

OPPOSITION IN RUSSIA TO THE INVASION OF UKRAINE: HOW MUCH OF A THREAT IS IT TO PUTIN'S REGIME?

BY NICHOLAS CHKHAIDZE, IVAN YUROV and TARAS KUZIO



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About Us



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Introduction

Vladimir Putin is terrified of telling the Russian public the truth: namely, that he has *de facto* launched a full-blown war against Russia's neighbour – Ukraine. The Kremlin has camouflaged the war as a so-called “special military operation”, and using the words “war” and “invasion” can lead to imprisonment for Russian citizens. Putin's conundrum lies in the fact that the “special military operation” was understood by the Kremlin to be a short-term military action but, as it was initially constituted, it was not sufficiently powerful to defeat the Ukrainian army. Putin is now clearly concerned that transforming the “special military operation” into a declaration of war against Ukraine and fully mobilising the Russian Army would be unpopular, both domestically and internationally, and could threaten the foundations of his regime.¹

This Henry Jackson Society research brief provides an in-depth investigation into Russian opposition to Vladimir Putin's “special military operation” (i.e., invasion) against Ukraine. Civil rights are limited in Russia, rendering it far more difficult for citizens to oppose the regime's policies and less likely that a colour revolution, similar to the Orange and Euromaidan Revolutions in Ukraine and the Rose Revolution in Georgia, will take place. Nevertheless, the impact of tough Western sanctions and the high number of Russian military casualties will not go unnoticed on the home front.

This research brief is divided into nine sections. The first section analyses how Russia transformed into a fascist state and a dictatorship. The second section analyses Russian nationalist views of Ukraine. The third section investigates Putin's long-term obsession with Ukraine and how this could pose a threat to his regime. The next five sections analyse disgruntled state officials – the threat of a coup in the Kremlin; divisions within Russia's *siloviki* (security forces); public disquiet at the invasion of Ukraine and military casualties; and the impact of Western sanctions on the Russian people. The research brief concludes with seven policy recommendations.

¹ See Taras Kuzio, “Vladimir Putin is running out of options to avoid defeat in Ukraine”, Atlantic Council, 17 May 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/vladimir-putin-is-running-out-of-options-to-avoid-defeat-in-ukraine/>.

How Russia Became a Fascist State

Six years ago, the well-known American political scientist Alexander J. Motyl published an academic study of Russia as a fascist state: it was not received with great enthusiasm. However, following Putin's invasion of Ukraine there is growing support for describing Russia as both a totalitarian and a fascist state.

We argue that there are six aspects that point to Russia having assumed these characteristics.

1) *Russia as a Totalitarian Dictatorship*

Russia transformed from an authoritarian system into a dictatorship following constitutional changes in 2020 that allowed Putin to remain in power until 2036 but *de facto* made him president for life.² In this way, collective leadership, reminiscent of the Leonid Brezhnev era of the Soviet Union during the 1960s and 1970s, was replaced with rule by a dictator last seen in the era of Joseph Stalin. This change began gradually in 2012 and was codified in the 2020 Constitutional referendum. The Russian state has promoted a cult of Stalin throughout Putin's time in power which has led to most Russians, including young people, holding a favourable view of the tyrant.³ Since Putin was first elected president in 2000 he has promoted a 'strong hand' and stability in return for high standards of living and as an antidote to the chaotic and economically depressed 1990s.

Since 2020, alternative political thought, independent media and protests have been ruthlessly crushed. Putin's speeches before and since the invasion are a throwback to the Stalin era in their quest to identify domestic and external traitors.⁴ Domestic traitors include anybody critical of the Russian authorities, as was the case in the Soviet Union. Prior to the invasion of Ukraine, one of the most renowned examples of the crackdown on opposition to the state was the poisoning of opposition leader Alexei Navalny and his subsequent imprisonment on trumped up charges. The search for traitors has increased in intensity following the invasion, with draconian censorship measures being imposed in Russia. Ukrainians who refuse to accept that the nation of Ukraine does not exist and who refuse to acknowledge they are a Little Russian branch of the pan-Russian nation are considered external traitors.

2) *Personality Cult / Putin as the New Tsar / Tsar and General Secretary*

The personality cult surrounding Putin has existed for nearly two decades. With Putin *de facto* crowned as ruler for life by the constitutional changes of 2020, he has effectively become a Tsar. According to the Tsarist Empire, the legitimacy of the tsars came from a higher being and no mere mortal had a right to question their authority.

Since returning to the presidency in 2012, Putin's goal has been to enter Russian history books as the "gatherer of Russian lands". "Russian lands" is understood to incorporate three branches of a pan-Russian nation – Great Russians, Little Russians (Ukrainians) and White Russians (Belarusians). As the pro-Kremlin commentator Timofey Sergeytsev wrote: "Russia is restoring its historical fullness, gathering the Russian World, the Russian people together in its entirety of Great Russians, Belarusians, and Little Russians."⁵

² "The Stalinisation of Russia", *The Economist*, 12 March 2022, <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2022/03/12/the-stalinisation-of-russia>.

³ "The perception of Stalin", Levada-Center, 17 April 2018, <https://www.levada.ru/en/2018/04/17/the-perception-of-stalin/>.

⁴ "Russian propagandists turn on pro-Western 'traitors'", *The Economist*, 19 March 2022, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2022/03/19/russian-propagandists-turn-on-pro-western-traitors>.

⁵ Timofey Sergeytsev, "What should Russia do with Ukraine?", *Novosti Information Agency*, 4 March 2022, <https://ria.ru/20220403/ukraina-1781469605.html>.

Russian nationalists in power, like Orthodox oligarch Konstantin Malofeev, believe that Russians and Ukrainians “are a divided people, just like Germany under the BRD and DDR during the cold war”.⁶ As Germany was re-united, so too will Russia and Ukraine be. The invasion of Ukraine is aimed at “reuniting” branches of the “Russian nation” which are being artificially torn apart by Western intrigue. The Kremlin claims that fighting the West in Ukraine is the main obstacle to “reunification” of Ukraine and Russia.

Putin has therefore made this restoration of a pan-Russian nation one of his principal geopolitical strategies since his return to the presidency in 2012. In 2014, Russia invaded and quickly annexed Crimea, an autonomous republic within Ukraine. Following fraudulent elections in Belarus in 2020, the country became a *de facto* Russian province through a bilateral union. The February 2022 invasion of Ukraine has the goal of eradicating the country's pro-Western Ukrainian national identity and transforming it into a Little Russia.

3) Imperial Nationalist Mobilisation and the Cult of War

Putin's 22-year rule of Russia has been dominated by bombings, terrorism and wars in Chechnya, Georgia, Syria and Ukraine. A cult of war is being fanned in Russia⁷ surrounding the symbol “Z” which was painted on Russian tanks invading Ukraine.⁸ “Z” has become trendy⁹ and hip among young Russians. It is used to show their support¹⁰ for the war, which stands at a record 81%.¹¹

After the Orange Revolution, the Kremlin created nationalist youth groups, such as *Nashi* (Ours). They were established as a supposed bulwark against a colour revolution in Russia, a prospect that Putin has always feared.¹² The country believes itself to be a fortress under attack by those who threaten Russian values. Pro-Russian extremists from Ukraine who share this ideology have been trained at Kremlin-organised camps in Russia alongside pro-Putin youth groups.¹³

The ongoing war in Ukraine is the first occasion when the Russian state has mass mobilised the population to back its war. The war in Ukraine is therefore not just Putin's as it is supported by four-fifths of the Russian people¹⁴ (the extent of active support is probably lower; see later). This support is evidenced by the countless videos shared on social media of young Russians, including sportsmen and women at international events, who have “Z” printed on their clothing and tattooed on their bodies.

4) Ukrainianophobia

The Russian people have been subjected to over a decade of dehumanisation of Ukrainians in the Russian media and political discourse. Ukrainians who have supported their country's

⁶ Max Seddon, “Ukraine: what does Vladimir Putin want?”, *Financial Times*, 10 December 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/f3aaf2de-994d-4870-92ac-2953cf56414e>.

⁷ “The new Russian cult of war”, *The Economist*, 26 March 2022, <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2022/03/26/the-new-russian-cult-of-war>.

⁸ Robert Coalson, “Special Operation Z: Moscow's Pro-War Symbol Conquers Russia – And Sets Alarm Bells Ringing”, *RFERL*, 17 March 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-ukraine-letter-z-fascist-symbol/31758267.html>.

⁹ “The Kremlin Hashtagging Ze War”, *EUvsDisinfo*, 7 March 2022, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/the-kremlin-hashtagging-ze-war/>.

¹⁰ Pjotr Sauer, “Why has the letter Z become the symbol of war for Russia?”, *The Guardian*, 7 March 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/07/why-has-the-letter-z-become-the-symbol-of-war-for-russia>.

¹¹ “The conflict with Ukraine”, Levada-Center, 11 April 2022, <https://www.levada.ru/en/2022/04/11/the-conflict-with-ukraine/>.

¹² Lincoln Mitchell, “Putin's Orange Obsession: How a Twenty-Year Fixation With Color Revolutions Drove a Disastrous War”, *Foreign Affairs*, 6 May 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2022-05-06/putins-orange-obsession>.

¹³ Anton Shekhovtsov, “How Alexander Dugin's Neo-Eurasianists geared up for the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2005-2013”, *Euromaidan Press*, 26 January 2022, <https://euromaidanpress.com/2016/01/26/how-alexander-dugins-neo-eurasianists-geared-up-for-the-russian-ukrainian-war-in-2005-2013/>.

¹⁴ Andriy Yeremenko, “Survey says 86.6% of Russians support the armed invasion of Russia in other European countries”, *Active Group UA*, 16 March, 2022, <https://activegroup.com.ua/2022/03/16/survey-says-86-6-of-russians-support-the-armed-invasion-of-russia-in-other-european-countries/>.

movement from the Russian sphere of influence into Europe have been labelled as “Nazis”. Russia’s media and disinformation network reject the legitimacy of Ukraine as an independent and sovereign state and deny the country’s existence. Ukrainians are depicted as having no independent agency and Russia believes it alone has the right to control Little Russia. The Kremlin claims Ukrainians are confused Little Russians.

Hyper-imperialistic discourse¹⁵ that proposes wiping Ukraine from the face of Europe is common in the Russian media and espoused in discourse used by Russian political leaders.¹⁶ For example, former President Dmitri Medvedev, now deputy head of the Russian Security Council, penned an anti-Ukrainian diatribe at the beginning of the crisis six months ago alleging that Ukraine is a US puppet state and President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is under the control of “Nazis”.¹⁷

5) *Revanchist Imperialism*

Russian revanchist claims towards Crimea and Sevastopol began on the first day of the post-Soviet era;¹⁸ claims towards Ukraine started with Putin’s well-known speech to the NATO-Russia Council in 2008.¹⁹ “New Russia” or “Black Sea Lands”, another Russian nationalist name for south-eastern Ukraine,²⁰ were allegedly wrongly included by Lenin in the Ukrainian SSR. Since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Putin and other Kremlin leaders have laid claim to the south-eastern area, which has become a target for occupation. Failing the occupation of Ukraine and capture of Kyiv, Russia’s goal is to annex “New Russia” to form a land bridge from the Russian border and Russian-occupied Donbas to Crimea. Russian politicians openly state that Kherson and these other occupied regions of south-eastern Ukraine are to be “forever” part of Russia.

Putin’s goal of returning “Russian lands” to Russia has symbolic nationalistic value, as examined in Section 2. But, in preventing Ukraine’s ability to trade, it also provides backing for the Russian nationalist claim that Ukraine is an artificial state. Russia also seeks to show what happens to a Eurasian country when it supports NATO membership and allows the international organisation to expand its influence into what the Kremlin has always claimed to be Russia’s exclusive sphere of influence.

6) *Genocide*

The sixth factor which demonstrates that Russia has become a fascist regime is the planned genocide of Ukrainians. The term “genocide” can be applied when the goal is either the complete eradication of an ethnic group, such as the Nazis’ eradication of Jews during the *Holocaust* and Roma/Sinti during the *Porajmos*, or part of an ethnic group, such as Stalin’s artificial *Holodomor* (Murder Famine) against Ukrainians. As Anne Applebaum has written, ethnic groups are first dehumanised before being subjected to genocide.²¹ This is true of both Stalin’s campaign against Ukrainians in the 1930s and Putin’s campaign today. Russian television talk shows are full of this dehumanisation of Ukrainians – they routinely call for

¹⁵ Petr Akopov, “Russia’s offensive and the new world”, *Novosti Information Agency*, 26 February 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220226051154/https://ria.ru/20220226/rossiya-1775162336.html>.

¹⁶ Dmitry Medvedev, “About fakes and real history”, *News Front*, 5 April 2022, <https://news-front.info/2022/04/05/dmitrij-medvedev-o-fejkah-i-nastojashhej-istorii/>?

¹⁷ Dmitry Medvedev, “Why contacts with the current Ukrainian leadership are meaningless”, *Kommersant*, 11 October 2022, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5028300>.

¹⁸ See Chapter 8, “Russia’s ‘Jerusalem’: Crimea and ‘New Russia’”, in Taras Kuzio, *Russian Nationalism and the Russian-Ukrainian War: Autocracy-Orthodoxy-Nationality* (London: Routledge, 2022), pp.228-260.

¹⁹ “Text of Putin’s speech at the NATO Summit”, *UNIAN*, 18 April 2008, <https://www.unian.info/world/111033-text-of-putin-s-speech-at-nato-summit-bucharest-april-2-2008.html>.

²⁰ Vladimir Socor, “Putin and Ukraine’s Black Sea Lands: Another Iteration of Novorossiia?”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 17, no. 2 (14 January 2020), <https://jamestown.org/program/putin-and-ukraines-black-sea-lands-another-iteration-of-novorossiia/>.

²¹ Anne Applebaum, “Ukraine and the Words That Lead to Mass Murder”, *The Atlantic*, 25 April 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/06/ukraine-mass-murder-hate-speech-soviet/629629/>.

genocidal measures in Ukraine. On one recent Russian television talk show, a commentator called for the elimination of 5% of the Ukrainian population who are pro-Western and “Nazi” so that the remainder would be free to return to Russia.²² Little wonder that 89% of Ukrainians classify the actions of Russia's army in Ukraine as genocide.²³

Putin justifies Russia's invasion and its genocidal goals through the “de-Nazification” of Ukraine. The Kremlin propagandist Timofey Sergeytsev proposed that: “Denazification will inevitably mean de-Ukrainianisation – a rejection of the large-scale artificial growth of the ethnic self-identification component of the populations in the territories of historical Little Russia and New Russia.”²⁴ De-Nazification is therefore understood by the Russian state as the eradication of Ukrainian national identity and its replacement by a Little Russian identity. Ukraine should come to resemble Belarus with a pro-Russian satrap prioritising the Russian language, the Russian Orthodox Church, the cult of the tyrant Joseph Stalin and the Great Patriotic War. Externally, Little Russia would be a loyal member of the Russian World and Russian-led Eurasian Unions.

Ukrainian cities that oppose Russian invading forces, even when they are Russian-speaking such as Kharkiv, and Mariupol, are bombarded and destroyed, their civilians starved, tortured and murdered. Tens of thousands of civilians have been killed in Mariupol. At filtration camps, Ukrainians who are local leaders are murdered and the remainder are deported to remote regions of Russia.²⁵

In areas occupied by Russian forces, “kill lists”, which were drawn up prior to the invasion and since areas of Ukraine have been occupied, have been used to arrest, torture and murder local leaders, journalists and civil society activists.²⁶ Over 400 women²⁷ and young children²⁸ have been raped and many have been murdered; 226 children have died, and hundreds more have been wounded in the war.²⁹ The town of Bucha, near Kyiv, has become synonymous with the criminal savagery of the Russian army.³⁰ The extrajudicial execution of civilians in the Kyiv region was evident in victims' hands tied behind their backs and bullets shot into the back of their heads.³¹

Putin has rewarded war criminals in his army. The 64th Motor Rifle Brigade, which became infamous for war crimes, rape and looting in Bucha, was awarded the prestigious military title of “Guards” and was praised by Putin.³² The commander of this notorious military formation, Colonel Azatbek Asanbekovich Omurbekov, has been designated a war criminal by the Ukrainian prosecutor's office.

²² Taras Kuzio (@TarasKuzio), *Twitter*, 7 May 2022, 5.32pm, <https://twitter.com/TarasKuzio/status/1522977763967344640>.

²³ “The Tenth National Survey: Ideological Markers of the War (April 27, 2022)”, *Rating Group Ukraine*, 3 May 2022, https://ratinggroup.ua/en/research/ukraine/desyatyy_obschenacionalnyy_opros_ideologicheskie_markery_voyny_27_aprelya_2022.html.

²⁴ Sergeytsev, “What should Russia do with Ukraine?”.

²⁵ Dean Kirby, “Putin sends Mariupol survivors to remote corners of Russia as investigation reveals network of 66 camps”, *I Newspaper*, 7 May 2022, <https://inews.co.uk/news/putin-mariupol-survivors-remote-corners-russia-investigation-network-camps-1615516>.

²⁶ Lyudmyla Denisova, “On the Trail of Russian War Crimes”, *The New York Times*, 29 April 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/29/world/europe/on-the-trail-of-russian-war-crimes.html>.

²⁷ “Interview with Ukrainian Parliamentary Ombudsman for Human Rights Lyudmyla Denisov”, *Nastoiashchee Vremya*, 22 April 2022, <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/denisova/31816162.html>.

²⁸ https://ombudsman.gov.ua/news_details/upovnovazhenij-riven-zhorstokosti-armiyi-teroristiv-ta-kativ-rf-ne-znaye-mezh-zgvaltovani-diti.

²⁹ https://ombudsman.gov.ua/news_details/upovnovazhenij-226-ditej-zaginulo-v-ukrayini-cherez-vijnu-rosiyi-vchora-stalo-vidomo-pro-smert-13-richnoyi-divchini.

³⁰ Ian Garner, “‘We’ve Got to Kill Them’: Responses to Bucha on Russian Social Media Groups”, *Journal of Genocide Research*, 9 May 2022, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14623528.2022.2074020>.

³¹ “Ukraine: apparent war crimes in Bucha must be investigated”, *Amnesty International*, 4 April 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/ukraine-apparent-war-crimes-bucha-must-be-investigated>.

³² “Putin honours brigade accused by Ukraine of ‘war crimes’ in Bucha”, *Al-Jazeera*, 19 April 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/19/putin-honours-brigade-accused-by-ukraine-of-war-crimes-in-bucha>.

Russian Nationalism and Ukraine

Putin has been obsessed with Ukraine for nearly two decades, and yet few Western policymakers, journalists or scholars paid attention to this until very recently.³³ Western interest in Putin's Russian nationalism towards Ukraine only surfaced in summer 2021 following the publication of his 6000-word essay "On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians". In this essay, Putin insisted that Russians and Ukrainians are "one people" and should therefore live together forever.³⁴ Since then, there has been a growing understanding that Russian identity is the root cause of Russia's military aggression since 2014, and the principal factor behind the Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine in 2022.³⁵

Russian investigative journalist Mikhail Zygar wrote that Putin has been obsessed with Ukraine since his first year in office in 2000.³⁶ Ukraine's re-absorption into the Russian World is considered "unfinished business" that Putin needs to accomplish before entering Russia's history books.³⁷ Putin's obsession with Ukraine has been visible in the daily diatribe of dehumanising attacks on Ukraine and belittling of Ukrainians in the Russian media. Out of 13,000 examples of Kremlin disinformation in the *EUvsDisinfo* database, 5,000 target Ukraine.³⁸

Russian information warfare has long depicted Ukraine as a country where Nazi putschists came to power during the 2013–2014 Euromaidan Revolution and have since ruled the country on behalf of Washington. Ukraine is portrayed as a US puppet state run by a thin layer of nationalists on the payroll of the US who, if removed, would allow Little Russians to clamour to join the Russian World. The Kremlin is adamant that Ukraine is a part of the Russian World that accidentally fell under the influence of the West but which would return to Mother Russia's embrace with the assistance of Russian liberating forces.³⁹

Officially, Putin has stated that the objective of his invasion is the de-Nazification of Ukraine. This is clearly absurd in a country led by a Jewish president where extreme-right parties consistently poll in the low single digits. In reality, he seeks to reverse the nation-building progress Ukraine has made over the past three decades of independence, and in particular during the eight years of conflict with Russia since the 2014 seizure of Crimea. In Putin's imperialistic worldview, a Ukrainian national identity independent of Russia is seen as intrinsically hostile to Russia. It is also viewed as synonymous with a pro-Western foreign policy and Ukrainian membership of the broader European community of nations.

³³ Taras Kuzio, *Crisis in Russian Studies? Nationalism (Imperialism), Racism, and War* (Bristol: E-International Relations, 2020), <https://www.e-ir.info/publication/crisis-in-russian-studies-nationalism-imperialism-racism-and-war/>.

³⁴ Vladimir Putin, "On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians", President of Russia, 12 July 2021, <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/misc/66182>.

³⁵ Kuzio, *Russian Nationalism and the Russian-Ukrainian War*.

³⁶ Mikhail Zygar, *All the Kremlin's Men: Inside the Court of Vladimir Putin* (New York: Public Affairs, 2016), p.85.

³⁷ Eugene Rumer and Andrew S. Weiss, "Ukraine: Putin's Unfinished Business", Carnegie Endowment For International Peace, 12 November 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/11/12/ukraine-putin-s-unfinished-business-pub-85771>.

³⁸ <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/>.

³⁹ "Ukraine is Part of the Russian World That Accidentally Fell Under Western Influence", *EUvsDisinfo*, 30 November 2021, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/ukraine-is-part-of-the-russian-world-that-accidentally-fell-under-western-influence>.

How Putin's Obsession with Ukraine Threatens His Regime

A full-blown Russian invasion of Ukraine would be potentially destabilising for Putin's regime. Hence Putin has coined the artificial term "special military operation" and has shied away from ordering a full-scale mobilisation and declaring war on Ukraine.

Russian information warfare and disinformation has a stereotypical view of Ukraine that has failed to learn any lessons from the failure of the 2014 New Russia project to dismember Ukraine. Russian nationalist myths of an artificial Ukraine that is, in reality, Little Russia were already disjointed from reality, and yet Russian leaders continued to believe them. The Kremlin's conviction was so strong that it believed that in 2022, Little Russians would welcome Russian forces with flowers, the capital city of Kyiv would fall within a few days and that Russia would successfully install a puppet dictator to do its bidding. The Kremlin was convinced its military intervention in Ukraine would not be met by stiff resistance. Malofeev said: "The war won't last a week. It'll be over in a matter of days. The whole regime will wind up in London and go around telling everyone that they would have ridden their tanks into Moscow if the [west] hadn't given up on them."⁴⁰

The war did not pan out as the Kremlin had expected, as any sober analysis would have shown, and the Kremlin has failed to achieve its military objectives in Ukraine. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy rejected a US offer to evacuate and has remained in Kyiv where he has rallied Ukrainian patriots and won international applause in speeches to parliaments, including to the UK parliament on 9 March,⁴¹ and interviews with several Western media broadcasters. Patriotic, NATO-trained Ukrainian forces have fought heroically, and are defeating Russian invaders using modern Ukrainian and Western weaponry.⁴²

The Kremlin is unsure what to tell the Russian people when its invading forces are facing stiff resistance, are becoming bogged down in an Afghanistan-style war and are actively perpetrating brutal war crimes. Ukrainians no longer believe they and Russians are close peoples: only 2% of Ukrainians hold positive views of Russians while 92% have negative feelings. This includes 90% in the south and 85% in the east of Ukraine who hold negative views of Russia; two Russian speaking regions which traditionally supported close relations with Russia.⁴³

Russian sociologist Olga Kryshchanovskaya writes that an overt Russian-Ukrainian war "would be incredibly unpopular with the Russian people".⁴⁴ She is right about a full-scale war being unpopular but Putin's continued camouflaging of the war as a "special military operation" to expel "Nazis" from Ukraine does have high levels of support.

Russia's occupation of Crimea has been popular among Russians over the last eight years, with 86% of Russians, including some members of the opposition such as imprisoned leader Alexei Navalny, supporting Crimea's annexation in 2014.⁴⁵ The same was not true of Russian

⁴⁰ Seddon, "Ukraine: what does Vladimir Putin want?"

⁴¹ UK Parliament, "President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy addresses UK Parliament", *YouTube*, 9 March 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_xcdWDwgBCg.

⁴² Taras Kuzio, "Nato training: How Ukraine is actually winning against Russia", *EU Observer*, 21 April 2022, <https://euobserver.com/opinion/154763>; and "Six reasons why Ukraine is winning the war against Russia", *UK Defence Journal*, 28 April 2022, <https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/six-reasons-why-ukraine-is-winning-the-war-against-russia/>.

⁴³ "Dynamics of Ukrainian Attitudes Towards Russia and Emotional Views of the War", Kyiv International Institute for Sociology, 15-18 May 2022, <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=ukr&cat=reports&id=1112&page=1>.

⁴⁴ Fred Weir, "Why Russia's troop surge near Ukraine may really be a message to the West", *Christian Science Monitor*, 23 November 2021, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2021/1123/Why-Russia-s-troop-surge-near-Ukraine-may-really-be-a-message-to-the-West>.

⁴⁵ "Crimea: Five Years", *Levada-Center*, 11 April 2019, <https://www.levada.ru/en/2019/04/11/crimea-five-years/>.

attitudes to the Donbas, where the Kremlin has claimed that a “civil war” is taking place. Only 25% of Russians support the incorporation into Russia of the DNR (Donetsk People's Republic) and LNR (Luhansk People's Republic), Russia's proxy entities in occupied Donbas, while another 28% believe the DNR and LNR should become “independent”. 26% believe the DNR and LNR should remain within Ukraine with enhanced autonomy or the same status they possessed prior to 2014.⁴⁶

A combination of tough Ukrainian resistance, high Russian casualties, and low levels of emotional pull to the Donbas may be a threat to Russia's political stability and thereby the survival of Putin's regime. British expert on Russian security Mark Galeotti believes that “A vicious war in Ukraine could shatter the unity and legitimacy of the Russian regime.”⁴⁷ The disintegration of Putin's regime could lead to a bloody struggle within Russia itself among those seeking to grab power and Putin's stolen loot.

The myths of a “civil war” and “special military operation” have revealed the realities of Russia fighting a bloody war with Ukraine. In the 1980s, the USSR could not hide the high level of casualties in Afghanistan from the Soviet people and this was one important factor that led to increasing levels of nationalist resentment in the non-Russian republics of the USSR.⁴⁸ Putin's regime will also be unable to hide the ramifications of his invasion of Ukraine from the Russian people, which will have major consequences for the stability of Putin's regime and his ability to hold on to power.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine makes it impossible that Putin will remain president for life. Putin will enter Russian history not as the “gatherer of Russian lands” but as the divider of Russia and Ukraine. The invasion has made Ukrainians into bitter enemies of Russians and this sentiment will last for decades to come.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ “Ukraine and Donbas”, *Levada-Center*, 16 April 2021, <https://www.levada.ru/en/2021/04/16/ukraine-and-donbas/>.

⁴⁷ Sarah Rainsford, “Russia-Ukraine border: Why Moscow is stoking tensions”, *BBC News*, 27 November 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-59415885>.

⁴⁸ Taras Kuzio, “Opposition in the USSR to the Occupation of Afghanistan”, *Central Asian Survey* 6, no. 1 (Spring 1987) pp.99-118.

⁴⁹ “The Tenth National Survey: Ideological Markers of the War”.

Disgruntled State Officials

As previously mentioned, Putin has a KGB-style obsession with removing traitors from Russia.⁵⁰ For those who are high-ranking officials in Russia, their opposition to the war is considered to be “treason”.

However, this has not stopped state officials from publicly expressing their opposition to the war, even if it means they lose their well-paid positions. For example, Anatoly Chubais, Putin's adviser and former special envoy to international organisations, publicly condemned the war, resigning from his position and fleeing the country. Arkady Dvorkovich, former deputy prime minister, also voiced his opposition to the invasion⁵¹ and was forced to step down as chairman of Skolkovo Innovation Centre and technology park in Moscow.⁵²

Critics of the war who remain in Russia are subject to imprisonment. Vladislav Surkov, for example, the political technologist behind Putin's “Russian sovereign democracy” ideology and the “New Russia” (*Novorossia*) project in south-eastern Ukraine, was placed under house arrest in April. He was once one of Putin's closest allies and played a key role in creating and shaping the Kremlin's ideology and the contours of Russian foreign policy towards Ukraine and Georgia. He is allegedly being investigated over embezzlement of funds in the Donbas since the 2014 crisis.⁵³ Considering Surkov has been one of the most influential figures in Russian politics since 2000, his detention shows that Putin has become much more ruthless in arresting influential political figures from his inner circle.⁵⁴

Some have even died in suspicious circumstances, such as the Vice-President of *Gazprom* Vladislav Avayev and his family. The official version was that he killed his entire family and then committed suicide. However, former Deputy Chairman of *Gazprom* Igor Volobuev, who defected to his native Ukraine where he joined the Ukrainian armed forces, claimed that Avayev was actually assassinated. He also claimed that Russian oligarch Sergey Protosenya, his wife Natalia, and their teenage daughter Maria were murdered. The official position is that Protosenya committed suicide by hanging.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ “Putin Adviser Chubais Quits Over Ukraine War, Leaves Russia”, *Bloomberg News*, 23 March 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-03-23/putin-adviser-chubais-quits-over-ukraine-war-and-leaves-russia>.

⁵¹ Raymond Keene, “Ukraine and world chess: whose side is Dvorkovich on?”, *The Article*, 23 April 2022, <https://www.thearticle.com/ukraine-and-world-chess-whose-side-is-dvorkovich-on>.

⁵² “Dvorkovich steps down as Skolkovo Foundation chairman”, *Interfax*, 18 March 2022, <https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/76981/>.

⁵³ “Peskov said he had no information about Surkov's house arrest”, *RBC*, 13 April 2022, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/13/04/2022/6256c7979a79473fced8578a>.

⁵⁴ Anders Anglesey, “Who Is Vladislav Surkov? Putin Ally Reportedly Under House Arrest”, *Newsweek*, 13 April 2022, <https://www.newsweek.com/who-vladislav-surkov-putin-ally-reportedly-under-house-arrest-1697674?amp=1>.

⁵⁵ Will Stewart, Jack Newman and Nick Fagge, “Putin-linked Gazprombank vice president found dead alongside his family was ASSASSINATED and did not carry out ‘murder-suicide,’ colleague claims”, *Daily Mail UK*, 27 April 2022, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10758177/Gazprombank-chief-dead-family-murder-suicide-ASSASSINATED-colleague-claims.html>.

Is a Coup Attempt in the Kremlin Likely?

Rumours of coup plotters in the Kremlin and in senior positions of the *siloviki* are increasing. These rumours talk of disgruntled military generals and FSB (Federal Security Service) officers plotting to remove Putin and end what they consider to be his war in Ukraine. The FSB is frustrated by the Russian military's failures in Ukraine, as are generals, twelve of whom have been killed in the war, and high-ranking former military officials. The *siloviki* may be seeking to replace Putin.

In order to conduct a coup, the FSB and other intelligence services would have to consider the situation inside Russia to be critical and the continuation of Putin's rule untenable. For a coup to be successful, all the *siloviki* (intelligence services [FSB, GRU], military, national guard [*Rosgvardia*]) would have to provide backing for it.⁵⁶ Rumours are circulating that preparations for a move against Putin are already in place.⁵⁷ Ukrainian intelligence officials claimed a plot was hatched to remove Putin from the presidency and replace him with the Chairman of the FSB Alexander Bortnikov, one of the most influential figures in the president's inner circle.⁵⁸ However, it is too early to tell whether this is wishful thinking, as these rumours cannot be verified. Coups are also rare in communist and post-communist states; the former USSR and Central-Eastern Europe are therefore dissimilar to Central and Latin America.

Tensions are rising between the FSB and Putin as their relationship has declined since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. For example, Andrei Soldatov, who runs the investigative website *Agentura*, wrote that Sergei Beseda, the head of the FSB's foreign intelligence division, along with his deputy, were detained and placed under house arrest.⁵⁹

Putin may have decided to purge the senior ranks of the security agencies because of his high level of paranoia, which has grown during his isolation during the Covid pandemic.⁶⁰ Putin is also certainly bitter about the poor performance of the FSB and has reportedly downgraded their involvement in the war in Ukraine and given the GRU (Russian military intelligence) overall control of intelligence activities.⁶¹ Given that the *siloviki* have been challenged but still maintain their leading role within Russia's security forces, they have the greatest probability of conducting a successful coup against Putin.⁶²

⁵⁶ See Amy Knight, "Is a coup against Putin possible? Russia's history offers clues", *Washington Post*, 6 April 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/04/06/putin-coup-soviet-russian-history-stalin-beria-khrushchev/>; and Michiel Willems, "Kremlin coup rumours growing in Moscow: Disgruntled generals join FSB looking to oust Putin and end Ukraine war", *City AM*, 5 May 2022, <https://www.cityam.com/kremlin-on-high-alert-as-coup-rumours-grow-in-moscow-disgruntled-generals-join-fsb-looking-to-oust-putin-and-end-ukraine-war/>.

⁵⁷ Roman Petrenko, "Russia's elite wants to eliminate Putin, they have already chosen a successor - intelligence", *Ukrayinska Pravda*, 20 March 2022, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2022/03/20/7332985/>.

⁵⁸ Rosaleen Fenton, "The new Putin? Former KGB spy in Putin's inner circle who is tipped to take over", *Mirror UK*, 21 March 2022, <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/new-putin-former-kgb-spy-26517291>.

⁵⁹ Irina Borogan and Andrei Soldatov, "Putin Places Spies Under House Arrest", *CEPA*, 11 March 2022. <https://cepa.org/putin-places-spies-under-house-arrest/>.

⁶⁰ Dmitri Alperovitch, "The Dangers of Putin's Paranoia. Why Isolation Encourages Escalation", *Foreign Affairs*, 18 March 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2022-03-18/dangers-putins-paranoia>.

⁶¹ Tom Ball, "Putin sidelines FSB over intelligence failures in Ukraine", *The Times*, 11 May 2022, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/putin-sidelines-fsb-over-intelligence-failings-in-ukraine-nw0d7zh25>.

⁶² Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, "Could the Siloviki Challenge Putin?", *Foreign Affairs*, 11 April 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/print/node/1128739>.

Russia's *Siloviki*

The only members of the Russian elite who could launch a coup against Putin are the *siloviki*, descendants of the senior ranks of the former Soviet KGB, military and military intelligence (GRU) who have captured the Russian state and run it as their militocracy.⁶³ Putin's war against Ukraine and the Western sanctions imposed in response are a threat to their *status quo*. The *siloviki* have lavishly enriched themselves during Putin's 22-year rule of Russia and are akin to feudal elites.⁶⁴

Since 2020, as Putin's Russia increasingly came to resemble a dictatorship, he reduced official meetings with the *siloviki* and many of them felt squeezed out of what has become a very narrow group of close people surrounding the president. Since 2012, Putin has strengthened the military and established a national guard.⁶⁵ These newly empowered armed structures are directly loyal to Putin, especially the national guard led by the head of Putin's former personal protection Viktor Zolotov. Putin has also closely allied himself with Chechen President Ramazan Kadyrov, who has a history of conflicts with the *siloviki* and is directly loyal to Putin.⁶⁶

Several anonymous whistle-blowers from the FSB have been leaking "letters" describing the general situation within the intelligence services. The first FSB "letter" outlined the failure to form an alternative government⁶⁷ and complains about the pervasiveness of corruption and the promotion of "yes-men". It also predicts Russia's descent into bloody internal strife because of rising discontent.

The second FSB "letter" reiterates the inability of the FSB to conduct in-depth analysis due to the domination of loyalty over professionalism within the security services, as well as a lack of sufficient data to conduct modelling.⁶⁸ The third FSB "letter" focuses on the structure of the FSB itself. Initially, the collective leadership was not willing to critique Putin. However, the situation is changing.⁶⁹ Putin is seeking to maintain his control over important senior groups, only giving his consent for actions provided he does not bear responsibility for their execution and potential failure.⁷⁰ The Russian military encouraged Putin to invade Ukraine while the intelligence services provided poor quality and inaccurate intelligence.

⁶³ Nina Khrushcheva, "The Coup in the Kremlin. How Putin and the Security Services Captured the Russian State", *Foreign Affairs*, 10 May 2022, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2022-05-10/coup-kremlin?utm_medium=newsletters&utm_source=fatoday&utm_campaign=The%20Coup%20in%20the%20Kremlin&utm_content=20220510&utm_term=FA%20Today%20-%20112017.

⁶⁴ Michael Rochlitz, Chapter 4, "The New Autocracy: Information, Politics, and Policy in Putin's Russia" in *The Siloviki in Russian Politics* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2018), pp.83-108, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329671889_The_Siloviki_in_Russian_Politics.

⁶⁵ David W. Rivera and Sharon Werning Rivera, "The Militarization of the Russian Elite under Putin", *Problems of Post-Communism* 65, no. 4 (2018), pp.227-228, <https://academics.hamilton.edu/documents/Rivera%20and%20Rivera,%20The%20Militarization%20of%20the%20Russian%20Elite,%20Prob%20of%20Post-Comm%202018.PDF>.

⁶⁶ Amanda Taub, "Is Putin's elite security service feuding with his own puppet regime in Chechnya?", *Vox*, 11 May 2015, <https://www.vox.com/2015/5/11/8585661/putin-kadyrov-fsb?msclkid=c16f0a10c4de11ec80c61a2f504f5a31>.

⁶⁷ Vladimir Osechkin, "War in Ukraine and recent events in Russia and the world. Inside from the source", *www.Gulagu.net*, 9 March 2022, <https://gulagu-net.ru/news/2022-03-09-1226.html>.

⁶⁸ Vladimir Osechkin, "The second letter from secret service analysts", *www.Gulagu.net*, 10 March 2022, <https://gulagu-net.ru/news/2022-03-10-1234.html>.

⁶⁹ Vladimir Osechkin, "Про Путина-нарцисса, ФСБ, Кадырова, гвардию и Ф3 о fake", *www.Gulagu.net*, 10 March 2022, <https://gulagu-net.ru/news/2022-03-10-1235.html>.

⁷⁰ Vladimir Osechkin, "Source about the Victory Plan and the threat of expanding the geography of the war", *www.Gulagu.net*, 10 March 2022, <https://gulagu-net.ru/news/2022-03-10-1236.html>.

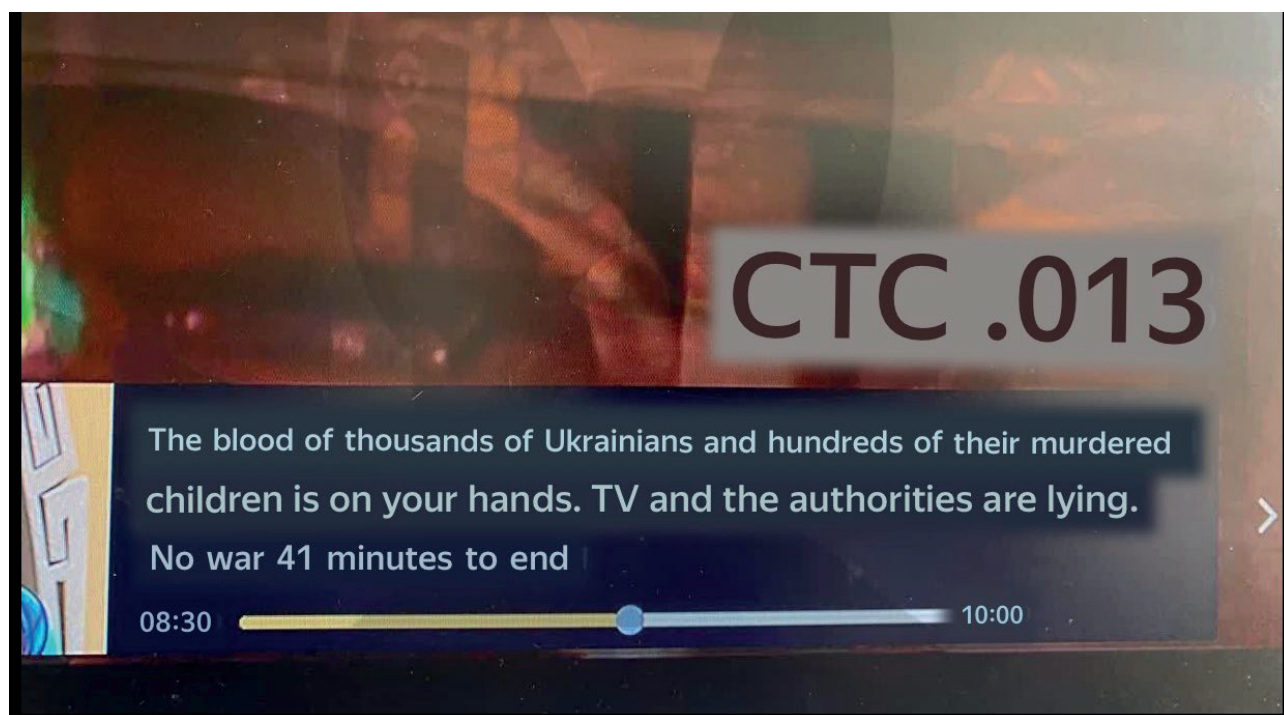
Russian Disquiet at the Invasion and Military Casualties

High rates of casualties and huge losses of military equipment are having a detrimental impact on Russian morale, which was already low. Russian soldiers were fed false information, told they were going on “military exercises”, and when inside Ukraine were never given clear instructions about their goals.⁷¹ At the beginning of the invasion, there was no overall commander of the “special military operation”.

Russian soldiers have abandoned military equipment because they do not want to fight, have run out of fuel or have deserted. Between the start of the invasion and mid-May 2022, Ukraine captured 233 Russian tanks, which, combined with its own and those supplied by the West, meant that Ukraine actually had more tanks than at the beginning of the war. Russia is a bigger “donor” of tanks to Ukraine than Western governments.

By mid-May, nearly 30,000 Russian soldiers had been killed and two to three times as many had been wounded, taken prisoner or deserted (according to Ukrainian estimates). Western estimates of 15,000 killed Russian soldiers are lower but nevertheless still very high. In comparison, 15,000 Russian soldiers were killed over a decade of brutal combat in Afghanistan during the 1980s. The US had far fewer casualties of 2400 over two decades in Afghanistan and 4400 over nearly two decades in Iraq.

The Russian government is hiding details about the number of troops killed in Ukraine, but – as in the 1980s – this will not prevent the Russian people from coming to know the true extent of the carnage. *Anonymous* is assisting with this process by hacking into Russian state television and official websites and posting truthful information about Russian casualties and war crimes in Ukraine.⁷² On 9 May 2022 for example, *Anonymous* hacked into Russian state television channels and posted a condemnation of the war, as seen below:



⁷¹ Uliana Pavlova, “Russian officer reveals why he risked it all to quit Putin’s war”, *CNN*, 23 May 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/05/22/europe/ukraine-russian-officer-resigns/index.html>; and Allison Quinn, “‘Our Commander Is Leaving With Us’: Putin’s Troops Openly Plot to Ditch ‘Stupid’ War”, *The Daily Beast*, 19 May 2022, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/vladimir-putins-troops-openly-plot-to-ditch-stupid-war>.

⁷² PuckArks (@PucksReturn), *Twitter*, 9 May 2022, 7:46am, <https://twitter.com/PucksReturn/status/1523555018733162496>.

The Ukrainian authorities and Ukrainian security forces have been posting images and videos of captured and killed Russians. POWs are asked to ring home on their mobile telephones to inform their families of the true nature of the brutality of the war. The Ukrainian authorities are also seeking to contact the relatives of dead soldiers to ask them to arrange for the collection of their bodies. They also allow family members to submit their DNA information to determine the identity of killed Russian soldiers. The relatives of captured or killed Russian soldiers can search through photos and videos on social media to identify their loved ones.

An adviser to Ukraine's interior minister has stated that the Russian government is unresponsive with regard to transporting Russian soldiers' bodies home. The Russian authorities express no interest in retrieving their dead soldiers who remain stacked in refrigerator trains in Ukraine.⁷³ The Russian Ministry of Defence is refusing to acknowledge their losses in the war or the number of its troops who have deserted, defected or been taken prisoner.⁷⁴ Mobile crematoriums are being used to hide the true number of casualties and the high number of civilians who have been killed in cities such as Mariupol.⁷⁵ The Russian army has shown utter contempt for its dead soldiers and their bodies "have been piled up in a heap 'as tall as a man' to hide the true extent of casualties, according to an intercepted telephone call released by Ukraine's security services. Russian troops have been ordered to dispose of thousands of bodies in a mass grave in Donetsk ... The families of dead soldiers are told they are 'missing in action' to avoid alarming the Russian public."⁷⁶

Military casualties remain a major issue for the morale of Russian troops. Increasing numbers of Russians called up to the army are refusing to sign a contract. The military command is resorting to bullying those refusing to do so.⁷⁷ Repressive measures have included a stamp in documents marking them as having traitorous tendencies or threats of imprisonment. In addition, Russian press conferences and official statements have stopped showing Russian casualties: the last official briefing on 25 March spread the false figure of only 1351 killed in the war in Ukraine.⁷⁸

Arson is also on the rise against military conscription offices, with five set alight since the war started,⁷⁹ and government offices have also been targeted. There has also been a large number of unexplained fires. For over a month from the start of April, warehouses containing ammunition, fuel and government documents caught fire around Russia.⁸⁰ Rumours circulated that the fires were started by Ukrainian covert forces, which Ukraine unsurprisingly denied.^{81, 82} However, if Ukrainian forces were indeed conducting numerous attacks inside Russia, it would be a source of great embarrassment to the Kremlin.

⁷³ Al Jazeera, "Russia's Victory Day puts focus on military's losses in Ukraine," *YouTube*, 9 May 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RWPt4P8GuDE>.

⁷⁴ Carl Schreck, "'Mama, I Didn't Want To Come': Ukraine Asks Russians To ID Their Killed, Captured Relatives", *RFERL*, 27 February 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-russia-pows-prisoners-identification-dead/31726619.html>.

⁷⁵ Bill Hutchinson, "Ukrainian officials accuse Russia of using 'mobile crematoriums' in Mariupol", *ABC News*, 8 April 2022, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/russia-accused-mobile-crematoriums-incinerate-civilians-mariupol/story?id=83932376>.

⁷⁶ George Gylls, "Russian dead 'slung onto huge pile' in Ukraine", *The Times*, 10 May 2022, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/russian-dead-slung-onto-huge-pile-in-ukraine-0w6v7nw99>.

⁷⁷ Nikita Sologub, "'You need to put anybody in jail, then they will understand... Let's start with you!': How commanders put pressure on those who refused to fight in Ukraine", *Mediazona*, 22 April 2022, <https://zona.media/article/2022/04/22/nah>.

⁷⁸ "Russia Says 1,351 Of Its Soldiers Have Died in Ukraine, Well Below Western Estimates", *RFERL*, 25 March 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-ukraine-death-toll-1351/31770672.html>.

⁷⁹ "5 Russian Enlistment Offices Hit By Arson Attacks", *Moscow Times*, 22 April 2022, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/04/22/5-russian-enlistment-offices-hit-by-arson-attacks-reports-a77454>.

⁸⁰ Giulia Carbonaro, "Every Mysterious Fire to Break Out in Russia Recently — Full List", *Newsweek*, 6 May 2022, <https://www.newsweek.com/every-mysterious-fire-break-out-russia-recently-full-list-1704100>.

⁸¹ Chris Pleasance, Will Stewart and Stephen M. Lepore, "'Ukrainian missile strikes' blow up oil facilities in Russia supplying troops in Donbas as British intelligence says Putin's forces have 'yet to achieve a significant breakthrough' and many units are 'exhausted'", *Daily Mail UK*, 25 April 2022, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10749921/Giant-inferno-Russian-oil-storage-amid-suspicion-strike-Ukraine.html>.

⁸² Andrew Roth, "Ukraine rejects Kremlin claim it sent helicopters to attack oil depot in Russia", *The Guardian*, 1 April 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/01/ukraine-accused-of-helicopter-attack-on-oil-depot-inside-russia>.

Another goal, which more closely resembled the truth, was espoused by Rustam Minnekayev, Acting Commander of Russia's Central Military District. He said that it would be in Russia's best interests to permanently occupy Southern Ukraine. He outlined that Russia's goal would be to permanently annex this territory, which would provide them with a land bridge to Crimea and Transnistria, the separatist region of Moldova. Besides traditional Russian imperial nationalistic goals of liberating so-called New Russia (i.e., south-eastern Ukraine), this also had the important goal of denying Ukraine control over its Black Sea coastline, thereby preventing trade of metallurgical and agricultural products and destroying its economy.⁸³

Minnekayev was wishful in his thinking. Ukrainian forces used Neptune missiles to destroy the flagship of Russia's Black Sea fleet, the *Moskva*, and the *Admiral Makarov*. Up to 250 sailors were killed or missing from the *Moskva*,⁸⁴ whose sinking demonstrated that Russian naval dominance was a myth and served as a huge loss to Russia's image as a great power.

Furthermore, Russia has failed to capture the port city of Odesa which is well defended by sea and by land. Russian forces have thus far failed to attack Odesa from land to the east of the port, with Ukrainian forces pushing them back at the port city of Mykolayiv. Odesa's defenders have British-supplied anti-ship harpoon weapons and the anti-ship version of the MBDA Brimstone air-to-ground, anti-tank missiles.

Russian forces are low on supplies. In part this is due to the impact of chronic corruption on logistics, a crucial component of an effective army machine. Russian forces are becoming increasingly demoralised, disoriented and hungry as the war drags on in Ukraine.⁸⁵ Soldiers have run out of supplies and food and have resorted to looting shops and eating dead dogs.

One important reason for low morale is confusion about the true goal of their mission. Russian soldiers "don't know who to shoot – they [Russian-speaking Ukrainian Slavs] all look like us".⁸⁶ Russian Jekyll and Hyde disinformation and propaganda paints Ukrainians as both Nazi enemies of Russia *and* the same people as Russians.

Russian soldiers are also demoralised by the interception of their military communications by Ukrainians. Russian military communications are not encrypted and Ukrainian and Western intelligence services and volunteer groups assisting the Ukrainian army are listening to them.⁸⁷ The SBU (Security Service of Ukraine) also routinely posts intercepted telephone calls between Russian soldiers and their families in Russia on social media; these calls reveal a host of details about war crimes including rape and looting. These leaked telephone calls reveal the criminal nature of Russia's army in Ukraine.⁸⁸ The first Russian soldier who committed a war crime of killing Ukrainian civilians was put on trial by Ukraine and convicted.⁸⁹ Another two Russian soldiers also pleaded guilty for firing artillery at civilian buildings in Kharkiv.⁹⁰

⁸³ Andrew Roth, "Russian commander suggests plan is for permanent occupation of south Ukraine", *The Guardian*, 22 April 2022, <https://amp.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/22/ukraine-south-occupation-russian-military-chief-rustam-minnekayev>.

⁸⁴ Larisa Brown, "Up to 250 dead or missing after Moskva sinking, says Ukraine", *The Times*, 25 April 2022, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/up-to-250-dead-or-missing-after-moskva-sinking-says-ukraine-n6kzdrkqh>.

⁸⁵ Kate Nicholson, "UK Officials Say Russian Troops Are Running Low On Supplies – And Morale", *HuffPost*, 7 April 2022, https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/amp/entry/russian-invasion-morale-ukraine-putin_uk_624eb0e9e4b007d3845f94b7/.

⁸⁶ Bevan Hurley, "'We don't know who to shoot, they all look like us': Russian soldiers in Ukraine becoming disoriented, US official says", *Yahoo News*, 26 February 2022, <https://sports.yahoo.com/don-t-know-shoot-look-223834824.html>.

⁸⁷ "Ukraine's battle of the airwaves", *Financial Times*, 8 April 2022, <https://www.ft.com/video/4adad9c9-151b-4448-8547-908b49d74fde>.

⁸⁸ Greg Myre, "How does Ukraine keep intercepting Russian military communications?", *NPR*, 26 April 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/04/26/1094656395/how-does-ukraine-keep-intercepting-russian-military-communications>.

⁸⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=386421556828852&set=a.124194319718245>.

⁹⁰ Pavel Polityuk, "Two Russian soldiers plead guilty in new war crimes trial in Ukraine", *Reuters*, 26 May 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/two-russian-soldiers-plead-guilty-new-war-crimes-trial-ukraine-2022-05-26/>.

Impact of Western Sanctions on the Russian People

Tough Western sanctions are placing significant pressure on the Russian economy, particularly trade, finance and, increasingly, the energy sector. Nearly 1000 foreign companies have left Russia, cutting its ties to the globalised economy.⁹¹ The impact of tough Western sanctions on the Russian population will be severe, although this may take months to bite and may only become visible in September. By then, household savings will have been exhausted. Unemployment will also significantly rise. Prices are rising and the Russian government does not have the financial resources to impose price controls. Middle-class Russians can no longer shop in high-end stores or take foreign holidays. Overall, with shop shelves barer than normal, life for most Russians will come to resemble the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and Russia in the early 1990s.⁹²

With 60% of Russian assets held abroad frozen, the probability of the country's default is highly likely.⁹³ By separating Russia's banking system from the SWIFT payment system and targeting the technology sector, Russia has descended to the ranks of Iran and North Korea. Without access to global markets and technologies, there can be no long-term growth in Russia.⁹⁴

The flow of investments into Russia has collapsed and placed additional pressure on supplies and logistical chains. Tens of thousands of middle-class professionals and IT specialists have emigrated, as they did from Belarus after the brutal clampdown on election protests. For the first time, Western sanctions are hitting Russian oligarchs, with their assets frozen and yachts seized. Increasingly, Western policymakers are raising the possibility of Russian assets in the West being confiscated and used in the rebuilding of Ukraine after the war ends.⁹⁵

Western sanctions will speed up the decline of Russia as a great power.⁹⁶ Russia will be unable to become an autarky and produce everything domestically.⁹⁷ Some Russian factories are already standing idle because of bans on exporting parts to Russia,⁹⁸ while other factories are using parts from domestic appliances.⁹⁹ Currency controls that *de facto* ban foreign currency transfers make it difficult for companies to conduct foreign trade and encourage corruption among regulators.¹⁰⁰

⁹¹ "Almost 1,000 Companies Have Curtailed Operations in Russia – But Some Remain", Yale School of Management, 26 May 2022, <https://som.yale.edu/story/2022/almost-1000-companies-have-curtailed-operations-russia-some-remain>.

⁹² Mark Galeotti, "Why September is the Month to Watch, and 'Putin, Ukraine and the Revenge of History'", *In Moscow's Shadow*, Podcast 67, 18 May 2022, <https://www.buzzsprout.com/1026985/10638355-in-moscow-s-shadows-67-why-september-is-the-month-to-watch-and-putin-ukraine-and-the-revenge-of-history>.

⁹³ Graeme Wearden, "Russia heading for worst recession since end of cold war, says UK", *The Guardian*, 8 April 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/08/russia-heading-for-worst-recession-since-end-of-cold-war-says-uk>.

⁹⁴ Grigory Bazhenov, "Russia after sanctions: What will become of us?", *YouTube*, 19 March 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VrHtjkEubq4>.

⁹⁵ "EU's Borrell Says Russian Reserves Should Be Seized, Used To Rebuild Ukraine", *RFERL*, 9 May 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/eu-borrell-frozen-assets-russia-reconstruction-ukraine/31841122.html?lflags=mailer>.

⁹⁶ Kathryn Stoner, "How Putin's War in Ukraine Has Ruined Russia", *Journal of Democracy*, May 2022, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/how-putins-war-in-ukraine-has-ruined-russia/>.

⁹⁷ Kirill Zykov, "Russia's EU Food Embargo Falls Short – Report", *The Moscow Times*, 7 December 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/12/07/russias-eu-food-embargo-falls-short-report-a72262>.

⁹⁸ Sergei Khazov-Cassia, "'Running Out Of Spare Parts': Plenty Of Pain Ahead For Russia's Economy", *RFERL*, 5 May 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-economy-pain-coming/31836083.html?lflags=mailer>.

⁹⁹ Jeanne Whalen, "Sanctions forcing Russia to use appliance parts in military gear, U.S. says", *The Washington Post*, 11 May 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2022/05/11/russia-sanctions-effect-military/>.

¹⁰⁰ Vasilisa Strizh and Valentina Semenikhina, "Update: Russia Further Tightens Currency Control Regulations and Directs Banks to Scrutinize Payments Made Abroad", *Morgan Lewis*, 22 March 2022, <https://www.morganlewis.com/pubs/2022/03/update-russia-further-tightens-currency-control-regulations-and-directs-banks-to-scrutinize-payments-made-abroad>.

The Russian state attempted to strengthen the rouble by forcing European nations to pay for energy imports in roubles instead of euros. They refused, claiming that this breached the contracts they had signed with Russia. The Russian media has also attempted to show that the rouble is strong despite Western sanctions. However, this is disinformation.¹⁰¹ Currency flows are under tight control and cannot be exchanged on the open market, only illegally. Russian stock trading has been partially and artificially reopened.¹⁰² With such restrictions, there is no reliable way to verify the real exchange rate in Russia.

¹⁰¹ Tommy Wilkes, "Analysis: Russia's rouble rebound is not as real as it seems", *Reuters*, 1 April 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/russias-rouble-rebound-is-not-real-it-seems-2022-04-01/>.

¹⁰² Ksenia Galouchko, "Moscow Exchange Bans Some Short Sales in Possible Sign of Return", *Bloomberg News*, 22 March 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-03-22/moscow-exchange-bans-short-selling-in-russia-s-biggest-companies>.

Russian Civil Society and Political Opposition

Russian society presents a mixed picture. Russian television and media and government-controlled sociological centres provide a rosy picture of a high majority of Russians supporting the Special Military Operation. As this research brief shows, the picture is far more complicated. Putin is, for example, unwilling to test Russian public opinion by ordering a mass mobilisation and declaring war on Ukraine probably because this would be unpopular.

Surveys conducted in dictatorships are unreliable in providing an understanding of public opinion as there is widespread fear that dissent can be punished, not only by imprisonment but also by losing one's job in a state-run structure. The other point to remember is that opinion polls in authoritarian states, such as Russia, do not always reflect genuine public feelings:

"Today, several months into Russia's war on Ukraine, a climate of fear is beginning to spread among ordinary Russians. As a result of the censorship laws and the repressive attitude by Russian authorities to force forward displays of loyalty no-one can fully trust the integrity of pollsters in Russia, Belarus or any other autocratic society."

This is because:

"The authorities use surveys as a weapon for their political ends, so public support for what the Kremlin is doing must be unwavering. Whenever corrupt leaders feel that the population might be critical of their policies, tampering with the results is the standard trick. In other words, polling results become manipulated because either the methodology seldom takes account of respondents simply giving false dishonest answers out of fear – or more bluntly – the data results are falsified."¹⁰³

The Levada Centre, Russia's last remaining independent polling organisation, found a very high 81-85% level of support for the Russian military action in Ukraine.¹⁰⁴ Some of this support is likely to be a case of rallying around the flag during the early days of the war. The poll asked about support for Russia's military in Ukraine (i.e., Special Military Operation) as describing this as an invasion or war would have been illegal and punishable by imprisonment.

Support would have most likely been lower if the Levada Centre had been able to ask direct questions, such as "do you support a war with Ukraine?", "what are your thoughts about the very high number of Russian casualties?" and "have you heard about war crimes committed by Russian troops in Ukraine?".

The Russian regime's advantage rests on the fact that most Russians continue to obtain their news from television, which is tightly controlled by the state and imbued with propaganda hostile to Ukraine, NATO and the US. Social media is more dominant among the educated middle class and young Russians.¹⁰⁵ Russia's equivalent of Facebook, *Vkontakte*, came under the control of the authorities in 2014 and its current CEO is the son of Putin's First Deputy Chief of Staff, Sergei Kirienko.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ "Should you trust opinion polls in Russia?", *EUvsDisinfo*, 24 May 2022. <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/should-you-trust-opinion-polls-in-russia/>.

¹⁰⁴ "Conflict with Ukraine".

¹⁰⁵ "Independent sociology: 71% of Russians are proud of the war in Ukraine", *RFERL*, 17 March 2022, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/nezavisimye-sotsiologi-71-rossiyan-ispytyvaet-gordostj-iz-za-voiny-s-ukrainoy/31757535.html>.

¹⁰⁶ "Russia's VK Appoints Son of Kremlin Insider as New CEO", *The Moscow Times*, 13 December 2021, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/12/13/russias-vk-appoints-son-of-kremlin-insider-as-new-ceo-a75802>.

The Russian dictatorship prevents public dissent and brutally suppresses protests.¹⁰⁷ Tens of thousands of citizens have been arrested for protesting against the war.¹⁰⁸ In 2020-2022, Russia's transformation into a dictatorship led to repression of the opposition and closure of independent media. Repression in Russia was one of the highest levels throughout Eurasia.

Russian opposition has a legacy of passivity that makes it different to Ukraine which has long had a vibrant civil society and a free media that is not actively suppressed by the state. A large segment of the Russian population is traditionally focused on escapism rather than current politics. In the Soviet Union, youth NGOs and hippy groups protested the Soviet way of life but largely stayed silent on the war in Afghanistan.¹⁰⁹ Many of the acts of opposition to the war are now undertaken by individual Russians rather than opposition groups. Other Russians have simply given up fighting Putin's dictatorship and have fled abroad to Georgia and Armenia or to the West.¹¹⁰ The authorities, afraid at the loss of IT and other specialists, have introduced measures to prevent some individuals from leaving Russia.¹¹¹

The remnants of the opposition in Russia are unlikely to pose a threat to Putin's regime, and besides, as in the case of opposition leader Vladimir Kara-Murza, they also face arrest. Navalny understood the necessity of appealing to the Russian public to challenge official narratives and show that those in the Kremlin were corrupt hypocrites and not true patriots. He was willing to accept people from different political backgrounds on the left and right of the political spectrum as partners in a common anti-regime front. However, Navalny failed to present a clear ideological picture of the future during earlier larger protests in 2011-2012 and 2017.¹¹² The protest wave after he was arrested in 2021 was smaller in size because the Russian state had become, as discussed earlier, a dictatorship and allowed no forms of opposition.¹¹³

Following the imprisonment of Navalny, only *tusovochka* remain in open opposition as they – unlike Navalny – have opted to remain abroad. *Tusovochka* is a term used by Russians to describe a small social gathering or group of liberal journalists, politicians and intellectuals who do not reach out to Russian society. They are hard-line in the sense that they do not support cooperating with the political opposition or anybody in the regime, preventing a broad coalition from uniting together in support of change. In the Orange and Euromaidan Revolutions in Ukraine, it was precisely such broad coalitions that were successful in opposing the authorities. In Russia, different strands of those opposed to Putin's regime have failed to find a common ground since the 2011-2012 protests.¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁷ "More than 15,000 Russians have been arrested in anti-war protests", *The Economist*, 22 March 2022, <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2022/03/22/more-than-15000-russians-have-been-arrested-in-anti-war-protests>.

¹⁰⁸ "Russia: Arrests, Harassment of Ukraine War Dissidents", Human Rights Watch, 24 March 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/24/russia-arrests-harassment-ukraine-war-dissidents>.

¹⁰⁹ Juliane Fürst, "A youthquake against Putin is unlikely. The history of Soviet hippies shows why", *The Guardian*, 1 April 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/apr/01/youthquake-putin-history-soviet-hippies-russian-satire-stiob>.

¹¹⁰ Carlotta Dotto, "Putin's war has triggered an exodus out of Russia – but the escape options are shrinking", *CNN*, 31 March 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/03/30/europe/russia-ukraine-brain-drain-graphics-intl-cmd/index.html>.

¹¹¹ Daria Novozhilova, "Passengers complain about 'surveys' when leaving the Russian Federation. Border guards ask to see chats in telegram", *Medialeaks*, 7 March 2022, <https://medialeaks.ru/0703ndi-str-abroad-safety/>.

¹¹² Alan Taylor, "Anti-Corruption Protests Across Russia", *The Atlantic*, 27 March 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2017/03/anti-corruption-protests-across-russia/520902/>.

¹¹³ "Alexei Navalny: Thousands across Russia defy ban on protests", *BBC News*, 21 April 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-56834655>.

¹¹⁴ "570 participants of the 'March of Millions' were detained on Bolotnaia Square", *Kommersant*, 6 May 2012, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1930004>.

Seven Policy Recommendations

1. The G7 group of countries should declare as its goal Ukraine's military defeat of Russia and the return of occupied territories and provide extensive military equipment and training until this goal is achieved.
2. The G7 group of countries should also publicly announce that it seeks to remove Putin from power. This should include spreading intelligence of the threat of a coup against the Kremlin leadership, though without endangering any such coup plotters. The US should declare Russia to be a state sponsor of terrorism and publicly declare Putin to be a war criminal¹¹⁵ who constitutes a serious threat to European and global security and to the restoration of democracy in Russia.¹¹⁶
3. Foundations promoting Western democracy should significantly increase their support of the different components of Russia's opposition as it faces unprecedented hostility from the Russian state.
4. These foundations should also increase their support of Russian independent media outlets in Russia (if they continue to exist), Ukraine, the three Baltic states and Poland.
5. Western governments should encourage the defection of Russian state officials who would be provided with asylum in the country of their choice in exchange for insider information on Putin's regime, particularly the location of his overseas financial assets.
6. Western governments should encourage the defection of officers from the Russian military with the offer of asylum in the country of their choice in exchange for information on war crimes committed in Ukraine that would be used for future criminal prosecutions of Putin and Russian leaders.
7. A campaign must be established to increase information being shared with the Russian public through Russian independent media outlets, through Western radio stations, and through operations conducted by *Anonymous* on the impact of Western sanctions on the Russian economy and finances and the high number of casualties of Russian soldiers.

¹¹⁵ Taras Kuzio and Alan Mendoza, "Ukraine-Russia Policy: Next Steps for the West", The Henry Jackson Society Research Brief, 9 March 2022, <https://henryjacksonsociety.org/publications/ukraine-russia-policy-next-steps-for-the-west/>.

¹¹⁶ Taras Kuzio, "Putin's Invasion of Ukraine and the Global Crisis", The Henry Jackson Society Research Brief, 9 May 2022, <https://henryjacksonsociety.org/publications/putins-invasion-of-ukraine-and-the-global-crisis/>.

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