



RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR

# What is Putin's ENDGAME?



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**AGENCIES**

The Russian president is facing an unexpected level of resistance but remains determined to continue on a belligerent path.

As Russia's war on Ukraine continues with reports of hundreds killed, there are rising questions about what President Vladimir Putin is trying to achieve here.

Cristian Nitoiu, lecturer in Diplomacy and International Governance at Loughborough University London, told Al Jazeera, "The long-term goals of Russia following the end of the Cold War have been to recover the great power status of Soviet Union, to be seen as equal by the West and to be able to influence political developments in its smaller neighbours like Ukraine, Moldova or Kazakhstan."

Ukraine has been incorporating itself into the Western orbit of influence. Accordingly, placing a Russian-friendly government in

led by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, was retained in office and able to negotiate with the Russians, Gill added.

"There are no easy options for Putin, and it would certainly not be easy for any interim government installed by force of Russian arms," said Gill.

Russia still has not put all its cards on the table, John R Deni, research professor of joint, interagency, intergovernmental, and multinational (JIIM) security studies at the US Army War College's Strategic Studies



Institute, told Al Jazeera.

"US officials have reported that somewhere between 50 and 70 per cent of available Russian forces have been committed so far, meaning there is still lots of nearby Russian military power left to commit.

To this point, it remains somewhat of a mystery what Putin would do with a nation the size of Ukraine.

Splitting up the country might be the most likely option. However, it is not without severe difficulties.

"Splitting Ukraine would require some entity to implement and enforce the split. While the Russian force might implement a split, I am not convinced Russia has the capacity and wherewithal to enforce it beyond the short run, given the Russian military forces arrayed at this point," said Deni.

"Nonetheless, a split – perhaps along the Dniepr River – remains a possibility," Deni added.

"I think Putin's options are quite limited.

Russia is now trapped in achieving some sort of victory in Ukraine," Nitoiu said.

"If Putin manages to install a puppet government, this will be a major blow to the West's commitment to liberal democracy and will set a dangerous precedent for interstate relations on the European continent," said Nitoiu.

Thomas Graham, who served as senior director for Russia on the National Security Council staff during the George W Bush administration, told Politico that if Putin does have an endgame, it is not clear to outsiders at this point. For the past several months, he has deliberately deceived people as to what his true intentions are.

Most recently, he suggested he would launch an operation to defend the separatist regions in Eastern Ukraine, and then he ordered a massive strike across the entire country. So, it is not clear what his territorial ambitions are. That said, he has declared that he will "demilitarise" and "denazify" Ukraine. That would seem to mean that at a minimum he wants to destroy Ukraine's military infrastructure and replace its government with a puppet regime.

Andrei Kolesnikov, a senior fellow and chair of the Russian Domestic Politics and Political Institutions Programme at the Carnegie Moscow Center in Moscow, Russia, told Politico that it is very difficult to determine what the endgame is for Putin.

One could assume that it would be enough for him to be listened to by the strongest leaders in the West. Or that Donbas and Luhansk would officially become his fiefdom. And all this against the background that he has suppressed civil society in his country, and the elites are afraid of him. But he probably needs a) the authorities in Kyiv under his control as a part of his "empire", and b) the world (or at least part of it) playing by his rules.

SOURCE: AL JAZEERA, POLITICO

## UKRAINE AT A GLANCE

**1989-1990**

In January 1990, more than 400,000 people join hands in a human chain stretching some 400 miles from the western city of Ivano-Frankivsk to Kyiv in an anti-communist protest. The Rada, the new Ukrainian parliament, votes to declare independence from the Soviet Union on July 16, 1990.

**1991**

The parliament declares independence a second time on August 24. In December, Ukrainians vote (92% to 8%) to make their independence official. The Soviet Union dissolves on December 26.

**1992**

Ukraine formally establishes relations with Nato but it does not join.

**1994-2004**

In 10 years as president, Leonid Kuchma helps transition Ukraine from a Soviet republic to a capitalist society.

**2004**

A presidential election pits Kuchma's hand-picked successor Viktor Yanukovich, supported by Putin, against popular pro-democracy leader Viktor Yushchenko. In the final months of the campaign, Yushchenko falls ill due to poisoning. Yanukovich wins the election amid accusations of rigging. Massive protests follow and the public outcry becomes known as the Orange Revolution. After a third vote, Yushchenko prevails.



**2005**

Yushchenko takes office as president, with Yulia Tymoshenko as prime minister.

**2008**

Yushchenko and Tymoshenko formally request that Ukraine be granted a "membership action plan". US President Bush supports Ukraine's membership but France and Germany oppose after Russia voices displeasure.

**2010**

Yanukovich is elected president. He says Ukraine should be a "neutral state".

**2011**

Court finds Tymoshenko guilty of "abuse of power" and sentences her to seven years in prison.

**NOV 2013-2014**

Yanukovich announces that he will not get Ukraine into the EU free trade agreement citing pressure from Russia. Ahead of an impeachment vote, Yanukovich flees to Russia. Ukraine's parliament removes him and installs an interim government. It votes to free Tymoshenko.

With Russian troops in control of the peninsula, the Crimean parliament in March votes to secede from Ukraine and join Russia.

With some 40,000 Russian troops on Ukraine's eastern border in April, violence breaks out in Donbas. Russian-supported separatists declare independence from Ukraine as the Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic.

Pro-West politician Petro Poroshenko is elected Ukraine's president in May.

Representatives from Russia, Ukraine, France, and Germany meet to sign the first Minsk agreement, a deal between Ukraine and Russia to stop the violence under a fragile ceasefire.

**2015**

The Minsk group meets again resulting in the Minsk II agreement.

**2016-2017**

As fighting in Donbas continues, Russia repeatedly strikes Ukraine in a series of cyberattacks, including a 2016 attack on Kyiv's power grid that causes a major blackout.

**2019**

In April, comedian Volodymyr Zelenskyy is elected president in a landslide. His early efforts to reach a solution to the violence are slowed by US President Trump, who briefly blocks US military aid to Ukraine and urges Zelenskyy to work with Putin.

**2021**

Russia sends about 100,000 troops to Ukraine's borders in April, ostensibly for military exercises. Zelenskyy urges Nato to put Ukraine on a timeline for membership. Satellite imagery shows in November a new build-up of Russian troops.

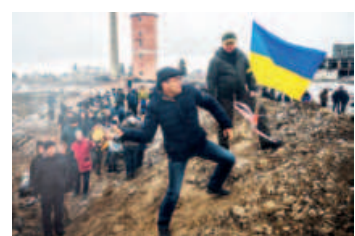
**2022**

On February 1, Putin denies planning an invasion and accuses the US of ignoring his country's security demands. Putin on February 21 recognises Donetsk and Luhansk as independent entities and then orders Russian troops to "maintain peace" there.

**FEB 24, 2022**

Russian forces invade Ukraine.

SOURCE: AGENCIES



Kyiv is most likely the main objective of the Kremlin, said Nitoiu.

The Russians would probably install at least an interim administration, said Graeme Gill, professor emeritus of government and international relations at the University of Sydney.

However, given the low likelihood of this being widely accepted among the Ukrainian population, Putin would have more success if the current government, perhaps stripped of some members but continuing to be

## Both could've done better

**TASNEEM TAYEB**

Kyivan Rus, the first Slavic state, is considered the birthplace of Belarus, Ukraine and Russia. In the 11th century, the vast territory of Kyivan Rus stretched from White Sea in the north to the Black Sea in the south, and nurtured people of various ethnicities and cultures. Russia, Belarus, Ukraine all claim shared cultural heritage to the Kyivan Rus. The names of Belarus and Russia are also derived from the Slavic state.

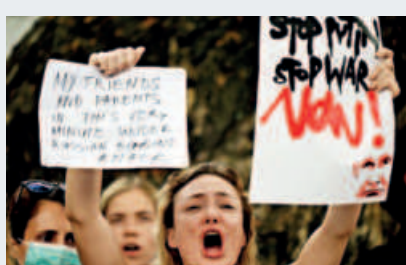
Over the centuries, Kyivan Rus has been at the receiving end of invasions, by the Mongols and by the western forces, including the Polish forces, with the lines of its fate being drawn and redrawn again by the invaders.

In 1991, with the break up of the Soviet Union, the fates of Belarus, Ukraine and Russia had finally been sealed. Or so it seemed at that time. But then 2014 happened, when Crimea had been annexed by Russia and Donetsk separatists had declared independence from Ukraine, leading to a prolonged conflict that has claimed the lives of more than 14,000 people so far. And now the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Eastern Ukraine was populated with people from Russia after the

death of millions of Ukrainians during the 1930s famine. The Russians there have a strong affinity with Russia. They are pro-Russian and often do not appreciate the pro-West sentiments of the western Ukrainians.

While Belarus—with its pro-Russian government in power, albeit unpopular—is secure in the knowledge that it has Russia's security support,



Ukraine, with public opinions divided over their approach towards Russia, and only "assured" by the West of its admission to Nato or the EU, has remained vulnerable on every front.

After the Cold War, Russia, feeling threatened by the growing influence of the West on the former Soviet Union states, has tried to put up a strong front as a major world power. This is why when Ukraine expressed its Nato and



EU admission ambitions, Russia did not sit quietly.

This invasion is as much about the existential threat of Russia as it is about Ukraine's. If Ukraine formally joins the Nato, then the Western security alliance—with its military might—will reach Russia's borders, a highly undesirable outcome for the country.

Pro-Russian Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko is unpopular and in 2020 in the face of mass public protests had come under significant pressure to step down. It was only with Russia's proactive support that he could hold on to power.

Belarus is not a very strong ally. This is why Russia needs Ukraine as a neutral zone.

And Russia's main aim—it seems from this invasion—is a changeover of government in Ukraine to a regime that

is more sympathetic to the country and more resilient to the lures of the West—in short replicating the Belarusian arrangement.

But Russia cannot harbour such ambitions about its neighbours.

Ukraine—despite its historical affinities with Russia and the Kyivan Rus, is now a sovereign nation and Russia cannot dictate its policies. If Russia feels threatened then it needs to address its insecurity through other means. Intimidations, manipulations, invasions are not acceptable actions or reactions and must be dealt with the strongest possible measures.

Ukraine's integrity must be acknowledged and respected by Russia.

The West while supporting Ukraine in these trying times, should also work towards building a relationship of trust with Russia, where the country would not need "neutral", "buffer" states between itself and the West.

This madness must end, and all parties must work towards peace. The historic ties between Ukraine and Russia should be celebrated, rather than misused to create a rift and divide.

Tasneem Tayeb is a columnist for The Daily Star. Her Twitter handle is @tasneem\_tayeb