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## FORECAST SERIES: Putin's Likely Course of Action in Ukraine

### STRATEGIC MISDIRECTION: AN ALTERNATE FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING RUSSIA'S PLAY IN UKRAINE



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Strategic Misdirection: An Alternate Framework  
for Understanding Russia's Play in Ukraine

Cover: UKRAINE-RUSSIA-CONFLICT

Ukrainian servicemen work on their tank close to the front line with Russian-backed separatists near Lysychansk, Lugansk region on April 7, 2021. (Photo by STR / AFP) (Photo by STR/AFP via Getty Images)

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ISW is a non-partisan and non-profit public policy research organization. It advances an informed understanding of military affairs through reliable research, trusted analysis, and innovative education. It is committed to improving the nation's ability to execute military operations and respond to emerging threats in order to achieve the strategic objectives of the US around the globe.

The Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute equips policymakers, opinion leaders, and the military and intelligence communities with detailed and objective open-source analysis of America's current and emerging national security challenges. Through daily monitoring, in-depth studies, graphic presentations, private briefings, and public events, the project is a unique resource for those who need to fully understand the nuance and scale of threats to America's security to effectively develop and execute policy.

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## Executive Summary

Russian President Vladimir Putin is amassing a military force on and near Ukraine's borders large enough to conduct a full-scale invasion. Western intelligence agencies have reportedly intercepted Russian military plans to do so by early February. Visible Russian military activities and these plans so clearly support preparations for an invasion that it seems obvious that Putin really might invade if his demands are not met.

Putin is rarely so obvious, however, and a massive Russian invasion of Ukraine would mark a fundamental transformation of the approach he has taken for two decades to advance his interests and respond to threats. We cannot dismiss the possibility that such a transformation has occurred. The United States, NATO, and Ukraine must seriously consider the risk of a Russian invasion of Ukraine and prepare military, diplomatic, and economic measures to deter and respond to that threat.

But Putin may have no intention of invading Ukraine at all. Putin may be attempting a strategic misdirection that impales the West in a diplomatic process and military planning cycle that will keep it unprepared to meet his preferred, wily, and more subtle next move. Putin benefits greatly by focusing attention on the risk of war and prompting the current US scramble to defuse and de-escalate this crisis that he invented. If Putin is threatening military action to misdirect, then the West's concessions will feed directly into his non-military efforts to achieve his objectives of changing the geopolitical orientation of Ukraine from west to east and weakening NATO.

There are good reasons to question Putin's seriousness about preparing for an invasion, despite the ostentatious military measures he has taken to get ready for one. Putin and other Russian officials openly recognize Russia's economic weakness and its implications for military operations. They developed the hybrid war model they have used throughout Putin's tenure to offset that weakness. Invading Ukraine casts aside that model and moves Russia toward a reliance on more conventional military power and more traditional strategies that its economy cannot sustain. Putin may think that Russia's situation has changed enough to justify such

a massive shift of approach, but there is no evidence as yet that he does.

A careful examination of Russian information operations directed at Russia's population and that of Ukraine suggests that Putin is not yet actively setting conditions to invade. A large-scale invasion of Ukraine risks generating a large number of Russian casualties. Putin's control of Russia is not so secure that he can ignore the unrest and instability that angry soldiers' families could cause—such anger at Soviet deaths in Afghanistan was, after all, a driver of the series of events that led to the Soviet Union's collapse. Putin would certainly prepare the Russian population for war before launching one on this scale. His current messaging, however, focuses on denying that he intends to wage war and insisting that war is not imminent. A change in that messaging to rhetorical lines preparing his people for war would be a critical indicator that he really is getting ready to invade.

The information environment in Ukraine is also not optimal for a Russian invasion, and Russia and its agents in Ukraine do not appear to be setting conditions to create that optimal environment. Closely watching Russian information operations in Ukraine is essential to forecasting Russian actions, as Russian military theory and doctrine requires careful preparation of the information space, and Russian actions have historically adhered to that requirement.

Putin's actions have changed the information environment in the West. The Western policy discussion during this crisis focused initially on the fear of a Russian invasion and debates about the seriousness of that threat. The December 7 conversation between Putin and President Joe Biden is changing the discourse to a focus on the processes being established



to de-escalate the crisis. Biden has threatened very tough economic responses to a Russian invasion but also ruled out unilateral US military operations to defend Ukraine. He has hinted that the diplomatic de-escalation process might make further concessions to Russia as part of an effort to avoid war but also rejected conceding the specific demands Putin has so far made.

Putin has responded by welcoming the diplomatic process, continuing the military buildup, and escalating some of his rhetoric that could set conditions for at least limited military actions in occupied Ukraine as well as in Belarus. The coming weeks and months will likely see oscillations in the policy discourse between a focus on the de-escalation negotiations and Putin's military activities and escalatory rhetoric outside that process. He is also setting conditions for a future in which he has moved forces into Belarus and overtly into occupied Donbas but has not invaded unoccupied Ukraine, and in which the West is so relieved by the latter that it simply accepts the former.

Putin has thus already achieved important objectives as a result of the buildup. He has redirected the Western policy discourse about Russia and Ukraine away from issues such as the Nordstream 2 pipeline, Russia's continued occupation of Donbas and illegal annexation of Donbas, and preparations to move Russian ground forces permanently into Belarus and/or overtly into occupied Donbas. As a result of Putin's actions, the United States and NATO have made clear that they will not defend Ukraine by force. Putin has enmeshed the United States in a new diplomatic process.

The West will likely make additional concessions over the course of the next two months as part of the diplomatic effort to de-escalate. Putin's "concession" may be nothing more than not invading Ukraine. If he never intended to invade Ukraine, he will have received quite a lot while giving up almost nothing.

Evaluating the likelihood of a Russian invasion of Ukraine is extremely important in shaping the appropriate Western response. If the West overestimates Putin's intent to invade, it will underestimate its own bargaining position and make more concessions than it should. The West's focus on the threat of invasion could cause Western leaders to miss important inflections in the Kremlin's actual strategy and the progress Putin makes toward achieving his aims. In the worst-case version of this scenario, the West will be congratulating itself for having avoided a Russian invasion Putin never meant to launch while Putin quietly celebrates an important non-military victory that the West does not even recognize.

The West should not allow the need to deter invasion to block consideration of alternative approaches Putin may be pursuing. Rather, it must develop and execute responses to the concealed as well as overt dangers. It must recognize that certain responses to the overt threat could badly undermine necessary responses to the concealed ones. This report and those that will follow it in this series examine this alternative "concealed" framework and the implications for US and NATO policy if Putin has chosen to pursue it.

This report, the first in a series, examines the political, military, and informational situations in Ukraine and Belarus; the military and informational situations in Russia as they relate to this crisis; and the informational and diplomatic situations in the West. The next report in this series will examine in detail the specific military operations for which Russia appears to be preparing and evaluate the risks, benefits, and likelihood of various military options Putin is creating for himself. Subsequent reports will consider alternate courses of action that Putin could be pursuing instead of a large-scale invasion of unoccupied Ukraine and evaluate their likelihoods and risks to both Putin and the West.

## Introduction

Russia is very unlikely to invade unoccupied Ukraine on a large scale this winter even though the Russian military is completing preparations that could support such an undertaking. Classic models of state actor behavior and traditional intelligence approaches to casting and evaluating indicators and warnings suggest that Russian President Vladimir Putin may launch such an invasion at some point in the coming months, but there are no clear indicators that he intends to do so as of December 9, 2021, as Secretary of State Anthony Blinken recently pointed out.<sup>1</sup>

The classical framework relies heavily on observed troop movements and preparations to deploy and use forces and is supported by analyses of intercepted communications, particularly military plans. Russian military actions over the past few months have tripped many of those classical indicators, and the West appears to have obtained copies of an invasion plan and other pieces of classified intelligence that trip other indicators. ISW takes all these indicators very seriously. We cannot dismiss the possibility that Russia will invade Ukraine in accord with the intercepted plan or some modification of it. We will consider what such an invasion might look like and the problems and challenges it would pose to Russia in great detail in the second part of this report.

But the Russia Team at the Institute for the Study of War has developed an alternate framework for assessing and forecasting Russian activities. All the actions Putin has taken thus far are also consistent with this alternate framework and the ongoing assessments and forecasts derived from it. This framework suggests that **Putin is highly unlikely to invade unoccupied Ukraine on a large scale if at all this winter**, but that he is likely to deploy Russian forces permanently into Belarus and possibly overtly into Donbas. He might conduct limited military incursions into unoccupied Ukraine, particularly along the northern littoral of the Sea of Azov, but even those operations are unlikely.

The ostentatious mobilization of Russian military forces in this framework may be intended to focus Western leaders on avoiding a war that Putin does not intend to fight, distracting them from his actual purposes. Putin might also aim to extract concessions from the West that would assist his asymmetric efforts to achieve other goals in return for not initiating a war.

There is no way at this time to invalidate either the classical framework or our own. The scenarios derived from the classical framework are receiving growing attention and discussion in the media and the expert community and are surely being thoroughly examined by the US government and our allies.

We, therefore, present the scenarios and considerations that emerge from our alternative framework to aid assessment, forecasting, and decision-making by others and to open the imagine-space of analysts and decisionmakers.

Consideration of Russian courses of action (COAs) within this alternative framework is important because measures taken to deter or defeat a large-scale invasion of Ukraine will not necessarily deter or defeat the Russian efforts we assess to be most likely and most dangerous. In some cases, US or allied efforts aimed at avoiding war will advance Russian objectives if our framework is correct.

An overt Russian invasion of the portion of Ukraine that Putin did not invade and occupy in 2014 is not necessarily the only devastating strategic outcome for America's interests and Ukraine's people. Putin may be able to generate catastrophes for Ukraine, Europe, and America without having to risk large-scale mechanized maneuver war. The United States and its allies must recognize these possibilities and develop and deploy contingencies to prevent them even as they also work to deter and, if necessary, defeat an overt invasion.

## Alternative Framework

ISW's framework is based on the deep study of Russian hybrid warfare theory and practice laid out in the reports of Mason Clark, on the evaluation of Putin's worldview and evolving approach to geostrategy described by Nataliya Bugayova, and on the meticulous assessments of Russian activities throughout the 2020 Belarus crisis and ongoing Ukraine crisis by George Barros.<sup>2</sup> It rests on a series of Russia Team's assessments that have become planning assumptions in the military-technical sense—if any of these assessments are invalidated, then the entire framework is invalidated and would have to be rebuilt. The ISW framework supported accurate forecasting of Russia's actions during the April 2021 crisis as well as of Russian efforts in Belarus since the 2020 elections protests.

Readers reluctant to accept these assessments are asked to suspend their disagreement with them for purposes of considering the assessments and forecasts of current Russian behavior that flow from them. We have argued them extensively elsewhere, and the value of the current essay, again, is to articulate an alternative view to open the imagination space of analysts and decisionmakers.

The key assessments include:

- I. Putin is and remains a rational actor who is not less well-grounded in reality than most world leaders. He generally understands the capabilities and limitations of the military and non-military forces at his disposal as well as any political leader does. He will not intentionally take actions likely to risk the survival of the Russian state or his own rule, although he might, of course, miscalculate. No “bounded rationality” is necessary to explain Putin's decisions and actions, only the ability to perceive the world from his logical and perceptual points of departure.<sup>3</sup>
2. Putin fears a full-scale conventional war with NATO and does not believe he can win it.
3. Putin is aware of Russia's domestic weakness, particularly its economic challenges, and is vividly conscious of Russia's poverty relative to the Western alliance.
4. Putin and his advisors rely on an asymmetric approach to achieving their objectives that focuses on creating conditions within the information spaces of target states that cause the leaders of those states to act unwittingly in ways that advance Russia's interests rather than their own. This approach is an implementation of the Soviet theory known as “reflexive control.”<sup>4</sup>
5. Russia's asymmetric approach goes beyond the information space. Putin relies on a few limited bases of real power, such as its military footprint and financial investments. He amplifies those power bases through means such as international coalitions and human networks. Putin exploits the forces within the West that drive Western leaders toward accepting his gains and dropping pressures on him. He accelerates the erosion of memories of Russian aggression. He uses legitimate causes such as counterterrorism cooperation to pull countries into Russian initiatives and legitimize his malign activities. He focuses his opponents on the short-term benefits or costs the Kremlin can offer or inflict on them and distracts them from their long-term interests and from the leverage they hold vis-à-vis Russia. He benefits from the desire for normalcy in the West and the ingrained reluctance to engage in confrontational policies toward Russia.
6. The Russian military increasingly applies a precisely articulated theory, doctrine, and approach in which all activities, up to and including major conventional military undertakings, are subordinate to informational objectives that enable reflexive control. ISW has published on this Russian concept of

“hybrid war,” acknowledging the extensive literature that exists on the validity and use of this term.<sup>5</sup> We ask readers who disagree with the use of the term hybrid war to instead engage with the key Russian premise that we assess is integral to understanding the Kremlin’s decision making in Ukraine: that attaining information objectives can achieve decisive effects beyond simply serving as supporting efforts for military or other operations.

7. Putin pursues a clear set of objectives and dynamically updates outlines of the approaches by which he means to achieve them. He is not simply an opportunistic predator reacting to observed possibilities to advance his aims.

He seeks instead to seize and hold the initiative and force his adversaries to react to him, all the while obfuscating his true objectives. Putin can move rapidly when he sees opportunities and often jumps from one theater to another in a way that appears to lack coherence to a Western audience that compartmentalizes theaters and problems. Putin has pursued the same goals consistently for years. He has shown a willingness to accept losses to advance his larger efforts. The Kremlin’s means of pursuing these goals are being continually modified and improved, even though their execution is often ineffective, poorly coordinated, and even counterproductive.<sup>6</sup>

## Russian Objectives in the Current Crisis

Putin, Russian officials, and official Russian documents have clearly articulated several grand strategic objectives that are likely driving Russian actions in the current crisis:

1. The permanence and stability of Putin’s own rule in Russia and, presumably, of his ability to control his succession.
2. The restoration of a multipolar world order in which the United States holds no privileged or even first among equals position and in which Russia has equal power and rights with the United States, China, and Europe.<sup>7</sup>
3. The re-establishment of Russia as a recognized global power that must be involved in and consulted with regarding major events and crises.
4. The neutralization of NATO as an effective and legitimate military-political alliance, an objective Putin pursues primarily by seeking to demonstrate that NATO will not honor its Article 5 mutual defense commitment to all its members.<sup>8</sup>
5. The establishment of an exclusive Russian sphere of influence within the former Soviet Union from which all external powers and specifically NATO are excluded. The precise degree and nature of the control Putin seeks to gain over former Soviet states is not yet clear and may well vary from state to state. It could also change over time. It likely falls well short of formally reintegrating the former Soviet states directly into the Russian Federation or some other body that re-establishes Moscow’s direct rule. It is probably greater than traditional forms of suzerainty, however, as Putin has already demonstrated his intent to influence and even control some aspects of the internal affairs of former Soviet states.<sup>9</sup>
6. The elimination of conventional threats to Russian security and the ending of all external efforts to influence Russian public opinion or constrain Putin’s domestic activities in any way. Putin perceives even public statements about his domestic policies as aggressions and violations of Russian sovereignty in close parallel with the Chinese view of such activities.<sup>10</sup>

7. The removal of all economic sanctions against Russia and, ultimately, global recognition of economic sanctions as an illegal form of economic warfare.

Putin and his lieutenants and propaganda machines expound these objectives repeatedly and in many forms. They often weave them into and through ideological formulations with deep historical resonances in both Russia and the West. Moscow wraps its objections to American global power and influence and to any Western commentary about Russia's domestic affairs in the language of United Nations idealism, international rather than multilateral collective security, disarmament, and anti-imperialism/colonialism.<sup>11</sup> Putin and his allies espouse the uniqueness and wholeness of Russian culture and the Russian ethnic space and weave narratives of it being crudely attacked and wrenched apart, in their exposition, by the clumsy and thoughtless way in which the post-Soviet states emerged from the collapsing Soviet Union. **Evaluating the rightness or wrongness of any of these portrayals is irrelevant to the task of identifying the objectives with which they are interwoven**, as Putin and other Russian officials repeat those objectives clearly and endlessly.

These grand strategic objectives may be distilled into a set of strategic objectives that Putin is pursuing in Belarus and Ukraine. In Belarus, he seeks to:

- I. De facto re-integrate Belarus and Russia through the mechanism of the Union State. The net effect of this re-integration would strip Minsk of real control over Belarusian domestic affairs and any control over Belarusian foreign and security affairs, although it might leave some thin veneer of domestic autonomy.
2. Re-integrate the Belarusian military into the Russian Federation Armed Forces (RFAF).
3. Permanently station Russian military units in Belarus.
4. Establish a fully integrated air defense network using the most advanced Russian air defense systems and covering Belarus and the Russian Federation.

In Ukraine, he seeks to:

- I. Permanently end Ukraine's aspirations to join NATO or the European Union and fix Ukraine's orientation on Moscow.
2. Obtain binding commitments from the United States at least and possibly NATO that neither Ukraine nor any other former Soviet state will ever be admitted to the alliance.
3. Drive all non-Russian-approved military advisors and equipment from Ukraine and secure guarantees that they will never return.
4. Bring about a political environment and system that is permanently and unalterably amenable to Moscow.
5. Gain Ukrainian and international acceptance of Russia's role as the protector of "ethnic Russians" and "Russian citizens" (residents of other countries to whom Russia has granted passports) in Ukraine and throughout the former Soviet space. This goal includes Russia's right to intervene in Ukrainian domestic law, policy, and security affairs to enforce that role.<sup>12</sup>
6. Gain Ukrainian and international acceptance of Russia's annexation of Crimea and of any other territory in Ukraine or in any former Soviet state he may choose to re-integrate formally into the Russian Federation.
7. Secure in advance the right to establish any political arrangement he chooses in Ukraine and to adjust that arrangement as he sees fit without external interference.
8. Obtain the elimination of all sanctions imposed on Russia for its actions in Ukraine.

Putin's pursuit of several specific objectives vis-a-vis NATO and Europe also influences his actions in Ukraine and Belarus. He seeks to:

- I. Avoid large-scale conventional war with NATO or its main military members.

2. Secure the removal of all international sanctions on Russia and avoid the imposition of costly new ones.
3. Increase tension between the United States and its European partners, between Britain and its continental partners, and between the Western and Eastern European NATO states.
4. Cement Russia's dominant economic leverage over Europe and particularly Germany by securing the opening of the Nord Stream 2 (NS2) pipeline.<sup>13</sup>
5. Avoid a costly arms race in Europe that Russia cannot economically sustain.

## Situation Assessments

Putin pursues his objectives within the concrete situations in Belarus, Ukraine, Europe, and the United States. He has worked to shape the situations in all those places for two decades with varying degrees of success and some noteworthy setbacks. We cannot evaluate his assessments of the situations in any of these places directly. **The impossibility of truly seeing these situations through his eyes is one of the likeliest sources of great error in this or any other forecast of Putin's future actions. We may be wrong in our assessment; he may be wrong in his.** Perhaps even more likely, he may over or underestimate his ability to change any given situation to his advantage within a certain time through a particular set of actions. We present here, in any case, our current running assessments of the situations in Ukraine and Belarus.

### Belarus

Russia will likely deploy its forces into Belarus; the only question is when the Kremlin calculates the most advantageous moment to do so.<sup>14</sup> Putin has already deployed elements of the Russian Air Force to Belarus and joint Russian-Belarusian air patrols of Belarusian airspace began in 2021.<sup>15</sup> Conditions are set for Putin to deploy Russian forces to Belarus at any time either temporarily or permanently. Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko has lost all meaningful leverage with which to resist

or delay such a deployment, and Putin could force the matter without paying any significant price if Lukashenko did seek to resist.<sup>16</sup>

Lukashenko's actions in inventing and protracting the "migrant crisis" at the Polish border enhance informational conditions for the deployment of Russian troops.<sup>17</sup> Belarusian officials and media and Russian officials and media have described the movement of Polish security forces in response to the migrant crisis as a military deployment of NATO troops that threatens Belarus, even though it is nothing of the sort.<sup>18</sup> That language could easily justify the deployment of Russian troops to the border as a "defensive" response to "deter" a "planned" NATO "aggression" against Belarus or the Union State and is probably intended to do so.<sup>19</sup>

*The impossibility of truly seeing these situations through his eyes is one of the likeliest sources of great error in this or any other forecast of Putin's future actions.*

Russian progress in efforts to complete the re-integration of Belarus with the Russian Federation via the Union State treaty is more difficult to evaluate because of the opacity of the process. The process appears to be accelerating toward Putin's desired end state, but Lukashenko has historically managed to be more successful in delaying the arrival of that end state than any rational calculation of relative strength would

have suggested was possible.<sup>20</sup> Lukashenko's ability to continue to delay, however, appears to be fading rapidly as his isolation from Europe (caused by his

own actions and likely encouraged if not spurred in part by Moscow) increases.<sup>21</sup> Putin can likely force a conclusion to this matter at a time of his choosing, although Lukashenko may be able to exact some price at least in the form of public embarrassment if Putin moves too fast or demands more than Lukashenko is willing to concede. Lukashenko may be negotiating with Putin over specific aspects of the Union State political order, including his own succession. This hypothesis, for which there is no direct evidence, could help explain Lukashenko's continued stalling of full integration even though he has clearly lost the ability to prevent it.

Lukashenko is himself setting conditions for Belarus to participate in Russian aggression against Ukraine, possibly as part of these Union State negotiations. Lukashenko's rhetoric and actions in the past two months are increasingly aligned with Kremlin objectives in an unprecedented manner. Belarusian border guards opened a new military base in Malorita, Brest, and announced the opening of two more bases on the Belarusian-Ukrainian border in Gomel before the end of 2021 on December 8.<sup>22</sup> The Belarusian Ministry of Defense (MoD) on November 29 announced a joint military exercise with Russia on the Belarusian-Ukrainian border on an unspecified future date to "cover Belarus' southern border" from enemy force groups.<sup>23</sup> Lukashenko reversed his position on the illegality of Russia's annexation and occupation of Crimea, stating that the peninsula is legally Russian for the first time on November 30.<sup>24</sup> Lukashenko implied that Belarus is ready to resume hosting Russian nuclear weapons infrastructure—as it did during the Soviet era—if NATO deploys nuclear missile systems to Eastern Europe on November 30.<sup>25</sup> Lukashenko stated that Belarus will support Russia during any military escalation in Donbas on November 29. He said that if the West conducts a military operation in Donbas or against Russian borders, then "Belarus will not be left on the sidelines. It is very clear on whose side Belarus will be."<sup>26</sup> Russia and Belarus decided to increase the quantity of combined Russian-Belarusian air patrols in Belarusian airspace on November 25.<sup>27</sup> Putin likely seeks to retain the perception that Lukashenko has some degree of independence from Russia.

Belarus could become a major long-term proxy of the Kremlin and could help Moscow obfuscate its activities, cover them under the veil of multilateral action, and give Putin deniability for some actions, however plausible or implausible. These factors further complicate the assessment of Russia's Belarus re-integration progress.

Putin can, in sum, likely rely on his ability to move forces into Belarus at will and to attack Ukraine from bases in Belarus after he has done so. Such operations face several complexities and challenges, all surmountable, that will be considered in subsequent reports. Putin may also be able to direct Lukashenko to send Belarusian forces, with or without Russian partners, to Russian-controlled Donbas or Crimea. Finally, Putin may be able to direct Belarus to create provocations and informational pretexts for Russian action on Belarus' southern border with Ukraine or its borders with Poland and Lithuania.

## Ukraine

The situation in Ukraine is much more complex and much less favorable to Putin than that in Belarus. Putin's invasions of Ukraine in 2014 backfired spectacularly in at least one respect—they have ignited a degree of Ukrainian patriotism and anti-Russian sentiment unprecedented in the modern history of Ukraine. Those attitudes allowed the previous Ukrainian president, Petro Poroshenko, to enshrine Ukraine's determination to join NATO in the Ukrainian constitution, for example.<sup>28</sup> They form a central basis of the current Ukrainian political environment in which a pro-Western orientation is one of the key pillars in Kyiv, western Ukraine, and even well into unoccupied eastern Ukraine. They also spurred the creation of a much more effective military than Ukraine had had before 2014 and a mobilized population that has demonstrated its willingness to fight and the ability to self-organize to do so.<sup>29</sup>

ISW assesses that Putin initially expected current President Volodymyr Zelensky to be more tractable and more amenable to Russian pressures. Zelensky ran on a platform of resolving the conflict

precipitated by Russia's invasion of eastern Ukraine in terms highly favorable to Russia. He quickly made moves aimed at following through on that campaign promise that also favored Putin.<sup>30</sup> Zelensky took office with no political experience, moreover, and little apparent understanding of the actual issues he would face. Putin likely expected him to be an easy mark.

Zelensky, despite his various missteps, has turned out to be less manipulable than Putin likely expected.<sup>31</sup> Zelensky may have learned and grown in office, as many novice political leaders do, but he also surely found himself constrained by the reality of a political environment in which excessive pandering to Russia could be electorally fatal.

Initial Russian optimism was manifest in the gentle and even welcoming tone with which the Russian media and Russian officials at first treated Zelensky. That optimism has vanished.<sup>32</sup> **The October 2020 elections during which Zelensky refused Putin's demand to allow the Russian-occupied territories in Donbas to hold regular voting under Ukrainian law may have been a key inflection point.** Putin appears to have concluded that Zelensky will not concede to his demands, and the tone and messaging coming toward Zelensky from Moscow is now hostile and aggressive. Zelensky has become an obstacle to be reduced, circumvented, or destroyed by Moscow.<sup>33</sup>

But Putin may well have drawn other lessons from both the election that brought Zelensky to power and the subsequent parliamentary election, as overtly pro-Russian candidates generally performed badly.<sup>34</sup> He may have concluded that the political environment in Ukraine has settled into such an anti-Russian mode that he cannot reasonably expect to manipulate it to bring a Russia-amenable leader or parliament back into office without first causing some major change.

**This hypothesis, for which there is no direct evidence, is pivotal to the overall assessment and forecast of Putin's plans for the large military**

*Zelensky's refusal to allow the Russian-occupied territories in Donbas to hold regular voting under Ukrainian law may have been a key inflection point.*

**force he is currently assembling. If Putin has truly concluded that neither information operations nor political machinations can deliver his objectives in Ukraine, he may well have decided that he must run the risk and pay the price of achieving them by some other means. The classic assessment framework suggests that he might pursue them by force of arms. Our framework suggests that he might be focusing on reflexively controlling the United States and NATO to make concessions that would reinvigorate his efforts to undermine and ultimately overturn the current political environment in Ukraine.**

Other aspects of the situation in Ukraine could offer Putin alternative ways of securing his goals without the risks and costs of massive invasion, however. Zelensky's initially very high popularity has predictably fallen as public hopes and his rhetoric have crashed into the challenges that even experienced leaders would have had in governing Ukraine and which his own inexperience and naivete increased.<sup>35</sup> He tried and failed to rein in Ukraine's economic-political oligarchs and their corruption networks.<sup>36</sup> He has not increased the effectiveness or efficiency of the Ukrainian government.<sup>37</sup> He has not handled the COVID crisis particularly worse than most heads of government, but then, COVID has harmed the popularity of most chiefs of state.<sup>38</sup> He has gone through periods of greater or lesser tension with the most anti-Russian elements of Ukrainian society, which are often angered by his real and apparent concessions to Putin, and with the Ukrainian military and security services.<sup>39</sup> Finally, he has suffered from constant headwinds of Russian information operations designed to intimidate, cajole, and damage him.<sup>40</sup>

This last point bears emphasis. Russia has important informational advantages in Ukraine. **Putin is far more able to shape the Ukrainian information space than is the West. He can maneuver in it at times more easily even than the Ukrainian political leadership.**<sup>41</sup> Russian agents have long penetrated many Ukrainian



government, security, and media institutions despite repeated and occasionally successful efforts to root them out.<sup>42</sup> Oligarchs compromised by Russia's seizure of Ukraine's eastern lands and other inroads create ambivalent power centers hindering the smooth operation and messaging of Kyiv's leadership.<sup>43</sup> Russian economic and religious penetration remains substantial, despite the Ukrainian Orthodox Church's success in obtaining its independence from the Russian Orthodox Church.<sup>44</sup> **Putin has good reason to believe that he can initiate an information campaign of his choosing in Ukraine and put Kyiv (and, if relevant, the West) on the defensive and in a purely reactive mode for some time. Moscow has demonstrated this capability on several occasions.**<sup>45</sup> Zelensky does not have a reliable bully pulpit from which to control the narrative in Ukraine.

*Putin has good reason to believe that he can initiate an information campaign of his choosing in Ukraine and put Kyiv (and, if relevant, the West) on the defensive and in a purely reactive mode for some time.*

Some elements in Ukrainian society, and even more in Europe and the United States, create pressure on Zelensky to seek accommodation with Putin.<sup>46</sup> Many Ukrainians are tired of conflict and eager to continue building their country and its economy. The problems of Crimea and Donbas can seem far off and abstract in some parts of Ukraine, possibly not worth the continued risks of war and strife.<sup>47</sup>

But a strong block of Ukrainians harbors deep anger about Russia's predations and a determination to resist rather than succumb to Moscow and its troops.<sup>48</sup> Many tens of thousands of Ukrainians who joined volunteer regiments to fight Russia in 2014 and were later demobilized remain ready to resist renewed Russian aggression or Ukrainian leaders they perceive to be kowtowing to Putin.<sup>49</sup> This block puts great pressure on Zelensky—and will put pressure on any Ukrainian leader—to stand tough against the Russians and will limit his ability to make the kinds of concessions that might Putin is demanding. This bloc and the larger anti-Russian grouping that did not actively fight in the war has shown its willingness to take to the streets en masse not just

in the 2004 Maidan and 2014 Euromaidan revolutions, but also in response to lesser provocations.<sup>50</sup>

The anti-Russia block in Ukraine offers a possible vector for Russian manipulation of the situation. If Putin could engineer a circumstance in which Zelensky (or any Ukrainian president) conceded, seemed to concede, or was plausibly presented as conceding, core principles held dear by this anti-Russia group, then this group might respond by engaging in large-scale street protests. If Putin had set conditions with provocateurs and other agents to generate events on the ground that fed Kremlin-prepared information operations, he could potentially leverage such protests and manufactured or exaggerated events to justify military adventurism or erode or even collapse Zelensky's ability to rule.<sup>51</sup>

Ukraine's economy is another potential vector of Russian manipulation. The mere fact of the Russian mobilization on Ukraine's borders has already damaged the economy.<sup>52</sup> Protracting the apparent risk of conflict will likely protract and deepen that damage. But Russia holds additional economic levers during the winter months in the form of the gas Ukrainians use to keep themselves from freezing.<sup>53</sup> Putin has hitherto struggled to use this lever to the fullest since Russia has had a reciprocal reliance on Ukraine to transit gas to Europe and especially Germany, which relies on it.<sup>54</sup> The Nord Stream 2 pipeline is a critical inflection in this situation.<sup>55</sup> It would allow Putin to cut Ukraine off from Russian hydrocarbons entirely while continuing to supply gas to Europe, thus avoiding any price Kyiv might seek to impose by stopping the transit of Russian gas across its territory.

Ukrainians are as sensitive to their economic well-being (to say nothing of their ability to stay warm in winter) as any other humans. If Putin can use these and other actions to inflict severe damage on the Ukrainian economy and quality of life this winter, he might be able to generate protests, potentially

large-scale ones, that he could weaponize in the various ways already discussed.

These internal fault lines and vulnerabilities offer ample scope for a savvy manipulator such as Putin to contemplate ways of constraining or bringing down politicians and even political systems he regards as hopelessly unwilling or unable to give him what he wants. Our consideration of possible Russian courses of action short of full-scale invasion and our consideration of the probability of Putin choosing to launch a full-scale invasion turns heavily on our assessment of the opportunities Putin likely sees in the Ukrainian domestic situation.

Our assessment of the unlikeliness of a full-scale Russian invasion also depends on the challenges Putin would almost certainly face as the result of the rise of Ukrainian nationalism, the development of the Ukrainian military, and the self-organization of Ukrainians to resist Russia that began in 2014. The Ukrainian military alone could not defeat a Russian invasion, to be sure, but it would fight. Self-organizing Ukrainian militias also could not stop a Russian mechanized assault on a large scale, but they could quickly turn into a decentralized insurgency in many parts of the country. We will consider the ways in which such a situation might evolve and Russia's possible responses to it in part II of this effort, but this self-organization and inclination to mobilize rather than surrender was a factor that surprised Putin in 2014 and derailed his plans well short of their goals. He will likely factor it into any decisions about invading more of Ukraine.

## United States and NATO

The West has allowed itself to be trapped into a series of false narratives and Russia-manipulated processes, driven largely by its strong desire to avoid conflict or even confrontation with Russia. The actual state of affairs is as follows:

The current Ukrainian crisis began in 2014 when a spontaneous revolution overthrew Russia-backed dictator Viktor Yanukovich. Russia claims that the West initiated and supported this “color revolution” to create a Ukrainian puppet state—a claim that is both false-to-fact and central to Putin's worldview.<sup>56</sup>

Fear that a new pro-Western government might end Russia's ability to retain the Black Sea Fleet at Sevastopol in the Crimean Peninsula, the only suitable port available to Russia in the Black Sea, prompted Putin to seize the peninsula using “little green men” (“polite people” in the Russian parlance), who were actually Russian SPETSNAZ and airborne troops out of uniform along with members of the Ukrainian military who chose to support Russia rather than fight for Ukraine.<sup>57</sup> Putin then occupied the peninsula with regular Russian troops and arranged a plebiscite to confirm its annexation to the Russian Federation.

Putin also initiated a conflict in Donbas, again using out-of-uniform servicemembers and intelligence service agents, playing on pro-Russian sentiments that the Kremlin had been aggressively stoking in the region since 2004.<sup>58</sup> When his proxies and agents encountered unexpected resistance that stalled their advances, Putin sent in elements of the conventional Russian military to back them, ultimately securing Kyiv's de facto acceptance of the current state of affairs in which Russian proxy leaders backed by militias controlled by the Russian 8th Combined Arms Army, headquartered in Rostov-on-Don, control the self-styled Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic (DNR and LNR after their Russian initials).<sup>59</sup>

The West has accepted a diplomatic framework for resolving the conflict based on premises Putin has insisted on rather than on the realities of the case. It has allowed Putin to involve himself in negotiations to end the conflict as a mediator despite the fact that he initiated and protracts the conflict as the aggressor.<sup>60</sup> Russia formally holds such a mediating position in the Minsk II Accords and in the Normandy Format talks that are their main negotiating mechanism.<sup>61</sup> The very nature of Minsk II and Normandy is itself a major diplomatic accomplishment for Putin and a major concession by France and Germany.<sup>62</sup>

The Minsk II accords treat the situation in Donbas as an internal Ukrainian matter rather than an international conflict. They impose many specific obligations on the Ukrainian state and no obligations explicitly on Russia.<sup>63</sup> They require the

withdrawal of all foreign forces and disbandment of all illegal armed groups, references to the Russian proxies and their Russian handlers, without mentioning Russia directly. Neither the proxies nor the Russians have abided by that commitment. The Ukrainian government, for its part, has therefore refused to honor certain of its commitments, specifically the passage of laws granting autonomy to the DNR and the LNR. Moscow continues to demand that Ukraine live up to those commitments while making abundantly clear that it has no intention of adhering to its own.<sup>64</sup>

France, Germany, and, from the sidelines, the United States and other NATO states, have allowed Moscow to frame the conversations surrounding Normandy and Minsk II around Ukraine's failure to abide by its commitments, generally side-stepping or downplaying Russia's failure to abide by its own. Continuing discussions about Ukraine's Minsk II obligations support major Russian information lines of effort, specifically the narrative that the Ukraine crisis is an internal conflict to which Russia is not directly a party.<sup>65</sup> The West's continuation of this dangerous farce puts constant pressure on Ukraine to make further concessions to Russia without having secured any Russian concessions in return. It also feeds strong narratives in the West that Ukraine, not Russia, is the main obstacle delaying resolution of the crisis. It thereby further undermines any will in the West to fight for Ukraine.

## NATO Membership for Ukraine

The expansion of NATO to the east is one of Putin's major grievances against the alliance. He bitterly resented the accession of the Baltic States to NATO in 2004, which he claims was a violation of promises the alliance had made to Russia in the 1990s.<sup>66</sup> Ukraine also sought NATO membership without success. But the 2008 NATO summit

in Bucharest issued a declaration stating "NATO welcomes Ukraine's and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO."<sup>67</sup> NATO has never given either country a formal Membership Action Plan (MAP) or any concrete roadmap that would end in their accession to the alliance. Ukraine nevertheless passed a constitutional amendment in 2019 committing itself

to joining the alliance, and NATO, for its part, has never formally rescinded the 2008 statement committing itself, in theory, to admitting Ukraine.<sup>68</sup>

Putin began demanding in the fall of 2021 not the rescission of that offer, but rather a formal, binding commitment from the US never to bring Ukraine into NATO.<sup>69</sup>

Zelensky, on the other hand, has repeatedly asked for rapid

admission to the alliance in the face of increasing Russian aggression.<sup>70</sup> Ukrainian confidence in the West naturally suffers every time Zelensky asks for help and is refused.<sup>71</sup> Zelensky's own credibility as a leader also suffers. **Putin, therefore, advances his objectives every time he creates a situation in which a Ukrainian leader asks NATO for help or for accession and NATO denies the request.** He likely aims to persuade Ukrainians that they will receive no meaningful help from NATO or its members and that they are on their own if they choose to fight him.<sup>72</sup> The purpose of that effort is likely to reduce their willingness to resist him, probably to force from Kyiv the political concessions he desires, but possibly to set more favorable conditions for Russian military action should Putin decide to restart it.

The combination of the Minsk II and Normandy frameworks and the indeterminate state of Ukraine's bid for NATO membership creates a favorable environment in which Putin can operate. It has established the current pattern in which Russia or its proxies initiate an aggression or a threat of aggression, Ukraine's leader asks NATO for membership

*Putin, therefore, advances his objectives every time he creates a situation in which a Ukrainian leader asks NATO for help or for accession and NATO denies the request.*

and is denied, he asks individual states for defense and help and receives limited assistance, and the United States, France, and Germany simultaneously demand that he make concessions to Russia as specified in the Minsk II accord, sometimes without making any similar demand that Russia abide by its own obligations under that accord and international law. The net effect of this pattern is to both raise and undermine the hopes of Ukrainians for Western support against Russian attack as well as to make any Ukrainian leader look like a fool who cannot deliver the assistance Ukraine needs, all the while undermining the true narrative that Putin is the aggressor. It is one of the most successful information operations Putin has ever conducted.

## Ukrainian Information Space

Ukraine's domestic information space is generally not treating a potential full-scale Russian offensive as likely.<sup>73</sup> Ukraine's information space is inherently fragmented in part due to its division among several oligarch-controlled media conglomerates.<sup>74</sup> Media outlets controlled by former Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko and other pro-Western oligarchs are focusing on covering Zelensky's various political scandals.<sup>75</sup> Pro-Russian Ukrainian media outlets controlled by Kremlin ally Viktor Medvedchuk are downplaying the Russian military buildup by using sterile language to refer to Russian deployments and a threat of invasion as "the situation in Ukraine," while echoing Kremlin rhetoric demanding Zelensky make political concessions in line with the Minsk II Accords.<sup>76</sup> News outlets controlled by Ihor Kolomoisky are covering national politics in a manner that neither supports nor undermines Zelensky, while emphasizing coverage of Western states' reaction to Russia's buildup, rather than covering the buildup itself.<sup>77</sup> Ukrainian media is largely ignoring the threat of a Russian offensive against Ukraine this winter, likely because war reporting has become mundane over the past several years of frozen conflict and the actors above who influence Ukraine's information space do not seek a fixation on the threat of war. Ukraine's information space is changing rapidly, however, and more coverage of that danger of a Russian invasion will likely emerge over the coming weeks.

The Kremlin likely has not yet tried to prepare the Ukrainian information space for a full-scale invasion. Ukrainians strongly support defending their independence against Russian efforts to control it even if individual Ukrainian politicians and blocs advocate more conciliatory approaches to Moscow. Ukrainians are more willing and better prepared to fight Russian aggression now than they were in 2014. Putin would very likely seek to demoralize the Ukrainian population and provoke internal dissent within Ukraine before launching an invasion to increase its chances of achieving Putin's desired post-war objectives and to disrupt Ukrainian efforts to fight the attack.

The Kremlin will therefore very likely conduct multiple simultaneous information operations to target Ukraine's population before launching any potential offensive military operations.<sup>78</sup> The Kremlin would use Ukrainian social media groups (Facebook, Instagram, VK, Odnoklassniki, Telegram, etc.), Russian agents, Russian media, Russian-influenced Ukrainian media, Russia's DNR and LNR proxies, and Russia's political proxies (such as the pro-Russian "For Life" opposition party), to conduct these information operations to:

1. Demoralize and disrupt Ukraine's political leadership and the Ukrainian population;
2. Provoke violent protests from Ukrainian nationalists; and
3. Provoke distrust and fear of the Ukrainian government, particularly among pro-Russian Ukrainians in areas the Kremlin seeks to capture.

Russia's demoralization information operation in Ukraine would likely center around fear campaigns with the following narratives:

- Overt threats that Russia would intend to capture Kyiv, Kharkiv, Mariupol, and other significant Ukrainian cities;
- The high costs that war with Russia would entail for Ukraine;<sup>79</sup>
- The inevitability of decisive Russian victory in such a war;<sup>80</sup>

- The West will not support Ukraine in such a war;<sup>81</sup>
- Political capitulation to the Kremlin would preempt the war;<sup>82</sup> and
- Ukraine is not really a sovereign state and is controlled by the West.<sup>83</sup>

The Kremlin would also likely intensify existing information operations portraying Zelensky as an incompetent leader and stoking divisions between him and his cabinet and senior military officials.<sup>84</sup>

The Kremlin would target Ukrainian nationalist elements to exacerbate existing frictions among Ukrainian nationalists, the Zelensky government, and pro-Russian Ukrainian forces.<sup>85</sup> Other efforts would likely seek to provoke Ukrainian nationalists, paramilitary organizations, veterans, and active service members to:

- Conduct violent protests against the Zelensky government's actual or perceived political capitulation;<sup>86</sup>
- Promote desertion from Ukraine's military and security services;<sup>87</sup> and
- Provoke violent protests against pro-Russian political parties in Ukraine.

The Kremlin would also target vulnerable Ukrainian territories with Russophonic and ethnic Russian populations to convince them that:

- The Ukrainian government or uncontrollable Ukrainian nationalists will harm ethnic Russians;<sup>88</sup>
- Ukraine is a failed state;<sup>89</sup>
- Kyiv cannot protect them from uncontrollable nationalists;<sup>90</sup> and
- Ukraine's membership in Western organizations will ruin Ukraine.<sup>91</sup>

These information operations would likely be less effective at present relative to their first introduction in 2014 because Ukrainians have developed more anti-Kremlin antibodies and are more familiar with Kremlin propaganda techniques.<sup>92</sup> The Kremlin likely try to advance them nevertheless.

ISW has not yet detected coordinated Russian campaigns along any of these lines, which strongly suggests that Moscow is not yet preparing the Ukrainian information space for a large-scale invasion.<sup>93</sup>

We must consider an alternative hypothesis, however: Putin is satisfied that the Ukrainian information space is already partially prepared for the most dangerous course of action (MDCOA) given its current ambivalence about the risk of invasion this winter. A different version of the demoralization campaign could leverage Ukraine's currently high levels of war fatigue to drive Ukraine's media space to cover news stories unrelated to a Russian offensive. This campaign would seek to lull Ukrainians into ignorance and complacency about an imminent or likely Russian offensive before the operation's execution to maximize the shock of such an attack and increase polarization between different groups in Ukrainian society once the Kremlin began the offensive.

The principal objection to this alternate hypothesis is that Putin needs more than the initial shock effect of an unexpected invasion to achieve his political objectives from such a war. He needs pro-Russian elements of Ukrainian society to be prepared to act in concert to advance his aims, and he would likely seek to suppress the instinctive responses of most Ukrainians to fight when an obvious invasion begins.

Another objection to this alternate hypothesis is that Ukrainian complacency is unlikely to survive two more months of active Russian military buildup and Western reporting on it. The Ukrainian government will likely lean into the task of mobilizing its people to fight against the invasion, and major Ukrainian media outlets will likely begin covering Ukrainian government messaging and Western reporting on the threat. Putin would have to conduct a large and concerted information operation against this trend and would not likely succeed in stopping it.

# Russian Dispositions Threatening Ukraine

Putin has set conditions for operations against both Ukraine and Belarus in the air, sea, land (ASL) military domains and the information domains (ISW considers Russian diplomatic-conditions setting to be part of the information domain). He likely has been setting conditions in the cyber domain as well, but we do not have good visibility on such activities.<sup>94</sup>

## Military Situation

The movement of Russian ground forces has received the most attention in the West. Russian ground forces have been accruing on or near Ukraine's and Belarus's borders for years, but the movement accelerated dramatically in April 2021.<sup>95</sup> The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) transformed pre-announced annual readiness check exercises into a large-scale mobilization of forces that included the movement of troops from other military districts to the Western Military District (WMD)—an activity previously not associated with exercises of the announced variety.<sup>96</sup>

The Russian military has moved a large number of combat, combat support, and combat service support units to and from positions on or near the Ukrainian border, into and out of Crimea, and into and out of Belarus over the course of 2021. Most of these units returned to their home bases after exercises in April and September, but some have not.<sup>97</sup>

The most noteworthy deployment was that of elements of the 41st Combined Arms Army (CAA), normally based near Sverdlovsk in the Central Military District (CMD), to the Pogonovo training area near Voronezh, roughly 100 miles from the Ukrainian border.<sup>98</sup> These forces reportedly included elements of the 35th and 74th Separate Guards Motorized Rifle Brigades, the 6th Tank Regiment of the 90th Guards Tank Division, and the 120th Artillery Brigade, along with Iskander missile launchers from the 119th Missile Brigade normally based in Sverdlovsk.<sup>99</sup> This composite group has the vehicle strength of a large separate motorized rifle brigade but drawn from enough brigades/regiments

to form a small division, although it did not reportedly come with a division headquarters or the other combat support and combat service support units a division would normally have. The separate motorized rifle brigades should be able to operate independently without such divisional support, assuming they brought all their own support elements along, but the tank regiment would likely require additional support elements drawn from WMD forces.

This composite group exercised at Pogonovo in April and then openly left its equipment set behind so that it could be used again during the Zapad-2021 exercises to be held in September, according to the Russian MoD.<sup>100</sup> It apparently did not, in fact, participate in Zapad-2021—the Russian MoD did not announce its participation in any activities associated with that exercise, in any case.<sup>101</sup> It did, however, move in October and November from Pogonovo to a new training area in Yelnya near Smolensk and the Belarusian border, where it again parked its equipment without conducting any announced exercises.<sup>102</sup>

## 41st Combined Arms Army

- 90th Tank Division
  - At least 1 battalion tactical group (BTG) in Yelnya.<sup>103</sup>
- 74th Motorized Rifle Brigade
  - At least 2 BTGs in Yelnya.<sup>104</sup>
  - Elements of the 74th Motorized Rifle Brigade. Observed in Novosibirsk deploying towards Ukraine from Yurga, CMD, on April 2, 2021.<sup>105</sup>
- 35th Motorized Rifle Brigade
  - At least 1 BTG in Yelnya.<sup>106</sup>
- 119 Missile Brigade
  - At least an Iskander battalion in Yelnya.<sup>107</sup>
- 61st Air Defense Brigade
  - At least one BUK-M3 battalion in Yelnya.<sup>108</sup>

- 10th Nuclear, Chemical, and Biological Defense (NCB) Regiment
  - At least a company and assorted equipment from the 10th NCB Regiment in Yelnya.<sup>109</sup>
- 120th Artillery Brigade
  - At least two artillery battalions.<sup>110</sup>
  - Elements of the 120th Artillery Brigade. Observed in Novosibirsk deploying toward Ukraine from Yurga, CMD, on April 3, 2021.<sup>111</sup>

Additional Russian military forces deployed to Belarus, Crimea, and positions near the Ukrainian border over the course of the year, with most returning to their home garrisons after the deployment. Perhaps the most worrisome deployments were those of the 1st Guards Tank Army, normally deployed around Moscow. This is the Russian military's most-elite heavy formation. It would likely form the core of a strike force conducting a large mechanized invasion, but is also Russia's primary strategic ground forces reserve. Elements would likely be held back in any invasion to deter and defend against possible counter-attacks from other fronts.

The 1st Guards Tank Army elements observed moving into Belarus during the Zapad-2021 exercises included:

- Elements of the 2nd Motor Rifle Division
  - Company-sized element of the 15th Motor Rifle Regiment at the Brest Training Ground, Brest, Belarus.<sup>112</sup>
  - Company-sized element of the 147th Artillery Regiment likely at the Brest Training Ground, Brest, Belarus.<sup>113</sup>
- Elements of the 4th Tank Division
  - One reinforced (or possibly two) battalion tactical groups of the 4th Tank Division at the Obuz-Lesnovsky Training Ground, Baranovichi, Belarus.<sup>114</sup> Elements of the 1088th Logistics Support Battalion at the Obuz-Lesnovsky Training Ground, Baranovichi, Belarus.<sup>115</sup>
  - Elements of the 275th Artillery Regiment at the Obuz-Lesnovsky Training Ground, Baranovichi, Belarus.<sup>116</sup>

- Elements of the 60th Command (C4I) Brigade at the Obuz-Lesnovsky Training Ground Range, Baranovichi, Belarus.<sup>117</sup>
- Elements of army-level assets of the 1st Guard Tank Army
  - Elements of the 96th Separate Reconnaissance Brigade at the Obuz-Lesnovsky Training Ground, Baranovichi on September 12.<sup>118</sup>
  - Elements of the 69th Separate Logistic Brigade at the Obuz-Lesnovsky Training Ground in Brest, Belarus, on September 15.<sup>119</sup>
  - Elements of the 20th NCB Regiment at the Obuz-Lesnovsky Training Ground, Baranovichi, Belarus.<sup>120</sup>
- Unspecified 1st Guard Tank Army Elements
  - Unspecified engineering, reconnaissance, topographer, electronic warfare, and battalion-sized artillery elements of the 1st Guards Tank Army at the Obuz-Lesnovsky Training Ground in Brest, Belarus, from September 11 to 15, 2021.<sup>121</sup>

Elements of the Russian 58th Combined Arms Army deployed to Crimea during the April 2021 exercises. They were reportedly redeployed to their home garrisons Vladikavkaz, North Ossetia, on April 26, 2021, but ISW has no independent confirmation that they all went home.<sup>122</sup> They included:

- Elements of the 136th Motorized Rifle Brigade
  - Unspecified elements of the 136th Guards Motor Rifle Brigade deployed from Makhachkala to Crimea on April 5, 2021.<sup>123</sup>
- Elements of the 291st Motorized Rifle Regiment
  - Unspecified elements of the 291st Guards Motorized Rifle Regiment deployed from Chechnya to Crimea on April 7, 2021.<sup>124</sup>
- Elements of the 291st Artillery Brigade
  - Unspecified elements deployed to Crimea in April 2021.<sup>125</sup>

Elements of most of major Russia's airborne (VDV) units and some SPETSNAZ units have exercised in Crimea and Belarus in 2021 with one brigade

permanently redeploying to Crimea from interior Russia.

The 56th VDV Brigade/Regiment first deployed from its original home station of Kamyshin, near Volgograd, to Feodosia in the Crimean Peninsula on March 30, 2021, ostensibly for exercises.<sup>126</sup> The brigade did not return to Kamyshin but has permanently relocated to Feodosia as of December 2021. The commander of Russia's Airborne Forces in October stated that the 56th Brigade will move into new barracks in Feodosia by the end of 2021.<sup>127</sup> The 56th Brigade was transformed into a regiment and is likely to be subordinated to the 7th Novorossiysk VDV Division.<sup>128</sup> It is unclear what happened to the additional supporting elements it would have had as an independent brigade, but we surmise that they were added to the 7th VDV division or to other formations in Crimea.

Other VDV units that temporarily deployed for training but subsequently returned to their home stations include:

Elements of the 7th Guards Mountain Air Assault Division

- Elements of the 247th Guards Airborne Assault Regiment
  - Elements of the 247th Guards Airborne Assault Regiment deployed from Stavropol to participate in exercises with over 2,000 personnel at Opuk Training Ground in Crimea on March 16-19.<sup>129</sup>
- Elements of the 1141st Guard Artillery Regiment
  - Over 600 personnel of the 1141st conducted exercises at the Opuk Training Ground in Crimea on February 11, 2021.<sup>130</sup>
  - Elements of the 1141st Guards Artillery Regiment deployed from Anapa, Krasnodar Krai to participate in exercises with over 2,000 personnel at Opuk Training Ground on March 16-19.<sup>131</sup>
- Elements of the 3rd Air Defense Missile Regiment

- 500 personnel of the 3rd Air Defense Missile Regiment conducted exercises at the Opuk Training Grounds on March 23, 2021.<sup>132</sup>

- Two echelons with airborne and artillery units of the 7th Guards Mountain Air Assault Division deployed from Novorossiysk and Krasnodar to Crimea around April 22, 2021.<sup>133</sup>

Elements of the 76th VDV Division

- Elements of the 104th Regiment deployed to Simferopol in Crimea on April 5, 2021.<sup>134</sup> The Russian MoD reported that personnel of the 76th Guards Air Assault Division left Crimea on April 29, 2021.<sup>135</sup>
- Unspecified elements of the 76th Guards Air Assault Division trained at the Obuz-Lesnovsky Training Ground in Brest, Belarus, on September 10 and September 13, 2021.<sup>136</sup>

Elements of the 98th VDV Division

- At least 2,000 personnel of the 98th deployed to the Opuk Training Ground in Crimea.<sup>137</sup>

Elements of the 31st Airborne Brigade

- Elements of the 31st Airborne Brigade exercised at the Obuz-Lesnovsky Training Ground in Brest, Belarus on September 10.<sup>138</sup>

Elements of the 45th Guards Spetsnaz Brigade

- A company-sized airborne infantry force of 90 paratroopers of the Russian 45th Spetsnaz Brigade deployed from Kublina airfield in Moscow to the Brest Training Ground, in Brest, Belarus on September 15, 2021.<sup>139</sup>

Elements of the 106th Guards Airborne Division

- Elements of the 106th Guards Airborne Division exercised at the Brest Training Ground, in Brest, Belarus on September 10, 2021.<sup>140</sup>

Russian naval forces from the Caspian Flotilla and the Northern and Baltic Fleets also exercised in the Black Sea and Belarus over the course of 2021. All elements of these naval forces reportedly returned to their home bases after exercising. They included:



### Elements of the Caspian Flotilla

- Over 500 marines of the Caspian Flotilla conducted amphibious landing drills with a ship from the Northern Fleet in the Black Sea on April 20, 2021.<sup>141</sup>
- Fifteen Caspian Flotilla vessels deployed to the Black Sea on April 11 to participate in a joint exercise with elements of the Southern Military District, the Black Sea Fleet, and Airborne Forces involving 40 warships and 10,000 servicemen at the Opuk Training Ground, Crimea, on April 22.<sup>142</sup>

### Elements of the Northern Fleet

- The Northern Fleet deployed large landing ships *Alexander Otrakovsky* and *Kondopoga* to the Black Sea on April 16.<sup>143</sup>

### Elements of the Baltic Fleet

- Elements of the 15th Helicopter Army Aviation Brigade (Subordinate to the Baltic Fleet)
  - Elements of the 15th Helicopter Army Aviation Brigade (Mi-8, Mi-26, Ka-52) deployed to the Baranovichi Air Base in Belarus for Zapad-2021.<sup>144</sup>

### Elements of the Black Sea Fleet

- Two large landing ships of the Russian Black Sea Fleet loaded Black Sea Fleet naval infantry for amphibious assault exercises at the Opuk Training Ground in Crimea on December 7.<sup>145</sup> The *Caesar Kunikov* and *Novocherkassk* large landing ships of the Black Sea fleet onboarded an unspecified number of naval infantry at an unspecified location for future exercises at Opuk on an unspecified future date.
- More than 500 marines of the Russian Black Sea Fleet began conducting military exercises in unspecified Crimean training grounds on December 3.<sup>146</sup> Black Sea Fleet naval infantry practiced defending equipment transport and neutralizing enemy reconnaissance groups while deploying to Crimean training grounds.

- The missile ship *Shuya* of the Black Sea Fleet conducted an exercise in response to the announcement of USS *Arleigh Burke's* deployment to the Black Sea on November 25.<sup>147</sup>

Russian Air and Air Defense Forces also exercised in Belarus and Crimea, including:

Elements of the 14th Fighter Aviation Regiment (Subordinate to 6th Air and Air Defense Forces Army)

- Three Su-30SMs from the 14th Fighter Aviation Regiment from Khalino, Kursk exercised at the Baranovichi Air Base for Zapad-2021.<sup>148</sup>

Elements of the 4th Air Force and Air Defense Army of the Southern Military District

- Elements from Stavropol, Kuban, Rostov, and Volgograd operating more than 50 fixed-wing aircraft deployed to operational airfields in Crimea and Ashuluk Training Ground on April 17.<sup>149</sup> They returned to Stavropol, Kuban, Rostov, and Volgograd on April 26, 2021.<sup>150</sup>

Elements of the 3rd Air Force and Air Defense Command of the Eastern Military District

- Elements of the 342nd Radiotechnical Regiment likely deployed from Chita to Crimea on April 21, 2021.<sup>151</sup>

Elements of the 1st Air Defense and Missile Defense Army (not subordinate to the Western Military District or to the 6th Air and Air Defense Forces Army)

- Elements of the 4th Air Defense Division
  - The 4th Air Force and Air Defense Army deployed an unknown quantity of fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft from Kuban, Stavropol, Rostov, and Volgograd to unspecified Crimean airfields.<sup>152</sup>
  - Elements of the 210th Air Defense Regiment (two S-300PM2 TEL) at Grodno, Belarus for Zapad 2021.<sup>153</sup>

## Russian Information Space

Putin will likely set conditions to minimize the damage military operations could do to Russian popular and elite support for his regime before embarking on such a course of action. We assess that he has not yet done so sufficiently to support a large-scale attack. Russian casualties in Ukraine in 2014 and 2015 reduced public support for the Kremlin.<sup>154</sup> Putin is already suffering from reduced public support following the COVID-19 pandemic and protests following opposition figure Alexei Navalny's poisoning and arrest. The Kremlin seeks to bolster its public support before a key 2024 presidential election. Putin could well see a foreign adventure in general and a victory in Ukraine specifically as ways of shoring up domestic support. But a massive invasion would almost certainly cause many Russian casualties, which could reduce or eliminate that support unless Putin has properly set conditions to prepare his population.

The Kremlin's messaging in the Russian information space about war with Ukraine is not yet coherently aimed at building support for a large war. Putin has information dominance over Russia's domestic information space and generally promulgates unified narratives to condition the Russian population to support Kremlin policies. Russian new outlets' messaging is still uncoordinated regarding war in Ukraine, however. Many Russian media outlets are still recycling Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov's April 2021 statement in which Peskov did not flatly deny troop movements near Ukraine, but characterized those movements as within Russian territory, at Russian discretion, and as not posing any threat to Ukraine.<sup>155</sup> Other Russian reports from December 6 and December 7 claim that Russia "categorically denies" "all claims" about a Russian invasion of Ukraine.<sup>156</sup> The Kremlin's predominant messaging narratives regarding war with Ukraine are that Russia is not preparing any kind of offensive action and that Western claims of Russian invasion plans are false.<sup>157</sup>

*The contrast between Russia's military preparations and its internal messaging is an important indicator.*

Russian media publications and television broadcasts on December 7 preceding and following the videoconference between US President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin did not have a clear narrative besides stating that the Kremlin did not expect any breakthroughs.<sup>158</sup>

**The contrast between Russia's military preparations and its internal messaging is an important indicator.** Putin is highly unlikely suddenly to spring a massive war on his population, having spent months saying no such war was in the offing, and expect popular support for it when body bags start coming home. He will almost certainly need to conduct a coherent and focused effort to justify the war to his people and build support for it strong enough to withstand the inevitable setbacks and casualties. ISW will continue to watch the Russian information space closely for indicators of the start of such a campaign.

Russian internal information operations along these lines would seek to promulgate the following narratives coherently. The Kremlin is already messaging some of these, but not the ones most important to justifying launching a major war.

- Ukraine has completely abandoned the Minsk Accords, and Russia must therefore enforce them. Russian officials are blaming Ukraine for not fulfilling its Minsk commitments but have not yet unified around the claim that Ukraine has completely abandoned Minsk.
- NATO expansion is a threat to critical Russian national security interests. Russian officials are coherently messaging this.
- Actual or likely humanitarian catastrophe in Ukraine necessitates overt Russian intervention. Periodic references to the dangers of a "Srebrenica" in Donbas set conditions for this messaging effort, but such references have not become the central focus of a unified messaging campaign, nor are they supporting explicit arguments that Russia must intervene militarily in response. The embryonic portions of this

campaign have not started laying the groundwork for a full invasion of all of unoccupied Ukraine, but point mainly toward more limited intervention to protect occupied Donbas.

- Russians who oppose direct action in Ukraine are “Western agents” or victims of Western propaganda. Russian messaging does not yet make this argument as it has not yet coalesced around the message that direct Russian action is necessary.

Early warnings that this information operation is in its early stages would include the following information operations, none of which we have yet observed:

- Senior Kremlin officials and Russian media pundits increasingly discussing the conditions under which Russian intervention in Ukraine is necessary, acceptable, or desirable;
- Senior Kremlin officials openly advocating for overt intervention in Ukraine;
- Russia’s explicit acknowledgement of a force buildup near Ukraine;
- A fear campaign warning of an impending humanitarian catastrophe in Ukraine targeting ethnic Russians or Russian citizens outside occupied Donbas;
- Official statements that Russia is “prepared to intervene if necessary” to prevent humanitarian catastrophe in Ukraine or secure Russian interest vis-à-vis NATO. These statements may make references to the Balkan wars of the 1990s and specifically reference the need to prevent another Srebrenica massacre. (We have seen elements of such narrative that have not yet sharpened into the form we would expect to see in support of this information operation.)
- Russian media entities supporting these narratives with a high volume of messaging in a centrally directed manner to create a propaganda echo chamber in Russia’s domestic information space would indicate this operation underway.

This operation would seek to convince Russians likely to believe such messages—such as working-class Russians, pensioners, and residents of rural Russia—while discrediting potential opponents of such messages among the Russian youth, “liberal” Russians in urban centers, and better-educated Russians. The operation would consist of multiple consecutive weeks of centrally planned and coordinated information operations. The Russian outlets most likely to lead this operation are Russian state television such as *Rossiya 1*, particularly through its primetime “Vesti” program, due to television’s high viewership among key target groups. Kremlin wires like *TASS*, *RIA Novosti*, and *Lenta* and Kremlin-dominated news outlets like *Izvestia* would likely support the information campaign through written mediums.

Russian information campaigns primarily conducted through outlets that the Kremlin uses to target foreign audiences such as *RT* and *Sputnik* but not through the outlets most important domestic audiences listed above would indicate that the observed campaign is not primarily intended to prepare the Russian population to accept casualties in a large war.

The main current coherent official information operation of concern focuses on accusing Ukraine of building up forces in preparation for some sort of armed operation against Russian-occupied Donbas. This operation has not yet reached the extent or intensity we would expect before a Russian military operation into unoccupied Ukraine, with its concomitant risk of Russian casualties. The nature and intensity of the current operation seems more suited to support the overt deployment of Russian troops into Donbas to “deter” or “prevent” the fictional Ukrainian offensive Russian officials are describing. We consider this more-limited course of action, which would not likely see Russian forces attacking unoccupied Ukraine at this time, in the second part of this effort: the analysis of the Kremlin’s Courses of Action (COAs).



# Russian Force Posture Around Ukraine as of December 2021



0 320 640 1,280 Kilometers

Russian-Occupied Ukrainian Territory

Map by George Barros  
Institute for the Study of War © 2021

Spatial Reference: WGS 1984 Web  
Mercator (auxiliary sphere)

# Endnotes

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