speaks of nuclear weapons use “in response to large-scale aggression using conventional weapons in situations critical to the national security of the Russian Federation”,<sup>52</sup> as of 2010, the threshold for using nuclear weapons in the event of a conventional conflict was raised, and limited to the case of an existential threat to Russia.<sup>53</sup> The six-page presidential decree “Foundations of State Policy in the Area of Nuclear Deterrence”, published in 2020, confirms the same wording of a use of nuclear weapons in a conventional conflict “in the case of aggression against Russia with conventional weapons when the very existence of the state is in jeopardy”.<sup>54</sup>

In 2018, the Pentagon underlined in its “Nuclear Posture Review” that Russia could use a low-yield nuclear weapon to persuade its adversaries to relent in a confrontation.<sup>55</sup> Among experts, the concept “escalate to de-escalate” is subject of debate,<sup>56</sup> but it does not appear in official Russian documents.<sup>57</sup> At the regional level, Russia could theoretically conduct a military operation and seize territory under a nuclear “shield”. Thus, nuclear

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a limited nuclear strike ‘de-escalation’. Here’s why”, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 8 March 2022.

51 Ball, Joshua: “Escalate to De-Escalate: Russia’s Nuclear Deterrence Strategy”, *Global Security Review*, 7 March 2022.

52 See “Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation”, April 2000.

53 See “Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation”, February 2010 and “Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation”, December 2014; See also Ven Bruusgaard, Kristin: Russian nuclear strategy and conventional inferiority. In: *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 44, Issue 1, 2020, pp. 3–35.

54 Kremlin: Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 02.06.2020 № 355 [Decree of the President of the Russian Federation № 355 from 02.06.2020]; this point was reaffirmed in March 2022 in an interview by Dmitry Medvedev, current Vice President of the Security Council of the Russian Federation. Medvedev, Dmitry: “Однополярному миру конец, США больше не хозяева планеты Земля” [The unipolar world is coming to an end, the United States is no longer the master of planet Earth], *RIA Novosti*, 26 March 2022.

55 See, for example, the foreword by the U.S. Secretary of Defense (page I and pages XI-XII) *Nuclear Posture Review*, The Pentagon: Washington 2018.

56 See, for example, Oliker, Olga/Balitskiy, Andrey: “The Nuclear Posture Review and Russian ‘De-Escalation’: A Dangerous Solution to a Nonexistent Problem”, *War on the Rocks*, 20 February 2018.

57 From the Russian perspective, Russian nuclear doctrine is primarily intended to prevent the risk of a first strike potentially disarming Russia. See Roberts, Cynthia:

weapons would fit into a continuum of “*anti-access/area denial, A2/AD*” defense,<sup>58</sup> which Russia applies in the Arctic, the Baltic, and Crimea, among other places.

Would Russia use one or more of its 4,310 nuclear warheads in any form in the war against Ukraine? On September 21, 2022, the Russian president warned that he could employ nuclear weapons in the event of a threat to Russia's territorial integrity, which would constitute a break with Russia's official nuclear doctrine.<sup>59</sup>

The Russian president's sometimes eschatological rhetoric regarding Ukraine poses the question as to how a threat to Russian state existence or Russian territorial integrity might be defined. Here, the linkages between ecclesiastical political and military authorities fail to reassure. In the nuclear forces, as in other parts of the military, the Orthodox priesthood has permeated all levels of command, and the church positions itself as the guardian of the state's nuclear potential.<sup>60</sup>

Putin's (political) survival depends on an outcome of the fighting in Ukraine that can be portrayed as a success in domestic political terms. His nuclear rhetoric reflects the aforementioned coercive Russian approach of using nuclear weapons not only to deter an NBC and conventional attack but also to intimidate its adversaries. Although the consequences of using nuclear weapons would be difficult for Russia to calculate and therefore would make it seem unlikely, a nuclear taboo-breaking by Russia cannot be completely ruled out.<sup>61</sup> However, giving in to nuclear threats or the use of nuclear weapons is not a viable option. Such a success for Putin would only make future armed conflict with Russia more likely and trigger a wave of nuclear proliferation in the world.

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“Revelations about Russia's Nuclear Deterrence Policy”, War on the Rocks, 19 June 2020.

58 An “*anti-access/area-denial*” (A2/AD) weapon system is a defensive device or strategy designed to prevent an adversary from occupying or transiting land, sea, or air space.

59 “И при угрозе территориальной целостности нашей страны, для защиты России и нашего народа мы, безусловно, используем все имеющиеся в нашем распоряжении средства. Это не блеф.” [If the territorial integrity of our country is threatened, we will certainly use all means at our disposal to protect Russia and our people. This is not a bluff]. Kremlin: Address by the President of the Russian Federation, 21 September 2022. Following the annexation of the territories of eastern Ukraine held only partially by Russian and separatist forces, Russia claims them as part of its national territory.

60 See Adamsky, Dmitry: *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy. Religion, Politics, and Strategy*. Stanford University Press: Redwood City 2019.

61 Likewise, an attack with chemical weapons would be conceivable.

## 5 Outlook

Has Russia's direct military attack on Ukraine brought it closer to its goal of expanding its sphere of influence and to consolidating its great power status? Despite Russian territorial gains, civilian and military losses in Ukraine, and the infliction of massive damage, the Ukrainian state and nation have emerged stronger from the Russian attack, not least because of broad support from the international community. Russian armed forces have lost prestige as a result of the "special military operation". Internationally, Russia appears quite isolated, and domestically, critical voices have been raised regarding the conduct of the war.

However, Russia continues to have means at its disposal to pursue its strategic goals. Russian threats of military escalation could push Western countries to pressure Ukraine to return to the negotiating table. The global economic crisis, exacerbated by a Russian-induced shortage of energy resources, grain, fertilizer, and other raw materials, also provides Russia with many opportunities to pursue its indirect strategy of undermining its adversaries. Similarly, targeted sabotage of critical infrastructure of Western societies by Russia cannot be ruled out.

Whatever the outcome of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, until Russia is ready for a post-imperial future, the fate of Ukraine, but also that of the countries of the Western Balkans, Moldova, Georgia, or Armenia, and the future of Europe remain inextricably tied. The attempt after the end of the Cold War to integrate Russia into a rule-based European security architecture, which does not recognize any "zones of influence", must be considered a definitive failure since February 2022 at the latest. The confrontation with Russia on multiple, constantly changing playing fields of international and national politics, as well as the shaping of a new relationship with Moscow will require enormous political, military, economic, and cultural efforts coordinated between partners.<sup>62</sup>

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62 See, for example, NATO's new June 2022 Strategic Concept.

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