

Putin's insane expedition: the first year of the war in Ukraine

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Last year, the article 'What's on Putin's mind' (*Atlantisch Perspectief*, # 1, 2022, pp.4-8) began with Ukrainian troops still fighting around the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv. Moreover, the article was still a search for Putin's real motives for attacking Ukraine, as 'denazification' and 'demilitarization' of Ukraine sounded like elusive goals at the time. Prior to the war, Putin had already threatened to use 'military technical measures' if Ukraine did join NATO. This message was sent not only to Ukrainian authorities, but also to the NATO alliance. The article also stated that the NATO-Russian relationship was one of 'tension, occasional relaxation and mistrust'. Furthermore, the article also indicated that Putin had come to believe strongly in the *Ruskiy Mir* concept, leading to a firm sense of superiority and a unique view of the world. It is disconcerting to experience that Ukraine does not actually exist for Putin. In his mind Ukraine is nothing more than *Malorossiya*, Little Russia, which, together with *Velikorossiya*, the Greater Russia, and *Belarus*, White Russia, belongs to the Great Russian Empire. A year has now passed since the publication of the aforementioned article and gradually we've gained more insight into Russia's rationale for and handling of the war. The purpose of this article is to build on the 'What's on Putin's mind' article. To this end, this article examines Putin's forced isolation and, as a result of his screwed-up worldview, Russia's problematic approach to war and what consequences this has for NATO and its member states.

PUTIN'S TINY INNER CIRCLE

First, let's go back to the ominous period leading up to the war in Ukraine. According to Russian-born journalist Mikhail Zygar, author of the 2016 book *All the Kremlin's Men* and currently residing in Berlin, President Putin has lost his grip on reality, especially from 2020 onwards. Putin fell under the spell of the corona pandemic; he was very concerned about being infected with the COVID-19 virus. Just after the global outbreak of the pandemic in the spring of 2020, Putin initially stayed in his residence in *Valdai*, known as *Dolgiye Borody*, located halfway between Moscow and St Petersburg. Later, Putin moved to the presidential palace, *Novo Ogaryovo*, just outside Moscow, where in the meantime locks were installed to isolate him completely from the rest of society. Both locations, *Valdai* as well as *Novo Ogaryovo*, were under severe control of the Federal Protective Service, the *FSO*. Putin's security guards worked with a strict protocol: no one was allowed to see the president without first being quarantined

for at least a week. Even Igor Sechin, the CEO of the energy company *Rosneft* and a close ally of Putin, regularly went into quarantine so that he could have a brief face-to-face meeting with the president once or twice a month. However, one of the exceptions was Yuri Kovalchuk, the largest stakeholder in *Rossiya Bank* and owner of several state-approved Russian media outlets. Kovalchuk regularly kept Putin company at the presidential country residence. Kovalchuk is not only the banker who has managed Putin's financial affairs for several decades and made Putin's money untraceable, but he is also an ideologue with a twisted worldview, linking Orthodox Christian mysticism to anti-American conspiracy theories and a form of hedonism. During the corona crisis, Kovalchuk and Putin were frequently in each other's company, Zygar indicates. Undoubtedly Kovalchuk regularly discussed his worldview with Putin. Many Kremlin watchers branded Kovalchuk as Putin's deputy at the time, but Putin has never spoken openly about this.¹



In Putin's mind Ukraine is nothing more than Malorossiya, Little Russia, which, together with Velikorossiya, the Greater Russia, and Belarus, White Russia, belongs to the Great Russian Empire. Pictured is Putin during a rally in support of the annexation of the Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporozhye and Kherson regions to Russia (photo: Kremlin.ru / CC BY 4.0)

Another person who also had regular access to Putin was Nikolai Patrushev. Patrushev is one of the leading figures within the *siloviki* faction, the 'men in power' who mainly come from the old KGB and FSB cadres. Putin's and Patrushev's friendship goes back to the mid-1970s, when both men worked for the KGB in Leningrad. Patrushev succeeded Putin as director of the FSB in 1999, and since 2008 he has been the Secretary of the Security Council of Russia, one of the most influential positions in the Kremlin. Patrushev is a hardliner and is strongly opposed to the United States. In an interview in 2015, Patrushev indicated that Russia was under constant threat from the United States. He held the United States responsible for the turmoil in Kyiv leading up to Euromaidan, the mass demonstrations that began in November 2013 and that ended with the departure of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014. According to Patrushev, the United States would have actually preferred that Russia not exist as an independent state at all.² Over the years, Patrushev started believing in all sorts of conspiracy theories against Russia in which the United States played a leading role. He discussed these conspiracy stories with Putin, who, with his background in Russia's intelligence ser-

vices, was very sensitive to these narratives. Kovalchuk and Patrushev were about the only ones who had access to Putin during the pandemic, which contributed to Putin's radicalization process. Also in the run-up to the Ukraine war, Patrushev once again made it clear to Putin that the United States was the driving force behind the tensions in Ukraine and aimed at Russia's collapse.³

BRIEF RUSSIAN PREPARATION

In late November 2021, some three months before the start of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, US Ambassador John Sullivan and CIA Director William Burns had a meeting with Patrushev in Moscow. The CIA had been carefully monitoring the large Russian troop build-up along the border with Ukraine and had also found out the intentions of Russian top brass through adequate intelligence operations. Sullivan and Burns made it clear to Patrushev that they were aware of Russia's attack plans for Ukraine. Patrushev, a well-trained intelligence officer, kept a straight face. Not long after, in December 2021, the White House and US State Department publicly proclaimed that Russia planned to attack Ukraine, a new tactic by US authorities to communicate these intel-



Ukraine appeared to have an effective air defense system, especially Western man portable air defense weapons, with which they could enforce air denial. It was too dangerous for Russian fighter jets to fly around in Ukrainian airspace. Pictured is the wreckage of a downed Russian military Su-25SM attack aircraft near Kyiv in April, 2022 (photo: Verushka / Shutterstock.com)

ligence messages so openly. Western European countries had long looked away, but now abruptly woke up. Russia had indeed deployed a huge force along the border with Ukraine and was also going to conduct a major joint exercise with Belarus in January 2022.⁴ Yet this show of force was not a surprise. By autumn 2021, coup attempts and subversive activities had already taken place in various cities in Ukraine, probably supported by the Russian authorities, as also reflected in the article 'Can NATO's and the EU's new strategies withstand Russian warfare?' (*Atlantisch Perspectief*, #4, 2022, pp. 12-17). Ukraine's intelligence service, the SBU, in cooperation with US and British intelligence services, managed to foil these attempts. It also indicates how well the Americans were aware of Russian intentions.

Meanwhile, the Kremlin also had understood that the United States was aware of the invasion plans. This was embarrassing for Putin because only a few of his loyal cronies knew of Putin's intentions. Putin decided to deny his plans, even to his own troops and to most of Russia's top political and governmental leaders. They heard what the intentions were only a few days or even just hours before the invasion began.

The old intelligence trick of secrecy turned out to be a mistake because, by this decision, Putin deprived his military commanders of proper planning and preparation for the invasion of Ukraine, which quickly became apparent. Although in February 2022 Russian forces were by far superior to their Ukrainian counterparts in terms of strength ratio, this has not been evident over the past year.⁵ The initial plan was to invade Ukraine from four different directions, with no follow-on forces. The Russian authorities expected it to be a 10-day walk-over. The Kremlin long continued to believe that their plan was sound, but it turned out differently. According to Keir Giles, a British expert on the Russian armed forces, the Russian forces did not treat the world to a new rendition of the 'shock and awe' campaign, in which the opponent is eliminated in one fell swoop. Giles is of the opinion that Russia did not wage the war it had been preparing for years. Instead of deploying an overwhelming force, Russia divided its troops into parts, scattered across the immense Ukrainian territory, and was disastrous in leading the military operation. Putin and his tiny inner circle did not expect serious Ukrainian opposition because they had fallen victim to their own propaganda and perceptions.⁶

RUSSIA'S STRUGGLE

During the war itself, all sorts of shortcomings soon became apparent, and other noteworthy events occurred. Russian airborne operations in the first hours of the war at *Vasylkiv* and *Hostomel* military air bases near Kyiv, were supposed to move quickly into the capital and eliminate President Zelensky's government, but this ended in a nightmare. Almost the entire 331st Guard Airborne Regiment was destroyed.⁷ Within two months' time Russia had to abandon the two northern avenues of attack. These approaches were logistically unsupportable, and, moreover, the Russian army lacked the necessary safeguards, while sustainment and protection in any military operation are considered essential conditions for a military operation to be successful. Furthermore, having taken the first Russian blows, Ukraine appeared to have an effective air-defense system, especially Western-made portable air-defense weapons, with which they could enforce air denial. It was too dangerous for Russian fighter jets to fly around in Ukrainian airspace. The Russian air force therefore played no significant role and could not support Russian land forces.

Management of the 'special military operation', as Russian authorities euphemistically called the war in Ukraine, was problematic. Initially, Russia had no overall commander in charge of its various lines of attack in Ukraine, and there was no proper coordination between air and land operations at the highest level. This was another prominent reason why Russian air power was not visible in 2022. The lack of a military supreme commander in theatre was remarkable, because in modern history, almost every operation has its own military 'face', a commander who led the entire operation: take for example General Dwight D. Eisenhower during the 1944 invasion, General Yitzhak Rabin during the 1967 Six-Day War, and General Norman Schwarzkopf during the 1990-1991 Gulf War.

In mid-April 2022, General Alexandr Dvornikov was appointed as the commander for Russian forces in Ukraine. Dvornikov was at that time commander of Russia's Southern Military District, which bordered the area Russia was going to concentrate on. As of May 2022, Russia planned to capture and annex the Ukrainian provinces of Luhansk, Donetsk (together the Donbas region), Zaporizhzhya and Kherson, and Russian operations in these areas had been led by the southern district since the beginning of the war. So it was obvious that Dvornikov would become the overall commander. Dvornikov was relieved as commander in early October 2022 by General Sergey Surovikin, the commander of Russian Aerospace Forces, Russia's combined air force and air defense. Both Dvornikov and Surovikin had established ruthless track records during Russia's operations in Syria, but it proved insufficient to command Russia's 'special military operation' in Ukraine. In January 2023, it was announced that

General Valery Gerasimov, who had been the Chief of Staff of the Russian Armed Forces since 2012, would head the Russian operation in Ukraine. Surovikin had to step down, and would act as one of the three deputies of Gerasimov. The two other deputies are General Oleg Salyukov, who had been commander of the Russian Land Forces since 2014, and Lieutenant General Alexei Kim, the deputy Chief of Staff of the Russian Armed Forces. It is the last trump card on military leadership Putin can play during this Ukrainian war, as he cannot scale up any further. These four generals who have been put in charge of operations in Ukraine are already the most senior leaders of the Russian Armed Forces. The appointment of the deputies suggests that Surovikin and Salyukov need to ensure better land-air cooperation, and Kim should guarantee a better flow of information towards the Kremlin. In addition, Gerasimov immediately made it clear that he saw no role for the Wagner Group, a private military company owned by Putin's friend Yevgeny Prigozhin, although it was the only unit on the Russian front that, although minimal, gained terrain in the late summer of 2022. From autumn 2022 to February 2023, the Wagner Group fought fiercely for the town of Bakhmut in Donetsk, a place of no strategic significance, with many casualties.

On the geopolitical front, Putin also made a serious error of judgment. To this end, Russian doctrine must first be explained, as it has four types of conflict: 1. a limited armed conflict, as took place in the Donbas region during 2014-2022, 2. a local conflict: Russia at war with another state, 3. a regional conflict: Russia at war with several countries, and finally 4. a large-scale conflict: Russia fighting a global war and not hesitating to use nuclear weapons. Putin, completely disconnected from reality, was convinced that the limited armed conflict in the Donbas region could devolve into a local conflict: Russia conducting a 'special military operation' throughout Ukraine, and NATO as a security organization would be too weak and divided to play a significant role. Nothing could be further from the truth: NATO is more cohesive than ever, and since April 2022 the majority of member states have been resolute in sending military equipment, including heavy materiel, to Ukraine.

IN CONCLUSION

This article has discussed how Putin has become increasingly detached from reality and how he has come to believe in a holy mission in Ukraine to reunite 'Little Russia' with 'Big Russia'. After a year of intense and oftentimes relentless fighting, it is good to take stock. Putin's holy mission in Ukraine turned out to be an insane expedition with many casualties. How this war will continue is still hard to predict. Both sides still assume that there are gains to be made by fighting and have no desire for any kind of negotiation. For NATO, it is important to maintain unity now and not be divided by Russia. Sweden and Finland have asked to join NATO, and almost



In January 2023, it was announced that General Valery Gerasimov, who had been the Chief of Staff of the Russian Armed Forces since 2012, would head the Russian operation in Ukraine. Pictured are Putin and Gerasimov, observing the main stage of the Vostok 2022 strategic command post exercise (photo: Kremlin.ru / CC BY 4.0)

all member states have already given their consent to this request. NATO, being a political and military alliance, has the advantage of having a robust standing command structure that has been in place for years. NATO should not further challenge this structure, because constantly shuffling generals at the top of this organization does not lead to stabilizing and improving military operations, as the Russians showed last year. Furthermore, Russian authorities, with Putin in the lead, are increasingly proclaiming that Russia is no longer at war only with Ukraine but also with NATO. According to Russian perception and as outlined by Russian doctrine, the conflict has evolved into a regional conflict: Russia in conflict with Ukraine and 30 NATO states. And every time member states take steps against Russia, it is Putin that does not shy away from threatening to use all deterrents, a Russian synonym for the deployment of nuclear weapons. NATO has to carefully weigh up each time: on the one hand the alliance should not be deterred by Putin's rhetoric, while on the other hand it should carefully avoid becoming a belligerent party. NATO member states, and not NATO itself, should continue to support Ukraine as much as possible, in both military and humanitarian ways, because this insane expedition by Putin remains a blatant violation of international rule of law. The Western world cannot afford to stand by and let this happen.

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