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RUSSIAN AGGRESSION AGAINST UKRAINE – WAR OF SURPRISES

Abstract: *The war between Russia and Ukraine is still ongoing and very difficult to predict when and how will be finished. This war started between Ukraine and Russia (together with pro-Russian separatist forces) in February 2014 following the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity so-called ‘Euromaidan’³, and initially focused on the status of Crimea and the Donbas, internationally recognized as part of Ukraine. Western military analysts believed that the Russian leadership initially thought its ‘special military operation’ would reach the capital and other big Ukrainian cities within 2-3 days, forcing the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky to resign and the Ukraine government to capitulate and which act allows for Russians a puppet, pro-Russian administration to be installed. From the military point of view, the Russian Army made childish mistakes. Russians overestimated their military capabilities, but they faced disorganization, underperformance and huge losses in manpower and military hardware as well. The President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin announced in his speech has attempted to justify Russia’s illegal invasion of Ukraine by constructing a narrative showing a military operation was unavoidable. He stated that the government of Ukraine is a ‘neo-Nazi regime’ and the alleged ‘genocide’ is being carried out by Kyiv in the Ukrainian separatist territories of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Nevertheless, as this research paper is arguing, at least two Russian neo-Nazi groups are fighting for Russian forces against Ukrainian*

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³ The Euromaidan was a wave of demonstrations and civil unrest in Ukraine, which began on 21st November 2013 and ended on 21st February 2014 when the pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich left the country.

Armed Forces, throwing into question Moscow's claims of 'de-nazifying' Ukraine. At the beginning of the war, nobody believed that Ukrainian Armed Forces will be able to resist against Russian invasion. Russian Army faced with determined Ukrainian Army causing several bad surprises for Russians. The war caused many unpleasant surprises for the Putin regime in the political arena as well. Russia against his initial expectation, now should face to more determined, stronger, enlarged NATO, a more unified European Union, and a lot of painful economic sanctions. Russia strategically already lost this war. After the war will be a weakened, discredited, and outcast country.

Keywords: *Russo-Ukrainian war, Putin, Russian aggression, political miscalculation, military surprises, Russian neo-Nazis*

Introduction

It is well known that the war between Russia and Ukraine is the biggest in Europe since the end of World War II finished in 1945, indiscriminately spilling the blood of thousands of Ukrainian soldiers and innocent civilians. This war is also demonstrating that the world is a far more complicated place than leaders thought. The war is still ongoing, and nobody knows when and how will be ended. However, it must be noted this Russo-Ukrainian war started not on 24th February 2022, but almost exactly 8 years earlier on 20th February 2014, when Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, President of the Russian Federation decided to annex Crimea and occupy the Donbas.

It is obvious, every war brings surprises, but the current war of Russia against Ukraine is full of bad surprises for Russia. From a politico-strategic point of view, Russia already lost this war. In the international political arena, Russia lost its reputation and became an isolated country. Militarily, Putin's army after gaining the Luhansk oblast could occupy the Donetsk oblast as well but the main political goals of the aggression such as the regime change in Kyiv, taking under control a large part of Ukraine, interdiction of NATO enlargement, and disintegration of EU and NATO already are not feasible or cannot be met. Putin, because of his megalomania, did almost the same miscalculation as Saddam Hussein with the invasion of Kuwait concerning the reactions from Western countries, especially from the US⁴.

In fact, against Putin's will, the EU and NATO became more unified and stronger even though Mr Orbán, PM of Hungary, permanently try to block sanctions against Russian aggression and Ukraine got EU membership

⁴ S. T. Hosmer, *Why the Iraqi Resistance to the Coalition Invasion Was So Weak*, Santa Monica 2007, pp. 20-21.

candidate status. Moreover, despite the billions of petrol dollars spent, the image of the Russian Army as a modern high-tech army is broken forever. Russian Army already suffered heavy and sensitive losses in manpower and military hardware as well.

Of course, both sides are hiding the real figures. Both Russian and Ukrainian sources are widely considered to inflate casualty numbers in opposing forces while downplaying their losses for the sake of morale. Both sides also tend to be quieter about their military fatalities, and the number of Russian deaths is a closely guarded secret. Moscow in March 2022 placed the death toll at 1.351, but even then, there was reason to believe it was far higher.

The British estimate in April put the number around 15.000⁵ – more than were killed in the Soviet Union’s nine-year war in Afghanistan – while other estimates project that as many as 40.000 have been injured⁶.

Nevertheless, the future of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) is in doubt. Russia’s large-scale invasion of Ukraine in clear violation of the OSCE’s commitments to territorial integrity, sovereignty, and human rights, has put unprecedented strain on the world’s largest regional security organization, raising questions about its viability as a forum for engagement between Russia and the West⁷.

As well known, the food price increases due to the Russia-Ukraine war are jeopardizing food security around the world. According to the FAO data estimated around 27,3 million people are facing acute food insecurity between March and May 2022. This number is projected to increase to an unprecedented 38,3 million between June and August 2022 if humanitarian interventions are not scaled up⁸.

Furthermore, in the international arena, one of the geopolitical consequences of the invasion that have the potential to severely degrade Russia’s international reputation and position. At the NATO summit in Madrid, allied leaders agreed to invite Finland and Sweden to join the alliance which means both countries will be soon NATO members. On 5th July 2022, a week after the Madrid Summit, Finland and Sweden completed accession talks at NATO Headquarters in Brussels. Both countries formally confirmed their

⁵ A. Patil, *Roughly 15,000 Russian troops have died since start of war, UK estimates*, <<https://www.sanjuandailystar.com/post/roughly-15-000-russian-troops-have-died-since-start-of-war-uk-estimates>> (26.07.2022).

⁶ P. D. Shinkman, *Russian Troops in Ukraine Face ‘Extraordinary’ Casualty Rates: U.K. Intelligence*. <<https://www.usnews.com/news/world-report/articles/2022-06-22/russian-troops-in-ukraine-face-extraordinary-casualty-rates-u-k-intelligence>> (26.07.2022).

⁷ *Can the OSCE Survive the Ukraine War?*, <<https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/eastern-europe/ukraine/can-osce-survive-ukraine-war>> (26.07.2022).

⁸ *FAO/ GIEWS: Special Alert No. 349: West Africa - Sahel, 16 May 2022*, <<https://reliefweb.int/report/world/faogiews-special-alert-no-349-west-africa-sahel-16-may-2022>> (27.07.2022).

willingness and ability to meet the political, legal, and military obligations and commitments of NATO membership⁹.

Moreover, Denmark, after having a referendum, has joined the EU's defence policy. Some other European countries traditionally having and exercising the principle of neutrality such as Ireland, Austria, Malta, and Switzerland are overhauling their defence policies because public opinions are shifting to the favour of NATO. Hence, the war against Ukraine and indirectly against the whole democratic West and civilized world, resulted in completely inverse outcomes for Putin.

Putin has argued that one of the main reasons for the war is the 'Nazi government' in Kyiv, and the genocide of Russians in the Donbas¹⁰. Not so many believe Putin's justification. Contrary, following the data of the Pew Research Centre, confidence in Putin reaches a 20-year low in most countries. Moreover, consistent with trends for Russian favourability, majorities in almost every country surveyed express little confidence in Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Across 18 nations, a median of 90% say they do not have confidence in Putin to do the right thing in world affairs, and nearly eight-in-ten (78%) express no confidence at all in Putin¹¹.

As this essay goes to print, the war is still raging, and it is difficult to draw dawn lessons learned from the war's events. However, it is already clear, Russia experienced several bad surprises in this war. The current paper will cover the question of the real *casus belli* of entering the war on Ukraine and in the second part of the article, the surprises for the Russian Army will be analysed.

What was Putin's real *casus belli*?

On 24th February, Russian dictator Vladimir Putin sparked one of the biggest security crises in Europe since World War II by invading Ukraine, with barrages of missiles and artillery accompanying troops as they entered the country from multiple directions. However, the scale and dimensions of the aggression were a big surprise for many specialists. Even just a day before the

⁹ *NATO Allies sign Accession Protocols for Finland and Sweden*, <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_197763.htm> (29.07.2022).

¹⁰ *Address by the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin on 24 February 2022*, <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>> (23.07.2022).

¹¹ R. Wake, J. Fetterwolf, M. Fagand, S. Gubbala, *Ratings for Russia drop to record lows*, <<https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2022/06/22/ratings-for-russia-drop-to-record-lows/>> (26.07.2022).

aggression, he announced the withdrawal of Russian troops from the border of Ukraine¹².

Of course, he was laying, just he did as Saddam Hussein¹³ on the eve of the invasion of Kuwait. The Invasion of Ukraine was not the first time when Putin's led Russia had invaded the sovereign territory of another country (Georgia's 2008, and 2014 assaults on Crimea and Donbas).

Vladimir Putin on 24th February 2022 gave the order to conduct a so-called 'Special Military Operation' for Ukraine¹⁴. In his speech delivered the same day, he was reasoning the war by mentioning three main reasons: the de-Nazification of the Kyiv regime, the genocide of Russians in the Donbas and an act of self-defence against NATO expansion¹⁵.

Of course, for someone who does not know Putin's past, his belief in Bolshevism and the resurrection of Stalin's Soviet Union, all of this is completely bizarre and illogical.

So, who Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin is? He was born in 1952 in Saint Petersburg, he is a former KGB agent who was stationed in East Germany in Dresden when the Soviet Union collapsed. His grandfather was a cook, who was cooking for Lenin and Stalin as well. His father was a member of the NKVD unit responsible for sabotage actions during World War II.

Putin, in 1990 retired from active KGB service with the rank of lieutenant colonel and returned to St. Petersburg. Soon afterwards Putin became an adviser to Sobchak, the mayor of St. Petersburg. After winning Sobchak's confidence and becoming known for his ability to get things done and in 1994 he got the post of first deputy mayor.

In 1992, Putin was investigated for a deal he oversaw while an official in the mayor's office. The deal involved the export of \$100m worth of raw materials in exchange for food for the citizens of St. Petersburg. The materials were exported, but the food never arrived.

As an outcome of his action in 1992 – when there was no food at all – the city of St. Petersburg was left with nothing. So, conspiracy, antihumanism and brutality always were part of his personality.

¹² S. Roy, *Russia announces withdrawal of troops from Ukraine borders: what this means*, <<https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/russia-troops-withdrawal-ukraine-border-explained-7776444/>> (26.07.2022).

¹³ *This Day in History August 02*, <<https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/iraq-invades-kuwait>> (26.06.2022).

¹⁴ *Vladimir Putin's Televised Address on Ukraine*, <<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-02-24/full-transcript-vladimir-putin-s-televised-address-to-russia-on-ukraine-feb-24>> (26.06.2022).

¹⁵ *Obrashcheniye Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii, Putin soobshchil rossiyanam o nachale voyennoy operatsii na Ukraine*, <<https://www.interfax.ru/russia/824020>> (27.06.2022).

Putin had business not only with ‘raw materials for foods’, but acquired with his former KGB man and the FSB (The Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation¹⁶) cronies, the so-called ‘Siloviks’,¹⁷ all the trade and industry of St. Petersburg¹⁸. Not accidentally, they called themselves between each other’s ‘chekists’¹⁹.

Putin moved on from the oil for food scandal, rising through the ranks and being elected president in 2000, after serving in the role for several months following the resignation of Boris Yeltsin. He was supposed to be loyal to the ‘Family’, i.e. Yeltsin and his men, but most importantly, the democracy the Yeltsin government established. It was because before being appointed as a prime minister in 2002, and then elected as president soon, he pretended to be obedient to Yeltsin and his administration. No one knew that Putin had already worked with his former cronies and intended to eliminate all the democratic results of the Yeltsin government. Putin later cut out Yeltsin’s oligarchs and replaced them with his cronies, the FSB, the next oligarch of Putin to control the entire Russian economy. It served their enrichment on one hand, but to acquire a huge amount of funds to undermine Western countries in many ways. For example, unleashing wars in the neighbouring countries, annexing them to Russia, also to influence the political life of Western countries, such as in the presidential election in 2006 in the United States, misleading corrupt Western politicians, and businessmen, and also, used social media to achieve this goal. As a result, Russia has interlaced all Western society, as a net²⁰.

In 1996 Putin moved to Moscow, where he joined the presidential staff as deputy to Pavel Borodin, the Kremlin’s chief administrator. Putin grew close to fellow Leningrader Anatoly Chubais and moved up to administrative positions. In July 1998 President Boris Yeltsin designated Vladimir Putin as the director of the Federal Security Service, and shortly thereafter he became secretary of the influential Security Council. Yeltsin, who was searching for an heir to assume his mantle, appointed Putin prime minister in 1999.

¹⁶ The principal security agency of Russia and the main successor agency to the Soviet Union's KGB. See: E. Schneider, *The Russian Federal Security Service under President Putin*, [in:] S. White (ed.), *Politics and the Ruling Group in Putin's Russia*, London 2008, pp. 42-62.

¹⁷ J. Langton, *Meet Russia's "Siloviki" – Putin internal circle*, <<https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/europe/2022/03/15/meet-russias-siloviki-putins-inner-circle/>> (27.07.2022).

¹⁸ C. Belton, *Putin's people – How the KGB Took Back Russia and Then Took the West*, London 2020, pp. 91-92.

¹⁹ K. Wilson, *Putin the Chekist: a sacred calling*, <<https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/putin-the-chekist-a-sacred-calling/>> (25.07.2022).

²⁰ C. Belton, *op. cit.*, pp. 178-467.

In 2005 he said: “The demise of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century”²¹. Even so, Putin the president of the aggressor country, at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum claimed that the Soviet Union is historically Russian territory²². Moreover, Putin made clear that he does not accept Europe's post-Cold War security architecture anymore²³.

So finally what does Putin want? Logically as a brainwashed Soviet-Stalinist fan, and as an individual with a damaged personality chasing the nightmare of the great Soviet Union, he definitively wants to re-establish the former Soviet Union by using aggression, now under the Russian flag.

With regard the Putin's causes belli so-called ‘de-Nazification of the Kyiv regime’, it is easy to refute it. Unlike in many countries, there is not a single neo-Nazi in the current Ukrainian parliament. De facto the far rights (Party Svoboda) received only 2% of the vote in Ukraine's 2019 parliamentary elections far less than in most of Europe, and they have no sit in the Parliament.

At the same time, the ‘Nazis’ like to talk about the Azov battalion, which was defending Mariupol, in which there were indeed militants with neo-Nazi views. After the disbandment of the battalion and the integration of its forces into the Ukrainian army, they were expelled from the army, and the perpetrators of various war crimes were brought to court. It is also true that the Azov battalion is officially part of the Ukrainian Defence Forces, but the fact that there is a battalion of 1.000 people in the 250.000-strong Ukrainian army, some of whose members are far-right, does not mean that the entire state is Nazi.

Ukraine's famed Azov Regiment was indeed formed out of a right-wing militia called the Azov Battalion that gained renown in the early days of the war. The group's leaders and founders openly espoused xenophobic and anti-immigrant rhetoric. Its logos bore a close resemblance to some used by Nazi units during World War II.

The Azov battalion was incorporated into Ukraine's National Guard, Azov has toned down extremist rhetoric but retained a reputation as a formidable fighting unit.

Another completely mind-blowing element of this is ‘de-Nazification’, that fact the leader of the ‘Nazi clique’ would be the president of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, who was born in Eastern Ukraine into a Russian-

²¹J. Nundy, *Decoder: What was the Soviet Union? Why does Putin miss it?*, <<https://news-decoder.com/decoder-what-was-the-soviet-union-why-does-putin-miss-it/>> (26.07.2022).

²² K. Tyshchenko, *Putin considers entire Soviet Union to be historical Russian territory*, <<https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2022/06/17/7353151/>> (27.06.2022).

²³ Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, *Russia's Proposal to Redraw European Security 'Unacceptable,' U.S. Says*, <<https://www.rferl.org/a/nato-russia-security-guarantees/31614168.html>> (27.06.2022).

speaking Jewish family. One-half of the Zelensky family perished in the Holocaust, and the other half fought against the Germans as soldiers of the Red Army.

What has received less coverage is the Putin regime's record of collaboration with far-right extremists. Even as Russian diplomats condemned 'fascists' in the Baltic states and Kremlin propagandists railed against imaginary 'Ukronazis' in power in Kyiv, the Russian state was cultivating its own homegrown Nazis, especially two groups namely the 'Nashi' or 'Ours'²⁴ (according to an estimate from the Russian Interior Ministry press service, by 2007 the number of Nashi numbered over 100.000) and the *Russkii Obraz* ('Russian Image', or 'RO' for short) which was boosted by the Putin's regime policy of so-called 'managed nationalism' and used against opponents of authoritarianism²⁵.

A lot of Russian neo-Nazis are fighting in the territory of Ukraine, like Alesei Michakov who openly determined himself as a neo-Nazi. It is worth mentioning the group called 'Russian Imperial Movement', which is a Russian ultranationalist, white supremacist, far-right paramilitary organization which operates out of Russia, has several thousand members and was founded by Stanislav Vorobyev in 2015²⁶.

According to a confidential report by Germany's Federal Intelligence Service, which was obtained by *Der Spiegel* and excerpted on 22nd May 2022, numerous Russian right-wing extremists and neo-Nazis are fighting in Ukraine²⁷.

Finally, we could argue that at least two neo-Nazi groups are fighting for Russian forces in Ukraine, throwing into question Moscow's claims of 'denazifying' Ukraine.

Putin has also accused Ukraine of committing genocide against ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine, particularly in the Donbas region, where Kremlin-backed rebels have been fighting with Ukrainian forces since 2014.

In contrast, the reality is that the war in eastern Ukraine, which broke out in 2014, had a total of 14.000 deaths by 2021, of which more than ten thousand were

²⁴ O. Wales, *Skinheads and Nashi: What are the reasons for the rise of nationalism amongst Russian youth in the post-Soviet period?*, "SLOVO", 2016, Vol. 28, No. 2, p. 111.

²⁵ R. Horvath, *Putin's Fascists. Russkii Obraz and the Politics of Managed Nationalism in Russia*, Sydney 2021, pp. 44-45.

²⁶ Center for International Security and Cooperation, *Russian Imperial Movement*, <<https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/russian-imperial-movement>> (27.07.2022).

²⁷ M. Eckel, *Who Are the Neo-Nazis Fighting for Russia in Ukraine?*, <<https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-neo-nazis-fighting-ukraine/31871760.html>> (17.07.2022).

soldiers. According to UN data, 3.393 civilians lost their lives during this period, most of them, 3.038, died in 2014-2015, during the months of active war²⁸.

There were 26 civilian victims of the conflict in 2020 and 18 in 2021, but real military actions, such as shelling, killed ‘only’ seven people last year. There were victims on both sides, although there were more dead and wounded among the separatists. Although the death of all civilians is a crime, the actions of the Ukrainian forces can hardly be called genocide. Among the civilian victims are the 298 people who lost their lives when separatist forces shot down a Malaysia Airlines flight departing from Amsterdam on 17th July 2014, probably by mistake. So, we could conclude there was no so-called ‘Russian genocide’.

The third element of Putin’s strange war justification was an act of self-defence against NATO expansion, in other words, Moscow wanted to prevent Ukraine from joining NATO and the former Soviet republic from becoming a staging ground for the North Atlantic military alliance against Russia.

Ukraine wanted to get closer to NATO, and even though the intention to join NATO and the EU was recorded in the Ukrainian constitution, in reality, de facto there was no chance that the accession would take place in the foreseeable future because of the ongoing war with Russia in the Donbas.

Although many NATO weapons and experts have indeed appeared in the country in recent years, this mainly took place after 2014, when Moscow annexed Crimea, part of Ukraine, and supported the separatist armed forces in eastern Ukraine. It is also important that Ukrainian society was strongly opposed to NATO membership before 2014 and turned towards the West only after the outbreak of the conflict²⁹.

However, two contradictions emerge from Putin’s latest *casus belli*. First, the timing of Russia’s invasion was arbitrary, Putin himself decided when the Russian army will attack Ukraine, and consequently, there was no imminent threat. The absence of anything on the order of a ‘Russian 9/11’ led some analysts to speculate that Russia would create a false flag attack, but it was not necessary for Putin. De facto, in January there were zero ceasefire violations in the Donbas, and there was no provocation that Putin could point to as the catalyst for urgent military action.

Furthermore, from Putin’s point of view, there is another real reason for invading Ukraine, besides the rebuilding of the Soviet Empire, the natural gas business.

28 UN OHCHR, *Conflict-related civilian casualties in Ukraine*, 27.01.2022, p. 3, <https://ukraine.un.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/Conflict-related%20civilian%20casualties%20as%20of%2031%20December%202021%20%28rev%2027%20January%202022%29%20corr%20EN_0.pdf> (27.07.2022).

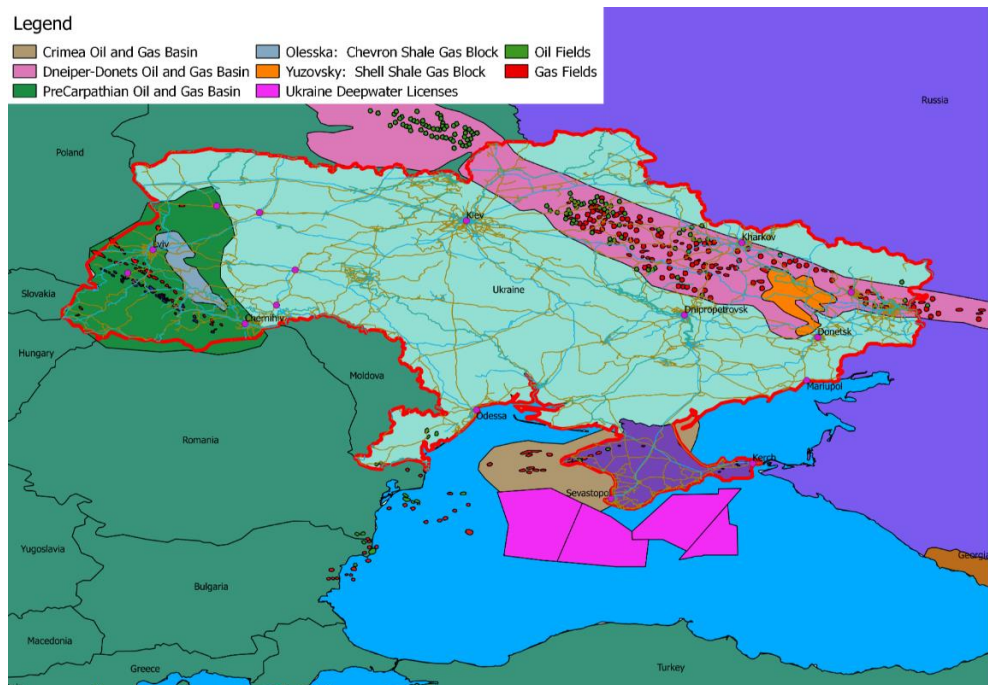
29 J. Ray, N. Esipova, *Before Crisis, Ukrainians More Likely to See NATO as a Threat. West and Central Ukraine warmer toward NATO than East*, <<https://news.gallup.com/poll/167927/crisis-ukrainians-likely-nato-threat.aspx>> (27.06.2022).

Ukraine today holds the second biggest known gas reserves in Europe. As of late 2019, known Ukrainian reserves amounted to 1.09 trillion cubic meters of natural gas, second only to Norway’s known resources of 1.53 trillion cubic meters. Up to now, these enormous energy reserves of energy remain largely not yet exploited or neither used. One of the reasons for this underutilization is the war started in 2014.

It is well known that Shell and Chevron were already contracted with the Ukrainian government but because of the war³⁰, they stepped back.

Today, Ukraine has a low annual reserve usage rate of about 2 per cent. Moreover, more active exploration may yield previously undiscovered gas fields, which would further increase the overall volume of Ukraine’s deposits (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Ukraine’s gas reserves.



Source: The Energy Consulting Group, *Map detailing the largely untapped gas and oil fields in Ukraine (2015)*, <https://www.reddit.com/r/MapPorn/comments/t22zkc/map_detailing_the_largely_untapped_gas_and_oil/> (27.06.2022).

³⁰ P. Polityuk, R. Balmforth, *Ukraine signs \$10 billion shale gas deal with Chevron*, <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-chevron-idUSBRE9A40ML20131105>> (26.06.2022).

If Ukraine will be able to explore and use this gas reserve, it could lead to an enormous income for the Ukrainian government because Europeans could buy instead of Russian gas the Ukrainian gas, even maybe at a cheaper price. It is not just about the money pouring into the country but also the share European gas market, less portion for Russian GAZPROM, and less income for Putin's Russia. In this case, Ukraine could be a prosperous, democratic country, potentially having EU membership and a vision for NATO membership as well.

For autocrat Putin, who grew to maturity in the Soviet era, who was a servant of the Communist state, who has an opinion that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a tragedy, who re-created the cult of Stalin, over glorification of the USSR's role in the Second World War³¹, created of a cult of fear, militarism, restricted on free speech and free association and has sought to establish Russia as a counterweight to the liberal Western order, a potentially prosperous and democratic Ukraine was intolerable.

For Putin, real democracy is disgusting and unbearable and Ukraine after two revolutions, the Orange Revolution in 2004, and the 'Revolution of Dignity' in 2014 was on the way to being a democratic and Russia-dependent country. In 2004, after the Orange Revolution Russia did not use its army against Ukraine but used other instruments of influence to help his protégé, Viktor Yanukovich, narrowly win the Ukrainian presidency six years later. The problem was for Putin that Yanukovich was making limbo between Russia and the West keeping a connection with both sides. In November 2013, Putin forced the president of Ukraine to choose between membership in Russia's Eurasian Economic Union and the European Union³² association agreement and Yanukovich was in favour of choosing Russia.

This decision triggered mass demonstrations in several cities of Ukraine, especially in the western and central parts of the country. This series of events from November 2013 and February 2014, become known as the Euro Mайдan or 'Revolution of Dignity'.

The mass demonstrations, clashes with police and street protests lasted several weeks, punctuated tragically by the killing of dozens of peaceful protestors by the government. The outcome was the collapse of the pro-Russian government and Yanukovich's flight to Russia in February 2014, and a new pro-Western government taking power in Kyiv. Putin had lost his influence over Ukraine for the second time in a decade (the first time in 2003), again

³¹ F. Georgesco, *The Russian myth of the Great Patriotic War and its manipulations*, <https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2022/05/03/the-russian-myth-of-the-great-patriotic-war-and-its-manipulations_5982273_4.html> (30.06.2022).

³² The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU or EEU) is an economic union of some post-Soviet states located in Eurasia created by Russia in 2014. Member states are as follows: Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia.

because of democratic regime change. Putin became extremely furious, and this time decided to use armed forces against Ukraine, according to his rhetoric to punish the alleged U.S.-backed, neo-Nazi regime in Kyiv.

Russian armed forces seized Crimea; Moscow later annexed the Ukrainian peninsula. Putin also provided money, equipment, and soldiers to back separatists in the Donbas, fuelling a bloody eight-year war in Donbas that claimed the lives of approximately fourteen-thousand people³³. After invading – not before – Putin amped up his criticisms of NATO expansion to justify his belligerent actions.

Bad surprises for Russia

The Russia-Ukraine crisis has also brought about many surprises. Putin, like Adolf Hitler before World War II³⁴, believed the West is weak, and divided and liberalism is obsolete, the democracy outlived its purpose³⁵. He probably assumed that, like the annexation of Crimea and the war provoked by Russians in the Don Basin, the US and Western democracies would react weakly and accept the imminent military victory and the Zelensky government change by a pro-Russian regime because of the EU's oil and gas dependence. Putin miscalculated completely the political reactions of the civilized world.

The first miscalculation and extremely bad surprise for Putin were that the large-scale aggression against Ukraine has united Europe rather than divided it. The United Kingdom and Poland called for support from the European Union and like-minded nations, and then, after some reluctance, Germany joined the countries supporting Ukraine.

In fact, against Putin's will, the EU and NATO became more unified and stronger. It has happened even though Mr Viktor Orbán, the recently re-elected Prime Minister of Hungary, notoriously try to block all European Union's sanctions against Russia punishing Putin's aggression. Despite Orbán's subversive, troublemaker, disruptive, and Putin-supporting policy, the European Union has already accepted six sanctions packages against Russia.

³³ The overall number of confirmed deaths in the so-called War in Donbas, which started on 6th April 2014, was estimated at 14.200–14.400 through 31st December 2021, including non-combat military deaths. Most of the deaths took place in the first two years of the war between 2014 and 2015 when major combat took place before the Minsk Agreements. See: UN OHCR, *Conflict-related civilian casualties in Ukraine...*

³⁴ *Appeasement before WWII*, <[https://www.historycrunch.com/appeasement-before-world-war-ii.html#/>](https://www.historycrunch.com/appeasement-before-world-war-ii.html#/) (27.06.2022).

³⁵ J. Marcus, *Putin: Russian president says liberalism 'obsolete'*, <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-48795764>> (27.06.2022).

Concerning Ukraine's EU membership, Putin failed as well. It has happened that, on 17th June 2022, the EU Commission officially announced its recommendation to grant Ukraine EU candidate status.

Moreover, on 23rd June 2022, the European Parliament adopted a resolution calling for the immediate granting of candidate status for EU membership to Ukraine and Moldova³⁶. On the same day, the European Council granted Ukraine the status of a candidate for accession to the EU, and finally, Ukraine got the EU's membership candidate status³⁷.

Putin-led Russia failed to achieve what was most probably its main political objective: to overthrow the Kyiv government in a blitzkrieg military operation. The President of Ukraine remained in his place, and he is supported by the Ukrainian population. The astonishing personal bravery and fearless leadership of Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky, has taken the world by surprise and he has won the admiration of the European and American public and even a lot of experienced politicians in different countries.

His courage does not leave but stays in the Ukrainian capital Kyiv, with his cabinet under siege by Putin's forces, was a real game-changer and encouraging factor for the people of Ukraine. He became a symbol of resistance and national identity and the determined element of the world's view of the conflict³⁸.

In the military dimension, the Russian Army was surprised by the determination of the Ukrainians. The Russians have forgotten the fact that the soldiers of the Ukrainian Armed Forces are fighting for their national survival, their homeland, and their way of life, and they have the home-field advantage, knowing the terrain and communities. Moreover, the Ukrainian Army is different from the army in 2014.

In 2014, Chief of the General Staff General Viktor Muzhenko described the situation as "an army literally in ruins, Russian generals at the head of Ukrainian Armed Forces and security agencies, total demoralization"³⁹. In 2016, Ukraine has started a comprehensive reform of the armed forces having an ambitious goal, to meet NATO standards by 2020. This goal was not achieved but the Ukrainian Army got Western-type training from American Canadian and British trainers, new equipment, and new leaders.

³⁶ European Parliament, *Grant EU candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova without delay*, <<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20220616IPR33216/grant-eu-candidate-status-to-ukraine-and-moldova-without-delay-meps-demand>> (27.06.2022).

³⁷ *Ukraine has officially received the status of a candidate for EU membership*, <<https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/news/2022/06/23/7141922>> (27.06.2022).

³⁸ *The courage of Ukraine's unlikely wartime leader*, <<https://www.ft.com/content/3e637a26-b608-4f45-9501-bd64753480c9>> (27.06.2022).

³⁹ V. Torba, *Armiya. Voina. Ekzamen. Interview with general Viktor Muzhenko*, <<https://day.kyiv.ua/ru/article/podrobnosti/armiya-voina-ekzamen>> (12.07.2022).

Of course, Russian planners wanted to blind the Ukrainian command and control system, but they failed. From the very beginning of the war, the United States provided satellite communication and an internet connection to Ukraine. This was a reasonable way for the Russian offensive cyber operations and electronic warfare failed to block Ukrainian command and control efforts, and critical governmental infrastructures and deliver Russian propaganda to the Ukrainian population. Russian Army was completely not prepared for such a situation.

Moreover, the United States and the United Kingdom provided vital intelligence data for Ukrainians which helped on the ground to resist successfully against Russian military machinery. Most probably, on 14th April 2022, American intelligence assisted in to sink of the Russian flagship “Moskva”⁴⁰.

Before the Russian Army aggression started a lot of observers believed that due to Russian absolute overwhelming military combat power, Ukraine will be defeated within days. For example, with regard the air power, Russian Airforce had a clear advantage in the air, with the combat aircraft it had moved near the border outnumbering Ukraine's air force by more than three to one. Logically, most military analysts predicted that Russia would quickly gain air superiority, but it has not happened. The Russian air force failed to achieve air superiority against the Ukrainian air defence system which is still limiting the Russian Airforce’s ability to manoeuvre. Moreover, the Russians lost a significant quantity of UAVs as well.

The Russian ground forces suffered unexpected heavy losses. According to independent sources, almost 900 Russian tanks have been destroyed (this number could significantly higher because this number contains only documented losses)⁴¹. These heavy losses could be explained by the fantastic effectiveness of the Western-made anti-tank weapons such as the US-made FGM-148 Javelin and the advanced tactics of the Ukrainian Army. According to some sources, already by 4th March 2022, almost 300 armoured vehicles were destroyed by Javelins⁴².

Moreover, despite the billions of petrol dollars spent, the image of the Russian Army as a modern high-tech army is broken forever. The huge losses in military hardware and the extremely big number of technical failures could influence the Russian arms trade negatively.

⁴⁰ K. Dilanian, C. Kube, C. E. Lee, *U.S. intel helped Ukraine sink Russian flagship Moskva, officials say*, <<https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/us-intel-helped-ukraine-sink-russian-flagship-moskva-officials-say-rcna27559>> (30.06.2022).

⁴¹ S. Mitzer, J. Oliemans, *Attack On Europe: Documenting Russian Equipment Losses During The 2022 Russian Invasion of Ukraine*, <<https://www.oryxspioenkop.com/2022/02/attack-on-europe-documenting-equipment.html>> (6.06.2022).

⁴² D. Achom, *300 Shots Fired, 280 Russian Tanks Gone: US Missiles in Ukrainian Hands*, <<https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/how-small-ukraine-force-is-killing-russian-tanks-with-us-javelin-missiles-2803289>> (17.07.2022).

Putin also assumed that he would overrun Ukraine in three days, and we see that more than several months have passed since then. With this, he weakened himself not only in Russian mass support, but he weakened his image as a big strategist and now he is leading to the strategic collapse of Russia.

Russia has already lost it since it was never interested in being dragged into a long-standing conflict without a clear winner. The costs of the war are enormous for the Russian regime and society and might potentially lead to an even higher price to pay in the future. After adopting the sixth package of sanctions, the EU is currently preparing the next package of sanctions. In this package of sanctions, the European Union will target Russian gold export⁴³, an embargo on technologies that can still be supplied to Russia and used by Russia in its industry, on maritime supplies of oil and petroleum products from Russia while seeking to ‘close exit routes’ that circumvent its previous packages too⁴⁴.

Even Switzerland, a non-EU member, who stayed neutral in the First and Second World War and did lucrative business with Nazi Germany, even do was not a member of the UN until 2002⁴⁵, has joined the party and taken strong action with full EU-style sanctions against Russia and Russian oligarchs trying to hide their fortunes in Swiss bank accounts.

Sanctions after sanctions it is visible that the EU and US are cutting not just political but economic links as well. This means it is a real cut-down momentum for Western relations with Vladimir Putin, as the West is finally willing to fully isolate Russia on the international stage.

The war between Russia and Ukraine became a war which cannot win by Putin in a meaningful sense.

How it is possible that Russia cannot win this war? The Russian armed forces are the unquestioned second-strongest military power in the world. Russia has the world's largest tank fleet, the second largest aircraft fleet behind the US, and the third largest submarine fleet behind the US and China⁴⁶. Firstly, it is well known, that not always the bigger one wins the war, for example, Afghanistan, or Vietnam.

Secondly, since Putin came to power in 1999, the use of the Russian armed forces in war has taken place in the so-called Second Chechen War and the

⁴³ A. Brozowski, *A preview of EU's seventh sanctions package on Russia, to be agreed by next week*, <<https://www.euractiv.com/section/europe-s-east/news/a-preview-of-eus-seventh-sanctions-package-on-russia-to-be-agreed-by-next-week/>> (18.07.2022).

⁴⁴ *British man captured by separatists in Donetsk dies*, <<https://www.dw.com/en/ukraine-british-man-held-by-russia-backed-separatists-dies-as-it-happened/a-62479923>> (17.07.2022).

⁴⁵ *Switzerland in the United Nations*, <<https://www.aplusforpeace.ch/switzerland-united-nations/>> (17.07.2022).

⁴⁶ *The world's 20 strongest militaries*, <<https://www.businessinsider.in/defense/ranked-the-worlds-20-strongest-militaries/slidelist/51930339.cms#slideid=51930374>> (18.07.2022).

creation of the puppet states of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, created to the detriment of independent Georgia. In parallel, Russia, after a period of partial suspension of implementation, fully withdrew from the implementation of the obligations of the CFE Convention in 2015⁴⁷. There are also opinions that already by 2003, Vladimir Putin had built a system that had almost all the characteristics of a dictatorship⁴⁸.

The new use of Russian armed forces took place during the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, and then direct Russian military intervention was necessary on the side of the two separatist puppet states created in Eastern Ukraine, the ‘Luhansk People's Republic’ and the ‘Donetsk People's Republic’. Moreover, the Russian intervention in Syria started in 2015, successfully saving the Assad regime but already presented Russian brutality and ruthlessness by killing thousands of innocent civilians. Also, after the elimination of the independence of Belarus, Russia’s intervention saved the pro-Russian leadership in Kazakhstan in January 2022.

Yes, Putin's foreign military successes in different countries but those achievements were all achieved by using small units of elite forces, mercenaries (for example the Wagner group which has been used in Syria, Mali, Libya, Sudan, Madagascar, Mozambique and Central African Republic, Belarus, Nagorno Karabakh and currently in Ukraine as well) and local militia groups alongside Russian air power.

Above mentioned engagements were always against weaker forces but now they should face an army having Western training and fantastic motivation for fighting.

Unfortunately, in every case in the past, Putin’s Russia moved swiftly and ruthlessly in ways the civilized Western countries were unable to replay or counterbalance Russian aggressive actions except impose sanctions but without any measurable success. Practically, Putin created new facts on the ground, and he believed that Western democratic countries will always accept his political actions.

In the large-scale war that started on 24th February, the president of Russia tried the same again on the grandest possible scale in Ukraine, he wish to achieve his goals, including the governmental change, within about 72 hours in a country having 41 million people occupying the second biggest land area in the European continent⁴⁹. It was an astonishing and reckless gamble and it

⁴⁷ R. Wicker, *Russia's withdrawal from CFE Treaty work a 'dangerous move'*, <<https://www.osce.org/pa/144946>> (17.07.2022).

⁴⁸ C. J. Friedrich, Z. Brzezinski, *The General Characteristics of Totalitarian Dictatorship*, [In:] *Comparative Government*, ed. by J. Blondel, London 1995, pp. 189-194.

⁴⁹ There are different estimations of population. The latest official census was held in 2001, and the population of Ukraine was around 48,5 million. For 2021 (before the war) the “Trading Economics” data has been accepted. Trade Economics, *Ukrainian population*, <<https://tradingeconomics.com/ukraine/population>> (20.07.2022).

failed already in the first week of the invasion, and this failure of ‘blitzkrieg’ represented an extremely bad operational surprise for the Russian Army.

After the first bad surprise arrived the second military failure because the Russian Army was unable to occupy Kyiv and Kharkiv by using military operational manoeuvres.

The performance of the Russian Armed Forces was very poor. The Russians had a lot of problems concerning the leadership, logistics, and tactical unpreparedness against an army conducting dynamic defence and some even asymmetric methods of warfare.

Moreover, it turned out that Ukraine is too big of a bite, and the Russian Army cannot dominate such a big country.

Then, the frustrated Russians moved to the new plan. They give up on Kyiv, and Kharkiv and regrouped the forces into the Donbas. De facto, because of the frontline configuration, Russians have advantages and the force ratio also against Ukrainians, especially in terms of artillery. With the reserves coming from Russia, even if they could take over not just Luhansk but Donetsk regions, will be a pyrrhic victory for Putin’s regime.

From a strategic point of view, this war became a war of attrition. From the four strategic directions of attack, the Ukrainian Armed Forces managed to eliminate the threat in two directions (Kyiv and Kharkiv), in Southern Ukraine the situation is frozen, and in Eastern Ukraine, the Ukrainians are losing territory.

Nevertheless, Putin will declare a military victory after taking over the Donbas, in his rhetoric ‘liberation of Luhansk and Donetsk peoples republics’, the Russian president will have only a choice between different types of defeat. Moreover, even if the Russians Armed Forces will be able to take under control the whole territory of the Donbas and the complete territory of Southern Ukraine, which is still far the case, they should have to hold those territories for the indefinite future in the face of several million Ukrainians who don't want them there.

On the southern front, Ukrainians had a promising success, taking back Snake Island, which has strategic importance in the Western part of the Black Sea⁵⁰. The Russian retreat from Snake Island is a strategic win for Ukraine and a boost for morale as resources run low in the east, where Russia is trying to take more territory. Moreover, it also means, the storm against Odessa is not feasible anymore.

Meanwhile, the Ukrainian control over Snake Island gives Ukrainian Joint Forcers a real chance to disrupt Russian shipping lanes in the Black Sea and weaken Russia's hold on southern Ukrainian land too.

⁵⁰ E. Fang. *Ukrainian invasion explained, Ukraine wins back control over Snake Island*, <<https://www.npr.org/2022/06/30/1108855805/russia-withdraws-snake-island-ukraine>> (20.07.2022).

One of the unbelievable surprises for the Russian navy was the capacity of Ukrainian Joint Forces to strike the navy ships at Berdyansk port which attack could limit Russia's ability to supply its forces fighting in the Donbas and could be a major logistical percussio for the Russian Army⁵¹.

Most probably the war will go on in summer and in the autumn as well. Considering the promised Western weapons and ongoing training in Poland, and the United Kingdom, the Ukrainian Army will possibly strike back and at least try to take back some occupied territory from the Russians⁵².

If the battle reaches an autumn stalemate, he will have precious little to show for so much loss and pain. If the military momentum shifts and his forces get pushed back, even more so.

Ukraine is sacrificing a lot in manpower and infrastructure as well. From the Ukrainian point of view, not collapsing at the very beginning of the invasion, is already a moral victory.

It has been believed that the Ukrainian Army will be outmatched early in Russia's invasion. Meanwhile, should be noted that the fact of not losing the war itself is still far from a victory for Ukraine. The difference between expectations and the surprising resilience of Ukraine's military makes it easy to misinterpret the current situation in Ukraine's favour. Ukraine and its army are in far worse shape than commonly believed and need, and will continue to need, a staggering amount of aid and support to win.

Conclusions

The war between Russia and Ukraine reminded Europeans and the entire civilized world again that freedom is not free and not cheap. The freedom requires an autonomous defence, military, and energy policy, rather than dependence on Russian oil and natural gas. Finally, the European Union learned that Russia must never again hold Europe hostage to energy imports.

This war became not just an armed conflict between two countries, but it also became a clash between the civilized, international law-based world and barbarism, annexationist law of the jungle.

A possible failure to respond strongly to Russian aggression against Ukraine is appeasement and an incentive to further erode the international system. Consequently, the international community must take measures to halt

⁵¹ B. Forest, N. A. Youssef, *Ukraine's Surprise Strike on Russian Fleet Hobbles Putin's Donbas Strategy*, <<https://www.wsj.com/articles/ukraines-surprise-strike-on-russian-fleet-hobbles-putins-donbas-strategy-11649250001>> (20.07.2022).

⁵² T. Balmforth, P. Polityuk, *Ukrainian rockets hit Russian-held area as Kyiv readies southern counterattack*, <<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukraine-prepares-fresh-russian-assault-west-braces-worsening-energy-crisis-2022-07-12/>> (20.07.2022).

Russian aberrant foreign policy, expel Russian occupants from the territory of Ukraine and uphold the global order.

Contrary to his justification, Putin's aggression against Ukraine, as argued in this paper, is a war of choice, a personal decision of the Russian president and was not necessary. This brutal invasion is just the latest of a ruthless trend dating back to wars in Chechnya, Georgia, Crimea, Donbas, and Syria. The real casus belli of the Russian aggression was Putin's hatred of democracy and the will to restorative the former Soviet Union.

Putin's fatal political error is the non-observance of Ukrainians' enormous resistance and free spirit. This spirit will never allow them to give up on their country and its territory and they will never surrender to Moscow's authoritarian rule and control.

As Sun Tzu wrote in *The Art of War*: "The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting." "If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles"⁵³. It is already obvious, the Russians failed to learn the oldest military philosopher and strategist adviser laws of warfare or have forgotten to use them.

After more than four months of the war between Russia and Ukraine, there are still many uncertainties about the outcome of the war, but the result of this war is beyond doubt: Putin will lose, and all of Russia will lose with him.

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⁵³ L. Gilles, *Art of War by Sun Tzu Chapter 3. Attack by Stratagem*, points 2 and 18, <https://www.utoledo.edu/rotc/pdfs/the_art_of_war.pdf> (20.07.2022).

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