

Russia's War Goals in Ukraine

Written by David R. Marples

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DAVID R. MARPLES, APR 21 2022

The war in Ukraine began after the Maidan uprising that occupied central Kyiv for the period from late November to 21 February 2014. The protests resulted in the departure of President Viktor Yanukovich, new presidential and parliamentary elections, the annexation of Crimea by Russia, and the fomenting by the latter country of a war in the eastern part of Ukraine. By the late spring, two breakaway republics had been formed in the eastern part of Donetsk and Luhansk regions but the majority of east Ukrainian cities had rebuffed the attempted takeovers. The conflict was brutal, and came to a halt thanks to the Minsk Protocol, hosted by Belarusian president Aliaksandr Lukashenka, initially in September 2014. The Protocol mediated by the French and German presidents in what was termed the Normandy format, was signed by Russia, Ukraine, and the OSCE (the Trilateral Contact Group on Ukraine). More fighting soon broke out, however, and a new agreement was signed in Minsk on February 12, 2015, which stipulated the removal of heavy weaponry from the battlefield, release of prisoners on both sides, and constitutional reforms in Ukraine including the provision of autonomy for the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Ukraine was to regain control of its borders and early elections were to be held in the two regions.

A period of eight years then followed in which the fighting continued spasmodically though Russian priorities were redirected to the civil war in Syria and support for the government of Bashar-al-Assad. The two breakaway republics were subjected to a trade embargo by Ukraine, but received supplies from Russia. Their status as independent states was initially recognized only by two Russian-backed regions of Georgia in a similar situation: Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russia began to distribute Russian passports to the Donbas residents from 2019, and in February 2022, Vladimir Putin announced that Russia recognized the two regions as independent states, including the territory under Ukrainian government control. His recognition ended the Minsk Protocol. He then focused attention on what he termed a 'genocide' of the populations by the Kyiv government.

Russian Expansionism

On April 6, 2022, an article in a Russian newspaper by Aleksandr Bochkarev made the comparison between the current rule of Vladimir V. Putin in Russia and the reign of Ivan III. The analogy stemmed from the fact that Russia faced more than one enemy – the Golden Horde to which it paid tribute and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania – just as it faces United States and the European Union today. It was able to defeat both and end the period of paying tribute and occupy one-third of the territories of the Grand Duchy, that were later expanded to the north by Peter the Great. The inference is that Russia will occupy Ukraine as well as other territories in its neighbourhood and Putin will achieve the same sort of status as Ivan III. Bochkarev also notes the presence in the south of the hostile Crimean Khanate, occupying not only the Crimea but much of today's eastern Ukraine and adds as an aside that if Russia and China acted in unison today, then the European Union could be dismantled in the same fashion as the Great Horde and be broken up into small 'khanates'. Putin would then be repeating the history of 600 years ago.

In another article in a different Russian source published on April 17, the focus is on the battle for Mariupol, which is being transformed into the pivotal battle of the war. The enemy is the pro-Nazi Azov Battalion, currently holed up in the Azov steelworks but surrounded by Russian forces. The description is reminiscent of the liberation of Stalingrad in early 1943, though it does not work perfectly because the Germans were never fully in control of the city named after Stalin. But the narrative is that after eight years of genocidal policy against the Russian populations of the two separatist republics in Donetsk and Luhansk regions, Russia has stepped it to remove the pro-Nazi rulers and end

Russia's War Goals in Ukraine

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their reigns of terror.

I use these two examples to illustrate the depiction of the war from the other side. And even if one can accept that war brings diverse reporting and the truth is the first victim, the Russian perspective is still so far from our realities in the West that we might be dealing with people from another universe. Would one find, for example, a Western leader lamenting the end of, say, the British or French empires, and advocating the reconquest of Africa or India, and correspondingly the physical destruction of one of its component states?

But in fact the use of such comparisons is close to the thinking of the Russian leadership, particularly Putin, his Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu, and the rigid Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. Their mission is to restore to Russia the territories of its former empire, though the nature of the military campaigns has changed as a result of the determined Ukrainian resistance in Kyiv and the generally unimpressive nature of the original assault from the north, launched from the territory of the quasi-independent Belarus at the end of the February 2020 military exercise there involving both the Russian and Belarusian armies.

Officially, Russia has the goal to demilitarize and de-Nazify Ukraine and what we are witnessing is always called a Special Military Operation and not an invasion. The second term is deliberately vague. The existence of the Azov Battalion notwithstanding, neo-Nazis play no role in the Ukrainian leadership. There is no such thinking prescient in the population generally – over 70% of the electorate voted for a Jewish president in 2019 – and the far right, though it exists, is no more prevalent in Ukraine than it is in the United States, Canada, or for that matter Russia.

But let us return to Mariupol and the Donbas generally. In 2014, in a conflict that was tied directly to Russia's annexation of Crimea, pro-Russian governments were established in Donetsk and Luhansk, which then declared independence in a referendum presided over by gun-toting gangsters. The two governments expanded slightly in the war that followed. Ukraine mounted an Anti-Terrorist Operation, which was halted in two major battles at Ilovaik and Debaltsevo, leaving the two governments – we will call them the DNR and LNR – in control of just over one-third of the territory of the regions Donetsk and Luhansk. Both battles saw the participation of units or mercenaries from Russia.

The Significance of Mariupol

Mariupol, however, had been lost during the earlier fighting, having earlier fallen into the hands of the separatists. It was perhaps Ukraine's greatest triumph in a losing war. The city was not only Ukraine's major port on the Azov Sea, but also home to one of the country's largest steelworks. Much of the Donbas has traditionally been devoted to the coal industry. But why is it so critical for Russia to capture it? And why is so much propaganda in the Russian media and social media being devoted to it? Several reasons can be suggested.

First, the city is either about to fall to the Russian army or very close to it. That would represent a psychological breakthrough in a war that has gone very wrong to date, with losses in the battlefield, deaths of generals, heavy casualties, the loss of Russia's most prestigious vessel in the Black Sea, the *Moskva*, most likely the victim of two Neptune missiles fired by the Ukrainian side, and the failure to capture Kyiv or remove the Ukrainian government led by President Volodymyr Zelensky.

Second, strategically, the capture of Mariupol would leave Ukraine with only one major port open, namely Odesa, which would likely be the next target, in order to cut Ukraine off from both the Black and Azov seas, depriving it of communications and important trade, and allowing Russia to use the navy as a backup for its armies.

Third, and perhaps most important, Russia would obtain a land bridge connecting the Donbas region to occupied Crimea. Though Russia has built a bridge allowing road and rail links between mainland Russia and Crimea, it has been riddled with problems. Conquest of Mariupol would permit supplies of water and food to Crimea and create a swathe of territory in the eastern part of Ukraine firmly under Russia's control. The same southern gains would extend later to Odessa region and Moldova and allow further links with pro-Russian Transnistria.

Russia's War Goals in Ukraine

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Fourth, if and when Mariupol falls, its main defenders, the Azov Battalion, would no doubt be scapegoated as the perfect examples of the sort of neo-Nazis Russia is fighting. Just as Nazis were paraded through the streets of Moscow in 1944 after Operation Bagration, so the battalion prisoners would follow suit in 2022. What right would Ukraine have to exist after the capture of such people? Presumably, it would be provided with some sort of puppet leadership from the pro-Russian segment of the current Parliament, such as the Opposition Bloc for Life, but without any real existence and certainly not independence.

But the defeat of the battalion would not end the war, particularly not while Zelensky is alive with his Cabinet in Kyiv, giving speeches on social media to European, American, and Canadian parliaments, and demanding more sophisticated weapons from United States and other members of NATO. The capture of Mariupol would catalyze the second phase of the war therefore, which concerns the consolidation and expansion of the DNR and LNR, and the current advance of the Russian army from the east toward Kharkiv and Kyiv, and from the south up the Dnipro River to Zaporizhzhia, Dnipro, and – again – Kyiv, the ultimate prize.

The subjugation of Ukraine, if attained without a lengthy delay – Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrev has warned Ukraine of its fate if it does not “denazify” and demilitarize – would allow the new Russia can turn to the next stage of the war, which would be to reverse the expansion of NATO by forming a bridgehead between its isolated enclave of Kaliningrad and the Baltic States, particularly Lithuania and Latvia, which are currently separating it from Russia.

The European Union

The EU is also an officially designated enemy of the Russian state. Though EU unity in response to the Russian attack was impressive and unusual, the official Russian narratives are that it contains deep divisions as well as dependency on Russian energy resources for its economies to survive in some cases. The electoral victory of Viktor Orban, leader of the Fidesz Party in Hungary, in early April, is perceived as the reinstatement of a certain ally and Russian relations with Italy have been traditionally warm. But the key stone to the Russian desire to divide Europe is Germany, with its heavy dependency on Russian gas and the completed – but suspended – Nordstream-2 pipeline from Vyborg in northwestern Russia to Greifswald is an important factor behind Germany's energy future.

Germany has announced plans to end Russian oil imports by the end of 2022, and it plans to end all imports in the near future – it relied on Russia for 55% of natural gas imports last year. The EU as a whole currently relies on Russia for 40% of its energy needs. It plans to phase out the consumption of Russian gas, oil, and coal in stages and to end the use of gas completely by the end of the decade.

Though linked with NATO and its eastern expansion, the EU is not itself a military power. Its significance lies in its economic and trading links with Russia and its role in the EU's Eastern Partnership project, which was initiated in 2009, and involved EU neighbors Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia. Russia began to compete with the EU for the allegiance of Belarus and Ukraine in particular, and today it has expanded its influence in and control over Belarus, from which the Invasion of Ukraine was launched two months ago. Ukraine, however, has long stressed its wish to reduce its links with Russia and embrace the EU. The Maidan uprising of 2013-14 arose from popular discontent with the decision of President Viktor Yanukovich not to sign an Associate Agreement with the EU in Vilnius in November 2013.

President Volodymyr Zelensky has now called for Ukraine's immediate enrolment as an EU member, though the prospect is not immediate. The EU traditionally has required the reduction of corruption, modernization of factories, and a democratic system with free elections and commitment to human rights. Other than the final two requirements, Ukraine prior to the war fell far short of EU standards.

NATO and the United States

Vladimir Putin has claimed that the United States considered Russia as an enemy even in 2017. The presidency of Donald J. Trump, which the Russians supported, brought a brief hope that relations could be mended. The relationship with President Joe Biden, however, is as cold as at any time during the peak of the Cold War. Putin's

Russia's War Goals in Ukraine

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mission is to restore parity between Russia and the United States by reducing the threat of NATO – regarded as a US-led entity – and occupying key areas that were formerly part of the Russian sphere, particularly during the period of the Russian Empire.

There have been several stages in the decline of relations, some of which have acquired importance long after the event, such as the NATO bombing of Belgrade in 1999, and the formation of the state of Kosovo in 2008 at the expense of Russia's ally Serbia. In turn, the United States' propensity for operating outside the confines of the UN – for example in its attack on Iraq in March 2003 when it sent an initial army of about 160,000 troops, over 70% of whom were Americans to remove the regime of Saddam Hussein – has rendered the UN ineffective as a body to maintain world peace. Russia today has continued this tradition by using its veto role in the UN Security Council to prevent any effective UN part in bringing the current war to an early end.

Thus, while Ukraine is the immediate focus, Russia's war aims are considerably broader, linked also to its role in Syria, where it has successfully maintained the regime of Bashar-al-Assad in power, where he has now remained for as long as that of Putin himself. The most important task is to redraw the boundaries of Europe before agreeing to any new peace agreement. There will be in this prospective no Ukrainian state, no Moldova, no Georgia, and likely no Baltic States either since Russia regards the expansion of NATO as an illegal action betraying promises made to Russia by the United States in 1990. Poland is also a target but its size and prospects of resistance with full NATO involvement renders it a formidable opponent.

The Realities

Thus far, I have offered a perspective that emphasizes the official Russian vision of the future. It is one founded on a disturbingly inaccurate and ill-informed interpretation of the past, including the Second World War, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the expansion of NATO. A part of Russia's new war may succeed, namely the occupation of all of Donetsk and Luhansk regions and the consolidation of the two separatist governments. They have existed de facto for the past eight years without any real prospect of their return to Ukraine. That is not to say, however, that there is any real desire within them for either occupation by Russia or independence outside both Russia and Ukraine. The Donbas has its own traditions and outlook, which are not usually aligned closely with governments in Kyiv or Moscow.

Thus far, other Russian goals have failed spectacularly. Russian missiles have wreaked havoc on cities such as Kharkiv and Chernihiv in a pointless exercise of military power that belies any real concept of a 'special mission' to liberate Ukraine. The Russian army and its allies – Chechens and others – have behaved very badly toward civilians, raping women and massacring innocent civilians and dumping them in mass graves. The Russian president has reportedly decorated the army unit responsible for the massacre in Bucha, near Kyiv.

The enmity of Ukrainians toward Russia will continue for a generation, and there can be no prospect of Ukraine in any form dealing with Vladimir Putin as the leader of Russia. Some world leaders, including President Biden and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau of Canada have concluded that the only plausible explanation of such behaviour is that Russia is seeking to eliminate Ukrainians as an ethnic group, i.e. committing Genocide, a term that is bandied around with alarming frequency in social media.

The other point is that Russia is not a Great Power. It is a military power with nuclear weapons, the subject of which has never been far from official narratives as a sort of last resort if all goes badly or NATO opts to intervene, imposes a no-fly zone, etc. The Russian economy cannot sustain a war on this scale for long. It is already facing shortages, a declining ruble, and the gradual squeezing of the oligarch wealth that sustains Putin and his acolytes in particular. Oligarchs have operated with impunity for two decades, buying property abroad, forming companies within companies to conceal ownership, offshore accounts, control of foreign banks in Cyprus and other places, and controlling the state along with the siloviki favoured by Putin, the most affluent oligarch of all.

To date, Western help to Ukraine has provided more rhetoric than substance, though there are some signs that United States and United Kingdom are starting to send more sophisticated weaponry. The West has clung to a naive

Russia's War Goals in Ukraine

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hope that Russia might be satisfied with some concessions at Ukraine's expense – recognition of the occupied Crimea as part of Russia, recognition of the two breakaway regimes, or perhaps the full occupation of the Donbas from Mariupol to Severodonetsk or Slaviansk. But, there is no obvious end point or exit point for Putin. He, and his regime, are not operating in a rational world in which diplomacy and reason plays a part. The goal is to win and occupy a vast territory and to be recognized as a victorious conqueror that has restored the glory of Russia. It is a return to imperialism in its crudest form.

About the author:

David R. Marples is a Research Analyst in the Contemporary Ukraine Program, Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies and Distinguished Professor of Russian and East European History at the University of Alberta. His books include *Understanding Ukraine and Belarus: A Memoir* (2020), *Ukraine in Conflict* (2017), *'Our Glorious Past': Lukashenka's Belarus and the Great Patriotic War* (2014), *Russia in the 20th Century: The Quest for Stability* (2011), and *Heroes and Villains: Creating National History in Contemporary Ukraine* (2007).