



Royal United Services Institute
for Defence and Security Studies

The Plot to Destroy Ukraine

Jack Watling and Nick Reynolds



Special Report
15 February 2022

The Plot to Destroy Ukraine

THE SPECTRE OF war looms over Europe. As Russian troops mass around Ukraine's borders there is a palpable sense of crisis. In Ukraine, however, there is a combination of resignation and grim determination to survive. If Russia invades, Ukrainians will fight.¹ But the real threat to their country is viewed as multifaceted and enduring. Ukrainians must not only deter military aggression, but survive the political, social and economic war that Russia is waging against their country. The multiple strands of Russia's assault on Ukraine have been widely discussed in terms of the activity that Russia undertakes – cyber attacks being a prominent example² – and in debates about the ends sought,³ but rarely are these actions and intentions framed in operational terms. This Special Report seeks to outline what Russia is trying to achieve in Ukraine, and how it is operationalising that intent through the synchronised application of state power.

Imperial Designs

Russia's intent towards Kyiv is a subject of considerable speculation. French President Emmanuel Macron is far from alone in arguing that Russia's behaviour is not about Ukraine, but rather that Ukraine is merely a lever by which Russia wishes to prompt the negotiation of a new security architecture in Europe.⁴ The problem with such theories is that they suggest that Russia is pursuing a single goal. On the contrary, there are several interrelated drivers to Russia's current policy, and it is important to understand them in combination.

Russian defence thinking since the war in Kosovo has revolved around the challenge of 'colour revolutions'.⁵ Watching Western intelligence agencies, diplomatic missions and military powers

-
1. Authors' assessment based on interviews with A, a senior Ukrainian officer, B, a senior Ukrainian defence official, C, a Ukrainian operational-level commander, D, a Ukrainian tactical commander, and visiting Ukrainian units in February 2022. The same assessment was made by E, a senior Western defence official interviewed in Ukraine in February 2022, and was noted by UK Foreign Secretary Liz Truss in Moscow on 10 February 2022. See Andrew Roth, 'Liz Truss Warns Russia of Sanctions During Tense Ukraine Talks', *The Guardian*, 10 February 2022.
 2. See, for example, Nicole Perlroth, *This is How They Tell Me the World Ends: The Cyber Weapons Arms Race* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021).
 3. Such as whether Russia wishes to renegotiate with NATO (see *Reuters*, 'Macron Urges New EU Security Deal in "Frank" Dialogue with Russia', 19 January 2022), or widespread speculation that the crisis is some sort of test of the Biden administration (see James S Robbins, 'Ukraine Crisis May be Putin's Test for the Biden Administration', *USA Today*, 21 April 2021).
 4. *Le Monde*, 'Crise en Ukraine: Macron propose à Poutine de « bâtir des garanties concrète de sécurité »', 7 February 2022.
 5. Alexandr Naumov, "Miagkaia sila" i "tsvetnye revoliutsii" i tekhnologii smeny politicheskikh rezhimov v nachale XXI veka ["Soft Power" and "Colour Revolutions", *Technologies of Regime*



Kostyantynivka Train Station, photographed from a Ukrainian Army Kozak MRAP, February 2022.
Courtesy of Jack Watling

collaborate in dismantling Serbia and thereafter fostering a political opposition to topple Slobodan Milošević,⁶ Moscow took this as a blueprint for how Western policy destabilises its adversaries.⁷ Western policy in Serbia stretched legal principles to erode national sovereignty,⁸ and thereby shaped Russia's view that the West's pronouncements about a rules-based international order were hollow and hypocritical. Putin believes that Hillary Clinton attempted to drive such a campaign towards Russia in 2011.⁹ And for the Russian state, Ukraine's 2014 Revolution of Dignity was yet another instance of the West subverting a Russian ally.

Russia is incorrect in this assessment. The Revolution of Dignity took Western governments by surprise.¹⁰ But Moscow is determined that the movement cannot be seen as a success, and ideally should be reversed. There is a fear of contagion by example in Moscow, where the government

Change at the Beginning of the 21st Century] (Moscow: Agramak-Media, 2017); Alexandr Bartosh, *Konflikty XXI veka: gibridnaia voina i tsvetnaia revoliutsiia [21st Century Conflict: Hybrid War and Colour Revolutions]* (Moscow: Goriachaia liniia – Telekom, 2018).

6. Tim Marshall, *Shadowplay: Behind the Lines and Under Fire: The Inside Story of Europe's Last War* (London: Elliott and Thompson, 2019).
7. Valery Gerasimov, 'Tsennost' nauki v predvidenii' ['The Value of Science in Prediction'], *VPK* (Vol. 476, No. 8, 2013).
8. Michael J Matheson, 'Justification for the NATO Air Campaign in Kosovo', *Proceedings of the ASIL Annual Meeting* (Vol. 94, 2000).
9. David M Herszenhorn and Ellen Barry, 'Putin Contends Clinton Incited Unrest Over Vote', *New York Times*, 8 December 2011.
10. Though a longer-term strategy of making integration with Europe culturally and economically desirable had been pursued with little thought given to strategic consequences. See John J

has expanded its capacity for repressive measures and begun to actively shut down civil society organisations deemed to provide vectors of criticism against the state.¹¹ In this line of thinking, Ukraine must at least remain in a state of civil conflict, and ideally be brought back under Moscow's shadow.

There is also a temporal aspect to Russia's defensive motivations in coercing Ukraine. As Kyiv moves closer to western states, its economy is likely to stabilise and its armed forces to become more capable. Even though NATO membership is unlikely and EU membership improbable, increased training and industrial collaboration, institutional support and personal ties will create a Ukraine armed with Western weapons, using NATO doctrine and fielding highly capable combined arms formations. Ukrainian civil society will also continue to reinforce a fierce sense of Ukrainian identity among the population, limiting Moscow's soft power in the country. Over time, therefore, Russia's capacity to coerce Ukraine must diminish, while under current conditions, NATO's penetration of the country must expand,¹² unless Russia can change the direction of travel.

Beyond Moscow's defensive concerns, the Kremlin also views Ukraine as a lever against NATO. Russian officials have become alarmed by expanding and overlapping Western alliances from an enlarged NATO and EU, to AUKUS and the Coalition of Democracies promoted by both the US and the UK. Collectively, these institutions are seen as creating a unified sanctions architecture that over time will build coercive leverage over Moscow. Russia's experience of the NATO intervention in Libya in 2011, where a UN Security Council (UNSC) mandate to protect the civilian population of Benghazi was used to overthrow Muammar Qadhafi, also underscored how strong Western alliances were able to bypass or manipulate the UNSC, essentially circumventing a forum where Russian interests could be protected.¹³

Mearsheimer, 'Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin', *Foreign Affairs* (Vol. 93, No. 5, 2014), pp. 77–89.

11. The requirement for all organisations financed from abroad to describe themselves as 'foreign agents' (see Sonia Phalnikar, 'What Is Russia's Foreign Agent Law?', *DW*, 3 February 2022), the poisoning and imprisonment of Alexei Navalny (see *Bellingcat*, 'FSB Team of Chemical Weapon Experts Implicated in Alexey Navalny Novichok Poisoning', 14 December 2020), and the closing down of Memorial (see Andrew Osborn and Mikhail Antonov, 'Russia Shuts Memorial Human Rights Centre in "One-Two Punch"', *Reuters*, 29 December 2021) all coincide with a significant increase in the budget for riot police. For more details, see Mariya Y Omelicheva, 'Repression Trap: The Mechanism of Escalating State Violence in Russia', Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 2021.
12. Russian officials may become fixed on escalation – even if they assess the outcome to have serious negative repercussions – because of loss aversion, fearing greater losses over time. See Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), pp. 278–88, 300–09.
13. Emma Farge, 'Russia Criticises UN Over NATO Role in Libya', *Reuters*, 9 March 2012; Philip Spassov, 'NATO, Russia and European Security: Lessons Learned from Conflicts in Kosovo and Libya', *Connections* (Vol. 13, No. 3, 2014), pp. 21–40.

In light of emerging alliance architectures, Russia's aggression towards Ukraine fulfils two purposes. First, it shows many non-aligned countries where Moscow is eager to pursue financial and security ties that the West's guarantees of support are hollow. Western states have made a range of commitments to Ukraine, starting with the Budapest memorandum,¹⁴ all the way through to President Joe Biden pledging 'unwavering support'.¹⁵ There is a risk that, in trying to assert the difference between Article 5 and other pledges, Western capitals undermine the credibility of their commitments, including those to NATO. If Moscow can demonstrate that Western security guarantees mean little, then it can contrast Western abandonment of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt,¹⁶ Ashraf Ghani in Afghanistan,¹⁷ and Ukraine, with Russia's determined support of Bashar Al-Assad. Though this pitch may be unpalatable to publics it is more appealing to governments.

Second, a Russian defeat of Ukraine would turn the proactive Western strategy of economic and political engagement into one of retrenchment, where boundaries could be placed on Western ambition and internal divisions stoked to create paralysis. The question in Eastern European capitals would be that if guarantees to Ukraine were negotiable, where does this leave Article 5? Divisions would emerge between the proponents of stability, such as France and Germany – eager for pragmatic diplomacy – and those in the Baltic, Balkans and the UK who fear Russian aggression. With NATO fixed by the imperative to assure its internal cohesion it would have little capacity to 'compete'. This would therefore open the door to a more coercive approach in Georgia and Moldova, where the objective would be to ensure that these countries remain dependent on Russia and within a Russian sphere of influence. Explicit or implicit assurances to consult Russia on European security frameworks, meanwhile, would demonstrate to Beijing that Moscow is an invaluable ally in preventing AUKUS and other alliances and/or regional security arrangements from being focused solely on the Indo-Pacific.

The final motivation for Russian policy in Ukraine is ideological. For the intelligence officers who have taken over the Kremlin – trained to be the vanguard of a Russian empire – there is a pervasive belief that Ukraine should be under the control of Moscow. Vladimir Putin¹⁸ and Dmitry Medvedev¹⁹ have described Russians and Ukrainians as one people. Foreign Minister Sergey

14. Council on Foreign Relations, 'Budapest Memorandums on Security Assurances, 1994', 5 December 1994, <<https://web.archive.org/web/20140317182201/http://www.cfr.org/arms-control-disarmament-and-nonproliferation/budapest-memorandums-security-assurances-1994/p32484>>, accessed 10 February 2022.

15. Alexandra Odynova, 'Biden Calls Ukraine's Leader, Pledges "Unwavering Support" in the Face of Russian "Aggression"', *CBS News*, 2 April 2021.

16. David E Sanger, *Confront and Conceal: Obama's Secret Wars and Surprising Use of American Power* (New York, NY: Broadway Books, 2013), pp. 277–303.

17. *BBC News*, 'Afghanistan: Joe Biden Defends US Pull-Out as Taliban Claim Victory', 1 September 2021.

18. President of Russia, 'Article by Vladimir Putin "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians"', 12 July 2021, <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>>, accessed 10 February 2022.

19. *Gazeta Kommersant*, 'Pochemu bessmyslenny kontakty s nyneshnim ukrainskim rukovodstvom' ['Why Contacts with the Current Ukrainian Leadership are Meaningless'], 11 October 2021.



Brigade Staff of the Ukrainian 95th Brigade approach the line of contact, February 2022.
Courtesy of Jack Watling

Lavrov has called the post-Soviet republics ‘orphans’, or perhaps more accurately ‘masterless’, intimating Russia’s intent to exert control beyond its borders.²⁰ Like Belarus – where Russia has already stationed large numbers of troops and the government is increasingly under Putin’s sway – the Kremlin aspires to bring Kyiv to heel. Russia is not therefore aiming at a mere agreement with NATO, but rather at the subversion of Ukrainian independence and of its independent identity.

Cat and Mouse

Dmitry Kozak, deputy Kremlin chief of staff, has been a longstanding ally of Putin from when they worked together in St Petersburg’s local government. Kozak has often remained separate from the various competing factions within the Kremlin, working closely for Putin directly. Known as the Cheshire Cat to Russian political commentators, this is the man who Putin has put in charge of directing the campaign against Ukraine.²¹

Ukraine is not the first country where Kozak has been at the forefront of Russian diplomacy. In 2002 he unsuccessfully attempted to create a federal settlement to the conflict in Moldova, which would have given Russia the right to maintain troops in the country and an effective veto over

20. Russian Embassy, UK (@RussianEmbassy), ‘FM #Lavrov: #NATO has become a purely #geopolitical project aimed at taking over territories orphaned by the collapse of the Warsaw Treaty Organisation and the Soviet Union’, Twitter, 10 January 2022, <<https://t.co/sVH9ysmJNh>>, accessed 10 February 2022. Authors’ note: Lavrov’s words could also be translated to mean ‘masterless’.

21. Dmitry Kozak replaced Vladislav Serkov as the lead on the Ukraine file in 2020 (see Meduza, ‘Putin Officially Fires Top Political Aide Vladislav Surkov’, 18 February 2020, <<https://meduza.io/en/news/2020/02/18/putin-officially-fires-top-political-curator-vladislav-surkov>>, accessed 10 February 2022), though Kozak had previously been extensively involved in the Russian annexation of Crimea.

Moldovan constitutional affairs.²² A former officer in the Spetsnaz of Russian Military Intelligence (formerly the GRU, and now the GU), Kozak is a long-time practitioner of covert warfare.

Russian covert operations have often suffered from being poorly coordinated, with the various agencies approaching and even recruiting one another's agents and competing for influence and responsibilities inside the Kremlin. During the 2000s, however, the Kremlin attempted to establish the 'power vertical', assuring the ability of the senior political leadership to execute integrated operations at the tactical level, and making sure that accurate information was passed up and down the chain. Outside of the Kremlin's area of focus this system has worked imperfectly.²³ With Kozak chairing the Ukraine file, however, there is now a centralised process for directing and deconflicting the full spectrum of capabilities across Russia's military, diplomatic and intelligence agencies through the ironically named Committee for Transborder Cooperation.

The coordination meetings chaired by Kozak have been running for over a year,²⁴ and examining the timeline and subsequent activities against Ukraine, it becomes possible to see the mechanisms by which Russia is seeking to bring Kyiv to heel. In the spring of 2021, Russia began a military build-up along Ukraine's borders. The initial surge of activity provided an opportunity to observe what caused a reaction in Western capitals. After a lull in the summer and the completion of the *Zapad* exercises in September last year,²⁵ Russia began rapidly expanding its military presence all along Ukraine's border. Unlike in the spring, the build-up was sufficient in size and had all the requisite enablers to effect an invasion. This brought about a sense of crisis in the West, with frantic diplomatic engagement to understand Russia's concerns.

In Ukraine, meanwhile, the government started to observe disruption to its coal supply.²⁶ After meetings with industrial leaders in the Kremlin, and instructions to Moscow's diplomatic posts in supplier countries, Ukraine noted a concerted effort to drive up energy prices over the winter.²⁷ In the information space, Russian agents of influence began to attribute this rise to the incompetence of the Ukrainian authorities. The Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) began to track attempts to

22. *Regnum*, "'Memorandum Kozaka': Rossiyskiy plan ob'yedineniya Moldovy i Pridnestrov'ya' ['"Kozak Memorandum": Russian Plan for the Unification of Moldova and Transnistria'], <<https://regnum.ru/news/polit/458547.html>>, accessed 10 February 2022.

23. Andrew Monaghan, 'The Russian Vertikal: The Tandem, Power and the Elections', Russia and Eurasia Programme Paper REP 2011/01, Chatham House, June 2011.

24. Authors' interviews with F, a senior Ukrainian intelligence officer in Stream 1, G, a senior intelligence liaison officer in Stream 1, H, a senior Ukrainian intelligence analyst in Stream 2, I, a senior Ukrainian intelligence liaison officer in Stream 2, J, a senior Ukrainian intelligence officer in Stream 3, and K, a senior Ukrainian security official in Stream 4, Ukraine, February 2022.

25. Michael Kofman, 'Zapad 2021: What We Learned from Russia's Massive Military Drills', *Moscow Times*, 23 September 2021.

26. Sudarshan Varadhan, 'Global Coal Prices Surge as Ukraine Tensions Worsen Supply Woes', *Reuters*, 28 January 2022.

27. Katya Golubkova, Christoph Steitz and Susanna Twidale, 'European Gas Prices Hit Record as Russian Flows via Yamal Reverse', *Reuters*, 21 December 2021.



An RAF A400M delivers equipment to the Ukrainian armed forces, February 2022. *Courtesy of Jack Watling*

mobilise small business owners and civil society organisations to protest against the government’s inability to stabilise the cost of living.²⁸

The energy axis of Russia’s unconventional operations was detected early by Kyiv and measures were taken to try to control its impact. Ukrainian officials believe that they have succeeded in countering this initial thrust, though Russia could go much further. Energy was one of many axes by which Russia was and is trying to undermine the credibility of the Ukrainian government. The aspiration is to create a domestic political crisis that Russia can capitalise upon to bring politicians willing to reach an accommodation with Moscow to power. Using extensive social surveys of Ukrainian citizens, the Russian government has been working out which pressures lead to a domestic reaction and which do not.²⁹

The rising military threat is another lever by which pressure is asserted on Kyiv. If deterrence activity and the threat of war – amplified in the West – undermine the Ukrainian economy, then this too can create a political crisis. The steadily rising threat of military invasion has suppressed external investment, while as the crisis peaked, insurance providers withdrew support to flights over Ukraine.³⁰ But military posturing has a second effect. As tensions rise, Western capitals will be desperate for ‘de-escalation’ and, should Moscow offer opportunities for such a draw down

28. Authors’ interviews with L, a senior SBU analyst, M, a senior Ukrainian security official, B and H, Ukraine, February 2022.

29. Rating Agency, Kyiv, ‘Obshchestvenno-Politicheskoye Nastroyeniya Naseleniya’ [‘The Population’s Socio-Political Mood’], 10 December 2021, <https://ratinggroup.ua/ru/research/ukraine/obshchestvenno-politicheskie_nastroeniya_naseleniya_6-8_dekabrya_2021.html>, accessed 15 February 2022; *Moscow Times*, ‘3 in 4 Ukrainians Say Russia Is “Hostile State” – Survey’, 10 December 2021.

30. Sebastian Shehadi and Jon Whiteaker, “‘Who’s Going To Travel Here and Invest Now?’ The Impact of the Ukraine Crisis’, *Investment Monitor*, 31 January 2022.

that comes at the expense of Ukrainian sovereignty, then Moscow hopes the West will pressure Kyiv into accepting it.

If the government in Kyiv is strong, then it will reject such propositions out of hand, including the implementation of the Minsk agreement in a manner consistent with Moscow's interpretation whereby the federalisation of Ukraine would cede Russia control over the politics of Donetsk and Luhansk and thereby give Russia a veto over Ukrainian policy.³¹ But if a political crisis in Kyiv can be manufactured, then the Ukrainian government may bow to external pressure. Russia either directly supplies or can control up to 60% of the fuel supply to Ukraine along with a significant proportion of the country's electricity. The speed at which Russia could bring about a domestic crisis is therefore a serious concern. Russia could also bring about an immediate political crisis in Ukraine by offering official recognition of Donbas and Luhansk, which would force Kyiv to respond and potentially provide a pretext for escalation.

As Moscow has already demonstrated in Belarus and has begun to achieve in Kazakhstan, concessions to Russia that allow limited military and political interference in another state are but the first step in the progressive subversion of that state's independence. Over time, small concessions regarding federal autonomy can create an opening that Russia will exploit to infiltrate Ukrainian politics until a pretext can be manufactured to achieve a Russian military presence on Ukrainian soil and eventual state capture.

A critical line of effort in Kyiv, therefore, is shoring up the stability of the state. Ukrainian officials are desperately working to identify Moscow's levers for destabilisation and countering them before they can create sufficient social unrest to allow Moscow to unleash more destructive methods of destabilisation. Military deterrence is but one line of effort in this game of cat and mouse, and for Ukraine it is a game they expect to have to play for months and years if the matter is not resolved in days and weeks by military invasion. If the threat of invasion protracts, however, and Ukraine improves its defence and economic stability, Russia's levers of influence may fade. There is therefore a serious risk that Russia will provoke a crisis, whether through military or covert means, to create the pretext for a more rapid seizure of Ukraine. This is deemed Moscow's second choice if Ukraine cannot be forced to surrender its sovereignty. But it is an option for which Russia retains the capabilities and readiness, and in the event of invasion it will not only be a conventional military effort, but coincide with the activation of covert operations across Ukraine.

The Spetsnaz Go to War

Pressure on Ukraine is orchestrated from Moscow, but turning that pressure into a domestic crisis in Kyiv is the responsibility of Russia's covert services: the Federal Security Service (FSB), Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), and Military Intelligence (GU) and Special Forces (SSO). While the Russian conventional forces mass on the Ukrainian border, the special forces and intelligence officers of these services are already operating throughout Ukraine. Over the past year they have

31. Duncan Allen, 'The Minsk Conundrum: Western Policy and Russia's War in Eastern Ukraine', Chatham House, Research Paper, May 2020.



Colonel Bratishko visits a company command post, February 2022. *Courtesy of Jack Watling*

all significantly increased their command-and-control manning dedicated to the Ukrainian file,³² and have their activities coordinated through Kozak’s steering committee.³³

The most concerning development to Ukraine is the expansion of FSB resources targeting Ukraine. Within the FSB’s Fifth Service, run by Colonel General Sergei Beseda, the Department for Operational Information has teams dedicated to most of the ‘territories’ of the former Soviet Union. Most teams comprise 10–20 personnel. In July 2021, however, the Ukraine team of the FSB Fifth Service was expanded to form the 9th Directorate comprising around 200 officers.³⁴

Initially the Ukrainian government assumed that the 9th Directorate was primarily concerned with building up the means to spread localised misinformation. The Directorate was actively organising surveys of sentiment across its regions of interest, which Ukrainian counterintelligence officers assumed were aimed at refining Russian information operations.³⁵ Prior to the 2014 Revolution of Dignity there were over 700 Russian-sponsored NGOs in Ukraine.³⁶ Some were closed by the SBU as the war in the Donbas escalated. Many, however, had primarily spread messages about Ukrainian and Russian cultural unity, a message that fell flat as Ukrainian troops were killed by

32. Authors’ interviews with F, G, H, I, J, K, M, a senior intelligence analyst from Stream 1 and N, a senior military intelligence officer from Stream 4, Ukraine, February 2022.

33. Authors’ interviews with F, G, H, I, J and K.

34. Authors’ interviews with F, G, H, I and M.

35. Ukrainian counterintelligence officers secured some copies of these surveys. Authors’ interviews, Ukraine, February 2022.

36. Authors’ interviews with L and O, a senior SBU counterterrorism officer, Ukraine, February 2022.

Russian soldiers. As a result, the network began to dwindle. It was thought the 9th Directorate might be trying to rebuild a comparable network of influence.

As the 9th Directorate expanded its activities, however, counterintelligence operations have begun to highlight what and who it is targeting, and the results are alarming. The surveys being conducted were more concerned with Ukrainian attitudes towards particular local figures and politicians than their sentiment towards Russia, and through Russia's extensive penetration of Ukraine's local government it became apparent that the 9th Directorate was more focused on building a detailed local map of personnel it controlled, could influence or prevail upon in running occupation local governments in the event of a Russian seizure of the country. This also involved identifying lists of persons most hostile to Russia who might organise resistance to Russian forces.

These suspicions were all but confirmed in December, when the 9th Directorate began to run wargames with the leadership of Russia's Airborne Forces (VDV).³⁷ These exercises linked the handlers for Russia's assets in Ukraine's regional governments with the special forces and airborne forces who would form the vanguard of an invasion. Together they mapped which locals would be supportive and began working on lists of targets who would not. The intent was to establish the command-and-control links between intelligence assets and military units to secure critical infrastructure, government buildings, and to locate and eliminate Ukrainian leaders who would rally resistance. This line of effort was bolstered by the seizure of Ukrainian car insurance data during a major cyber attack in January,³⁸ providing Russian units with the car registration, addresses and personal information of a large swathe of Ukrainian citizens.

This threat is exacerbated by the widespread penetration of Ukrainian politics and governmental institutions by agents of the Russian services, handled by both the FSB and the SVR. A network of around 30 personnel linked to the SVR have been involved in building financial mechanisms for astroturfing protests, ballooning the size of demonstrations relating to energy tariffs, tax reforms and other legitimate concerns.³⁹ Meeting with Ukrainian security officials there is a widespread acknowledgement that many of their colleagues – even in some quite senior positions – are working for or sympathetic to Russia.

A shadow structure has emerged inside the Ukrainian government to move information around known Kremlin assets.⁴⁰ But in a country aspiring to protect its democracy, there is also an unwillingness to begin arresting Ukrainians, since any public prosecution would reveal Ukrainian

37. Authors' interviews with F and M.

38. The public reporting of the cyber attack focused on the defacing of government websites (see Jules Darmanin, 'Cyberattack Knocks Out Ukrainian Government Websites', *Politico*, 14 January 2022). However, according to Q, a senior counterintelligence officer of the SBU, the more consequential target was the car registration database. This assessment was supported by H, though H did not disclose the contents of the database.

39. Authors' interviews with H, I and K.

40. Authors' interviews with K, Q and R, a senior Ukrainian intelligence officer, Ukraine, February 2022.



Ukrainian soldiers walk beside a minefield on the line of contact, February 2022. *Courtesy of Jack Watling*

sources and methods critical to protecting the state. It could also fracture Ukrainian politics, creating precisely the conditions to facilitate a Russian takeover. The result is that Russia has a bureaucracy in waiting. Western pre-emptive disclosure of individuals tied to these networks in an attempt to disrupt their coordination is a technique that can be effective,⁴¹ but also suffers from diminishing returns as the disruption of plots also primes the audience to believe the authorities were exaggerating and thus underestimate what is, in fact, a very real and present threat.

The Russians are also laying the groundwork for spreading chaos across Ukraine through direct action. Ukrainian assessments of GU strength vary, but there is believed to be around two companies of Russian covert special forces operating in Kyiv.⁴² For the Ukrainian security forces there is a significant risk at protests that Russian agent provocateurs – disguised as demonstrators or police officers – will initiate acts of violence.⁴³ It is a tactic that has previously been observed in Ukraine and was particularly noticeable in the recent internal turmoil in Kazakhstan, where what was initially just a protest against price rises was turned into a violent showdown between different factions of the security apparatus amid greater bloodshed. But the Russians have also

41. The UK have published details of such plots during the present crisis. See, for example, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, 'Kremlin Plan to Install Pro-Russian Leadership in Ukraine Exposed', press release, 22 January 2022, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/kremlin-plan-to-install-pro-russian-leadership-in-ukraine-exposed>>, accessed 10 February 2022.

42. Authors' interviews with K, Q and E.

43. This was observed repeatedly during the Euromaidan protests, and using plain-clothed attackers and follow-up information products to imply that security forces are attacking citizens has been a longstanding Russian tactic. See Oleg Sukhov, 'Police Officer, Suspected of Being Agent Provocateur During Rada Clashes, Is Arrested', *Kyiv Post*, 15 October 2014; *Bellingcat*, 'A Reconstruction of Clashes in Mariupol, Ukraine, 9 May 2014', 28 January 2015. Agent provocateurs were observed by many organisers of the Euromaidan protests during the Revolution of Dignity. Authors' interviews with K and T, a civil society organiser during the revolution, Ukraine, February 2022; authors' interview with U, a Ukrainian journalist, Ukraine, 2014.

made extensive use of their intelligence network to recruit Ukrainians to conduct attacks on government personnel, as when a Russian team coordinated the assassination of a senior SBU counterintelligence officer in Mariupol in 2017.⁴⁴ Another attack targeted a military intelligence officer in Kyiv that year.⁴⁵

The question for the Ukrainians is what will happen when Russian covert forces switch their main effort from collection to direct action. Senior Ukrainian officials are clear that they expect and have planned for a decapitation strategy against them.⁴⁶ There is also an expectation that critical national infrastructure including telecommunications, government services, electricity and utilities will be attacked by both physical sabotage and cyber attack. The Ukrainian security services do not expect to be able to disrupt all of these attacks. They are already receiving over 500 hoax bomb calls per month, with around half originating from Russian territory and the remainder from inside Ukraine.⁴⁷ There is a recognition that at some point some of those threats will be real.

Before the Iron Mountain

Unconventional disruption may be able to upset defence plans and social mobilisation, but such forces lack stamina unless backed up by conventional forces. Russia has these in ample supply, and if its unconventional forces begin to conduct direct action on any significant scale it is a sure sign that an attempt at a conventional seizure of the country will follow. A cursory glance at simple numbers would suggest that seizing Ukraine would be a tall order. At the time of writing, Russia has 147,000 troops on Ukraine's border, split into 83 Battalion Tactical Groups. These have been bolstered with critical enabling capabilities such as air defence, artillery, ballistic missiles, engineers and medical support.⁴⁸ This is against a Ukrainian military of over 200,000 troops supplemented by thousands of citizen soldiers.⁴⁹ The Ukrainian strength, however, also includes training and support personnel, rather than just combat units, so that in reality there is close to numerical parity between the forces. However, this is highly misleading as regards capability.

Russia has amassed a large arsenal of short-range ballistic missiles and cruise missiles. If a conventional war begins, these will likely be used in the opening stages to destroy Ukrainian defensive radar sites, command-and-control nodes, and key military installations such as airfields. Ukraine has no effective counter to these systems. In the absence of wider coordination, Ukraine's air defences are liable to operate as pop-up threats to Russian aircraft – a dangerous, but not a reliable, defence. In the face of electronic warfare, Ukrainian forces expect 3–7 minutes warning, depending on the axis, before coming under air attack. Ukraine's air force has around 105 combat

44. *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, 'Top Ukrainian Regional Security Officer Killed in Mariupol', 31 March 2017.

45. *BBC News*, 'Ukraine Intelligence Officer Killed by Car Bomb in Kiev', 27 June 2017.

46. Authors' interviews with B, A, Q and K.

47. Authors' interview with O.

48. David Brown, 'Ukraine: How Big Is Russia's Military Build-Up?', *BBC News*, 12 February 2022.

49. Michael Robinson Chavez and Ruby Mellen, 'Volunteers and Veterans Train for War in Ukraine', *Washington Post*, 11 February 2022.



Ukrainian soldiers and a RUSI member of staff move along a trench on the line of contact, February 2022.
Courtesy of Taras Mokliak

aircraft, but not all of these are combat capable and there is a shortage of munitions for them. Russia has amassed around 317 combat aircraft within range of Ukraine's borders.⁵⁰ Ukraine's air force will likely be able to maintain defensive counter-air (DCA) missions in Ukraine's deep until their airfields are knocked out. But against the layers of Russian air defence around Ukraine's borders, these aircraft will struggle to counter VKS sorties supporting Russian manoeuvre elements.⁵¹

Russia's advantages in the air will likely have a decisive impact on the ground. A large proportion of Ukraine's best troops are currently fixed on the line of contact in the Joint Forces Operations (JFO) area encompassing Donetsk and Luhansk. The enemy air threat will make it exceedingly difficult to reposition units quickly without coming under devastating attack. The result is that Ukrainian units will likely be forced into positional defences. Russian units, by contrast, without the threat of significant air attack, will be able to manoeuvre to bypass and defeat Ukrainian units in detail. Against positional defences the Russian advantage in artillery and armour will likely lead to the rapid overrunning of Ukrainian conventional units.

Due to the length of the Ukrainian border, Russia has multiple axes along which it could potentially invade. The first axis, and the most direct, could involve a push west from Rostov Oblast, reinforcing the DPR and LPR and assaulting the line of contact. The second axis would be to push south from Russia's Belgorod Oblast. A third axis would be to push north from Crimea. If performed in conjunction with the second axis, Russian forces could rapidly cut off the JFO. Two further axes have been opened through Russia's deployment of troops to Belarus. Fourth would be to push south from the Gomel region of Belarus, to encircle or overrun Kyiv, and a fifth would be to push south from Brest, to physically block Ukraine from receiving assistance overland from NATO countries. It is likely that in any conventional invasion Russia would push on all of these axes to fix Ukrainian forces, but weigh the main effort to target Kyiv, or to break the core of the Ukrainian army in the JFO.

50. Ukrainian General Staff J2 assessment of enemy strength as of February 2022.

51. Justin Bronk, 'Ukrainian Air Defence Options in the Event of a Russian Attack', *RUSI Commentary*, 8 February 2022.

Figure 1: Map Showing Possible Axes of Advance Into Ukraine by Russia’s Armed Forces



Source: Authors’ adaptation of map generated by olinchuk / Adobe Stock. Locations and borders are approximate.

Most assessments of the correlation of forces lead to an expectation that Kyiv would be enveloped within days if Russia committed to an all out assault. What followed would be critical to the success or failure of Russia’s effort. If Russia’s unconventional forces could break the cohesion of popular resistance, and close down movement within Ukrainian cities by seizing key movement corridors, then the use of conventional forces to provide on-call fires could rapidly trap the resistance in isolated pockets. On the other hand, if the unconventional units are delayed, attrited, and their allies in local government seized and detained, then Russia will face the prospect of urban fighting. It may choose to proceed with overwhelming firepower as Russia demonstrated in Grozny.⁵² But

52. Olga Oliker, *Russia’s Chechen Wars 1994-2000: Lessons from Urban Combat* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2001), pp. 33–80.

to do so would come at a massive political cost and likely make the long-term governance of any occupied territory exceedingly difficult, as has been the case with Chechnya. Success for Russia's conventional forces is therefore intimately tied up with the success of its unconventional operations and the preparation of the battlefield. It is precisely the question of whether Russia has set the preconditions for a successful capture of Ukraine's cities that has left many Ukrainian officials sceptical of Western assessments of an imminent invasion. But if Russia is failing to bring about its desired preconditions, the question is whether it is prepared to bear the cost of occupation. The more it can shift the burden onto Ukrainian assets, the lower the cost for Russia.

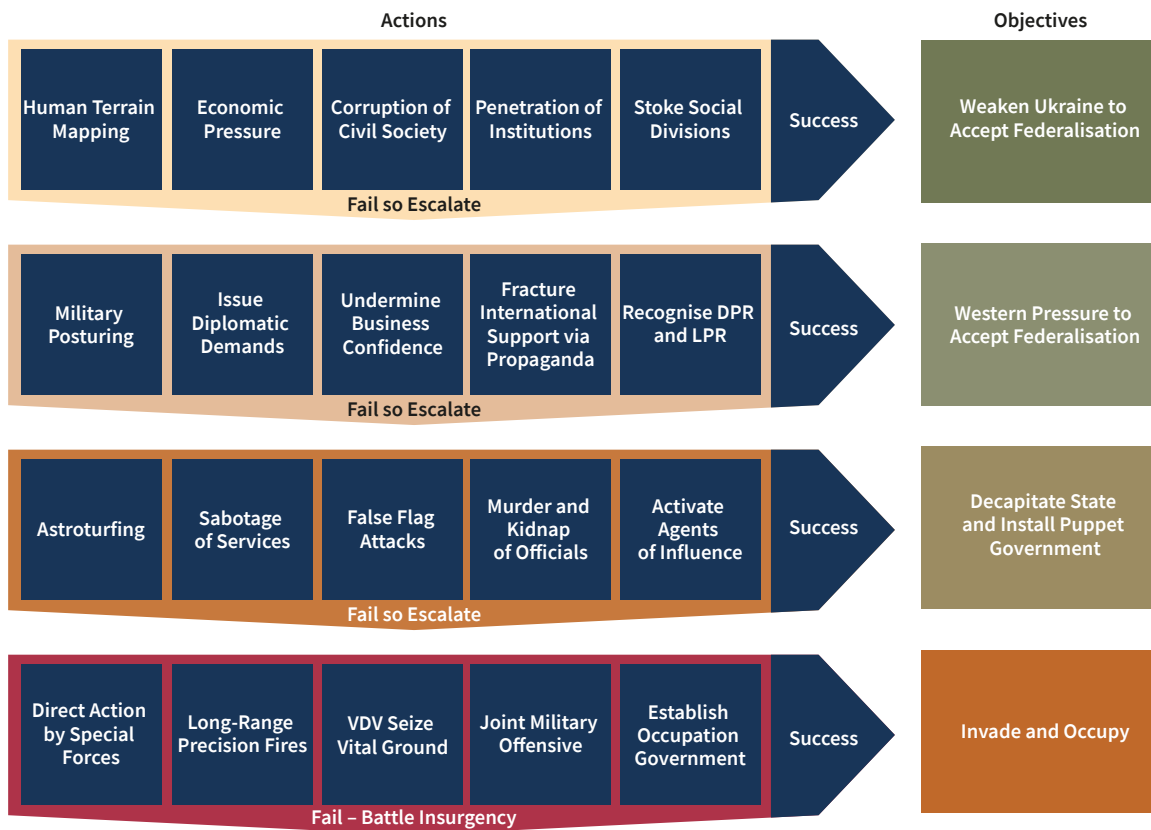
Multiple Paths to Victory

For the Ukrainian state, the threat is both acute and protracted. Russia can create a domestic crisis at short notice through the denial of critical resources and exacerbate the political reverberations by amplifying domestic dissent. Agent provocateurs can turn protests violent, creating the conditions for the assassination of Ukrainian officials and the decapitation of the state. With the government in crisis, Russia is poised to escalate fighting in the Donbas, offering the West the prospect for de-escalation if it can force Ukraine into a compromise of its sovereignty through accepting the Russian interpretation of the Minsk Agreement. If these paths fail, then Russia has amassed the capacity to invade and is able to defeat the Ukrainian armed forces. The question is whether Russia believes it can absorb the economic blowback and suppress the risk of protracted insurgency. If society has been divided domestically then the backbone of a protracted resistance could be broken and the FSB will be able to leverage its networks in the country to establish a system of Ukrainian-fronted repression. But it is a major gamble.

Russia has consequently laid the groundwork to achieve victory along several paths and is pursuing all of them simultaneously. Indeed, the combined threat has fixed Ukraine because the measures best suited to countering one Russian path to victory are precisely those that would precipitate defeat on a different axis. If Ukraine mobilises to deter an invasion, Russia can destroy its economy and break the cohesion of the Ukrainian state. If the Ukrainians move to break up the networks eating their country from the inside, their government will be weakened and vulnerable to pressure from the West to accept the sacrifice of Ukrainian sovereignty. If the Ukrainian government remains steady, and the West holds firm in supporting Ukrainian sovereignty, then Russia may resort to invading the country and using its covert networks to enact systematic repression.

Countering these threats will not be achieved through a breakthrough diplomatic summit. Nor will the delivery of small quantities of military aid change the conventional balance of forces. It is entirely plausible that, in their erratic lack of focus, Western governments have lurched into crisis mode too late to have many meaningful options. If Ukraine survives the next month, however, then Western policy must be multi-layered and coherent. The first requirement is to bolster the Ukrainian armed forces, and in particular the equipping, training, and command and control for territorial defence, which is the best route to deny Moscow a viable path to a swift military victory. The key is asymmetric deterrence. There are also key systems that must be bolstered, most significantly air defence.

Figure 2: Russia’s Multiple Paths to Victory



Source: Author generated.

The second requirement is to support Ukraine’s political stability. In the first instance, this requires economic stability and consequently the transition of Ukraine’s dependence upon Russia for fuel and energy to Europe. There is also a need for safeguards to stabilise investment in Ukraine. Job security and preventing inflation are vital to both the government’s ability to prevent domestic instability and to pay and retain soldiers, especially military specialists, trained at state expense with transferrable skills. There is clearly a legitimate concern about corruption when it comes to financial aid to Ukraine. However, the Ukrainian government cannot effectively tackle corruption while it is being systemically destabilised by Russia. Aid will therefore need to be carefully structured to ensure that it expands the capacity of the Ukrainian state.

Ukrainian soldiers approach a platoon command post on the line of contact, February 2022. *Courtesy of Jack Watling*



Finally, there is a need for significant intelligence and security cooperation to identify those undermining the Ukrainian state and remove them. Given the number of Russian intelligence personnel operating in Ukraine, turning it into a hostile environment by identifying, exposing and constraining the travel and subsequent opportunities of the individuals concerned should raise the cost for Russia of its covert activity and deter personnel from wanting to be deployed on operations in Ukraine. The fact that much of Russia's activity in Ukraine is illegal allows for sanctioning of identified individuals through criminal prosecution, which circumvents many of the barriers to intelligence cooperation in terms of protecting sources and methods. If Ukraine can make it through the current period of high tensions, then it is important that as the sense of crisis fades the West does not lose interest. To fail to remain engaged would be to leave the ground fertile for Russia to mount another attempt. If Ukraine does fall, then the same tactics and measures may well be applied elsewhere, in Georgia, Moldova and the Balkans, and the West should act quickly to prevent Russia from repeating its multipronged assault on yet more countries. Punishingly harsh sanctions and other measures in the wake of an assault on Ukraine may buy the West time before Russia regroups and goes further. It must not fritter away such a reprieve.

Jack Watling is Research Fellow for Land Warfare at RUSI.

Nick Reynolds is Research Analyst for Land Warfare at RUSI.

191 years of independent thinking on defence and security

The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) is the world's oldest and the UK's leading defence and security think tank. Its mission is to inform, influence and enhance public debate on a safer and more stable world. RUSI is a research-led institute, producing independent, practical and innovative analysis to address today's complex challenges.

Since its foundation in 1831, RUSI has relied on its members to support its activities. Together with revenue from research, publications and conferences, RUSI has sustained its political independence for 191 years.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author, and do not reflect the views of RUSI or any other institution.

Published in 2022 by the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution – Non-Commercial – No-Derivatives 4.0 International Licence. For more information, see <<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>>.

RUSI Special Report, 15 February 2022.

Cover Image: Drills of the Ivan Sirko 92nd Mechanised Brigade of the Ukrainian armed forces in Kharkiv, 10 February 2022. *Courtesy of Ukrinform / Alamy*

Royal United Services Institute
for Defence and Security Studies
Whitehall
London SW1A 2ET
United Kingdom
+44 (0)20 7747 2600
www.rusi.org
RUSI is a registered charity (No. 210639)