



RUSSIA AT WAR

Intention and military capability after Ukraine

Niels Bo Poulsen and Jørgen Staun (eds.)



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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

By Niels Bo Poulsen & Jørgen Staun

On 24 February 2022

"'Nachalos', he said in Russian. 'It has started'."

It was around 4.30 in the morning, but Olena Zelenska, First Lady of Ukraine, immediately understood what her husband meant. For months, the news in Ukraine had been warning that war was coming. TV talk shows had been debating who would be the quickest to flee – officials or elected representatives? A popular programme had offered advice on how best to pack an escape suitcase. Two of Ukraine's key allies, the US and the UK, had taken the drastic step of publishing satellite surveillance photos and intercept logs of Russian forces deployed on three sides of Ukraine – to the north (in Belarus), to the east (in Kharkiv and Donbas, which had been in a state of war since 2014) and to the south (in Crimea, which Russia occupied and annexed in 2014). The assessment from the Americans and the British was that Russian troops could probably overrun Ukraine in a matter of days.

Yet the presidential couple had gone to bed shortly after midnight on 24 February in their house in Kontja-Zaspa outside Kyiv without having made plans for what to do with the children, the house, the German Shepherd, not to mention the parrot Kesha, if the Russians attacked.

The lack of preparation was symptomatic of pre-war president Volodymyr Zelensky, who "had spent weeks playing down the risk of a full-scale invasion and assuring his people that all would be fine. He had refused the advice of his military commanders to call up all available reserves and use them to fortify the border." (Shuster, 2024, p. 8). Many in the West

were also wrong. Some, like Zelensky, insisted to the very end that Russia would not attack, that the deployment of forces was just a bluff, pressure, coercive diplomacy to get the West and Ukraine to agree to Russia's inflated demands – including that NATO should withdraw militarily from Eastern and Central Europe and pull back to what was called the 1997 borders (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021).

Others argued that the Russian pressure *had to be* a bluff because a country the size of Ukraine could not be invaded with a force of only around 190,000-200,000 troops. Russia simply didn't have the strength for such an invasion. Therefore, it was not going to happen.

The threat from Russia

This book attempts to analyse the threat from Russia against the backdrop of the very attack that the presidential couple, the Ukrainian population and the international community woke up to on 24 February 2022. It is specifically aimed at Danish security policy officials, both civilian and military, including the Danish Defence's educational institutions. Yet we have endeavoured to create a text that can be read by non-specialists. We hope that not only those with a professional need to touch on the subject, such as journalists, but also more generally interested readers and students will enjoy the book.

The book is written against the backdrop of almost three years of large-scale warfare. To date, the human toll of the invasion amounts to at least 36,000 killed and wounded civilians (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner, 2024) – and this estimate contains a substantial dark figure. To this must be added millions of refugees and internally displaced persons, as well as extensive Russian destruction of civilian infrastructure across Ukraine.

The military consequences of the war have even more monstrous dimensions. In October 2024, the US authorities put the casualty figure at 600,000 dead, wounded and missing (Robertson, 2024). The British authorities assessed the number to be 700,000 (AFP, 2024). The Ukrainian forces' official casualty figure is 30,000 killed, but many more are estimated to have been killed, in addition to the many wounded. An article in *The Wall Street Journal* quotes a confidential estimate from the Ukrainian government and puts the figure at 80,000 killed and 400,000 wounded (Pancevski,

2024). Yet the war continues. For Ukraine, this is because the war has taken on the character of a struggle for existence. This is due to the recurring Russian declarations that Ukraine is not a real and viable state, that its government is illegitimate, and that parts of Ukraine are located on territory that used to belong to Russia. But it is also due to the heavy-handed Russian warfare, with attacks on civilian targets, serious war crimes and coerced Russification of the territories occupied by Moscow. These factors, combined with foreign support and the Ukrainian defence's ability to adapt on the battlefield, have given Ukraine the ability and will to fight a war of attrition against a larger and more ruthless opponent. But why hasn't Russia long since ended a war that has cost it far more lives and money than all other conflicts Russia and its predecessor state the Soviet Union combined have been involved in since World War II? Does Russia's leadership still expect to win the war? And what does the war mean for its strategic plans and military capabilities? Despite the many Russian setbacks on the battlefields of Ukraine, has the threat from Russia to Denmark and its NATO allies increased rather than decreased as the war has progressed?

It is the intention of this book to penetrate as far as possible into the Russian military and its surrounding security policy framework to create a better basis for the Danish public and the Danish authorities – first and foremost the Danish Defence – to assess how large the military threat from Russia will be in the coming years and how we should respond to it. We do this by first examining why Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, then we discuss the elite worldview and the accelerating patriotism and militarism in Russian society. The intention is to predict the interests and ambitions of the Russian regime and how we expect these will affect Denmark and Europe in the future. Next, we analyse Russian military capability service by service: What did we think we knew about Russia's military capability before the war in Ukraine in 2022? And what have we seen unfold during the war in Ukraine? Overall, this should provide a consolidated answer to how serious the threat from Russia is and what this means for Denmark and NATO – the security policy framework within which our defence takes place.

The book is written under the auspices of a now long-standing research effort at the Royal Danish Defence College in collaboration with colleagues from other Danish research institutions. Most recently, this collective work resulted in the book *Rusland som militær stormagt* [*Russia's Military Might*] (Poulsen & Staun, 2021) and before that in the book *Kreml i krig: Ruslands*

brug af militær magt [*The Kremlin at War: Russia's Use of Military Power*] (Poulsen & Staun, 2018). As the former title suggests, in 2021, we assessed that Russia's armed forces, after (at that time) almost 15 years of reforms and economic favours, would be a very capable instrument in a potential major military operation (Poulsen & Staun, 2021, p. 385-397). It was an assessment that aligned with NATO's emerging perception of Russia as a potential peer opponent. The assessment was also aligned with the views of recognised Western research institutions on the Russian military (Defense Intelligence Agency, 2017; Hackett et al., 2024; IISS, 2019, 2021; Persson, 2016; Renz, 2018; Westerlund & Oxenstierna, 2019). In our view, Russia would prioritise stability in its neighbourhood, but also guard its great power status and be ready to use force if threatened. At the same time, we warned that Russia saw itself as being at war with the West. Not (yet) in a hot war (armed conflict), but in an information and cyber war.

The Danish research community, like many international researchers, was generally surprised by Russia's military invasion of Ukraine (Renz, 2023). Even in the Royal Danish Defence College's Russia research group, not many – albeit some – believed that Russia would invade Ukraine in the winter of 2021-22. Not only did Putin's willingness to use his armed forces for an unprovoked war of aggression prove to be far greater than assumed by many of us, but also the brutality the regime was willing to use against its "brother nation" Ukraine – a country with which Russians have close linguistic, religious and cultural ties – caught most of us by surprise. It also came as a surprise to most of us how poorly the Russian defence actually performed during the first long period of the war – and to some extent is still performing. The war in Ukraine has shown that in a number of areas, the Russian military was far less well-equipped than generally assumed. Against this background, it is natural to begin this book by asking why assessing Russia's intentions and military capabilities proved so difficult.

The difficult art of prediction

Let's first look at the problem of predicting the Russian regime's willingness to use its military in a conventional war of aggression against Ukraine. According to German political scientists Jonas Driedger and Mikhail Polianskii (Driedger & Polianskii, 2023), one of the main reasons why Russia was misjudged in Western research circles is due to what they call "utility-

based thinking". Driedger and Polianskii believe that many of the structuralist theories of international politics in particular are based on the logic that the costs in the form of sanctions, international isolation, protracted war and military losses would be so great for Russia that it would make no rational sense to invade Ukraine. The actual developments – with Russian casualties in the order of 600,000-700,000, international sanctions and partial isolation, as well as the expansion of NATO to include Sweden and Finland – make it almost inconceivable that the invasion will ultimately have the effect Putin has hoped for. In this sense, utility-based thinking represented a valid argument – it just didn't stop Russia from attacking, either because Putin's and the elite's perception of what is expedient differs from what can be seen from the outside or because Putin made the decision based on flawed information and overly optimistic assumptions.

Another, similar, reason why so many people were mistaken about the intentions of the Putin regime is probably "mirror-imaging". In other words, people mirrored their own understanding of the world and way of reasoning onto the Russian elite. This may have led people to attribute a risk aversion to the Putin regime that turned out not to exist. Perhaps the cost-benefit analysis simply looked different in the Kremlin than it was imagined from the outside.

A third factor that made it extremely difficult to predict the invasion was the closed decision-making process in Russia. British Russia expert Mark Galeotti, in criticising the inability of researchers in this field, states: "Even the big shots in Putin's court", such as (then Secretary of the National Security Council) Nikolai Patrushev and (head of the SVR foreign intelligence service) Sergey Naryshkin, not to mention smaller but significant fish like Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and former President Dmitry Medvedev, "even they did not know what Putin wanted – just three days before the invasion. Ukrainian intelligence – listening to what the Russian generals and colonels, who had been massed along the border for months, were saying to each other – they didn't know either. Until about 72 hours before the invasion" (Galeotti, 2023, 17:19-18:06). Although there is no consensus in this research group on whether the argument can be stretched this far – especially the idea that parts of the political elite, such as Sergey Lavrov, did not know that the war was coming is debatable – it is a valid point that open sources, such as those on which our research is based, are only useful to a limited extent when it comes to capturing important and immediate decisions in a system as closed as the Russian one.

Similarly, the image of a strong and professional Russian military in 2022 can be skewed by the Russian invasion of Crimea and eastern Ukraine in 2014, which went very smoothly in the case of the former. So did Russia's military intervention in Syria – which mainly took the form of air operations – from 2015 onwards. Forgotten for a while was the far inferior performance of the Russian army in Georgia in 2008 and in the Chechen wars from 1994 to 1997 and again from 1999 to around 2009. It was also overlooked that from 2014 onwards, Ukrainian forces gained valuable experience from fighting Russian (proxy) forces in the Donbas region and received increasing Western support in terms of both training and equipment.

Three years of war in Ukraine have clearly demonstrated that the Russian armed forces have their limitations in the field. Russia's strategic, operational and tactical capabilities are not comparable to those of the US when it waged war against Saddam Hussein's heavily armed but technologically inferior Iraq in 1991 and again in 2003. The invasion of Ukraine was not over in two days – or two hours – as some of the most optimistic voices in Russian public discourse claimed. Nor was the war over in a few months, but is now about to enter its fourth year. To date, Russia has occupied around a fifth of Ukraine's territory (including Crimea), but the cost has been enormous. What the Kremlin is likely to achieve on the battlefield is some territorial gains and a freeze of the conflict somewhere in eastern Ukraine, not a seizure of the entire country or a full Ukrainian capitulation. That is, unless Western support for Ukraine disappears completely, of course.

But just as it was a mistake to overestimate Russia's military capabilities based on the prowess of its forces during the annexation of Crimea and the air war in Syria, it is also problematic to underestimate Russia's military capabilities based on what we have seen in Ukraine from 2022 until now.

Despite losses that no contemporary Western democracy could withstand in a war of aggression, the fighting has not led to a collapse in the field or a political upheaval in Moscow, or created a completely weakened and demoralised Russia. The Kremlin regime has mobilised additional soldiers in various ways; it has greatly accelerated its military production; it still has a tight grip on power; and Russia does not seem to be facing an immediate economic collapse – albeit the Western sanctions combined with the transition to a war economy have significant consequences, which is why the Russian National Bank is struggling to control inflation. At the

time of writing (early December 2024), the lending rate is at 21 per cent, with a warning that it may rise. On the other hand, Russia is still the second strongest, if not the strongest, nuclear power on the planet and regularly rattles its nuclear weapons. And as long as Russia does not use these nuclear weapons, it seems to be able to count on diplomatic and other support from China. The ability to import (and license) drones from Iran and acquire ammunition and soldiers from North Korea has also strengthened Russia's ability to continue its offensives. According to some observers, around 6,000 Iranian Shahed drones had been purchased by early 2024 (Yaron, 2024). North Korea is estimated to have delivered between 1.6 and 6 million artillery shells to Russia to date (Johnson, 2024). In comparison, Russia is estimated to produce around three million artillery shells per year after converting its economy to wartime conditions, which is why the contribution from North Korea is substantial. In reality, Russia would not be able to maintain the same pressure on Ukraine without the help of Iran and North Korea.

The biggest surprise for our research group has probably been the impressive skill of the Ukrainian army and the exemplary ability of the Ukrainian state and nation to stick together and perform a formidable feat of strength in their resistance to the invasion forces. The war in Ukraine is thus a reminder that military power is always contextual and relative. International politics scholar Robert Gilpin writes on this issue that "Both power and prestige are ultimately imponderable and incalculable; they cannot be known absolutely by any a priori calculation process. They are known only when they are tested, especially on the field of battle" (Gilpin, 1981, pp. 32–33). It is therefore important to bear in mind when reading this book that the judgements we make about Russia's security preferences, risk appetite and military capabilities are dynamic. They can change over time as a consequence of both internal and external conditions – ranging from Russia's demographics and economic base, the composition of its leadership and popular sentiment, to actions, events and moods in the outside world, i.e. the environment in which Russia can use its armed power. This is an issue we will return to in the conclusion. Since this means that while this book provides an updated assessment of what Russia's intentions and military capabilities are now and in the near future, such an analysis must always be complemented by the context for the possible use of military force.

To this challenge – which quite banally relates to any assumption about the use of military force and not just to Russia – comes a previously mentioned problem: the Russian political system and the way the country's civil-military relations function create particularly difficult conditions when it comes to collecting and interpreting data. This hampered our and other experts' ability to assess whether war would break out in 2022 and how it would unfold. And it will continue to create special conditions for research in the future. It is therefore worth considering how we acquire knowledge about Russia, its security policy and its possible use of military force, and how we interpret this knowledge.

The book's theoretical approach

The book takes an interdisciplinary approach to Russian foreign and security policy processes and uses it to shed light on Russia's use of military means and ways of organising and using its military, drawing on the humanities, social sciences and military disciplines. Theoretically, the chapters are predominantly based on international political theory, in close interaction with military history and war theory, as well as drawing on area studies to a certain extent. In each chapter, you will find a research overview and separate considerations on how that particular chapter is theoretically and methodologically organised. It should also be mentioned that the majority of the authors are from the Royal Danish Defence College and that the work has been conducted within a more or less explicit shared "paradigm", namely that there is a (distinct) military threat from Russia and that this is best handled through military deterrence. This common starting point provides the book's chapters with considerable rigour in terms of literature base and approach, but can of course also be seen as giving the book a degree of one-sidedness.

International relations theory, or IR theory, belongs to a set of theories within political science that seek to explain developments and dynamics in the international system – with a particular focus on the behaviour of states – based on general assumptions about how states and international actors behave in general. IR theory focuses on the causes of war and conflict. Out of the many schools and sub-schools, three main schools can be identified as the most important and widespread: Realism (including neorealism), liberalism (including neoliberalism) and constructivism. Of Danish

introductory books on IR theory, we especially recommend Rasmussen and Skött (2019) and Wæver (1992).

Neoclassical realism¹, which is the subject of Chapter 2 of this book, is one of the latest developments within IR realism. It seeks to embrace the two most common realist traditions – neorealism and classical realism – while emphasising structural explanations: the change in the relative distribution of power in the system is the main explanation over time. At the same time, however, this approach has been inspired by a number of other IR traditions and allows for the inclusion of, for example, the role of institutions, learning from past conflicts, and domestic political pressure from parties and interest organisations. The theory is also open to the influence that a country's strategic culture may have on foreign and security policy decisions. Despite the primacy neoclassical realism theory places on the change in the distribution of power in the system, critics have called the openness of the theory a smorgasbord of good ideas. A few recommendable neoclassical studies of Russia's foreign policy are Götz (2022) and Kropacheva (2012).

The next theoretical starting point is strategic culture.² This theory is about how the internal beliefs and assumptions about the world (of a country's elite) influence foreign and security policy decisions (Johnston, 1995). Strategic culture is defined in Chapter 4 of this book as a set of discourses related to strategy that exist across a country's key power elites, relating to issues such as the country's role in the world and the legitimacy and effectiveness of the use of military force. The thesis is that states do not react similarly to international pressures and opportunities, but assess and respond to external events via their own distinct strategic culture (Götz & Staun, 2022). As a result, countries that are otherwise similar on several parameters can pursue different foreign and security policies. According to Alastair Iain Johnston (1995), the explanation lies in the fact that elites socialised in different strategic cultures will make different choices when placed in comparable situations.

The historical-cultural and country-based approach – often referred to as area studies³ – is a more holistic way to examine Russia. It views state

1. See, for instance: Kitchen, 1998; Rose, 1998; Wivel, Anders, 2005; Wohlforth, 2010.
2. See, for instance: Berger, 2012; Desch, 1998; Facon, 2016; Johnston, 1995; Staun, 2018.
3. For some key contributions that outline the overarching tradition, see: Engerman, 2016; Kennedy, 2001; Khosrowjahi, 2011; Orlovsky, 1995; Taylor, 2003.

behaviour as the sum of conditions, including external influences, with much of the explanation sought in historical-cultural conditions. In the historical-cultural or country-based approach, internal conditions are attributed with the greatest explanatory value for Russia's behaviour. This is a more humanistic way of looking at things. To put it bluntly, the historical-cultural mode of analysis helps us see things in context. For example, Putin does not shape his foreign policy solely based on Russia's interaction with other states. We must also pay attention to the psychological climate in the Kremlin, domestic political motives, Russia's historical experiences and distinct cultural beliefs about how to behave as a head of state, etc. Thus, this approach has some common ground with the strategic culture approach.

Finally, there is the approach used by military theory.⁴ Military theory can be briefly described as "a comprehensive analysis of all the aspects of warfare, its patterns and inner structure, and the mutual relationships of its various components/elements. It also encapsulates political, economic, and social relationships within a society and among the societies that create a conflict and lead to a war. Sound military theory explains how to conduct and win a war. It also includes the use of military force to prevent the outbreak of war." (Vego, 2011, p. 60). In terms of the sociology of science, the field is characterised by the fact that much of military theory has been developed by officers. The studies have therefore frequently had a prescriptive aim, namely to provide instructions on how to win in war. Military theory is included in the research project as a tool for analysing Russian military thinking and the capabilities of the Russian armed forces.

The field of war and military theory offers several concepts and explanatory models that enable military analyses of war. These include the division of (especially) land military operations into three levels: tactical, operational and strategic, and the distinction between different domains that can be subject to military action: land, sea, air, space and cyber domains. The different domains are characterised by specific fundamentals that determine how to fight in each of them. It is also in military theory that you will find thinking about what can explain victory and defeat in combat. This is unfolded on a generic level by Carl von Clausewitz, who sees war as a struggle of wills conducted for political purposes. War is characterised

4. Some of the commonly referenced works are: Angstrom & Widen, 2015; Høiback & Ydstebø, 2013; Lider, 1983; Vego, 2011.

by eternal changeability due to the countless ways in which one can fight and because there will always be incomplete knowledge about the opponent and their plans, just as chance (friction) creates unexpected developments. With such a starting point for an analysis, one will notice, for example, that Russian war planning did not sufficiently take into account the effects of friction and underestimated the Ukrainian will to fight. But the course of wars has also been explained (and predicted) by other, more positivist parts of military theory, e.g. through the establishment of supposedly eternally valid principles for warfare. Based on the writings of Henri Jomini, for example, it can be pointed out that the Ukrainians have in many cases benefitted from the so-called internal lines. This has enabled them to concentrate their forces in hotspots faster and more easily than their opponent. A model like the Danish-developed cycle of warfare shows that the Russians (and Ukrainians) have done best when they have achieved a reasonable balance between the materiel they had available, the way they organised their forces and the doctrine according to which they fought. On the Russian side, this balance was rarely present at the start of the war but has been achieved to a greater extent now, through reorganisation and adapted tactics and better knowledge of what new types of equipment, such as drones, can be used for and how.

One will not necessarily find explicit references to classical military theory in the book's chapters. However, the analyses will to a large extent be shaped by it, either directly or indirectly. In addition, many of the authors have been trained through their military education in various analytical models that NATO uses in its operational planning. These offer tools for understanding the actions of the Russian armed forces, but they also entail the risk of mirror imaging, i.e. assuming that the Russian armed forces analyse and act in the same way as NATO forces.

How to assess Russia's political interests and military capabilities?

One of the reasons for our own and many Western expert think tanks' overestimation of Russia's military capabilities ahead of the 2022 invasion is an excessive focus on quantifiable data: How many tanks does the Russian army have? Of what type and degree of modernisation? How good is the armour? How far and how accurately can they fire and with what effect,

etc.? In other words, a certain fascination with "big shining objects", rather than what is much more difficult to study from a distance and in peacetime, such as the morale, fighting spirit and military culture of the forces, which are only really tested when the going gets tough. The problem of big shining objects is also a challenge for our research on the Russian armed forces: We try to observe the military of a foreign, hostile state power from a distance, in the hope of being able to say something about its military capabilities. However, the Russian authorities do not put their own internal investigations and assessments of what went wrong before or during the war on public display. To the extent that Western intelligence services have this type of information, it is largely classified. And if classified information is published it is hard, sometimes impossible, for independent researchers to check the validity of the information. The same applies to information about the fighting and the Russian forces that comes from the Ukrainian authorities. Ukraine is at war and needs to control the flow of information from the battlefield as best it can for the sake of national security.

The way to deal with this methodological challenge is to relate the quantitative data and official statements we have – for example, the number and nature of tanks etc., the official information on doctrine (how the Russian army prescribes to use them most effectively in a given situation) and training – to the actual deployment in Ukraine that we can observe through open sources. This makes it possible to examine how much or how little this differs from the deployment of forces in an exercise (which is always described in the Russian media as a success) to the reality on the battlefield. The war therefore gives us a more realistic and tested picture of what the Russian forces can and cannot do. Although the Kremlin regime seeks to portray the war as a success and camouflage the shortcomings of warfare, the war has actually provided a wealth of data, probably far superior to that available in any previous war. This is due to the many new data sources that abound on social media and elsewhere, combined with the numerous (more or less) independent military bloggers and analysts that the war has produced. To this must be added the amount of information being disseminated to the public by Western intelligence services and military experts, and of course by the Ukrainian authorities. As mentioned above, it goes without saying that extensive critical scrutiny of the validity of the empirical sources is needed here too, as there is a clear risk of overlooking Ukrainian weaknesses and challenges and exaggerating the corresponding Russian ones in this process.

There is a tendency in Danish and Western media and analyst circles – out of a kind of solidarity with Ukraine – to make fewer critical analyses of Ukrainian weaknesses and problems. The website of the Institute for the Study of War, whose coverage of the war is otherwise quite authoritative, is a striking example of this. A few days after Ukraine launched an offensive against Russian territory in August 2024, it wrote that it would only cover the offensive descriptively. The justification was: "ISW will not offer assessments about the intent of this Ukrainian operation in order to avoid compromising Ukrainian operational security. ISW will not make forecasts about what Ukrainian forces might or might not do or where or when they might do it. ISW will continue to map, track, and evaluate operations as they unfold but will not offer insight into Ukrainian planning, tactics, or techniques." (ISW, 2024). In line with this, the number of reports and analyses dealing with the Ukrainian military's efforts during the war remains relatively modest. And these writings are – with exceptions – not characterised by the same critical-analytical approach as when it comes to Ukraine's Russian opponent.

The structure of this book presents a further challenge. Its "service-focused" research design, where we go through Russia's military service by service, makes it a challenge to conduct an analysis of the overall Russian ability to deploy its forces. For example, we have not been able to conduct a comprehensive analysis of Russian doctrine and its impact on the combat power of Russian military forces. Nor have we been able to give an overall assessment of how good the Russian forces are at co-operative or joint operations, not to mention NATO's new buzzword: multi-domain operations (MDO). We discuss problems with logistics in several of the service chapters, but not in an overall analysis in one single chapter. The same goes for Russian military culture – that is, the ways of acting and behavioural norms that are reflected as patterns in the way the Russian military functions. While this topic does not have its "own" chapter, one may consult Chapter 4 of our previous book (Poulsen & Staun, 2021), where the topic was analysed in depth. There, we pointed out several factors that negatively impacted the effectiveness of the Russian military, including the inability to share information and delegate decision-making power downwards in the organisation. It is our clear impression that the course of the war has confirmed these and other assessments in the chapter. EW (Electronic Warfare) and ISR (Information, Surveillance and Reconnaissance) have not been given independent chapters, despite the fact that these are increasingly

important factors on the battlefield and must therefore be assumed to have a growing importance for the development of the Ukraine war. Nor do we make any overall, comprehensive assessment of Russia's economic ability to maintain and possibly expand the war, or any overall analysis of the Russian defence industry's production capacity, but simply discuss the topics in various places in the book. The same applies to the ability and willingness of Russia's allies – primarily China, North Korea and Iran – to support Russia's war machine. Including chapters on these issues would contravene the logic of the book, as its focus is primarily directed inwards, towards the Russian armed forces.

However, these issues will – based on existing research – to some extent be brought into play in the book's conclusion, where we seek to synthesise the knowledge contained in the book as a whole. And we end the book with an assessment of the consequences of the war in Ukraine for Denmark and its armed forces.

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We wish you a good read,
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Chapter 2

Geopolitics, regime security and Putin's imperial ambitions: A neoclassical realist account of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine

By Elias Götz

Introduction

According to former US Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara, crises in international politics are best resolved through "strategic empathy" (not to be confused with sympathy) and the ability to put yourself in your opponent's shoes. Therefore, dealing effectively with Russia – either on the battlefield or in diplomatic forums – requires that Western policymakers understand the Kremlin's aspirations, concerns and intentions. It is therefore not surprising that a large number of researchers and political analysts are trying to figure out what drives Russia's actions and, in particular, why the Kremlin decided to attack Ukraine in February 2022.

So far, however, there is little consensus. On the contrary, a heated debate has emerged. This chapter takes stock of this debate and shows that three main perspectives can be identified. One argues that Russia's invasion can be attributed to President Putin's personal worldview and imperial ambitions. The second perspective suggests that regime security and especially the Kremlin's fear of democratic spillover is behind Russia's attack on Ukraine. A third group of scholars argue that Russia's attack is best understood as a strategic response to Ukraine's growing geopolitical align-

ment with the West. Of course, there are explanations that do not neatly fit into any of the three camps. But as shown below, most arguments can be identified with one of these perspectives.

In the next three sections, I look at them in order and assess their explanatory power. In other words, the first three sections serve as an extended research overview that critically analyses the existing literature. Specifically, the merits of each perspective are assessed based on their ability to account for the underlying drivers (why), timing (when) and scale (how) of Russia's attack. This certainly sets the bar high. But to produce policy-relevant knowledge, researchers need to provide detailed accounts of the event or case in question; partial explanations are of limited value. My analysis shows that each perspective offers some valuable insights. On their own, however, none of them are fully convincing. All three explanations suffer from analytical problems. In the fourth section, I suggest how researchers can overcome the identified shortcomings. More specifically, I put forward a so-called neoclassical realist model that suggests how the interplay of international, domestic and individual factors led to Russia's attack on Ukraine in February 2022. The final section briefly summarises the chapter's main findings and outlines some policy implications.¹

Explanation 1: The Putin factor

Perhaps the most popular explanation for Russia's attack on Ukraine centres on Putin's worldview. According to this perspective, Putin decided to invade Ukraine to fulfil his personal desire to restore Russia's imperial greatness. As Torbakov (2022) puts it, the Russian president is guided by "imperial fantasies, historical nostalgia, and resentment towards the West." Similarly, Melvin (2022) argues that Putin's decision to attack Ukraine is "driven by a sense of a historic mission to rectify perceived injustices and to regather lost Russian land." Wilkinson (2022) similarly claims that "Putin is hell-bent on recreating a new empire".

Such arguments are either implicitly or explicitly based on decision-making theories. These theories argue that the worldviews and cognitive

1. Portions of this chapter have been published previously in "Russia's War Against Ukraine: Context, Causes, and Consequences", *Problems of Post-Communism* Vol. 17, No. 3, pp. 193-205 (Götz & Ekman, 2024). Reprinted by permission of Informa UK Limited, trading Taylor & Francis Group, <https://www.tandfonline.com>.

frameworks of individual leaders are a chief determinant of states' international behaviour. According to existing research, this is especially the case in so-called personalised authoritarian regimes (Weeks, 2014, pp. 82–105). This seems to be an apt description of Russia's political system, which has become increasingly centralised and personalised in recent years. Furthermore, there are strong indications that Putin is a leader with unusual ambitions. For example, Putin has openly compared himself to Peter the Great, saying that he shares the tsar's goal of "taking back" lost Russian land (quoted in Roth, 2022). Putin is also known for making controversial statements about Ukraine. As early as 2008, he reportedly told US President George W. Bush that Ukraine was not a "real" country (quoted in RFE/RL, 2008). Another well-known example is Putin's June 2021 essay "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians". In the essay, he provides an extended review of selectively chosen historical events and concludes that Russians and Ukrainians are "one people" (Putin, 2021).

Against this background, it can be argued that Russia's attack is best explained by Putin's neo-imperial ambitions. Upon closer inspection, however, several caveats must be added. To begin with, the argument that Putin is striving for the reconstruction of a Greater Russia is not as convincing as it may seem at first glance. After all, in the early years of his presidency, Putin accepted the establishment of US bases and airfields in Central Asia to support Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan despite opposition from hardliners in the Russian military (McFaul, 2001). Furthermore, in the past few years, Putin has missed several opportunities to reintegrate parts of the former Soviet Union. For example, he has refrained from formally annexing Moldova's Transnistria region or South Ossetia in Georgia – despite repeated requests from local authorities to do so (Kucera, 2022; TASS, 2014). This is hard to square with the image of Putin as someone intent on rebuilding an empire.

One could argue that Putin is obsessed with Ukraine rather than the entire post-Soviet region. As mentioned above, he has repeatedly stressed the unity of the Russian and Ukrainian people. Accordingly, his primary goal may be to bring Ukraine back into Moscow's fold in the name of Russian greatness. But even if this is the case, it still doesn't explain the timing of the attack. Why didn't Putin launch a military operation to take Ukraine at an earlier point during his 22 years in power? Putin-centric explanations struggle to answer this question.

Furthermore, the claim that Putin has a penchant for excessive use of military force and foreign policy "adventurism" needs to be nuanced. In the past, Putin has been calculating and often opportunistic – but not a big risktaker. As Rumer (2022) points out: "despite being described as reckless, Putin is anything but. He has used military power in calculated ways: in Syria, where his brutal air campaign took the lives of countless civilians but minimized Russian military losses; in Libya, where he deployed mercenaries who could be written off as expendable if wounded or killed; or most recently in Kazakhstan, where his high-profile deployment was in reality small and very low-key." Even the 2014 takeover of Crimea was carried out with a minimum of violence as Russia was able to take advantage of extremely favourable circumstances (including a predominantly pro-Russian population, the presence of significant Russian military bases and a woefully unprepared Ukrainian army). Therefore, it seems an exaggeration to claim that Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 – the largest military land operation in Europe since World War II – was merely the latest manifestation of a well-established pattern in Russian foreign policy under Putin.

Finally, many of the above accounts fail to examine how Putin's personal ambitions interact with factors at the domestic and international levels analysis. This is problematic. Area studies scholars have repeatedly warned against the tendency to overemphasise the Putin factor in explaining Russian foreign policy. For example, Mankoff (2022, p. 120) noted a few months before the war: "Lost in this Putin obsession is the reality that the challenge Russia presents to the West rests on deeper historical, geographic, and political foundations." Similarly, Frey (2021, p. 26) concluded: "The debate on whether great individuals make history or history makes great individuals is long and inconclusive. But it is safe to say that our (...) debate on Russia has overplayed the individual at the expense of other factors." Noble & Schulmann (2021, p. 94) also pointed out that "by focusing on Putin as an individual, observers can too easily ignore the structural conditions that shape his thinking". All this is not to say that Putin-centric explanations of Russia's Ukraine war are wrong – but that they have so far paid insufficient attention to domestic and international influences.

In other words, the claim that Putin and his preferences are the immediate cause of Russia's decision to go to war is true in a definitional sense. Foreign policy decisions are always made by state leaders. But that in itself is also an unsatisfactory explanation. The key question is: to what extent is

Putin a free agent acting on his own will and to what extent are his choices shaped by underlying material, social and cultural factors? Proponents of individual-level explanations of Russia's war against Ukraine have not properly addressed this question. In other words, there is much to suggest that knowing something about Putin's personality is necessary to understand the reasons for Russia's attack on Ukraine. At the same time, however, it does not seem to be a sufficient explanation.

Explanation 2: Democracy prevention

Another explanation is that Russia's war against Ukraine is driven by domestic political factors and considerations. Specifically, many observers argue that the Kremlin is concerned about the spread of democracy from Ukraine to Russia, which could undermine the Putin regime's grip on power. As Person & McFaul (2022, p. 26) write, the leadership in Moscow "cannot tolerate a successful and democratic Ukraine on Russia's border (...). That would undermine the Kremlin's own regime stability and proposed rationale for autocratic state leadership." Kramer (2022) also notes that "Putin's fear of a successful, vibrant, democratic Ukraine on Russia's border is the real reason for the invasion". Similarly, Stoner (2022) argues that "Kyiv represents a threat to Putin's cronyistic autocracy not because it might become a NATO member (...), but because it is struggling to be what Mr. Putin's Russia is not: a free, democratic society that could serve as an example to an increasingly restive segment of the Russian population."

The general argument here is that the Kremlin is opposed to democratic change in the post-Soviet region as it could prove contagious and spread to Russia. Building on this, several observers argue that the Kremlin was (and still is) particularly concerned about Ukraine. The reason: Ukraine is culturally and historically close to Russia; there are many close family ties between the peoples of the two countries. Thus, a democratic Ukraine could easily serve as a source of inspiration for many Russians to rebel against the Putin regime. To neutralise this threat, it is argued that the Kremlin decided to carry out a regime change in Kyiv.

At first glance, there is much in favour of this argument. Firstly, it is beyond dispute that the Kremlin has built an increasingly autocratic and repressive regime. Secondly, there is a long list of examples where the Kremlin has intervened to support autocratic leaders. Think, for example,

of Moscow's backing of Lukashenko after his "election victory" in November 2020 or the Russian intervention in Kazakhstan on behalf of the Tokayev regime in January 2022. Thus, the "democracy prevention" thesis has some *a priori* plausibility. But on closer inspection, it has some limitations too.

Firstly, and most fundamentally, before the outbreak of the war, Ukraine was not on the path to becoming a successful democracy. According to Freedom House (2021), which ranks countries according to their political rights, Ukraine was "partly free" with a score of 60 out of 100 in 2021 (down two points from the previous year). In addition, many area specialists described Ukraine as an "oligarchic democracy" given the role wealthy business tycoons played in Ukrainian politics. To be sure, the Zelensky government initiated a campaign to roll back the oligarchs' influence. But the success of the campaign is controversial. Some observers even believe that Zelensky used the campaign as a veneer to silence political opponents (Mykhailo, 2021; Wilson, 2021). Other reforms did not live up to expectations either. For example, Ukraine's judiciary continued to be only partly independent from the executive branch and corruption remains rampant. According to Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index, Ukraine scored 32 out of 100 points in 2021 (one point less than the previous year), ranking it 122nd out of 180 countries (Transparency International, 2021). All this means that Ukraine was not on the path to becoming a functioning liberal democracy. This undermines a fundamental premise of the thesis that "democracy prevention" was the primary reason for Russia's invasion.

Second, and closely related, the risk of pro-democracy spillover from Ukraine to Russia was low. In the last few years, the Kremlin has effectively eliminated the liberal opposition through a combination of repression, information control and co-optation. The result is that nationalist groups of various kinds – not liberals fighting for Western-style democracy – dominate the opposition in Russia today (Barber, 2022; Kolstø & Blakkisrud, 2016). Moreover, there is little evidence that ordinary Russians saw Ukraine as a role model worth emulating. On the contrary, many came to associate Ukraine with the kind of chaos and poverty that plagued Russia in the 1990s. There is no doubt that the Kremlin has deliberately promoted this narrative. Yet it seems to have struck a chord with many Russians. According to survey data from the Levada Centre, large parts of the Russian population see the idea of a Maidan-like revolution in Moscow as a threat rather than a path to freedom (Levada-Center, 2016). Overall, therefore, it

seems reasonable to conclude that the risk (or chance, depending on one's perspective) of a pro-democracy spillover was low.

Thirdly, if you put Russia's Ukraine policy into a broader perspective, the argument loses even more of its punch. After all, in several post-Soviet states, Russia has tolerated democratic leadership changes. One example is Moscow's reaction to the Velvet Revolution in Armenia. In May 2018, a wave of street protests erupted in the capital Yerevan, demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Sargsyan, who had been in power for ten years. The opposition made it clear that their ambition was to move the country in a more democratic direction. According to the "democracy prevention" thesis, the Kremlin should have helped the Sargsyan regime crack down on the protesters. This, however, did not happen. Instead, the Kremlin pursued a wait-and-see policy and established cordial relations with the new government in Yerevan after Sargsyan's resignation. For a regime supposedly deeply intimidated by protest-driven change and pro-democracy uprisings, the Kremlin showed a curious restraint (Weir, 2018). Similarly, the Kremlin accepted democratic leadership changes in the separatist regions of Abkhazia in 2004 and 2020 and Transnistria in 2011 (Kolstø, 2021). A comparative perspective thus casts further doubt on the claim that democracy prevention was the primary driver behind Moscow's decision to launch a large-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Explanation 3: Balancing the West

A third group of scholars explain Russia's attack in geopolitical terms, describing it as a reaction to actions by the West. In particular, they argue that US and NATO efforts to build a close military-strategic alliance with Ukraine provoked Moscow. The most prominent exponent of this view is Mearsheimer (2022), who argues that "the United States is primarily responsible for causing the Ukraine crisis. (...) The United States has pursued a policy toward Ukraine that Putin and other Russian leaders see as an existential threat. (...) I am talking specifically about the US quest to bring Ukraine into NATO and make it a Western bulwark on Russia's border."

By this logic, any other great power confronted with the same circumstances would have acted in the same or similar way. As Lieven (2022) puts it: "Russian fears about expansion of a potentially hostile military alliance to Russia's border should be understandable to any American who has

heard of the Monroe Doctrine." Similarly, Walt (2022) argues that "Great powers are never indifferent to the geostrategic forces arrayed on their borders, and Russia would care deeply about Ukraine's political alignment even if someone else were in charge". In short, Russia's attack on Ukraine is described as typical of the way great powers behave.

This reasoning is theoretically linked to the perspective of structural realism, which argues that military interventions and wars have their sources in the international system, primarily in the relative distribution of power and external security threats (Waltz, 1988). At first glance, much speaks for this perspective. Firstly, President Putin and other senior Kremlin officials have repeatedly stated that Ukraine's growing alignment with the West was an important reason for launching the so-called "special military operation". In the run-up to the war, Moscow also made a number of demands to de-escalate the crisis. These demands included, most importantly, written assurances that NATO would not expand into the post-Soviet space in general and Ukraine in particular (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021a, 2021b). Indeed, policymakers in Moscow have long complained about NATO's eastward expansion, describing it as a threat to Russia's national security (Götz, 2019). Finally, existing studies show that Russia went to war with Georgia in August 2008, at least in part, to prevent it from obtaining NATO membership (Mankoff, 2009, pp. 255–264). In this sense, Russian leaders have spoken and acted in accordance with a realist logic. On its own, however, this line of reasoning does not provide a fully convincing explanation for Moscow's decision to attack Ukraine – for at least three reasons.

Firstly, the available evidence suggests that Moscow is guided not only by defensive considerations but also by offensive objectives. According to captured war plans and intelligence reports, Russia's goal was not only to force regime change in Kyiv but also to occupy large parts of eastern, southern and central Ukraine (Jones, 2022). Furthermore, two days after the war broke out, the state-owned news agency RIA Novosti published an apparently prepared article celebrating Russia's quick victory over Ukraine. The article, which was later removed from the news agency's website, praised Putin for "uniting the Russian world" and re-establishing Russia's "historic borders" in Europe (Coleman, 2022).

Secondly, if Moscow's primary goal was to push Western states back from Russian borders, the attack has proven counterproductive. After all, the war has only reinforced Ukraine's desire to join Euro-Atlantic institutions, including NATO. Moreover, Russia's military actions have raised concerns

among other neighbouring states and caused them to forge closer ties with the Western alliance. The most obvious examples are Finland and Sweden's NATO membership. In addition, NATO has announced a massive increase in its rapid reaction forces to over 300,000 troops; it has drawn up plans to increase its military presence in Central and Eastern Europe; and it has enhanced its air policing missions over the Baltics and the Black Sea. Russia's attack on Ukraine has thus triggered exactly the troop build-up on its borders that Russia supposedly wanted to prevent (Foy, 2022; for background and discussion, see Matlary & Johnson, 2024).

Thirdly, there appears to be an element of miscalculation on Russia's part, not only in terms of the strategic consequences of the war but also in terms of the local balance of military power. Despite the Kremlin's adamant declarations that the war has gone according to plan, virtually all military analysts agree that the initial phase of Russia's campaign was a failure and that the subsequent phases have been of mixed success at best. There are many reasons for this, including poor logistics, low morale and faulty intelligence (Dalsjö et al., 2022; Jones, 2022). But probably the most important reason was that there were faulty assumptions about the willingness and ability of the Ukrainian military and its citizens to resist – a point to which I return below.

This leads to a larger analytical question. Many realist-inspired approaches and explanations rest on the premise that states are strategic or rational actors. Some care is required here. As realists correctly point out, assuming strategic behaviour or rationality is not the same as assuming foresight or success (Mearsheimer & Rosato, 2023, pp. 66–68). Especially in military conflicts, there is an inherent level of uncertainty, the famous "fog of war", which can lead to miscalculations. However, to assume rationality is to say that states (or more precisely, the politicians acting on their behalf) carefully weigh the costs and benefits of different policy options. As Rathbun (2018) shows in his examination of the microfoundations of realism: "Rational thinking, based on objectivity and deliberation, is a necessary condition for Realpolitik". The available evidence, although limited, suggests that the Kremlin's decision to attack Ukraine was not made through a process of open, elite-level deliberation that included debates about the relative merits of different courses of action (for more on this, see Chapter 3, "Putin's court and the war: How did Russia make the decision to invade Ukraine in 2022?"). One example is the meeting of Russia's Security Council three days before the invasion, parts of which were broadcast on live TV. The broadcast showed "a series of visibly fearful officials trying

to come up with statements they thought were expected of them. None of it suggested that many of them were consulted in advance" (Liik, 2022). This is not consistent with the strategic-actor assumption that underlies many realism-inspired explanations.

All in all, the balancing argument sheds light on an important factor. Russia seems to have been concerned about the growing political-military co-operation between Ukraine and the West. But at the same time, the argument faces serious difficulties on both empirical and analytical grounds. In particular, it has difficulty accounting for the scale of the attack and Moscow's apparent failure to foresee the counterproductive effects of the war.

Integrating the results: A neoclassical realist explanation

The previous sections have shown that all three perspectives provide some important clues to understanding the causes of Russia's attack on Ukraine. However, none of them is able to provide a fully convincing account. In other words, the three perspectives provide partial explanations. Hence, we are likely to arrive at a fuller and more comprehensive picture by integrating elements from all three of them. To do so, I draw on the neoclassical realist approach in the field of international relations. At its core, neoclassical realism holds that states' foreign policy is shaped primarily by systemic stimuli in terms of external threats and opportunities. However, the impact of these stimuli is mediated by unit-level factors such as elite perceptions and domestic political conditions. In other words, unit-level factors operate as intervening variables between systemic imperatives and the actual foreign and defense policies states undertake (Rose, 1998; Ripsman et al., 2016).

In the following, I use this analytical framework to develop a model that explains Russia's attack on Ukraine. This model consists of three interconnected analytical layers or arguments. The first is that geopolitical imperatives and status aspirations in combination provide Russia with a strong incentive to maintain some form of control over Ukraine, particularly in foreign policy and military affairs. Second, it is argued that Kyiv's increasingly pronounced westward drift, along with the waning influence of pro-Russian political actors in Ukraine, goes a long way toward explaining the timing of the attack. Lastly, the model suggests that Putin's belief system, combined with Russia's autocratic political system, can account for the

decision to launch a large-scale invasion – rather than a more limited military campaign.

Drivers: Geopolitical demands and status aspirations

Building a regional sphere of influence has long been at the centre of Russian foreign policy, even before Putin came to power. After a brief period of soul-searching in the early 1990s, the Russian elite – including President Yeltsin and his team – more or less openly expressed their ambition to dominate the post-Soviet space. Moscow wanted to limit the ability of its smaller neighbours to pursue independent policies, especially in foreign and defence matters, but without denying their formal sovereignty (Hill & Jewett, 1994; Porter & Saivetz, 1994).

From a geopolitical perspective, this comes as no surprise. Scholars of the realist school have long argued that great powers have strong military-strategic incentives to surround themselves with a sphere of influence. But that's not all. As recent research in international politics has shown, the establishment and maintenance of a regional sphere of influence is one of the most important markers of great power status (Murray, 2019, pp. 63–65). This means that the interplay between geopolitical factors and status ambitions provides a strong incentive for great powers to establish a form of regional hegemony.

This fits well with Russia's behaviour in the post-Soviet space. As early as May 1992, Andranik Migranjan, a member of Yeltsin's Presidential Advisory Council, formulated the idea of a Russian "Monroe Doctrine" in a series of articles in the Russian daily *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*. He argued that "the entire geopolitical territory of the former USSR is a sphere of *its* [Russia's] vital interests" and that "Russia should state openly that it is against the former union republics forming any kind of closed military-political alliances, either with each other or with third countries that have an anti-Russian orientation" (Migranyan, 1992). Similarly, recently released transcripts of conversations between Presidents Yeltsin and Clinton are replete with references by Yeltsin to Russia's great power status and the geopolitical importance of maintaining a regional sphere of influence (Memcon, 1997a, 1997b; Telcon, 1994). We also find a number of documents and public statements by Putin and other senior Russian politicians that suggest that Moscow's pursuit of regional hegemony is closely linked to strategic-military considerations and a broader desire to achieve great power status.

Ukraine plays an important role in this context for two reasons. Firstly, from Russia's perspective, Ukraine has enormous military-strategic importance. A look at the map shows why. Russia shares a 2,000-kilometre-long border with Ukraine. Furthermore, Ukraine's border is about 500 kilometres from Moscow and is crucial for protecting ground approaches to Russia's Volga-Don region. Ukraine also has a long coastline along the Black Sea and can act as a staging area for Russian military operations in the wider Black Sea region. In other words, Ukraine acts both as a natural shield for Russia and as a springboard to project influence into regions further afield (Götz, 2016).

Secondly, according to Russia's dominant national identity narrative, the Kyivan Rus (a medieval confederation of Slavic tribes around present-day Kyiv) is the historical epicentre and birthplace of the Russian state. In other words, Ukraine has enormous civilisational significance for many Russians. Moreover, Ukraine was part of the Tsarist Empire and the Soviet Union in various forms for many centuries. This is still prevalent in Russian historical consciousness, which is why a large part of the Russian political and intellectual elite has maintained a kind of "proprietary" attitude towards Ukraine (Mankoff, 2022).

In short, Ukraine has both a huge military strategic and symbolic importance for Russia. Therefore, for most of the last three decades, Russia has worked hard to establish some degree of control over Ukraine (for overviews, see D'Anieri, 2019b and Götz, 2016). To that end, Russia has used a wide range of diplomatic, intelligence, trade, energy and financial tools – but stayed away from the use of large-scale military force until 2022. This begs the question: What made the Putin regime switch gears?

Timing: Ukraine's westward movement and Russia's waning influence

To explain Russia's attack in February 2022, we need to rewind a few years. The ousting of President Yanukovich in 2014, along with the proposed EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, threatened to move Ukraine decisively out of the Russian sphere of influence. Russia responded by annexing Crimea and fuelling a separatist rebellion in eastern Ukraine (for background and analysis, see Menon & Rumer, 2015).

After heavy Ukrainian battlefield losses due to the intervention of Russian regular forces, the Poroshenko government in early 2015 reluctantly agreed to the Minsk II peace plan brokered by France and Germany. The plan put an end to the worst of the fighting but left the pro-Russian

separatists in control of about a third of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. Furthermore, the Minsk agreements committed Ukraine to a constitutional reform that would give the eastern regions significant autonomy – and perhaps even veto powers over Ukraine's foreign policy decisions. This is why Russia was such a strong advocate for the "full implementation" of the Minsk agreements (Allan, 2020).

In parallel, Moscow consolidated its influence in the rebel regions of Donetsk and Luhansk. Among other things, it began issuing Russian passports and deploying political advisors in the separatist-controlled areas. Moscow also began to reorganise rebel forces into formal military units, which in practice came to operate under Russian command. Local commanders who opposed the incorporation were either demoted or died under mysterious circumstances (ICG, 2016; Losh, 2016).

The overall situation seemed to suit Russia well. Either the Minsk II agreement was implemented, which would turn Ukraine into an asymmetrical confederation where the Moscow-controlled regions had extensive autonomy and probably even veto power over its foreign policy; or, alternatively, Ukraine was left with a "frozen conflict", giving Russia a de facto assurance that Ukraine would not be able to join NATO. After all, according to NATO rules, countries with unresolved ethnic or territorial conflicts are barred from joining the alliance (NATO, 1995, paragraph 6).

In retrospect, it is clear that not everything went as Moscow had planned. Firstly, neither the Poroshenko nor the Zelensky governments were willing to implement the Minsk agreements on Russia's terms. Instead, they both pursued a strongly pro-Western foreign policy. This was perhaps not surprising given Russia's annexation of Crimea and support for the Donbas rebels. What shook politicians in Moscow was that the West increased its diplomatic, economic and military aid to Ukraine. In July 2016, for example, NATO defence ministers agreed to increase the alliance's support for Ukraine by approving a comprehensive assistance package (NATO, 2016). In parallel, practical defence cooperation was increased, which included a series of military exercises and training programmes. As the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) has noted: "Since 2014 the militaries of the United States and other NATO members have trained Ukrainian Army combat units at the Yaroviv Combat Training Centre at a rate of about 6-7 battalions (about 4,000 soldiers) every year. The training has the double aim of making Ukrainian forces an effective military again and making them interoperable with NATO forces"

(Wezeman & Kuimova, 2018). In June 2020, Ukraine also joined NATO's Enhanced Opportunity Partners programme. This included consultations on security issues, access to various interoperability projects and close cooperation in times of crisis. All this raised a red flag in Moscow. Russian strategic thinkers and politicians were no longer confident that the Donbas conflict would be sufficient as an instrument to prevent a close geopolitical alignment between Ukraine and NATO.

To make matters worse, at least from Moscow's perspective, Russian influence on Ukrainian domestic politics was waning. This was partly self-inflicted. The annexation of Crimea and the Donbas conflict had removed a significant portion of the Ukrainian electorate – around 3.75 million – who used to vote for pro-Russian candidates and parties. This made the return of a Moscow-friendly government in Kyiv, at least via the ballot box, next to impossible (D'Anieri, 2019a). In addition, the Ukrainian authorities took measures to rein in the remaining pro-Russian political forces. In February 2021, the Zelensky government targeted several individuals with close ties to the Kremlin, including business tycoon Viktor Medvedchuk, a personal acquaintance of Putin and leader of the pro-Russian opposition party Platform-For Life. Zelensky also ordered the shutdown of three popular Russian-language TV networks (ZIK, News One and 112) for promoting propaganda. As a result, Russia had fewer and fewer levers left to influence Ukrainian politics – and thus Kyiv's foreign-policy orientation – from within.

The Russian leadership responded in March-April 2021 by deploying around 80,000-100,000 troops near Ukraine. The goal was to demonstrate its escalation dominance to both the West and the Zelensky government, and make it clear that Moscow would not let Ukraine slip out of its sphere of influence (Lee, 2021). However, this attempt at coercive diplomacy went nowhere. If anything, it strengthened the political-strategic cooperation between Ukraine and the West. In June 2021, the UK and Ukraine signed a memorandum for a major arms deal worth 1.7 billion GBP to improve Ukraine's naval capabilities (UK Ministry of Defence, 2021). In October 2021, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin visited Kyiv, where he expressed strong support for Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic ambitions and right to join NATO (US Department of Defense, 2021). In November 2021, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and his Ukrainian counterpart Dmytro Kuleba signed a US-Ukrainian Strategic Partnership Charter at a meeting in Washington (US Department of Defense, 2021). All of this clashed directly

with Moscow's insistence that as a great power it was entitled to a regional sphere of influence.

Russia, in turn, began another military build-up, this time deploying around 200,000 troops (including irregular forces) on Ukraine's borders. In parallel, the Kremlin sent letters to Washington and NATO headquarters demanding written assurances that Ukraine would not be invited to join the NATO alliance, that practical defence cooperation with Kyiv would cease, and that NATO military infrastructure would be withdrawn from Eastern Europe (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021b, 2021a). In other words, the Kremlin more or less openly demanded that the West accept Russia's self-declared sphere of influence – to no avail.

As a result, tensions were close to boiling point by the end of 2021. Given Ukraine's civilisational and geostrategic importance to Russia, any government in Moscow would likely have increased its pressure on Kyiv – though not necessarily embarked on a large-scale invasion. For example, Russia could have enforced a naval blockade of Ukrainian ports or made a limited push along the Sea of Azov to Crimea, thus creating a land corridor to the peninsula. The Putin government, however, decided to launch a massive attack.

Scope: Putin's worldview and Russia's authoritarian regime

As mentioned above, the original battle plan was to drive towards Kyiv, oust the Zelensky government and replace it with a Russian-friendly puppet regime while occupying parts of southern, central and eastern Ukraine. In retrospect, it is clear that the Kremlin's expectations of a quick and easy victory turned out to be wrong. Russian planners can be forgiven for misjudging the military balance of power. Most Western analysts, too, expected Kyiv to fall in a matter of days. Yet Western analysts also emphasised that the fall of Kyiv would not be the end of the war. On the contrary, they stressed that any large-scale invasion would likely trigger armed resistance and partisan warfare – and that the Russian forces were completely unprepared for that (Dobbins, 2022; London, 2022; Nagl, 2022). According to any standard military manual, effective counterinsurgency requires approximately 20-25 troops per 1,000 inhabitants. By this measure, a simple calculation shows that Russia would have needed around 880,000 to 1,100,000 troops to occupy Ukraine (instead of the assembled 200,000 troops). Thus, the entire campaign was apparently based on the belief that large parts of the Ukrainian population would not resist and might even welcome the Russian forces as liberators

(Cranny-Evans & Kaushal, 2022). This was a strange assumption. Even before the war, a number of surveys and sociological studies showed that Ukrainians over time had formed a strong national identity, especially after Russia's takeover of Crimea in 2014. Polls also indicated that most Ukrainians – including the majority of Russian-speaking Ukrainians – were prepared to fight a Russian invasion (KIIS, 2021).

This raises the question: How could the Russian leadership be so mistaken? Given the limited access to internal political documents, it is impossible to conclusively answer this question. However, there are strong indications that it can be attributed partly to Putin's worldview. After all, when he announced the "special military operation" in a televised speech, Putin called on Ukrainian forces to lay down their arms. For sure, one could write off this comment as war propaganda. However, it was consistent with other statements he had made and thus could also be seen as a window into Putin's own expectations and perceptions of the situation in Ukraine. As mentioned above, Putin has repeatedly made the argument that Ukrainians and Russians are essentially one people. This was also repeated in his war speeches on 21 and 24 February (Putin, 2022a, 2022b). The speeches were very emotional and passionate, but also rambling; it seems likely that Putin had written large parts of them himself. Of course, it is impossible to know exactly what was in Putin's mind prior to the attack. The fact is that the way in which Russia initiated the war fits with Putin's view that there is no such thing as a Ukrainian nation and that there was therefore no robust resistance to expect (Jones, 2022).

This leads to the question: Why did no one in Putin's inner circle warn him that the belief in a quick and easy victory was misguided? This is where domestic political factors come into play. In Russia's centralised political system, there were no checks and balances that could have prevented Putin from ordering a large-scale attack. In recent years, Putin has surrounded himself with a number of hand-picked loyalists, many of whom have a background in the security and intelligence services (Galeotti, 2020). Therefore, one would expect to find a significant risk of groupthink. Putin and his close associates may have become locked into basic assumptions about Ukrainians' unwillingness to resist and, by extension, may have had excessive confidence in the feasibility of carrying out a large-scale attack – without frank and open discussions about the risks involved. It could also be that some members of Putin's inner circle were simply afraid to challenge his views for fear of reprisals. Although there is no direct evidence of the decision-making

process in the Kremlin, the live broadcast of the above-mentioned meeting of Russia's Security Council supports this claim. Several Security Council members seemed intimidated and afraid to express dissenting views. The best example was the presentation by the Director of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), Sergei Naryshkin, who was scolded by Putin after suggesting that one should consider giving the West "one last chance" (Vasilyeva, 2022; for the full text of the meeting, see Kremlin, 2022).

There is even evidence that Russian intelligence analysts reported to Putin what he wanted to hear. According to a report by the Royal United Service Institute (RUSI), in the run-up to the war, the FSB's Fifth Department conducted a study into the possibility of removing Zelensky from power. The FSB concluded that internal divisions and a general lack of support for Zelensky made Ukraine an easy target (Reynolds & Watling, 2022). Indeed, before the war, Zelensky's popularity had fallen to less than 25 per cent and he faced numerous domestic problems ranging from high unemployment to political infighting. But domestic political strife and low popularity of a sitting government very rarely, if ever, lead to support for an invasion by another country. When you think about it, it is startling that trained intelligence officers could produce such low-quality analysis. While the lack of source material makes it hard to know for sure, it seems likely that FSB analysts tailored their estimates to Putin's view of Ukraine (Barnes et al., 2022).

Overall, this suggests that Putin's misguided view of Ukraine, combined with Russia's centralised decision-making structures, goes a long way toward explaining the choice of Russia's intervention strategy. In other words, while almost any Russian government would have felt pressured to counter Ukraine's westward drift with coercive means, it seems unlikely that another leader would have launched a large-scale invasion.

Conclusions and implications for Denmark

The debate about the motives behind Russia's invasion of Ukraine is in full swing. This chapter has taken stock of this debate and identified three sets of explanation: individual-level accounts that focus on Putin's mindset and his neo-imperial plans; domestic political accounts that emphasise the

Kremlin's interest in preventing a democratic slide; and geopolitical accounts that point to Ukraine's growing political-strategic alignment with the West as the main reason for Russia to attack. The chapter has shown that all three perspectives can support their preferred interpretation with anecdotal but ultimately inconclusive evidence. By themselves, therefore, the existing perspectives do not provide a fully satisfactory explanation.

With this in mind, the chapter has argued that a more comprehensive account requires that we examine the interplay between different factors. Going beyond the claim that "everything somehow matters", the chapter outlined a neoclassical realist model focusing on the interplay between three sets of factors: first, geopolitical and status ambitions; second, Russia's declining influence in and over Ukraine; and third, Putin's worldview coupled with Russia's highly centralised and personalised political system. The previous section has shown that this model sheds considerable light on the underlying drivers, timing and scale of Russia's attack.

Several policy implications follow from this. First, it would be wrong to characterise Russia's attack on Ukraine and the attendant collapse of the European security order as a "Putin problem" that will disappear once he leaves office. No doubt, the scale of Russia's attack on Ukraine in February 2022 can be at least partially explained by Putin's idiosyncratic worldview. But the fundamental problem runs much deeper. As mentioned above, the goal of keeping Ukraine within Russia's sphere of influence is shared by much of the Russian elite. This means that even if Putin resigns or passes away, it is unlikely that Russia will simply pull out of Ukraine.

Secondly, the most likely future scenario is that Europe will be divided by a new Iron Curtain in political, economic and military terms. The question is on which side of this curtain Ukraine will end up. That is currently being decided on the battlefield. It seems safe to conclude that the Russian military will not succeed in its original mission, which was to effect a regime change in Kyiv and replace the Zelensky government with a pro-Russian puppet regime. Indeed, it is far from certain that Russia will be able to capture and hold the four provinces it annexed in September 2022. At the same time, it seems unlikely that Ukraine will be able to take back all the territories that Russia currently occupies. But even if Ukraine "wins", meaning it manages to regain control of all its territories, including Crimea, it seems highly unlikely to expect the West (or Russia for that matter) to return to pre-invasion *business as usual*. Thus, it seems more likely that we

will live in a Europe marked by adversarial forms of constraint cantered on deterrence and intense security competition.

Thirdly, there is the question of what all this means for Denmark and Danish defence policy in particular. On the one hand, Denmark is no longer a frontline state as it was during the Cold War. In fact, with Finland and Sweden joining NATO, Denmark is now surrounded by alliance partners. The Baltic Sea has effectively been transformed into a "NATO lake"; hence, as paradoxical as it may sound, Denmark's position has actually improved in geostrategic terms. Furthermore, Denmark clearly does not have the same strategic or national identity-related significance for Russia as Ukraine does. This means that Russia does not pose a major or immediate threat to Danish territory.

On the other hand, it is clear that European security has deteriorated significantly over the past decade. Russia has shown a willingness to resort to extensive use of force to defend what it perceives as its rightful sphere of influence. As a result, it is likely that Russia will escalate its hybrid activities in the Baltic Sea region, which could jeopardise Danish interests. There is also much speculation about whether Russia will target one or more of the Baltic states. This would allow Russia to establish military bases along the Baltic coast and gain direct control over transit routes, perhaps even securing a land corridor to its exclave Kaliningrad (via Belarus). Furthermore, such an attack would put NATO's Article 5 collective defence to the test; if NATO failed to defend the Baltic states against a Russian attack, no matter how limited, the credibility of the entire alliance would likely collapse. Of course, this would greatly affect Denmark, both directly and indirectly, as NATO remains the cornerstone of Danish defence policy.

That noted, much speaks against a Russian attack on one of the Baltic states. From Moscow's perspective, there is a non-trivial risk that military operations against the Baltics would lead to a major confrontation with NATO. This would be extremely costly and dangerous for Russia. After all, NATO as a whole is far superior to Russia in terms of economic and military capabilities. Thus, simple balance of power logic suggests that deterrence will work. Alas, this cannot be taken for granted. As this chapter has argued, Russia is a personalised authoritarian regime that is prone to miscalculation. If Putin and his inner circle come to believe that NATO is internally divided and weak, Russia may be tempted to launch an attack on the Baltics. To minimise the risk of such a miscalculation on the part of the Putin regime, Denmark should – together with its Western alliance partners –

contribute to a robust deterrence posture in the Baltics. This means signalling determination to the Russian leadership that one is ready to defend the Baltic states in the event of an attack. Signalling resolve involves both words and actions, which means a clear communication strategy towards the Kremlin and strengthening NATO's forward presence in the region.

Finally, in the worst-case scenario – that is, if deterrence fails and the conflict in Ukraine spirals out of control and moves into the Baltics – Denmark will play a crucial role, not so much as a force provider, but rather as a host nation for the US and other NATO forces that are deployed. To this end, Denmark needs to ensure that its transport infrastructure (ports, road-and-rail networks, military bases) is capable of receiving large numbers of incoming troops and enabling their rapid and safe forward movement. In short, Russia's war in Ukraine has far-reaching strategic implications for Denmark, both in the short and medium term.

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CHAPTER 3

Putin's court and the war: How did Russia make the decision to invade Ukraine in 2022?

By Jørgen Staun

Introduction

"Vladimir Putin has only three advisors: Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great, and Catherine the Great."

These are the words of Sergey Lavrov, the Russian Foreign Minister. And the somewhat dry characterisation is probably due to the fact that earlier that day, at 1 a.m. on 24 February 2022, Lavrov had received a disturbing phone call. Having spent many months building an invasion force on the border with Ukraine, Lavrov's boss, Vladimir Putin, had ordered an invasion. According to Lavrov himself, the decision came as a complete surprise – he had publicly dismissed the idea of an invasion as "absurd" for months. And a few days earlier, the Russian president had asked his Security Council – where Lavrov also sits at the table – for their opinion on recognising the two breakaway republics of Luhansk and Donetsk. Part of the meeting had been recorded and later televised and had turned particularly awkward when Putin had exposed – and shamed – the head of the SVR foreign intelligence service, Sergey Naryshkin, for tentatively suggesting that negotiations with the West be given a second chance. But the meeting had apparently not enlightened Lavrov about Putin's real intentions. And he only got a truthful answer a few hours before it all broke out.

If this information, which comes from the British newspaper the *Financial Times* (Seddon et al., 2023), is credible – and parts of it are consistent with a number of other sources (Anin, 2022; Bloomberg News, 2022; Pertsev, 2022; Sherwin, 2022) – this means that Lavrov was once again kept in the dark about important foreign policy decisions – despite the fact that he held the post of foreign minister.¹ By all accounts, this also happened when Russia surprisingly invaded and annexed Crimea and incited rebellion in eastern Ukraine in 2014 (*Crimea. The Way Back Home*, 2016; Galeotti, 2022, p. 170; Zygar, 2016, pp. 274–279). And it testifies to a pattern by which Putin in recent years has narrowed the circle of advisors and confidants whom he makes privy to important matters and listens to when making key decisions (Baev, 2021, p. 35; McFaul, 2020; Snegovaya, 2019; Zygar, 2016, pp. 275–276), just as it is indicative of a system where institutional affiliation matters less than close personal ties to the man at the top of the pyramid.

Of course, this does not mean that Putin is all-powerful and single-handedly determines the direction Russia should take in foreign policy. The assumption in this chapter is that the form of government has gradually changed over the years and has become more centralised around the president and his inner circle. This invites the following research questions: How does Russia make important foreign and security policy decisions and, most importantly, how was the decision to invade Ukraine in 2022 most likely made? And what does this mean for Denmark and the Danish Defence? To answer these questions, we discuss the form of government – Putinism as a system – and the size, appearance and influence of the elite on the decision-making process. This is done by reviewing and discussing key concepts from the debate on the form and function of the Putin regime. The section concludes with a discussion of the appearance of the form of government and the inner elite around the time of the invasion in 2022 – to paint a picture of who influenced the decision and how. The chapter's contribution to the research, together with Chapter 4, is to seek to expand the knowledge in research circles about how the Putin regime makes foreign and security policy decisions – in the hope that there are generic features that can be used to assess other and future political decisions. In addition,

1. Nor did central parts of the presidential administration seem to have known very much. They allegedly only learned about the invasion when they saw Putin announcing the "special military operation" on TV at six o'clock in the morning (Seddon et al., 2023).

it is hoped that the chapter will contribute to the debate on what foreign and security policy direction we can expect from Russia in the future, and what this means for Denmark and the Danish Defence.

If we turn to the formal provisions of the Russian constitution, Article 80 states that it is the Russian president who sovereignly makes all foreign policy decisions, just as it is the president who must ensure the sovereignty of the Russian Federation (The Russian Federation, 1993). Russia is a semi-presidential system where executive power is divided between the President (and related institutions), who is the head of state and who "sets the broad lines and directions of policy, and a Prime Minister and a government responsible for developing, implementing and managing policy" (Willerton, 2019, p. 26). However, the assumption in this chapter, which is widely supported in the research, is that the informal structures are far more important than the formal ones. The chapter aims to examine how the regime itself and the research world characterise the regime's way of making decisions: Who makes up this supposedly small group of people who belong to the circle of key decision-makers? And who belongs to the circle of people able to influence the key decision-makers, which is assumed to be a somewhat larger circle. Informal power structures are extremely difficult to discern with confidence, especially in a closed system like Russia's, which is why this effort is perhaps best described as an educated and informed guess: a guess based on a number of analytical sources, primarily researchers with many years of research expertise related to the decision-making processes in the Kremlin, supplemented by Western and Russian journalists' interviews with (often anonymised) people from the inner circle.

Research overview

As the chapter is essentially a review of the main debates on how best to understand the form and functioning of the Putin regime, the research overview only briefly presents some of the main works on which the chapter is based. The three most important general works and texts on the functioning of the Putin regime are probably Judah (2014), Laruelle (2021) and Zygar (2016). In addition, you can also familiarise yourself with Dawisha (2014), Stent (2023) and Taylor (2018).

Putinism as a system – the debate about who makes the decisions and how

One of the foremost researchers in the study of Putinism, Marlene Laruelle from George Washington University in the United States, highlights three "schools", each with their own concepts that seek to characterise the nature of the Putin regime (Laruelle, 2021, p. 85). Although there are significantly more "schools", her approach is a good place to start. The first "school" sees the regime as a "kleptocracy" or a "mafia state" where the main purpose of the regime is to ensure the elite's own personal enrichment. The foremost exponent of this view is probably Karen Dawisha (Dawisha, 2014), but see also Åslund (2019), Browder (2015) and Goldman (2003). And much can be said about the Russian system, but the corruption *is* extensive. In 2015, Russia ranked 119th out of 167 countries in Transparency International's survey of corruption in the world. In 2022, Russia was ranked 137th out of 180 (Transparency International, 2022) – in comparison, Denmark was number one on the list both years, ahead of Finland, New Zealand and Norway. According to Celeste Wallander, corruption in Russia is "not just part of the system; it is essential for political power to function". She describes the regime as a "patrimonial" system in the sense that "the political system is based on political control of economic resources to enrich those in patron-client clans" (Wallander, 2007, p. 116).

However, much of the debate about clans is not only about money but also very much about politics – and about competition between different power groups divided along political lines. Over the years, much has been said about the so-called "siloviki", people with a background in the security services or the armed forces, who seem to have a certain "hawkish" and anti-Western view of world politics and who have a power-focused and authoritarian mindset. See for example Staun (2007).² Competing groups,

2. Another term for this group, which was quite widespread for a period, is "St Petersburg Chekists", referring to Chekists or siloviki from St Petersburg. See, for example, Skak (2016). Other relevant terms from Putin's early years as president include references to people from the "family", meaning individuals who belonged to Boris Yeltsin's close circle. Notable figures typically highlighted in this context are Yeltsin's daughter, Tatyana Dyachenko, and his son-in-law, as well as the head of the presidential administration, Valentin Yumashev (who was replaced in the spring of 1999 by Alexander Voloshin, whom Putin later "inherited"), along with the oligarchs Boris Berezovsky and Roman Abramovich (Mommsen, 2003, pp. 70–71).

such as the "liberals" or "liberal-technocrats", were represented for example by Alexey Kudrin, the former finance minister whom Putin knows from his time in St Petersburg. Or German Gref, former Minister of Economic Development, whom Putin also knows from the old days in St Petersburg. Leading authors in that discussion were Kryshtanovskaya (2004, 2008) and Kryshtanovskaya & White (2003). Today, the liberal forces – at least in the form of actual groupings – seem to have disappeared from the Russian part of the world, except that Kudrin, who is currently head of the Russian State Audit Office, and Gref, head of one of Russia's largest banks, SberBank, are occasionally heard on economic issues. Anatoly Chubais, who played a key role in the privatisation of the large state-owned companies in the 1990s and at times served as Putin's special envoy, left Russia in March 2022 after distancing himself from the war. The term *siloviki* is still widely used, and there is still some debate about the influence of *siloviki* on Russian politics (Kragh & Umland, 2023; Meakins, 2018). A more recent part of the Klan discussion is about how Russia under Putin has become radicalised in a more violent direction and increasingly resembles a "mafia state", (see Harding 2021). The bombing of Wagner boss Yevgeny Prigozhin's private jet in particular prompted a number of commentators to draw this comparison. (See for example, Lucas 2023.)

Marlene Laruelle also mentions "a school" that sees the regime as "totalitarian" and "neo-Stalinist". Many researchers over the years have focused on the authoritarian or even totalitarian turn of the Putin regime – see for example, Motyl (2009, 2010); or for a critique of this, see Luks (2009) – and see a connection between the totalitarian, nationalist and neo-Stalinist elements and Russia's foreign policy. (See for example, Clover, 2016; Van Herpen, 2014.) This is a characterisation that gained particular momentum after Putin's return to the presidency in 2012, when the regime cracked down on protesters who did not like Putin's return – after four years of swapping places with Medvedev. Since the 2022 invasion, the totalitarianism debate has been fuelled by the extensive restrictions on freedom of the press and the police state methods that protesters and opposition forces face today. This chapter takes the view that "totalitarianism", "neo-Stalinism" and "fascism" are not concepts that bring us much closer to understanding the nature of the Putin regime. If one follows the definitions of totalitarianism from classical thinkers such as Hannah Arendt (Arendt, 1999) or Carl Joachim Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski (Friedrich & Brzezinski, 1956), then the Putin regime is not totalitarian in a strict, theoretical

sense.³ Furthermore, it is worth noting that totalitarianism is a descriptive concept, not a theory, so it has little explanatory power anyway (Kershaw, 1993, p. 104). Instead, Andreas Umland suggests using the term "para-totalitarian features" to describe the development where Putin's "political technologists" have developed specific totalitarian instruments rather than creating or seeking to create a totalitarian state (Umland, 2014). The advantage of this approach is that it turns the focus of the analysis towards the means of control and repression used by the authorities, rather than towards a possible end-state for a set of particular, historical forms of politics. It also tones down the comparison between the Putin regime and Hitler's Germany or the Soviet Union under Stalin, which does not seem very fruitful. Partly because the repression in today's Russia is in no way comparable, even though it is now very extensive and has increased sharply since the start of the war in 2022, and partly because it is easy to lose focus on the present – which in this context, after all, is the most important thing – and get stuck in historical details.

Two key concepts in the debate on the nature of government that Laruelle glosses over are "managed democracy" (*upravlyayemaya demokratiya*) and "sovereign democracy" (*suverennaya demokratiya*). These are two terms that the Putin regime itself has previously used to describe the Russian form of government. The terms were particularly popular in the 2000s and early 2010s, but are still relevant, especially when discussing the radicalisation of the regime over time. If one is generous to the Kremlin, managed democracy can best be described as a semi-authoritarian system whose purpose was to secure necessary economic reforms without jeopardising political stability (Tsygankov, 2014, p. 133). More critically, managed democracy is actually "democratic rhetoric and undemocratic

3. Friedrich and Brzezinski saw the core of totalitarian regimes in their ability to facilitate total control. In their book *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* from 1956, they outline six general principles of totalitarian regimes (Friedrich & Brzezinski, 1956): 1) a comprehensive ideology with distinct utopian or religious-like characteristics and a claim to represent the truth; 2) a hierarchically organized mass party that is identical to the state or at least controls the state; 3) a system of physical terror, control, and surveillance of the public through a secret police; 4) an almost complete monopoly on the means of mass communication; 5) an almost complete monopoly on the use of force; and 6) a centrally, bureaucratically coordinated supervision or incorporation of private enterprises (the economy). By these standards, Putin's Russia is not a totalitarian state, although it has moved in a more totalitarian direction after the war in 2022.

intentions" (Pomerantsev, 2014). The concept of "sovereign democracy" is a continuation and development of managed democracy. It is intended as a vision to support the renewal of Russia's position as a "normal" great power and emphasises Russia's right to internal as well as external self-determination.⁴ It was developed by Putin's Deputy Chief of Staff Vladislav Surkov in the aftermath of the 2004-2005 Orange Revolution in Ukraine as a response to what the Kremlin perceived as a serious threat from Western attempts to export democracy to Russia (Tsygankov, 2014, p. 133).

The third of Marlene Laruelle's schools is the one she herself belongs to. It sees the regime's relationship with Russian society as one that is based on a social contract between the regime and the population. A contract that is constantly being renegotiated and sets limits to the regime's ability to act. This is why the presidential administration employs a sea of sociologists and polling experts who constantly seek to gauge the public mood and try to pick up on even the slightest threatening changes and then either police them or incorporate them into the system itself. Laruelle essentially sees the Putin regime as a kind of "ecosystem" with three elements: the presidential administration, the military-industrial complex, and the orthodox world (Laruelle, 2021).

It is on the basis of Laruelle's work that this chapter takes its starting point. However, the influence of the military-industrial complex and the orthodox world is considered as more limited:⁵ their influence on politics is more indirect, in that they influence the debates in the public sphere that shape the framework of the elite's worldview – for example, through the church's influence on the notion of so-called "traditional values" or soldier morality (Kurki, 2023). However, there are certainly individuals from the

4. Philipp Casula sees the concept of "sovereign democracy" as "one pillar in the discourse aimed at providing a *discursive stabilization* of Russian politics" (2014, p. 4). According to Victoria Hudson, it is an attempt by the Putin regime to emphasize Russia's "European intellectual heritage" while simultaneously highlighting Russia's own "civilizational distinctiveness" (Hudson, 2009, p. 189).
5. As Steven Fish puts it regarding the relationship between the Orthodox world and those in power: "Since the government effectively appoints the leaders of religious organizations and controls their funding and property, Orthodox patriarchs, chief rabbis, and favored imams are all too happy to provide public paeans for the ruler's righteousness and indispensability to the nation" (Fish, 2017, p. 63).

military-industrial complex, including members of the General Staff, who act as key figures in military matters.

Putin's court

In this chapter, the concept that is considered most apt to describe the Putin system is the court metaphor; in other words, the idea of the Putin regime as a kind of medieval royal court.⁶ As Mark Galeotti puts it, the Putin regime is "more reminiscent of the tsar's court, with (1) access to the *vozhd* (the boss) and his trust and favor being the most important political currencies and (2) 'curators' appointed at the leader's pleasure being responsible for particular issues and areas" (Galeotti, 2020, p. 2). Another proponent of this view is American journalist Ben Judah, who in 2014 compared the Putin regime to the court of British Queen Elizabeth I – a comparison that is still relevant today:

"At the court of Elizabeth I, politics was a constant jostling between 'factions' and favourites. These factions had some idealistic tints but cannot be compared to twentieth century 'believers' [that characterised the Soviet Union, JS]. Elizabethan factions were loose and informal groupings, friends and networks, competing above all for patronage and power for its own sake. Their tussles had ideological tints but were for the sake of spoils not causes. Putin's 'liberals' and 'siloviks' have more in common with renaissance factions than the 'hardliners' and 'democrats' of *perestroika*" (Judah, 2014, p. 124).

According to Judah, the best way to get a picture of who has influence and power in the "court" is to first get an overview of "the oligarchs on the Forbes' rich list of Russia's wealthiest, then superimpose a list of ministers, senior officials and directors of state corporations, then mind-map out a list of Putin's personal friends, before visualising a spider-diagram spreading off to include family members and network of all the above." (Judah, 2014, p. 124). The circle in the court is probably narrower today, especially after the invasion in 2022, and perhaps more dominated by people from defence

6. Konstantin Gaaze argues that the court-style governance took shape in 2009 when Putin temporarily left the Kremlin and handed the presidency to Dmitry Medvedev. Since Putin was then prime minister and no longer formally held the same power as he did as president, he was forced to restructure his power base, including renewing his inner circle and the way decisions were made (Gaaze, 2017).

and security circles than in 2014. But the logic is the same. In addition, family ties seem to have gained importance recently, symbolised by the appointment of Pavel Fradkov, son of Mikhail Fradkov, former prime minister and former head of the SVR foreign intelligence service, and Anna Tsivilyova, Putin's cousin's daughter, as deputy defence minister (Luzin, 2024). Meanwhile, Nikolai Patrushev's son Dmitry has been promoted from Minister of Agriculture to Deputy Prime Minister in charge of agriculture. Some analysts are even talking about a generational change.

A third exponent of the court metaphor is Russian journalist Mikhail Zygar, who talks about "the collective Putin":⁷ "It is widely assumed that decisions in Russia are made by one man and one man alone, Vladimir Putin. This is only partially true. All decisions are indeed made by Putin, but Putin is not one person. He (or it) is a huge collective mind. Tens, perhaps hundreds of people every day try to divine what decisions Vladimir Putin needs to make" (Zygar, 2016, p. xx) – and, one might add, make them for him in his spirit (Taylor, 2018). The fact that hundreds of determined officials and other subjects seek to fulfil what they believe to be the president's commandments every day is something we know from other authoritarian systems, not least from one of the foremost in the category: Hitler's Germany – no comparison in other respects. Thus it is an important point for British historian Ian Kershaw, author of one of the best Hitler biographies (Kershaw, 2008), to emphasise how everyone worked *Im Namen des Führers*, in the name – and spirit – "of the Führer".

A further link to understanding how the Putin court works is Ben Judah's – and others' – descriptions of Putin's compartmentalised work life, which is divided into thousands of 15-minute units and is planned months, if not years in advance, and which testify to a president who already in 2014 was increasingly isolated from critical or different (ordinary) parts of

7. See also Krastev (2023). For a somewhat similar perspective, see Kurbangaleeva (2024). Minchenko Consulting is critical of the idea of the "collective Putin" and instead argues for the metaphor of "Politburo 2.0" (Minchenko Consulting, 2019). In reality, Minchenko's descriptions of the elite closely resemble those of Zygar and Judah: "The Politburo 2.0 is not a formal structure. Its members don't gather in the Kremlin's Walnut Room, as their predecessors did, or adhere to the formal procedures of the Soviet Politburo" (Gaaze, 2017). Instead, Politburo 2.0 includes representatives from Russia's most influential and independent power centers – a club of selected officials and businesspeople who, most importantly, have the president's trust.

the outside world. Putin was often met by bowing and scraping, yes-saying bureaucrats and was hung up on pedantic formalities and presidential protocol. He came less and less often to the Kremlin in Moscow, which he was rumoured to detest with all its noise and pollution, but stayed at his Novo-Ogaryovo mansion on the Rublevka highway west of Moscow when he was not on his numerous trips out of town or abroad. He surrounded himself with his old friends from St Petersburg and the KGB days because he trusted them. They were also consulted when foreign policy decisions had to be made (Judah, 2014).

The tendency towards self-isolation was greatly reinforced during Covid-19, when anyone who wanted an audience with the president had to spend at least two weeks in isolation, and visiting foreign heads of state, such as Emanuel Macron, were kept many metres away from Putin (Proekt, 2020; Seddon et al., 2023; Sherwin, 2022; Stent, 2023, p. 364). This made it very difficult for outsiders to gain access to the president, which is why the crowd of old friends and regular advisors that Putin surrounded himself with, and was therefore in isolation with, played an unreservedly important role as advisors to Putin. According to a number of unrelated sources,⁸ one of those who apparently spent a lot of time with Putin was banker Yury Kovalchuk, chairman of the board and largest single shareholder of Rossiya Bank, Russia's largest. Kovalchuk is also known as "Putin's banker", while the Moscow bank is referred to as "Putin's purse" (Harding, 2016; Pomerantsev, 2016). Kovalchuk once had a dacha neighbouring Putin's outside St Petersburg (the Ozero collective). Kovalchuk, like Putin, has long been fascinated by Eurasianism, including the Russian philosopher Ivan Ilyin, as well as being inspired by Orthodox mysticism and anti-American conspiracy theories (Bukkvoll, 2023, p. 158; Zygar, 2022).⁹

In this view, the presidential administration is seen as a key player in Russian politics. It is this administrative body that controls what

8. Mikhail Zygar's sources estimated that, at least during this period, Kovalchuk was considered "the most influential among the president's entourage" (Zygar, 2022). And according to one of the sources interviewed by the Financial Times, Kovalchuk "inspired" Putin to reflect on a "historic mission to assert Russia's greatness, much as Peter the Great had" (Seddon et al., 2023).
9. At Putin's initiative, all governors and high-ranking politicians were sent three books as Christmas gifts in 2013: Vladimir Solovyov's "The Justification of the Good", Nikolai Berdyaev's "The Philosophy of Inequality", and Ivan Ilyin's "Our Tasks: Russia's Historical Fate and Future" (Laqueur, 2015, p. 177).

information Putin is presented with and who gets an audience with him. Anton Vaino, as head of the presidential administration, has overall responsibility for the flow of information to the president, and is central, along with Sergey Kiriyenko, First Deputy Chief of Staff in the presidential administration, who is the executive arm. In a 2021 survey by the Russian Agency for Political and Economic Information, which for several years has compiled a list of the 100 most powerful people in Russia, Anton Vaino and Sergey Kiriyenko came in at number three and six respectively. This is certainly too high, but the presidential administration is absolutely central to Russian politics. Kiriyenko is so central because it is his people who relay and coordinate the three daily briefings to Putin, primarily from the FSB security service (headed by Aleksander Bortnikov) on internal affairs, the SVR foreign intelligence service (headed by Naryshkin) and the Federal Security Service (FSO) (Dmitry Kochnev). In addition, there are briefings from the National Security Council (of which Patrushev was head until June 2024, a post now taken over by Sergei Shoigu) (Galeotti, 2020)¹⁰.

Who from the inner circle of the court was involved in making the invasion decision?

If you want to get an idea of who from the court's inner circle helped make the decision to invade Ukraine in 2022, the decision to invade Crimea back in 2014 may serve as an illustration. What we do know – or what we think we know from the fragments of information; much of this has been propaganda that has emerged gradually over the years – is that very few people were involved in the decision itself (Seddon et al., 2023). In the propaganda film *Crimea. The Way Back Home* (Kondrashov, 2016),¹¹ shown on Russian state television on 15 March 2015, Putin said that during the evacuation of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich on 22-23 February 2014, he had told his "four colleagues" that "we are forced to start working on the return of Crimea to Russia". The four colleagues with whom Putin apparently spent "a sleepless night" at his Novo-Ogaryovo residence were Defence

10. The National Security Council and the Federal Protective Service are formally part of the Presidential Administration but operate independently.

11. As the source is a propaganda film, the following statements are, of course, subject to considerable uncertainty.

Minister Sergei Shoigu; National Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev; FSB chief Aleksander Bortnikov and Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administration Sergei Ivanov. Patrushev, who is even more of a hawk than Putin and had long talked about "sobering up" Ukraine and forcing it back into the fold (Galeotti, 2022, p. 170; Yegorov, 2014), had been on fire. Shoigu, who would be in charge of the military part of the operation, had reacted with "extreme caution". According to Putin, the decision was made at 7:00 on the morning of 23 February.¹²

According to the statements and testimonies that have accumulated, the decision to invade Ukraine in 2022 seems to have been made in a similar manner. The news agency Bloomberg wrote in April 2022, based on interviews with nine different anonymous sources with intimate knowledge of the Kremlin decision-making process, that "the decision to invade was made by Putin and a handful of hawks, including Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu, Chief of General Staff Valery Gerasimov, and Nikolai Patrushev, secretary of Russia's Security Council" (Bloomberg News, 2022). Other sources estimate that the head of the FSB, Bortnikov, must at least have been aware of the operation, as it was the FSB's Fifth Service that was responsible for the erroneous intelligence picture that formed the basis of the attack plan (Harris et al., 2022; Soldatov & Borogan, 2022; Zabrodsky et al., 2022). Sergey Naryshkin, the head of the foreign intelligence service SVR, whose intelligence is believed to have supplemented the picture from the FSB, although without changing its overly optimistic assessment, can also be assumed to have been informed (Sherwin, 2022). Whether these two took part in the decision itself is questionable. As Russian analyst Nikolai Petrov of Chatham House puts it in an interview, these two are not the typical "thinkers who develop strategy" (Sherwin, 2022).

If we try to assess the available information about the decision to invade Ukraine in 2022, it seems likely that Patrushev, in his then role as Secretary

12. The official narrative that the decision to invade Crimea was only made on 23 February is contradicted by evidence that medals of merit issued to Ukrainians who assisted Russia in the operation bear the inscription "For the Return of Crimea 20.02.14 – 18.03.14"(Cathcart, 2017; Galeotti, 2022, p. 170). Furthermore, Russian forces in Crimea had been placed on alert a week prior, around February 15–16 (Galeotti, 2022, p. 171). This is also contradicted by Zygar's account, according to which a specific operational plan regarding Crimea had already been discussed in December 2013, when the head of Crimea's parliament, Vladimir Konstantinov, visited Moscow.

of the Security Council, was present when the decision was made. Patrushev knows Putin from the old days when they both worked for the KGB in Leningrad, and he was Putin's second in command when Putin was head of the FSB. He later took over as head of the FSB himself when Putin was appointed Prime Minister in 1999 and elected President in 2000. After the 2014 war and up until the 2022 invasion, Patrushev seems to have moved even closer to Putin. After it became clear to Putin that the narrative of an easily feasible invasion of Ukraine was a sham, Putin has distanced himself further from Patrushev – most recently illustrated by his demotion in May 2024 to presidential advisor (Faulconbridge & Osborn, 2024). The information that Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu was part of the decision-making process is also highly probable.¹³ It is also likely that Valery Gerasimov, the Chief of the General Staff, was at the table, but he is assessed in this chapter more as someone who receives strategic decisions than as someone who makes them. The current head of the FSB, Aleksander Bortnikov, was most likely also present when the decision was made. As mentioned above, there are many sources that support the information that it was the FSB's Service for Operational Information and International Relations, the so-called Fifth Service, which provided the main input to the intelligence picture, supplemented to some extent by the Foreign Intelligence Service, SVR – the intelligence picture that quickly turned out to be a fatal misrepresentation (Anin, 2022; Seddon et al., 2023; Zabrodsky et al., 2022). And perhaps this is what Sergey Naryshkin, the head of the SVR, was trying to signal when, during the Security Council meeting on 21 February, he spoke openly about giving negotiations with the West a second chance. Only to be publicly

13. Anatol Lieven still considers Igor Sechin to be part of the innermost circle around the president (Lieven, 2022). Sechin is the chairman and CEO of the state-owned oil company Rosneft and has known Putin since their time in the St Petersburg city administration, where he served as Putin's chief of staff when Putin was deputy mayor under Sobchak. From 2000 to 2008, Sechin was deputy chief of staff in the Presidential Administration and controlled access to Putin, which at the time made him one of the leading figures among the "siloviki". In recent years, however, he appears to have lost ground to Nikolai Patrushev, particularly as security policy issues have risen on the agenda. Available information on the 2014 annexation of Crimea does not indicate that Sechin was involved in the decision-making process. The same applies to the 2022 invasion, which is why he is not considered in this chapter to belong to the innermost circle responsible for foreign and security policy decisions.

slapped down by Putin.¹⁴ Whether there were others who sat in or were available to the president when the decision was made, and therefore knew about it early on, is something that few sources deal with. One obvious person could be the head of the presidential administration, who since 2016 has been Anton Vaino. However, Vaino has primarily had a domestic political and economic profile. Instead, it is more likely that Alexey Gromov, who since 2012 has been First Deputy Chief of Staff in the Presidential Administration and responsible for foreign policy matters, is someone who may not have been at the table, but who was at least briefed relatively early on. So far, however, there are no sources to support such a thesis.

Conclusion: The collective versus the isolated Putin

If we are to summarise the above description of the form of government, there are a number of key characteristics and dynamics of the Putin regime and the way it functions that should be highlighted. A key parameter is the tension between the Collective Putin (the collective mind of the Putin regime) and the Isolated Putin (Putin and his inner circle). The Collective Putin is the phenomenon of hundreds of officials and other people commissioned by the regime (writ broadly) trying daily to guess what decisions Putin wants them to make on his behalf. And it is the thoughts and ideas that make up this collective mind that in turn shape and frame the worldview in whose context each decision is made every day. The Isolated Putin is Putin himself and the inner circle of advisors and confidants he consults when making key foreign policy decisions – the extended statesman, if you will. In other words, the Collective Putin helps shape the worldview from which the isolated Putin makes decisions. Everyone in this span between the Isolated Putin and the Collective Putin has some kind of influence – some very little, some more – on the actual decisions

14. Mark Galeotti even argues that the televised broadcast of the Security Council meeting on 21 February 2022, testifies to the fact that even "the mighty figures within Putin's court stuttering and stammering and hedging their bets, desperately trying to say the right thing." [...] "It's clear that even they had no idea what Putin really wanted them to say and was sort of stumbling around and trying to either influence him – people like (Dmitry, J.S.) Kozak clearly were trying very much to push a 'let's not invade right now, line – or just simply guess what he wanted'" (Galeotti, 2023, 17:19-18:06).

made and their implementation. The range goes from Putin himself and his inner circle to the court – old friends from St Petersburg or from the KGB or FSB days; to a few key ministers, a few of the president's special envoys or particularly trusted officials, oligarchs or directors of the large state companies and the "family" – and out to the "ecosystem", whose most central player is the presidential administration with its 2-3,000 officials, but which also includes the military-industrial complex and the Orthodox world.¹⁵

The system embodies kleptocratic features with high levels of corruption – and sometimes there are also private economic interests that influence Russian foreign policy (Marten, 2015). The corruption provides a certain level of inefficiency and promotes a patron-client relationship where absolute loyalty is rewarded over competence and efficient solutions. There is a daily struggle for access to the *vozhd* (the boss), which makes court gatekeepers key because they control the information flow and access to the boss. Institutions are often less important than personal relationships when it comes to getting an audience with the boss, and the informal groups of friends and networks are what keep you safe in the clans' constant power struggles.

The presidential administration is central, not only because of its gatekeeper function but also because it is tasked with ensuring that the government is never completely out of touch with the people. This means that the system is at once self-contained, yet responsive to new trends and, not least for historical reasons, sensitive to unrest and resistance.

The concept that best describes the Putin regime today is, in this view, the court metaphor, which depicts the form and function of the Putin regime as a kind of royal tsarist court, where people compete for access to the tsar/president and woo his trust and favour. Power struggles and intrigue thrive here, and loyalty is often rewarded more than competence. Corruption is the driving force that ultimately greases the wheels if the system breaks down. At the same time, you secure your own loyal subjects and allies, families marry into each other, or you secure an important godfather for your newborn child to signal closeness to the strong man at the

15. Perhaps one should also, to some extent, take into account certain right-wing and conservative circles, where prominent figures include Aleksandr Dugin, Aleksandr Prokhanov, and possibly Alexander Zinoviev (until his death), as well as some of the mil-bloggers from the war in Ukraine.

top or someone below. The circle of men, because it was only men who made the decision to invade Ukraine, can, based on the available information – which is quite sparse – be reduced to five, maybe six, people besides Putin himself: the head of the National Security Council, Nikolai Patrushev, Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu, Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov, the head of the FSB intelligence service, Aleksander Bortnikov, and the head of the foreign intelligence service, Sergey Naryshkin. In addition, the chairman of the board of Rossiya Bank, Yury Kovalchuk, was probably a key inspiring force during the Covid-19 lockdown, although he was not present when the actual decision was made.

The most important lesson to draw from this, from a Danish and Danish Defence perspective, is that the closed decision-making process makes it extremely difficult to predict breaks and major changes in Russian foreign policy. The circle of key decision-makers and their role in the various types of decision-making processes is so closed and opaque, and we don't really know much about them, which makes them difficult to predict and even more difficult to influence. We can assume that this will continue to be the case in the future.

From the outside, the Putin regime looks stable. Despite losses of 600,000-700,000 soldiers, a coup attempt and what looks like an incipient overheating of the economy due to the large sums of money being pumped into society for the war, the Russian regime does not seem to be affected. The elite have so far not betrayed Putin despite the targeted Western sanctions that were intended to drive a wedge between him and the rich. Nor is there any sign that the FSB's position has weakened, despite the fact that by all accounts it was their Fifth Service that was responsible for the erroneous intelligence picture – a picture that created the perception that Russia could easily win the war and would hardly even have to fight, resulting in a poor start to the war. Neither has there been any significant purge in the Russian military leadership – Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu has been transferred but has been given the post of head of the National Security Council – despite the war exposing the pervasive corruption. The turmoil following the coup attempt by Prigozhin and the Wagner group on 23 June 2023 also seems to have subsided after a limited round of arrests and transfers. So the regime looks stable. However, it's a stability that, it must be remembered, could be quickly upended. Regimes like Russia's are usually stable until the day they are not.

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CHAPTER 4

Russian strategic culture and the war in Ukraine: The worldview behind the invasion

By Jørgen Staun

Introduction to the chapter

At six o'clock in the morning on 24 February 2022, a serious-looking Vladimir Putin appeared on screen sitting at a desk with three phones, two Russian flags and a wood-panelled wall in the background. In the presumably pre-recorded clip, Putin is visibly affected, clears his throat a few times and then begins to recite a long list of injustices committed by the US and the West against Russia: NATO expansions to the east despite Russian protests and despite promises from the US that NATO would not move "one inch" to the east; Western military operations against Serbia, Iraq, and Libya without or with highly stretched mandates from the UN Security Council – despite Russian protests; simply an international system where the US has done as it pleased. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is not mentioned once in the speech. Nor is there any real focus on Ukraine, other than as a territory that the great powers compete for and act upon. Attention is primarily focused on the United States and NATO, which in Putin's eyes pursue "a policy of containment" against Russia – and have repeatedly lied to Russia: We have always faced "either cynical deception and lies or attempts at pressure and blackmail, while the North Atlantic alliance

continued to expand despite our protests and concerns."¹ "[T]heir military machine is in motion and approaching ... our border" (Putin, 2022b).

It's not until 20 ½ minutes into the video that Putin explains what this stream of words is a prelude to: "I have made a decision to conduct a special military operation." It sounds a bit like a pinprick operation. But it isn't. It is a massive attack on Ukraine.

Putin lists three main objectives of the operation: to protect the people of Donbas, including Russian citizens, from a "genocide" that Putin (falsely) claims Ukraine is committing. Additionally, the goal of the invasion is to "denazify" and "demilitarise" Ukraine, "as well as prosecute those who have committed numerous bloody crimes against civilians, including citizens of the Russian Federation" (Putin, 2022b).²

Putin argues that he has had no other choice:

" [I]n territories adjacent to Russia, which I have to note is our historical land, a hostile "anti-Russia" is taking shape. Fully controlled from the outside, it is doing everything to attract NATO armed forces and obtain cutting-edge weapons. For the United States and its allies, it is a policy of containing Russia, with obvious geopolitical dividends. For our country, it is a matter of life and death, a matter of our historical future as a nation." (Putin, 2022b, p. 6).

In a particularly powerful argument in favour of the invasion, Putin compares the situation today to the pre-World War II period: " [I]n 1940 and early 1941 the Soviet Union went to great lengths to prevent war or at least delay its outbreak." ... "When it finally acted, it was too late" ... "The attempt to appease the aggressor ahead of the Great Patriotic War proved to

1. This is an argument that Putin has used many times in his foreign policy speeches, for example, in connection with the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014: "The containment policy was not invented yesterday. It has been implemented against our country for many years, always, for decades, if not centuries. In short, these tools are put to use as soon as someone believes that Russia has become too strong or too independent." (Putin, 2014). As emphasised later in the chapter, Putin was not nearly as critical of NATO's expansions at the beginning of his tenure.
2. Three days earlier, during a meeting of the National Security Council, Putin had argued why it was necessary to "do something" regarding Ukraine: "Ukraine is not just a neighbouring country for us. It is an inseparable part of our own history, culture, and spiritual space. It is our comrades, those we care about the most—not only colleagues, friends, and people who once served together, but also relatives, people bound by blood, by family ties. Since time immemorial, the people living in the southwestern part of what has historically been Russian land have called themselves Russians and Orthodox Christians" (Putin, 2022a).

be a mistake" ... "We will not make this mistake the second time." (Ibid., pp. 4–5).

In other words, according to Putin, Russia had to pre-emptively invade Ukraine to defend itself in order to prevent an even worse, inevitable future major war with NATO. "[T]he showdown between Russia and these forces cannot be avoided. It is only a matter of time. They are getting ready and waiting for the right moment. Moreover, they went as far as aspire to acquire nuclear weapons.³ We will not let this happen" (Ibid., p. 7). In the above quotes from Putin's "war speech", three of the fundamental Russian foreign and security policy discourses play a special role. They form a central part of the conceptual or ideological framework – the worldview – that logically enabled Putin to make the fatal decision to invade, and perhaps even forced him and his inner circle to make the decision to invade Ukraine in 2022. The three discourses are:

- The idea of Russia as a great power with the right to play a special role in its "near abroad" – above all, but not exclusively, in the post-Soviet space.
- The idea that Russia is vulnerable and threatened by the West, above all by the US and NATO.
- The idea that Ukraine is not a real state, but a constructed and therefore illegitimate state, whose population is actually Russian and whose state is located on territory of which large parts belong to Russia.

The purpose of this chapter, its research question if you will, is the following: What was the worldview behind the decision to invade Ukraine in 2022, as analysed from the public discourse? And what does it mean for Denmark and the Danish Defence? The chapter focuses on the part of the elite's worldview that is relevant to the decision to invade, as expressed in publicly available political statements. This is done in an attempt to paint a picture of the reasoning of the foreign and security policy elite. The chapter's contribution to the research is thus partly to seek to expand the knowledge that exists in research circles about what foreign and security policy direction we can expect from Russia in the future, and what this means for Denmark and the Danish Defence.

3. An incorrect claim.

Strategic culture and Russian foreign and security policy

The chapter's theoretical framework is strategic culture theory. Strategic culture can be briefly described as the set of deeply entrenched and culturally rooted understandings of the world and its workings internalised by the elite, especially what threats exist and how best to counter them. In this chapter, strategic culture is defined more narrowly as the set of discourses related to strategy that exist across a country's key power elites, relating to issues such as the country's role in the world and the legitimacy and effectiveness of the use of military force. See (Poulsen & Staun, 2021, pp. 64–69). Thus, what is being investigated are some linguistic actors (the elite) (Austin, 1962) and the public statements and concepts that these linguistic actors use in public – we do not know what they say behind closed doors – and the actions that these statements give rise to. For a similar approach, see: (Libel, 2018; Lock, 2018). These discourses are rooted in socially constructed interpretations of the nation/state's history, geography and domestic traditions, among others. As a result, states do not react equally to international pressures and opportunities but assess and respond to external events via their own distinct strategic culture (Götz & Staun, 2022). As a result, countries that are otherwise similar on a number of parameters can pursue different foreign and security policies. According to Alastair Johnston, the explanation lies in the fact that elites socialised in different strategic cultures will make different choices when placed in comparable situations. Since cultures are “attributes of and vary across states, similar strategic realities will be interpreted differently” (Johnston, 1995, p. 35).

That said, it is important to emphasise that strategic culture does not in itself determine the specific details of state behaviour. Rather, it delineates how politicians and officials understand the world, thus enabling some policy choices while making other choices less logical to make. It is also worth emphasising that political elites are not simply carriers of a prevailing strategic culture. They can adjust and, within limits and over time, reshape certain narratives – and do so in small ways all the time. This is often done by powerful individuals – the linguistic actors mentioned above – in response to external crises or similar. In terms of what determines the outcome of a decision, discourses provide the structure – the linguistic framework – while elite individuals are able to move within, push and reshape this framework to varying degrees. It should be emphasised that the elite

is particularly important in non-democratic countries due to their disproportionate weight in decision-making (Kragh & Umland, 2023, p. 367).

Who belongs to this small group of key decision-makers and who (a somewhat larger circle) is able to influence the central group is discussed in detail in Chapter 3, "Chapter 3.: Putin's court and the war: How did Russia make the decision to invade Ukraine in 2022? It should be emphasised that this is a guess based on several analytical sources, primarily researchers with many years of focus on the decision-making processes in the Kremlin, supplemented by Western and Russian journalists' interviews with (often anonymised) people from the inner circle.

The description of the elite worldview relevant to the decision to invade Ukraine and to predict Russia's interests is examined in this chapter by tracking three key concepts over time: the great power discourse, the sense of vulnerability and Russian imperialism/ethnic nationalism. This part is more specifically empirically rooted than the study of the decision-making process in Chapter 3, as these are public statements that have demonstrably taken place and, if you can read Russian, or in many cases, just English, can be verified by anyone with a computer and access to the Internet. In examining the elite worldview, the chapter primarily uses three main sources:⁴ 1) Russian public security doctrines: First and foremost, the national security doctrines followed over the years. Secondly, the military doctrines and the foreign policy concepts, which are considered secondary. 2) Statements from the political elite, here primarily interpreted as the narrow circle around President Putin, as well as other significant voices in the Russian foreign and security policy elite. 3) Then the influence that the wider circle, including military theorists and political analysts, have through the debates that are constantly going on in the Russian public, and probably continue behind closed doors (we only have access to the public parts).⁵ This chapter draws primarily from *Voyennaya Mysl*, *Voyenno-Promyshlenny Kurier* (VPK) and *Russia in Global Affairs* – as well as books and news articles from the daily press, with a preponderance of articles from *Vazhnyye Istorii*, *Proekt*, *Kommersant*, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, the

4. For a similar approach, see: (Poulsen & Staun, 2021)

5. For pedagogical reasons, however, I have chosen to rearrange the order in the following analysis of Russian discourses, which is why I began the chapter with a brief review of Putin's so-called "war speech" from February 24, 2022. In the following sections, I supplement this with doctrines and strategy documents, before consulting contributions from political analysts and others in the public debate.

government newspaper *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* and the state news agency TASS, and reports of various kinds. In addition, a number of English-language sources with secondary literature have also been consulted.

Research overview

There have been many studies of the Russian elite's worldview. Much of the research emphasises a conservative element in the regime's worldview. See for example: (Fish, 2017; Suslov, 2024). For literature focusing on Russian imperialism, see: (Oksamytna, 2023). Some of the literature emphasises the ideological shift that seems to have taken place after Putin's return to the presidency in 2012, see for example (Fomin, 2022). On the reason behind and decision to invade Ukraine in 2022, see: (Bukkvoll, 2023; Heier, 2023; McFaul & Person, 2024). In relation to great power thinking, you can consult: (Reshetnikov, 2024).

The Putin regime and the war in Ukraine – three key discourses

Great power dreams

The idea of Russia as a great power is a central theme in Putin's and the Russian elite's understanding of the world. We find the great power discourse in many of Putin's speeches and in speeches by other top members of the Moscow elite, such as Nikolai Patrushev, Sergei Shoigu or Sergey Lavrov (Lavrov, 2016; Patrushev, 2014, 2015a; Putin, 1999, 2007, 2012, 2014; Shoigu, 2018). It is also present in *all* major Russian strategy papers over the years – in the national security strategy, the foreign policy concept and the military doctrine – and the ambition has evolved from being little more than a regional "great power" to being "a leading world power." The latest Foreign Policy Concept 2023 states that Russia is "an influential world power" (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023, p. 14) and that Russia is a "unique state civilisation, a great Eurasian and Euro-Pacific power" (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023, p. 4). And that "Russia acts as one of the sovereign centres of world development, fulfilling its historically unique mission of maintaining the global balance of power and building a multipolar international system" (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023).

The idea of Russia as a great power can also be found in a number of speeches by former President Boris Yeltsin,⁶ or in speeches by his Western-oriented foreign minister, Andrei Kozyrev. For example, Kozyrev declared in 1994 that Russia was "destined to be a great power" (Kozyrev, 1994). We can also quite easily find the great power identity (the Soviet Union) articulated by a number of Soviet leaders. In other words, the belief that Russia is destined to be a great power – not only because of its energy resources, economic or especially military power, but for Putin and his inner circle largely as a natural, almost fated consequence of the country's history and culture – has been part of the self-image of the political elite in Moscow for decades, if not longer (Neumann, 2008; Poulsen & Staun, 2018, 2021; Reshetnikov, 2024; Tsygankov, 2008, 2014). An important characteristic of the great power concept is that it is perceived as an existential question: Russia needs to be a great power or it will cease to exist (Bassim & Aksenov, 2006; Reshetnikov, 2011). As Foreign Minister Lavrov argued in a speech in 2007: "Russia can" ... "exist within its current borders only if it is one of the world's leading states" (Tsygankov, 2008, p. 46).

A key element of the great power thinking is also the recognition aspect – the question of great power status. Thus, especially until the invasion of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, there was a clear frustration with the lack of international (Western) recognition of Russia's interests. The 2000 National Security Strategy states: "Attempts to ignore Russia's interests in the resolution of major international problems, including conflict situations, may undermine international security, stability" (President of the Russian Federation, 2000b). And when Dmitry Medvedev, after the short-lived war against Georgia in 2008, had to justify as president why Russian troops went into Georgia, the frustration at the lack of recognition from the West was also clear: Here he said that Russia went into Georgia because "we simply want respect, respect for our country, our people and our values." (Medvedev, 2008) "Russia has zones that are part of its interests. For the West to deny it is pointless and even dangerous," said President Medvedev. "It's unjust, it's humiliating, and we've had enough. It's

6. Yeltsin had the ambition to secure Russia a place as a recognized great power. In April 1992, for example, he stated: "Russia is rightfully a great power by virtue of its history, of its place in the world, and of its material and spiritual potential" (Erickson, 1999, p. 255).

something we are no longer prepared to endure," he said. "You have a very clear choice here. Let there be no doubt about it." (Kendall, 2008).

Russia's status ambitions are closely linked to the idea that great powers have spheres of influence and that Russia therefore has the right to have its own. In the eyes of the Russian elite, international politics is a system dominated by a small number of great powers. Each of these great powers has a regional sphere of influence to which the other great powers must stay out – not unlike the American Monroe Doctrine of 1823.⁷ Small states that are close to the great powers must, according to the common belief of the elite in Moscow, pursue a policy of accommodation with the local great power. In the autumn of 2021, for example, there were a number of contributions from Russian political scientists who used the concept of Finlandization⁸ to discuss the need for – and the sense in – Ukraine pursuing a policy of alignment with Russia in order to avoid something worse. As Fyodor Lukyanov put it, "the European idea after the end of the Cold War that any country should just be allowed to do whatever it wants, regardless of its location, is historically new. There has never been anything like this." (President of the Russian Federation, 2020). A large part of the elite considers a Russian geographical sphere of influence in the so-called Russian "near abroad" (*blizhnee zarubezhnye*) as a necessity for Russia to re-establish and maintain its great power status and thus its identity. The idea that Russia should exercise some form of control over its geopolitical "neighbourhood" – including, above all, Belarus and Ukraine – is therefore widely supported among the elite.⁹

7. Andranik Migranyan, a member of Yeltsin's advisory Presidential Council, sought in 1992 to promote the idea of a Russian Monroe Doctrine through a series of articles in *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*. He argued that "the entire geopolitical space of the former Soviet Union is a sphere of vital interest for Russia, and that Russia should openly declare its opposition to the formation of any closed military-political alliances between the former union republics, either with each other or with third countries that have an anti-Russian orientation" (Götz, 2022).
8. For a theoretical discussion of the concept of Finlandization within the framework of adaptation theory, see (Mouritzen, 1988).
9. This is, moreover, not something limited to the Putinist elite. Yeltsin's pro-Western foreign minister, Andrei Kozyrev, argued in a 1993 article in *Diplomaticheskyy Vestnik* that "the main priority of [Russian] foreign policy today [lies in] the formation of a belt of good neighbourliness along the entire perimeter of Russia's borders. This primarily concerns the former republics of the USSR, which we in Russia today can call 'the near abroad'" (Götz, 2022, p. 9).

Russia feels threatened by the West

The next key element of Russian foreign and security policy thinking is the perception that Russia is threatened from the outside, threatened by the West. This is a result of a sense of vulnerability in the Russian political, but especially military elite that is partly historical and partly geographical (Covington, 2016; Marshall, 2016; Poulsen & Staun, 2021). But it is also a result of the conscious break with the West that the Putin regime made when, in 2004-2005, inspired by Deputy Chief of Staff Vladislav Surkov, it switched from "managed democracy" to "sovereign democracy" in response to the Orange Revolution in Ukraine. The sense of vulnerability and the perception that the West is threatening Russia is reflected in Russia's key documents.

1) Firstly, Russia feels threatened by NATO in general. They (the elite) feel cheated in relation to what Russia perceives as the US promise not to expand NATO eastwards – "not one inch eastwards" as US Secretary of State James Baker verbally promised Mikhail Gorbachev during a meeting in 1990 (Shifrinson, 2016) – but which Russia never got rooted in a treaty. Strictly speaking, there was no urgency, the West and Russia were friends then, and Russia was supposed to be like us. For many years, Russia did not feel specifically threatened by NATO enlargement, although it saw it as a general danger¹⁰ and clearly stated that it was against enlargement. In the 1997 National Security Strategy, NATO's eastward expansion is called "unacceptable" (President of the Russian Federation, 1997). However, in the military doctrines from 1993 and 2000, the wording is kept in general terms, where NATO as an organisation is not mentioned by name, but where the following is written under possible future dangers: "the expansion of military blocs and alliances to the detriment of the interests of the Russian Federation's military security" (President of the Russian Federation, 1993, 2000a, p. 5). In his early years as president, Putin made several overtures to NATO about possible NATO membership¹¹ and he was also open to the idea of NATO enlargement. In November 2001, during a visit to the United States, he was asked by a journalist about his position on the

10. Russia distinguishes in its doctrines between danger (opasnost) and threat (ugroza), with threat being the more severe of the two.

11. See (BBC Documentary, 2012). Whether there was realism behind it is difficult to assess.

potential membership of the Baltic states. "We of course are not in a position to tell people what to do. We cannot forbid people to make certain choices if they want to increase the security of their nations in a particular way." (Brands, 2024, p. 49). Or as Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov stated in 2002: "The question of enlargement is not our business. It is NATO's business" (Banka, 2024, p. 4). Even in 2004, after the big enlargement package, which included the Baltic countries, the tone was still relaxed. Standing next to German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, Putin stated that in relation to NATO enlargement, "we have no concerns regarding the security of the Russian Federation" (Banka, 2024, p. 4). At the time, there does not seem to have been a definite red line in relation to Ukraine's possible NATO membership. During a press conference in May 2002 with Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma, Putin remarked: "I am absolutely convinced that Ukraine will not shy away from the processes of expanding interaction with NATO and the Western allies as a whole. Ukraine has its own relations with NATO; there is the Ukraine- NATO Council. At the end of the day, the decision is to be taken by NATO and Ukraine. It is a matter for those two partners." (Brands, 2024, p. 49). The more cooperative attitude shifted, if not before, then at least with Putin's speech to the Munich Security Conference in 2007, where he complained about the US's "almost uncontrolled hyper use of force – military force" (Putin, 2007). A use of force that, according to Putin, was "plunging the world into an abyss of permanent conflicts" (Putin, 2007). The change is evident in the 2010 and 2014 military doctrines, which take a more confrontational line, explicitly mentioning NATO by name and describing NATO expansion and the alliance's "military infrastructure" near Russia's borders as one of the "main dangers" (opasnosti) to Russia. In addition, NATO's increasing "power potential" and the tendency of "vesting NATO with global functions carried out in violation of the rules of international law" is considered a risk (President of the Russian Federation, 2014, p. 12). And relations with NATO did not improve. Instead, the Russian government increasingly began to refer to NATO's eastward expansion as something that had happened despite Russia's protests. And in December 2021, as Russian troops were slowly deployed along Ukraine's borders, the Kremlin demanded, as a condition for not attacking, that all talk of a future Ukrainian membership of NATO be taken off the table and that NATO's borders revert to where they were in 1997 – before any of the Eastern and Central European countries became members (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021).

2) Russia also feels vulnerable to the technological superiority of the US and NATO. The doctrines particularly emphasise the US and NATO missile shield, the US Prompt Global Strike concept, and the increased focus in the US on military exploitation of space. These are perceived as attempts by the West and the US to undermine the Russian ability to retaliate against a first-strike attack, including a nuclear one. The 2010 Military Doctrine identifies "the creation and deployment of strategic missile defence systems", "the militarisation of outer space" and "the deployment of strategic non-nuclear systems of high precision weapons" as "external dangers (opasnosti)" (President of the Russian Federation, 2010). The 2014 military doctrine repeats these formulations and adds a specific term for "the implementation of the global strike concept" (President of the Russian Federation, 2014). There is also a growing concern among Russian military theorists about Western military superiority, see for example: (Chekinov & Bogdanov, 2013). The Russian nuclear doctrine has similar wording (President of the Russian Federation, 2020) This reflects a concern among the Russian political and especially military elite about the strategic effect of conventional long-range missiles, which seems to have spread over the last decade, see for example (Alyoshin et al., 2016; Gareev, 2013; Kartapolov, 2015).

3) In addition, Russia is deeply concerned about the West's penchant for exporting democracy – above all, initiating and supporting so-called colour revolutions, which Russian Chief of General Staff Valery Gerasimov refers to as "coups d'état organised from outside" (by the West) (Gerasimov, 2016). In the 2014 military doctrine, "subversive information activities against the population, especially young citizens of the State, aimed at undermining historical, spiritual and patriotic traditions related to the defense of the Motherland" are described as a potential "risk" (opasnosti) for Russia (President of the Russian Federation, 2014).

Russian imperialism and ethnic nationalism

The final element is Russian imperialism and ethnic nationalism. This is Putin's (and others, such as Nikolai Patrushev) idea that Ukraine is not a

real nation but rather an artificial construct.¹² This is why Ukraine, in Putin's eyes, has no right to exist as an independent state. Putin's argument is that Ukraine is a nation invented first by the rulers of Austria and Hungary to weaken the Poles who then used the idea to break free from Moscow. After this, the Bolsheviks used the idea of an independent Ukrainian nation to seize power during the revolution (Putin, 2021). In addition, the idea entails that large parts of Ukraine's territory – and perhaps even areas in Poland, Slovakia and Romania¹³ – are actually Russian land and are areas that have been "robbed" from Russia during periods of historical Russian weakness. It's an idea – and a mindset – that we previously only saw a few allusions to in Putin's speeches, for example in the concept of "Novorossiya" – the new Russia – which Putin used in 2014 in connection with the annexation of Crimea. The term Novorossiya dates back to the time of Catherine the Great (Catherine II, 1729-1796) and was used to designate areas in southeastern Ukraine.¹⁴ In his 2014 speech, Putin also used the

12. Putin's use of the concept of the nation thus aligns with the ethnic, nationalist tradition. For an analysis of the intellectual history of European nationalism, focusing on the struggle between the understanding of the nation as a "romantic-organological" (ethnic) community versus the nation as a "Kantian-patriotic" (civic) political community, see, for example, (Kohn, 1946), Staun, (2002), and Yack (1998). It should be noted in this context that the Russian elite's relationship with and use of ethnic nationalism is quite complex, given that several key members of the elite would face challenges if public rhetoric moved too far in this direction. Putin's inner circle, for instance, represents a mix of ethnicities. His chief of staff, Anton Vaino, is an ethnic Estonian. Sergei Kiriyyenko, the first deputy chief of staff in the presidential administration, is Jewish. Magomedshah Magomedov, deputy chief of staff in the executive office of the presidential administration, is a Dagestani Muslim (ethnic Dargin). Putin's close confidant, the former defence minister and now Secretary of the Security Council, Sergei Shoigu, is an ethnic Tuvan from a Siberian region bordering Mongolia. Beyond creating internal challenges for the elite itself, a widespread use of an ethnically Russian concept of nation also carries the risk of undermining the attachment of non-ethnic Russian minorities to the Russian state – a significant concern, given that they make up nearly 20 per cent of the population.
13. In the article "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," Putin refers to the regions of "Galicia," "Western Volhynia," and "Carpathian Ruthenia" as territories that have, for shorter or longer periods, been part of Russia or the Soviet Union and therefore rightfully belong to Russia (Putin, 2021). These are areas that today lie in eastern Poland, Slovakia, and Romania.
14. The term Novorossiya first appeared on 22 March 1764 in a decree by Catherine the Great, which established the Guberniya Novorossiya based on the territories of Slavianserbiya, the Kremenyuzh province, and the "Ukrainian defence line"

ethnic-Russian term "ruskiy narod", when referring to Russians collectively, instead of using the citizenship term "rossiyskiy narod," as he has mainly done previously and as was customary under Yeltsin (Kolstø, 2016, p. 18). But otherwise, imperial thought and ethnic nationalism have largely been left out of his speeches.¹⁵

But in the article "On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians", which Putin had published on the Kremlin's website on 12 July (Putin, 2021), imperialism and ethnic nationalism are on full display. Why Putin chose to unfold his imperialist and ethnic nationalist view of Ukraine in the summer of 2021 in full public – and whether this is a view he has held all along but has just not said publicly – when he has only used such vocabulary to a limited extent until then, is unknown. But it implies a clear radicalisation of the worldview of the Russian elite as expressed in public statements.

The main idea of the 2021 article is the so-called one-people thesis; namely, that Russians, Ukrainians (and Belarusians) are one people dating back to the original "Rus" in the 9th century – a loosely knit Slavic tribal society with Kyiv as its capital. Putin writes: "Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians are all descendants of Ancient Rus, which was the largest state in Europe. Slavic and other tribes across the vast territory – from Ladoga, Novgorod, and Pskov to Kiev and Chernigov – were bound together by one language (which we now refer to as Old Russian), economic ties, the rule of the princes of the Rurik dynasty, and – after the baptism of Rus – the Orthodox faith. The spiritual choice made by St. Vladimir, who was both Prince of Novgorod and Grand Prince of Kiev, still largely determines

(Suslov, 2017). Novorossiia was made an administrative territory under the Russian tsar after Catherine the Great's victory over the Turks in the Russo-Turkish War of 1768–1774. At that time, Novorossiia spanned southeastern Ukraine, including the Crimean Peninsula.

15. Putin has on occasion expressed himself in a similar manner regarding "real" and "artificial" nations, see for example (Putin, 2020). During the NATO summit in Bucharest, when Ukraine and Georgia were offered the possibility of NATO membership "at some point," Putin was present on the sidelines. According to Kommersant, he addressed George W. Bush and said, "You understand, George, that Ukraine is not even a state! What is Ukraine? Part of its territory is Eastern Europe, and part of it, and a significant part of it, is a gift from us!" (Kommersant, 2008). Putin has also previously made similar remarks about Kazakhstan, questioning the authenticity of the Kazakh nation and, by extension, its right to an independent state (Najibullah, 2014).

our affinity today." (Putin, 2021, pp. 1–2). Several times in the article, Putin refers to the relationship between the Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians as "a single large nation, a triune nation" (triyediny narod) (Ibid., p. 14). The idea of the trinity is also used by Putin to argue that (large parts of) Ukraine and Belarus are actually Russian land that has been "robbed" (Ibid., p. 10) from Russia during periods of historical weakness (Putin, 2021).

Ukraine

As perhaps is evident from the above, Ukraine occupies a central place in Russian self-understanding, including in Russian threat perception and its emphasis on great power status. According to Russia's dominant national identity narrative, Kyivan Rus is the cradle of Russian civilisation, a narrative that Putin relies on heavily in his speeches and texts.¹⁶

Therefore, the westward course Ukraine has taken in recent years has been unacceptable to Putin and the rest of the Kremlin elite. Although Ukraine was never given a date for its admission to NATO at the NATO summit in Bucharest in 2008, or a membership action plan – only a vague promise that Ukraine (and Georgia) "will become members of NATO" (NATO, 2008) at some point – it has moved closer and closer to NATO over the years. In the view of the Russian elite, Ukraine has participated in NATO exercises and has thus been trained in NATO doctrine. Ukraine has participated in NATO's international operations and was allowed to buy NATO equipment to a certain extent before the war. And therefore, according to Putin, Ukraine has gradually been transformed into a "bridgehead" (platsdarm) for NATO operations against Russia (Putin, 2021, p. 13). Moscow has not been able to live with this. At the same time, there is a perception among the elite that the US is just using Ukraine to weaken Russia. As Nikolai Patrushev put it in 2015: "The United States is not interested in Ukraine per se, their goal is to weaken our position. The Americans are trying to drag the Russian Federation into an interstate military conflict, to achieve a change of power through the Ukrainian events, and ultimately to dismember our country" (Patrushev, 2015b). The reason, according to Patrushev, is that the American elite wants access to and control over Russian natural resources: "Many American experts, in particular former US

16. A narrative that Ukraine is increasingly challenging (Shuster, 2024).

Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, assert that there are vast territories “under Moscow’s power” that it is incapable of exploiting and which therefore “do not serve the interests of all humanity”. Assertions continue to be heard about the “unfair” distribution of natural resources and the need to ensure so-called “free access” to them for other states.” (Yegorov, 2014). These are ideas that in 2015 were on the fringes of what was *comme il faut* to say in the Russian public sphere. But in 2021 and especially now, in 2025, it has become more mainstream.

Conclusion

The Russian elite is characterised by an increasing radicalisation of its worldview, which the elite expresses publicly in speech and writing. From the beginning of Putin's term in office, the great power identity has moved from an idea of Russia as a kind of regional great power, to being described as "a leading world power" from 2015, to Russia in 2023 being described in key documents as "an influential world power", "a unique state civilisation, a great Eurasian and Euro-Pacific power". This represents a great power concept that includes a presupposed right to a sphere of interest in Russia's so-called "near abroad", which primarily includes the post-Soviet space, and to a certain extent is also formulated as including parts of the former Warsaw Pact countries. The threat perception in relation to the West has also developed negatively during Putin's reign. Whereas Russia in the mid to late 1990s was opposed to NATO expansion in principle, and even wrote this in its national security strategy, Putin's tone during the first part of his term of office, perhaps right up until 2007, seems to have been much more accommodating. The distrust of NATO enlargement that we see now is not evident in Putin's speeches until after his Munich speech in 2007, when Russia officially broke with the US and the West. In contrast, since Putin's return to the presidency in 2012, the perception of the threat from the US and NATO's eastward expansion, the supposed technological superiority of the US and NATO, and the support of Western countries for democratic movements in other countries has only grown and grown. This threat perception has gone on to become a central part of the official justification for the invasion in 2022, which Putin gave to his people in the war address on 24 February. But given the history, it seems partly an instrumental use of the vulnerability discourse.

Where the radicalisation of the elite's worldview is most evident is definitely in the use of imperialism and ethnic nationalism. For example, Putin fields a statement that Ukraine is not a genuine nation, but merely a constructed one – which is why, in Putin's eyes, it doesn't have the same right as (organically grown) nations like Russia to exist as an independent state. This is also evident in Putin's idea that parts of the Ukrainian state lie on territory that previously belonged to the Russian state but was "robbed" from Russia during periods of weakness. Imperialism and ethnic nationalism are thus used to dismiss the right of Ukraine and Ukrainians to freedom, autonomy and their own identity.

These three dominant discourses: the idea of a great power, the sense of vulnerability (fear of the West and the perception of being threatened by the West), and the ethnic nationalist and imperial idea that Ukraine is an illegitimate, artificially created nation – these discourses were central to the decision to invade Ukraine, and they live on as key elements of the Putin regime's official statements, largely unaffected by developments on the Ukrainian battlefield. And they will also be there when we eventually reach a peace settlement in Ukraine – whatever form that may take.

Outcome

Since the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the regime has closed in on itself even more, and there has been an ideological alignment and further radicalisation of the elite's worldview. One of the places where this radicalisation has been most evident is in the debate over the use of nuclear weapons, not only against Ukraine, but also against selected NATO countries in order to get the West to stop supporting Ukraine's continued war. One of the main proponents of this argument is political scientist and geopolitician Sergey Karaganov. He was the lead author of a report to the Russian presidential administration recommending that Russia consider using tactical nuclear weapons against selected NATO countries, primarily Poland, to persuade the West to reduce its support for Ukraine. The recommendation came on the back of a major public debate among Russian experts during the summer of 2023 on the possible Russian use of tactical nuclear weapons in the Ukraine conflict. In a post entitled "A difficult but necessary decision" (Karaganov, 2023a), Sergey Karaganov argued that the US nuclear umbrella over Western Europe is a bluff, as the US will not retaliate

anyway, risking a devastating nuclear war with Russia. Because, as he wrote, the US is not willing to trade the Polish city of Poznan for the American city of Boston.¹⁷ This argument was echoed in the above-mentioned report that Karaganov wrote for the presidential administration, together with political scientists Dmitry Trenin and Fyodor Lukyanov, and former ambassador to London Aleksandr Kramarenko in the summer of 2023. In addition to Russia working to restore the balance of terror by attacking Poland with nuclear weapons, the report recommended, in language that sounded like a recipe for genocide, that Russia set up a programme to "re-settle one to two million people from Ukraine" to Siberia, and that after a peace settlement, large parts of Ukraine be set aside for "marginal agriculture", "destroying all transport, energy and industrial infrastructure" (Saltykov-Shchedrin, 2023).

Now Karaganov is just a well-known political scientist, and actually well removed from the power elite. But Karaganov apparently has people in the presidential administration who support him. And Karaganov has several times since then taken on key roles at major, official, state-organised conferences, for example at Valdai 2023 and 2024, and at the St Petersburg International Economic Forum 2024, where he interviewed Putin live about the war in Ukraine and the use of nuclear weapons. Trenin and Lukyanov seem to have received a similar, albeit somewhat more modest, profiling. It moves their arguments closer to the elite and power. And thus, even in a small way, they are increasingly expanding the political space of opportunity. Although the purpose of the debate is probably first and foremost to try to scare the West from supporting Ukraine through heightened nuclear rhetoric, one side effect is that the debate expands the political language and thus the political options available to the elite.

17. The statements immediately prompted reactions from several Russian political analysts. For example, Ivan Timofeev from MGIMO University in Moscow warned that Karaganov's reading of Western elites as weak, divided, and fundamentally incompetent was mistaken. What if the West does not come to its senses, he asked, but instead climbs the nuclear escalation ladder alongside Russia? For selected contributions to the debate, see (Karaganov, 2023a, 2023b; Timofeev, 2023; Trenin, 2023).

What does this mean for Denmark and the Danish Defence?

The most important lesson that Denmark and the Danish Defence should learn from the above is that the Russian elite is highly radicalised and is willing to go to great lengths to ensure victory in Ukraine. And they furthermore want to ensure that Russia continues to play a significant, if not decisive, role in Belarus and throughout the so-called "near abroad", understood as the former Soviet area, including parts of the Baltic Sea region, just as parts of the former Warsaw Pact countries are increasingly articulated as former Russian territories. At the same time, the war in Ukraine continues to be articulated as something close to existential for Russia. Galeotti argues that one can even speak of the war having become an organising principle of the regime (Galeotti, 2023), in the sense that the war in Ukraine – and the conflict with the West – has become the axis around which all politics in the Kremlin, and all distribution of goods of importance to society, currently revolves. Which is often the case for countries in an important and difficult war.

The Russian elite also genuinely sees Russia as being at war with the West. Not just an information and cyber war – as was the case in the run-up to the invasion in 2022 – but also in the form of an actual proxy war in Ukraine. And although large parts of the elite, including Putin himself, think in terms of the balance of power, and therefore recognise that Russia is materially the weaker party vis-a-vis a united NATO led by the US, there is also a widespread belief that the Western democracies are weak and that the West is actually internally divided, and that this is a weakness that could be exploited in a conflict situation.

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CHAPTER 5

Tomorrow's young soldiers: The patriotic socialisation of children in Russia

By Flemming Splidsboel Hansen

Introduction

"The events of the past year represent a turning point in Russia's modern history on par with the October Revolution". Thus read an editorial in the state-controlled Russian newspaper *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (2023) on the one-year anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. It was clear from a very early stage that the Russian regime under President Vladimir Putin would have to introduce far-reaching changes in Russian society in an attempt to mitigate the potentially destabilising effects of the war, and that it would also have to continuously adapt to create the necessary conditions for the war to continue. This would broadly be done along two separate but closely related lines: firstly, by suppressing all criticism, and secondly, by actively socialising the population in support of the war.

Indeed, changes in Russian society could be observed immediately after the invasion.¹ Within days, a broad campaign against "treason" was launched under the leadership of Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin

1. Already on February 26, 2022, the Russian authorities – arguably in their most widely discussed intervention – decided to ban the use of the word "war" to describe what they instead insist is a "special military operation."

(2022), which essentially delegitimised and threatened anyone who expressed opposition to the war or simply neglected to show their active support. And in a widely quoted speech delivered less than a month after the invasion, Putin (Kremlin, 2022a) warned that Russians could easily distinguish between "true patriots on the one hand and scum and traitors on the other" and that they would "simply spit [the latter] out as one spits out a mosquito that has accidentally flown into one's mouth". This radicalisation of Russian society, with its strong undertone of cleansing, has led observers to claim that Russia has now become fully fascist (e.g. Motyl, 2022, Kuzio, 2022, Snyder, 2022, Ash, 2022; for a counterargument, see e.g. Laruelle, 2022). Historian Ian Garner (2023a), in an essay on "Russia's frightening fascist youth", notes how even some of Putin's young supporters and followers are now "ready to 'purify' themselves, their children and their neighbours through violence – and death".

This chapter offers a discussion of the policy initiatives that have been introduced after the full-scale invasion in 2022, targeting Russian schoolchildren. The chapter aims to analyse and evaluate a key and highly visible element of the "active socialisation line", that is, a policy or set of policies specifically designed to shape the norms of the members of a target group, in this case schoolchildren. Norms are defined here as "collective expectations of appropriate behaviour for a given identity" (Jepperson, Wendt and Katzenstein 1998, 59). The given identity here is Russian. In the following, I turn to Russian schoolchildren to see how the Russian regime attempts to successfully socialise young people to actively support the war, and I provide an initial assessment of the likely impact of this socialisation effort.

The radicalisation of Russian society has exacerbated well-known methodological challenges: How do you study a society that is ruled by a highly repressive regime and is therefore characterised by very strict restrictions on freedom of speech and assembly on the one hand, and subject to monopoly-like official narratives on the other? The only viable path is for the observer to rely on context-specific understandings, in this case of the dynamics of Russian society, to try to piece together a larger picture from a large number of smaller parts (Morgenbesser and Weiss, 2018 and Jananova, 2019).

Methodologically, I start from the hypothesis that the socialisation effort aimed at Russian schoolchildren will succeed in achieving its goal. I do this both for methodological reasons – I classically make a positive hypothesis, which I then attempt to falsify – and for empirical reasons: the sheer scale

of the campaign targeting Russian schoolchildren – with a centralised narrative spread across a large number of domains and platforms and supported by a quadrupling of public spending from 2022 to 2024 – gives reason to expect that the campaign will ultimately shape a set of very basic norms in the youngest Russians (*The Moscow Times*, 2023). I have selected three case studies that are recognised by both Russian politicians and experts as central to the patriotic (re-)education programme, and it is my expectation that the case studies make the basic hypothesis relatively difficult to falsify.

The chapter falls into four main parts. I begin by briefly introducing children as objects of active socialisation by the Russian regime, before turning to the concept of "patriotism", which is central to socialisation efforts but also remains contested by members of the Russian public. I then present the three case studies selected for the study – the introduction of a new compulsory subject ("Conversations about what is important"), the establishment of a new voluntary national movement for young people ("Movement of the First") and the reintroduction of basic military training as a compulsory leisure activity – and describe their origins. I conclude that attempts have clearly been made to create a comprehensive socialisation system to bring the dominant norms of Russian schoolchildren in line with those promoted by the regime and almost completely transfer this socialisation from the private to the public domain. However, it remains questionable whether this approach will succeed and whether the regime actually manages to mould the young soldiers of tomorrow.

This chapter discusses one element of the Russian population's *willingness* to wage war. The overall focus of the other chapters in this book is on the Russian state's *ability* to wage war, and it is of course of great importance for the Danish Defence and the Danish public to gain an accurate understanding of this ability. But the Russians' willingness to wage war is of course also an extremely important variable that can inform us about, for example, their overall risk appetite, troop losses and endurance. This variable is not only about Russians' willingness to wage war in a direct sense, but also about their willingness to maintain, for example, a relatively high defence burden, accept far-reaching restrictions on their rights or accept extensive and one-sided public pressure in support of a highly militarised state. This human factor, even more than the education and training levels of the troops, is likely to ultimately determine the Russian state's

ability to wage war and maintain a high level of tension with the Kingdom of Denmark and our allies.

Research overview

No corresponding studies have yet been published on (parts of) the package of new initiatives to strengthen patriotism among Russian children in schools. However, a few studies shed light on various initiatives and policies that have been introduced after the full-scale invasion. John Morgan (2024) writes very well about morality and education in Russia, and his framework is Putinism specifically as a concept and as a source of patriotic indoctrination. Jussi Lassila (2024) briefly touches on schools as an ideological battleground, but his focus is more on the government's need to secure support among different groups in the population. Ian Garner (2023) takes an even broader approach in his discussion of a comprehensive range of measures aimed at Russian children. He focuses in particular on the militant youth movement *Yunarmiya*, which was established in 2015, and on the general efforts to influence children and young people in Russia through campaigns on both traditional and social media.

Previous studies have discussed the patriotic (re-)education programmes – design, implementation and impact – in schools and society in general *before* the full-scale invasion. Collectively, they inform us about an extremely important development in Putin's Russia, but they do not include the latest initiatives and the underlying debate surrounding the introduction of not just one but several new initiatives. This literature addresses, among other things, the transfer of specific norms of patriotism and the will to wage war (Sanina, 2017, Alava, 2021, Basin, 2022, and Barbieri, 2023 (on children in the occupied Ukrainian territories)), as well as the development of patriotism as an ideological tool in Russia (Basin, 2021, Lassila and Sanina, 2022, and Alexeev and Pyle, 2023).

The school

Russian schoolchildren are clearly interesting from a regime perspective. Among many other roles, they represent future voters, taxpayers and soldiers. The idea of using the school system as an arena for very active and targeted socialisation of children into a set of political norms that support the existing regime is familiar to a wide range of Russian politicians, officials and educators. The Soviet Union aimed to cultivate a sense of loyalty among Soviet children to the Soviet state and its entire institutional expression through education.

The Soviet school system therefore played a very pronounced ideological role. "Perhaps the most distinctive guiding principle of Soviet education", says Jonathan Tudge (1991, p. 121) in a study of the Soviet school system, was " [its] explicit emphasis on moral education". This moral education – the inculcation of certain prescribed norms – prevailed over academic learning and critical thinking, and it was clear to observers that, in Tudge's words, "There was clearly a correct answer and a correct way to answer" (ibid., p. 131). A very basic norm was to act for the collective good and to abandon individual interests in the process (Zajda, 1988, p. 390).

Observers of the current Russian school system argue that Putin reintroduced this view of education back in the 2000s and that he did so in response to the relatively widespread political and social unrest that occasionally hit Russia during those years (Hinsey, 2013). His focus on Russian schools – with the decision to reintroduce top-down moral education – was in recognition of the importance of schools as an essential part of the infrastructure that supports the state. Schools provide authoritarian rulers with a valuable and unfiltered resource – teachers in particular – and offer a relatively closed information space where unwanted noise can be minimised or even eliminated (Forrat, 2018). A telling development was the resurgence of censored textbooks in Russia in the 2000s, a process that has only become more pronounced since (Zajda, 2007 and Lisovskaya and Karpov, 2020). The use of censored textbooks increases the likelihood of gaining control over the information space by banning alternative voices and interpretations and ultimately achieving the desired effect among schoolchildren.

This educational turnaround brought back patriotism. A new generation of censored textbooks told Russian schoolchildren that they should be proud of their country – and indeed of both the Soviet Union and Imperial

Russia. They did so by downplaying some of the darker chapters in the history of these states (most famously the crimes committed under the highly repressive regime of Soviet dictator Josef Stalin) and by sanctifying their military achievements (especially the Soviet war effort during World War II) (Zajda and Zajda, 2003, Korostelina, 2010 and Nelson, 2015). I will discuss the public understanding of the concept of "patriotism" below, but at this point it should be mentioned that the patriotism reintroduced into the Russian school system in the 2000s was ultimately patriotism as a readiness to defend the Russian state – the "motherland" or "fatherland" in more emotional terms – with weapons in hand (Lisovskaya and Karpov, 2018).

A clear indication of this interpretation was seen in the state programme for the "Patriotic Education of Citizens of the Russian Federation in the Years 2001-2005", adopted in 2001 as the first in what has since become a series of these broad and Soviet-inspired five-year programmes. The 2001 programme laid the groundwork for the understanding that "a constituent element of patriotic education is represented by a military-patriotic education of citizens in accordance with the Federal Law on 'Military Obligations and Military Service'" (Government of Russia, 2001). This law stipulates, among other things, that Russian citizens must serve when they are conscripted or mobilised (Duma, 1998). Patriotic education, including its expression in the school system, is clearly aimed at getting Russian citizens to accept these obligations.

Political preferences among the youth

From a regime perspective, Russian schoolchildren are not only interesting as future voters, taxpayers and soldiers. They also pose a political challenge. Both opinion polls and broader surveys clearly show that when these children turn 18 and become eligible to vote, they are far less likely than older Russians to show active support for the regime, including by voting in various elections. Instead, they are much more likely to be politically apathetic or, even worse for the regime, in active opposition. A few examples will demonstrate this.

If we start with the most pressing issue – the war in Ukraine – polls conducted by the independent Russian polling institute Levada show that members of the youngest cohort (18-24 years old in Levada's methodology) are less favourable to the war than older Russians. The war is also generally

supported by the youngest respondents, but this support is typically around 25-30 percentage points below that of the most ardent supporters of the war, who are almost without exception the oldest cohort (in this case 65+ years). For example, a Levada survey from March 2024 found that 58 per cent of 18-24-year-old respondents supported the war either "fully" or "to some extent", while overall support among those aged 65 years or older was 86 per cent (Levada, 2024b). When asked in the same survey whether Russia should continue the war in Ukraine or seek negotiations, 59 per cent of the youngest respondents supported the idea of negotiations, while only 22 per cent supported a continuation of the war. Among members of the oldest cohort (in this study 55+ years), the split of support was 40 per cent and 50 per cent respectively (ibid.).

If we look at another sensitive issue – support for President Putin's rule – a similar picture emerges. Polls conducted before, around and after the March 2024 presidential election show that younger voters are less likely to support Putin, less likely to vote and generally pay less attention to politics than older voters. For example, one survey found that while 60 per cent of respondents aged 18-24 years were in favour of a fifth presidential term for Putin (2024-2030), 74 per cent of those aged 55 years or older were reportedly happy to see him continue. While 60 per cent of younger voters actually cast a vote, 86 per cent of older voters did so. And when respondents in December 2023 were asked in which month the upcoming presidential election would be held, only 41 per cent of 18-24-year-olds could give the correct answer (which was March 2024); 64 per cent of those aged 65 years or over knew (Levada, 2023a, 2023b and 2024a).

Political apathy and lack of turnout among younger voters are hot topics in Russia's public debate. In the academic literature, they are generally treated as challenges that need to be properly understood and addressed. Political apathy and non-participation in elections are said to weaken the legitimacy of the regime in a minimalist interpretation and lead to active opposition and protest in a much broader interpretation. One researcher notes how young people who exhibit political apathy or fail to vote "as a social group" can ultimately be "used" for destabilisation (Mitajeva, 2019, p. 10; also Gumennikova, 2017, p. 211 and Gladun and Klepikova, 2020, p. 20). Other researchers (Rozhkova, Vlazneva and Dubina, 2019, p. 370) explain that the widespread political apathy "can be explained by [young people's] negative attitude towards the institutions of power and that it is

also associated with a negative assessment of the political situation in the country".

One remedy for this unwelcome state of affairs is said to be the development of "political education" among young Russians (*ibid.*, p. 370). Political literacy is a well-known concept often discussed in the context of low political engagement of young voters and is usually associated with the individual and collective ability to "contribute [to political processes] and be able to enjoy rights and assume responsibilities" (Bochel, 2009, p. 151). This is *not* the authoritarian approach. Instead, it is to work for the consolidation of the authoritarian system (Wu, 2024). Political education in this context can be translated into either a genuine belief in or a tacit acceptance of the entire institutional expression of the authoritarian regime. Authoritarian leaders are eager to show their citizens as believers, even if the belief is a mere facade. Political education in an authoritarian context is therefore the willingness to participate in this demonstration of loyalty, again even if it is a façade or, as J. Paul Goode (2017) has put it, even if citizens are merely "humming along".

The need for action against young Russians is largely blamed on their parents. These "children of perestroika and the collapse of the Soviet Union", who are typically Millennials or members of Generation Y, are said to have lost the moral compass that previous generations guarded so zealously (Demkovich, 2023, p. 219). A Russian critic explains that the main values of the parental generation are "freedom of choice, freedom of speech and aversion to authority" and she adds that "all these life priorities the members of this generation openly pass on to their children" (*ibid.*, p. 219). Millennials are usually considered a failed generation in Russia and they are seen as deviant; they took or were led down a wrong path sometime during their formative years (e.g. Rzhanova, 2022). A 2023 study comparing Russian Millennials with their grandparents found that "when it comes to issues of geopolitics, the values are significantly different" (Emeljanova and Taraso, 2023, p. 81). Millennials are more likely to support the sovereignty of the other former Soviet republics, favour the 1991 borders of these states and be more peace-loving; in turn, they are less likely to support the "reunification" of territories "traditionally part of Russia's sphere of influence" with Russia and the incorporation of "new territories" into Russia (*ibid.*, pp. 81-82).

The influence of these parents on their children is such that a Russian researcher unhesitatingly concludes about the latter that "[they] are not

patriots: state borders, cultural and national values are non-existent for them. They prioritise personal happiness and not professional self-realisation (...) They easily change their minds after making a choice, and they strive for comfort and peace" (O. Fesenko in Voronkov, 2023, p. 167). Criticism of this type abounds in Russian academic literature. Children and young people are generally portrayed as individualistic, self-centred, consumerist, apathetic – and unpatriotic (e.g. Bikov, 2010, Resjetnikov, 2014, Smolin, 2014, Osipova et al., 2018 and Osipova et al., 2019). This viewpoint leads another researcher (Voronkov, 2023, p. 167) to warn that these young Russians, if given a weapon for military training, will "use the knowledge they have gained against their own people in support of a fifth column". This leads him to add that military training must be preceded by lessons in patriotism.

I will discuss the concept of patriotism in the next section, but here it should be added that younger Russians generally tend to think that the question "to be or not to be a patriot?" is purely a personal choice rather than a public issue. Here we see an illustration of the more pronounced individualism that so many Russian researchers criticise. When asked whether patriotism is an individual matter or a universal duty, 81 per cent of younger Russians (in this case, those aged 18-30) insist that it is and should be an individual choice; 53 per cent of members of the oldest cohort (in this case, 60+ years) share this belief. The proportion of respondents who believe that being a patriot is a universal duty that all Russian citizens must fulfil is 17 per cent and 42 per cent respectively (FOM, 2023). These figures tell us that it can be difficult for the Russian school system to transmit a norm of patriotism – especially when defined as a readiness to actively defend the Russian state – to students.

However, it is equally clear why the Russian authorities may have decided to introduce a new and much more comprehensive campaign of patriotism in the Russian school system after the full-scale invasion: the available data suggests that without such a strategy, children would grow up to be far more sceptical of the political system and political processes in Russia; they would be far less willing to accept an expansionist foreign policy supported by military means; and that they would be far less willing to serve in the military and far less willing to accept military service as a universal duty. According to Russian researchers, this can largely be explained by the neighbourhood they grow up in – their parents have very similar views. By introducing this new and more extensive campaign of patriotism

into the Russian school system, patriotic education is elevated to a state responsibility (as is actually dictated in the Russian Constitution: (Constitution of Russia, 1993/2020, 67/4)), and the Russian authorities can hope that the role of the children's neighbourhood – an environment that is perceived as largely negative – will be reduced accordingly. Patriotic education is apparently too important to leave to parents.

Patriotism

As previously mentioned, the idea of patriotism promoted by the Russian school system since the 2000s has ultimately been patriotism as a readiness to defend the Russian state with weapons in hand. The reintroduction of compulsory military training in Russian primary schools has helped to reinforce this understanding of the concept, possibly displacing alternative and less binding interpretations.

The Russian public has been very divided on the meaning of patriotism. State-controlled polls conducted before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 showed that when respondents were asked to identify different types of behaviour that they consider *incompatible* with patriotism, they pointed to "lack of concern for nature" as the most disqualifying trait (77 per cent in a 2020 poll). "Trying to avoid military service" was a close second (71 per cent in the same 2020 poll), but this response option never surpassed "lack of concern for nature" (FOM, 2023). However, this changed in 2022, when the first poll after the full-scale invasion showed that the order of these two responses had been reversed. Interestingly, however, "only" 70 per cent believed that trying to avoid military service is incompatible with patriotism; the proportion was actually lower than before the full-scale invasion (*ibid.*).²

The split over the meaning of patriotism can also be seen in the fact that other possible answers to the question of what types of behaviours are *incompatible* with patriotism include "not knowing the history of their country", "going abroad to live and work", "criticising their country's regime", "not knowing the lyrics of the national anthem" and "not participating in elections" (*ibid.*). Other state-controlled polling institutes use a positive definition of patriotism, and the relevant response options include "work

2. The polling institute FOM conducted the first survey on this topic in 2006.

in the interest of the state", "defend his/her state against any kind of attacks and accusations", "speak honestly about his/her state, no matter how difficult it is" and "believe that his/her country is the best" (VTsIOM, 2023a). The wide range of possible answers indicates that patriotism means different things to different parts of the Russian public.

This diversity of approaches to patriotism observed in the Russian public fundamentally weakens our use of the self-reported data that is so central to our understanding of the topic: if respondents have very different perceptions of patriotism – for example, concern for nature, willingness to do military service, or familiarity with the national anthem – what do they *actually* rate when answering questions about their perceived level of patriotism, both individually and collectively?

However, we can still observe overall trends. And they tell us, firstly, that over the years Russians have consistently seen themselves as more patriotic than their compatriots, and secondly, that they have observed an increase in the level of patriotism in society as a whole. Before the illegal invasion and annexation of Crimea in 2014, respondents felt that only a minority of Russians could be considered patriots, but after 2014 their most frequent response has been that patriots now represent a majority of Russians (FOM, 2023). It is unclear exactly what changes respondents have observed, but the trend confirms the assessment that a patriotic wave – still of a somewhat unclear nature – washed over Russia in the wake of the annexation of Crimea. A state-controlled Russian polling institute has explained how "the trend of 'unconditional patriotism' began in autumn 2014 (...)", adding that "one of the obvious explanations for the rise of patriotism in society during this period was the reunification of Crimea with Russia" (VTsIOM, 2024b).

Despite this rise in self-reported patriotism – further fuelled by the "special military operation", as the Russian authorities call the war in Ukraine – there is still confusion about the concept (ibid.). A state-controlled poll from 2024 asked Russian respondents to explain what they associate with the word "Russia". The most popular answers were "this is where I was born" (33 per cent), "great country, great power" (25 per cent) and "patriotism" (23 per cent). On the other hand, the answers "war, the war against Ukraine, the special military operation" and "defence, a will to defend, heroism and bravery" both received only two per cent support from respondents (VTsIOM, 2024c). The latter fact led one Russian newspaper to note that "this may seem surprising given the great emphasis placed on military

matters in the usual patriotic discourse", but it then explained that "people rarely reflect on the theme of patriotism in their daily lives" (*Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 2024).

Patriotism in schools

Since 2022, the Russian school system has increasingly forced children to reflect on the theme of patriotism. This is done through a number of initiatives, three of which will be outlined and discussed below: "Conversations about what is important" ("Razgovory o vazhnom"), "The Movement of the First" ("Dvizhenie pervykh") and basic military training ("Nachalnaya voennaya podgotovka").

Conversations about what is important

This new subject, conducted every Monday morning, was introduced on 5 September 2022, when Russian schoolchildren returned from summer holidays. It is, as one Russian expert puts it, part of a larger campaign to support "the education of the growing population"; she describes this task as "a matter of state importance" (Levchenko, 2022, p. 361).

As a clear sign of the central position of this new subject on the school timetable, Putin launched a pre-talk prior to the opening of the new school year. He did so on 1 September 2022 at a school in Kaliningrad Oblast, in the westernmost part of Russia. In his session with the children, he lectured them about the war in Ukraine and the alleged importance of discussing the war. He noted that "judging by everything, it is not only children but even adults who are unaware that Ukraine never had its own statehood before the creation of the Soviet Union. There was no such state" (Kremlin, 2022d). This set the stage for many more conversations across the country. The Russian Ministry of Education explains in a set of guidelines for teachers that "Conversations about what is important" is a "big, socially important project". The Ministry adds that the new topic is "dedicated to the shaping of the spiritual-normative values of children and adolescents, a task that presupposes the creation of a unified normative space (...)" (Vinogradova et al., 2023, p. 4). The Ministry also notes in its guidelines that the teacher should help each child "form their Russian identity" and that the subject is designed to support the establishment of "civic-patriotic feelings" in children (ibid., pp. 7 and 10).

According to the guidelines, "patriotism" – "the highest normative value" – should be a prioritised element in all conversations (ibid., p. 15). The guidelines also establish a clear link to the "special military operation". They do this by suggesting, for example, that teachers can illustrate the theme of "unity of the people" by drawing parallels between 1612, "when the Motherland needed protection", and "the current times and events of [the special military operation]", when our contemporaries, fathers and brothers, stand as a united formation in defence of traditional Russian values, the Russian language and the territory of our country" (ibid., p. 15).

A special website for which the Ministry of Education is responsible provides an overview of the various topics selected for discussion – this is centralised at the Ministry – and offers tools for teachers to use in the talks (razgovor.edsoo.ru). This includes messages to be read aloud in class. For the "Victory Day" conversation in 2023, it was suggested to teachers that they read the following to the children:

"Today the Russian army is honourably fulfilling its mission in the special military operation. Our army protects, first of all, our general right to live in peace and in accordance with the historical traditions of good neighbourliness established over centuries, of spiritual and normative ideals, our right to independently define our future and development path" (Razgovor, 2023a).

An accompanying text on methodology suggests that teachers express "support for the children whose parents or close relatives participate in [the special military operation]" as well as "gratitude and a respectful attitude towards the participants in [the special military operation]". It is also suggested that teachers engage in a "discussion about the importance of fulfilling one's duty as a citizen to the state – participation in military actions as well as in voluntary and humanitarian movements (...)" (Razgovor, 2023b).

In a later conversation about "Heroes of Our Time" (December 2023), teachers were asked to read the following:

"The most heroic profession is undoubtedly the military profession! (...) We have expressed our reverence and respect for our soldiers on many occasions during these classes! During the special operation in Ukraine, Russian troops fulfil their combat tasks in the most difficult conditions, and regardless of all difficulties, they are always ready to cover for a comrade and risk their lives to save other people" (Razgovor, 2023c).

The Russian expert community – as expected under the current conditions of political radicalisation – strongly supports the initiative. For example, one researcher notes how "society is in a state where worldview paradigms are being reassessed and changed, new spiritual values are being established (...)". She adds that "[‘Conversations about what is important’] suggests supporting values that are understood by all citizens of the Russian Federation, but which also require updating in a changing world" (Mikhailovna, 2023, pp. 288-289). Another researcher links the new subject to a broader effort to raise the level of patriotism in Russian society "as a defence against domestic and foreign threats to Russia's security" (Bogdanova, 2023, p. 156).

State-controlled polls (VTsIOM, 2023c) indicate overwhelming support for the initiative among the population. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that the reception among parents has been much more cautious. The political repression and homogenisation in Russia today make it difficult to know what has caused parents to have reservations about the new subject. The online media is very direct in its criticism, focusing especially on the risk of political indoctrination. It is therefore reasonable to assume that there is a similar concern among parents, as both the subject itself and the associated teaching materials are very much directly linked to the war in Ukraine. This sentiment was expressed by Dmitry Zitser, a teacher and film director, in an independent Russian media when he explained that:

"If we are talking about indoctrination of people of, say, eight or nine years, then it stays with them forever. Is it possible to achieve this? It is, but it comes at a very high price. It's really, really difficult in every respect (...). [But] with this machine that we see, this road roller that's moving forward, I'm afraid everyone in the public schools will eventually give in" (*Ochevidcy*, 2024).

However, the metaphorical road roller may have been stopped at least temporarily by the parents. As a clear indication that the conversations have not been received in Russian homes as planned, the Russian authorities decided in early 2023 to launch a separate conversation for parents. A member of the Duma explained that "parents had many questions about both the form and content of ‘Conversations about what is important’" and added that "I hope that we will soon find answers to many of these" (in *Vedomosti*, 2023). According to a journalist from Moscow, this separate conversation was initiated because parents were looking for guidance online on "how to save children from ‘Conversations about what is important?’"

She added that "judging by the responses, in many schools across the country, these lessons are conducted in a boring way, for the sake of appearances" (*Vechernaya Moskva*, 2023).

Then, in October 2023, the Russian Minister of Education welcomed parents – or at least those who decided to participate – to an online conversation on "Conversations about what is important". A Russian newspaper – "Teachers' Newspaper" – noted how "experts at the online meeting told parents what challenges 'Conversations about what is important' help to solve, how themes for individual lessons are prepared and why it is important for parents to be involved in these lessons" (*Uchitelskaya Gazeta*, 2023c). This suggests that parents have not reinforced the messages from the school system – perhaps they have even gone so far as to challenge them – and have thus weakened the authorities' attempts to control the information space that children inhabit.

The Movement of the First

In January 2023, Russian schoolchildren were introduced to the "Movement of the First" through their Monday "Conversations about what is important" classes. This patriotic cross-fertilisation was clearly designed to bring the children into the Movement of the First. The accompanying text prepared for the teachers stated as a goal for this specific lesson: " (...) to motivate children to do work for the benefit of society and to join [the movement's] ranks" (Razgovor, 2023d). The Ministry of Education has prepared different presentations – a kind of handout – for the different age groups. In the presentation for the youngest children, those in the first and second year, they were asked: "Did you know that there is such a public organisation and do you know what the children are doing there?", adding that " [The movement] is a team of your friends, it's classmates, friends [united] by interests, friends all over the world". It ended by asking, "Who is ready to join?" (Razgovor, 2023e).

Putin signed the order for the creation of a new "All-Russian Movement for Children and Youth" in July 2022. Soviet symbolism and nostalgia were on full display when the law was debated in a first hearing in the Duma on 19 May 2022, on the 100th anniversary of the creation of the Soviet pioneer movement. The law states that among its many goals, the movement should instil in children a sense of "love and respect for the Fatherland (...) and a sense of responsibility for their own and the Fatherland's fate towards present and future generations" (Kremlin, 2022b). A few days after

the signing of the law, representatives from a total of 26 state organisations met at a founding conference to add more substance to the overall framework of the law. The name "Movement of the First" was adopted in December 2022. Membership was initially available to children aged six to 18, but the age limit was raised to 25 in 2024. As mentioned earlier, public spending on patriotic campaigns targeting Russian schoolchildren quadrupled from 2022 to 2024, and as an illustration of the movement's political importance, almost 50 per cent of all spending in 2024 was allocated to the latter (*The Moscow Times*, 2023).

Russian experts generally agree that the establishment of the Movement of the First marks the beginning of a new era in the history of organisations for children and youth in Russia and the Soviet Union. All periodisations share a few key arguments: the emergence of the Soviet pioneer movement in 1922 was a monumental event; the 1990s saw a tragic loss of most of what had been achieved in the previous decades; and the establishment of the Movement of the First represents a return to former glory days when the state was successful in making children feel a patriotic purpose (Ilaltdinova and Mandrova, 2023, Ilaltdinova and Kovyteva, 2023 and Boguslavsky, 2023). One expert (Boguslavsky, 2023, p. 19) explains that the movement represents a goal of establishing a "unifying mono-organisation", that is, a broad organisation designed to bring together otherwise separate entities, just as was achieved with the pioneer movement.

The pioneer movement is actually the comparison used throughout Russian society. When Putin was reminded of the establishment of the Movement of the First during a government meeting in April 2023, he responded by saying: "What is this, they are pioneers, right?" Deputy Prime Minister Tatyana Golikova replied, "Yes, that's an old way of saying it (...)", to which Putin replied, "Old ways, new ways – it is what it was, there is no way around it" (Kremlin, 2023). After this exchange, the Movement of the First is the new pioneer movement in modern Russia. A "Conversations about what is important" class in May 2023 illustrated this by placing the two organisations side by side in the teaching material prepared for the class: The oldest children were introduced to the laws of the Pioneer Movement, while the youngest were shown pictures of Soviet pioneers, complete with banners, scarves, pins, drums and trumpets (Razgovor, 2023f and 2023g). The ambition is clearly to develop a new mass organisation. At the movement's first steering committee meeting in September 2022 – a meeting chaired by Putin – a representative of another state children's

organisation stated that although "several million" children were already enrolled in various activities, "we understand that this is far from all children – there are almost 19 million children aged six to 18 in Russia, and therefore it is important for the children's movement to become truly accessible and thus comprehensive" (Kremlin, 2022c). The chairman of the Movement of the First, Grigory Gurov, later echoed this in an interview with Teachers' Newspaper when he explained that "we are building a large children's organisation for many years to come. Potentially, all children up to the age of 18 should join" (*Uchitelskaya Gazeta*, 2023b).

Recent experience with children's organisations in Russia suggests that the Movement of the First will struggle to achieve these ambitious goals. A first indication is the simple fact that a large number of organisations have existed – and seemingly failed – before the creation of the Movement. A "Conversations about what is important" class in May 2023 listed the 26 organisations that attended the Movement's founding conference and then asked the children, "How many do you know?" (Razgovor, 2023h). Central among the 26 organisations was the "Russian Schoolchildren's Movement", which was established by a presidential decree in 2015 and then given a coordinating role (Kremlin, 2015).

The Russian Schoolchildren's Movement represented the first post-Soviet attempt to recreate the pioneer movement, but it clearly did not succeed. We can see this from at least two facts: Firstly, the Russian Schoolchildren's Movement was simply incorporated into the Movement of the First in 2022, ceasing to exist as a separate entity. It's unlikely that Russian politicians would have invented a new organisation if the Schoolchildren's Movement had been successful. Secondly, Russian experts have openly lamented the lack of a unifying organisation that does exactly what the Russian Schoolchildren's Movement should have done: In 2020, a group of military researchers wrote that "there is no longer a single, monopolising and essentially state-controlled [All-Russian] pioneer movement" (Vorobev et al., 2020, p. 30). This was five years after the establishment of the Russian Schoolchildren's Movement, which was *then* the new Pioneer Movement.

The fact that representatives of 26 organisations had to come together to establish *yet another* organisation raises at least two obvious questions: Why have these organisations not delivered as desired, and why should the Movement of the First do better? If the ambition is to create a new mass organisation, the Russian government needs to ensure the Movement's dominant role in the entire market of activities for children and young

people, including those provided by private actors. The political messages are clear that Russian children and young people should now join the Movement and leave other organisations, mainly private, but to some extent also public, when they do so.

Tellingly, the Movement's website, in a "frequently asked questions" section, asks if membership "is mandatory? " Even if membership is *not* mandatory, the one-sided promotion of the movement by authorities, as seen in "Conversations about what is important", can easily lead to a situation where non-membership can prove to be problematic for the individual child or young person. For example, non-membership could negatively affect opportunities for education and employment. One Russian expert notes how there was a change in the 1990s: Whereas *before* the collapse of the Soviet system, membership in state organisations was the general norm and non-membership the exception, the opposite became true in the post-pioneer era (Boguslavsky, 2023, p. 18). It is clear from the previously quoted statements that key people in and around the Movement would like to see a return to this previous situation.

State-controlled polls show overwhelming public support for the Movement. But even these polls reveal that many Russians are completely unaware of the existence of the highly publicised organisation. In a January 2024 poll, 35 per cent of adult respondents and even 33 per cent of children reported hearing about it for the first time during the same survey (VTsIOM, 2024a). These numbers should be considered a minimum, representing what the polling organisation felt comfortable reporting. This was more than a year and a half after the founding conference of the Movement.

Membership figures should be treated with caution. It's clear that the Russian authorities are keen to portray the Movement as a great success. When officials announce that they are aiming for a membership rate as close to 100 per cent as possible – and politicians express the belief that they have invested in a new mass organisation – the risk of inflated figures is obvious. Russian media reported in May 2024 that "the number of members of the 'Movement of the First' has increased by 260 times". This was based on figures from the Movement itself, which claimed that membership had increased from 25,000 in January 2023 to 6.5 million in May 2024 (*Parlamentskaya Gazeta*, 2024).

Prior to this, the All-Russian Schoolchildren's Movement was celebrated by the Russian Ministry of Education as a "backbone" of collective action

for children and youth. This happened as its membership grew dramatically: from 500,000 in 2020 to 1.5 million in 2021, to a whopping 3.5 million by the end of 2022 (TASS, 2021 and Russian Ministry of Education, 2022). At its alleged peak in late 2022, the "Schoolchildren's Movement" was, quite paradoxically, simply incorporated into the "Movement of the First". All this reminds us that numbers can be easily manipulated by authoritarian regimes for political purposes – after all, the Kremlin manipulated an alleged 31.6 million votes in the 2024 presidential election (*Novaya Gazeta Evropa*, 2024). But membership numbers alone, inflated or not, are no guarantee of successful socialisation of children, as the change from the "All-Russian Schoolchildren's Movement" to the "Movement of the First" also suggests.

Basic military training

Basic military training was (re)introduced in September 2023, when the new school year began. However, the decision to do so was made in the Kremlin already in September 2022 (Bogdanov, 2023, p. 165). It is a compulsory extracurricular activity that takes place after school. It contains both theoretical and practical elements, the latter including handling different types of weapons, shooting and hand grenade training, and tactical exercises. The training is embedded in a broader course on "Foundations of Safe Living" ("Osnovy bezopasnosti Sjiznedejaltel'nosti"), which includes, for example, guidance on how to respond to a fire or how to protect yourself from malicious cyber activities.

Basic military training is largely inspired by the Soviet legacy, where military training was part of school life from 1918-1990. As such, the current training has generally received a thunderous reception in the (state-controlled) Russian public, where nostalgia for most Soviet social institutions, including military training, seems to be at an all-time high. For example, a member of the Duma, Yana Lantratova, clearly tried to shape public opinion on the reintroduction of compulsory military training in schools by pointing out that in the Soviet Union "during these lessons, military exercises were conducted, schoolchildren dismantled and assembled machine guns, produced items for personal protection and learnt to administer medical aid". She added that the civil preparedness course offered before 2023 "does not reflect the current realities and needs" (*Vedomosti*, 2022).

These realities and needs have been created by the war in Ukraine. "Russia is currently experiencing massive pressure from sanctions, [and]

dozens of cities are under attack", explained Deputy Prime Minister Yury Trutnev in late August 2023, as Russian parents prepared to send their children back to school. He then added that "the revival of a general introduction to military affairs and of the patriotic, spiritual traditions of our people is necessary for victory today and for the future Russia of tomorrow" (RBK, 2023). Others have linked it even more directly to the needs of the battlefield in the occupied Ukrainian territories: "The need to resume teaching basic military training is growing year by year", an academic article preceding the new initiative stated, before explaining that "[an important reason] is the current situation with the partial mobilisation [ordered by Putin in September 2022]. Although it is not a prerequisite for a full mobilisation, a person who has undergone basic military training will be better prepared for such an event than an ordinary civilian of the young generation" (Shershiev and Koshevnikova, 2023, no page citations). These authors seem to envision a development where full mobilisation will include young men who have not (yet) undergone military service and will therefore rely on their basic military training alone. When the new course was being prepared, the "Teacher's Newspaper" told its readers that a majority of parents (62 per cent) supported the new initiative. This was in reference to state-controlled polls. However, the newspaper writer added that 23 per cent of parents had expressed opposition, believing that basic military training was "something to be forgotten". The paper concluded that parents lacked confidence in the quality of the new course. But it also explained that there was resistance because parents "do not want a military career for their children" (*Uchitelskaya Gazeta*, 2023a). State-controlled polls showed greater support among the population as a whole, as high as 80 per cent (FOM, 2022; VTsIOM, 2023b).

Given the level of repression in Russia today, it is again difficult to assess how basic military training is perceived – by the public and by parents. A first indication of the general attitude can perhaps be found in the fact that the voluntary military training offered before the introduction of compulsory military training was attended by only 1.4 per cent of those eligible to attend (RBK, 2023). In other words, it was *not* a popular activity. Deputy Prime Minister Trutnev commented on this low figure by noting that "in the last three decades a number of problems and mistakes have accumulated", adding that "there has been a deterioration of the system of military preparation" (ibid.).

Russian newspapers continued to run stories like "Why do Russian schoolchildren need [basic military training] in 2024?" long after the training was introduced in September 2023, which can be interpreted as an indication of some public confusion about the rationale behind the decision. One newspaper interviewed an enthusiastic teacher who expressed his support for the class, explaining that "there has been an increase in the number of stereotypes and misconceptions about military service" (*Lenta*, 2024). These alleged stereotypes and misconceptions may be real, but it might also be that both children and their parents are simply critical of the Russian armed forces.

It is clear from the public debate in Russia that the political system sees another reason why Russian children need basic military training. According to Andrei Kartapolov, a retired general and chairman of the Duma Defence Committee, the oldest schoolchildren are "infantile adolescents who in many respects are unprepared for real life". To this he added that "there is absolutely no doubt that [basic military training] is necessary" (*Nastoyashchee vremya*, 2023). The essence of this message can be found elsewhere: "In [the current] conditions, when the socio-political views of young people are under negative influence", explains a researcher specialising in educational studies on basic military training, "the issues of improving and developing a functioning system of patriotic education (...) gain special relevance (...)" (Kytin, 2023, p. 39). There is a paradox in that the greater the stated need for basic military training, the poorer the prospects for success, all else being equal. It is really a question of the outcome of the socialisation effort.

This is actually true for all three case studies discussed here. But basic military training is arguably more far-reaching and demanding than the other two initiatives discussed. The idea of "goodness of fit" informs us about whether the norms being promoted are compatible with the target audience. It tells us about the effort required to convince members of the target audience that the norms being promoted are "right" and have them demonstrate this through the associated "appropriate behaviour" mentioned earlier. In the case of basic military training, this "appropriate behaviour" dictates military action. It may only be in a protected learning environment, but even here, target practice, hand grenade training and tactical exercises may be too much for some children and their parents to accept. Add to this the clear link between the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the decision to reinstate mandatory basic military training, and it is

easy to understand why some may fear that the protected learning environment is just a prelude to something much more serious.

With the 2023-2024 school year underway, the Duma decided to change the broader "Foundations for a Safe Life" course. From 1 September 2024, the course has been called "Foundations of security and defence of the Motherland". This will dedicate more time to basic military training. There is little to suggest that this change is prompted by the success of the original basic military training – instead, it seems to be simply based on a political desire to add to patriotic socialisation. Thus Kartapolov, chairman of the Duma Defence Committee, justified the change by saying that "the world has entered a time of turbulence. Our children and grandchildren must be ready for this, that it will be necessary to protect the country" (*72.ru*). The name change suggests a more pronounced focus not just on military skills, but also on obligations – on what constitutes "appropriate behaviour" when the Motherland calls. A state-controlled newspaper noted that "some parents are already concerned" about this change, but it went on to downplay this concern by quoting a mother with fond memories of her own Soviet-era training: The mother explains that "if our daughter, instead of 45 minutes of maths, which she doesn't need, marches with the class through the corridors, then I personally don't mind" (*Moskovsky Komsomolets*, 2024). It remains to be seen whether Russian parents in general will be as accepting as this mother, or whether Russian politicians have taken basic military training with its new notion of active defence of the Motherland a step too far.

Conclusion

In the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Russian authorities have designed and implemented the largest, most comprehensive and most ambitious patriotic (re-)education programme for Russian schoolchildren since the collapse of the Soviet Union. It is part of an even broader, wall-to-wall effort that covers Russian society and aims to shape public understanding of the war in Ukraine, Russia's place and mission in the world, and ultimately the Putin regime. The goal is to consolidate control over a Russian society that is experiencing social changes of historic proportions. It is very likely that both the overall effort and the initiatives

aimed specifically at schoolchildren will remain dynamic and therefore subject to adjustments or changes as the regime deems necessary.

The patriotic (re-)education programme for Russian schoolchildren has many facets. This chapter has introduced and discussed just three of the elements of this programme. All three elements are new in the sense that they did not exist in their current form before the full-scale invasion in 2022, but they are old in the sense that they are all taken from the tried and tested Soviet handbook of political and even ideological socialisation of children. These three elements are generally recognised by Russian politicians and experts alike as central to ensuring the successful socialisation of Russian schoolchildren that the Kremlin wants.

As the patriotic (re-)education programme launched by the Russian authorities in the wake of the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 is more comprehensive and ambitious than any previous post-Soviet programme, it may be tempting to declare it a foregone success. After all, the programme is very generously funded and receives explicit and often repeated support from the very highest political levels. Moreover, at least on the surface, it has the potential to be very pervasive as it covers different but complementary aspects and thus has the potential to influence different target groups in different ways. For some students, the socialising effect might come from lessons in patriotism in a historical context, while for others it might come from lessons in marksmanship. It should also be noted that the (re)education programme can also, by its sheer volume, crowd out alternatives. This is especially true for a leisure activity such as the "Movement of the First", which may ultimately become the place where Russian children spend their free time.

But the experience of the previous strategies and policies should warn everyone against thinking that success is guaranteed. It is clear from the discussions that much has failed in the past and that *now* is the time to correct the mistakes made in the past. The hyper-patriotic tone in post-2022 Russia has led to a situation where most public voices will uncritically praise current initiatives while contrasting them with previous policies just to show how well the authorities have learnt from past mistakes and how well-equipped they are to deal with current challenges. Of course, it is possible that the Russian authorities have learnt from past mistakes and have managed to design a programme with greater reach and impact than previously seen, but key structural issues can be difficult to overcome. The

literature is very clear on the existence of generational differences in key norms, and these differences are evident in various opinion polls.

Millennial parents generally have preferences that are very different from those of their parents and especially grandparents, and the literature identifies this as a structural obstacle. The chapter actually pointed to the possibility that authorities see a need to take patriotic education out of the private sphere and turn it into a public issue. The authorities may succeed in creating a new – albeit inverted – generation gap by making schoolchildren more loyal and pro-regime citizens than their parents, but this would obviously require a lot of effort. Added to this is the extreme uncertainty surrounding the war in Ukraine: A central argument in this chapter is that the rapid introduction of new initiatives aimed at Russian schoolchildren is an attempt by the authorities to socialise children into supporting the war and all its associated costs. However, the Kremlin will surely be concerned that the various costs of the war, and thus possibly opposition to the war, will ultimately grow faster than the patriotic (re-)education programme will succeed in promoting and ultimately mobilising support for the Putin regime.

Russian society has changed – and continues to change – as a result of the war in Ukraine. The war is a catalyst for major changes, and some of these major changes are in turn specifically designed and implemented to continue the war and make continued fighting possible. Until the point where the regime, either by choice or by compulsion, decides to stop fighting. As claimed in the very first sentence of this chapter, the transformation of Russia after 2022 represents a "turning point (...) in line with the October Revolution". Such a large-scale transformation is usually accompanied by great uncertainty, which is also the case here. Russia's development – especially in the short and medium term – can unfold according to very different scenarios. It is extremely difficult to assess what role the outcome of the socialisation – of the Russian public in general and Russian schoolchildren in particular – towards a more pronounced patriotism will play in this as a dependent variable. Will the regime be able to maintain its course after 2022 without a change in mentality? Will it be able to continue regardless of the outcome of the various initiatives that have been introduced in the wake of the large-scale invasion? Unless the Russian authorities manage to do something different than they have done before, there is little reason to expect that they will be able to mobilise children – and later

young people – to a greater extent than they have done in the past. Today's Russian schoolchildren will not necessarily be tomorrow's soldiers.

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CHAPTER 6

The land warfare dynamics

By Jesper Hein Olsen

Introduction and purpose

On 24 February 2022, soldiers from the Russian 144th Division crossed the border into Ukraine. As part of the Russian invasion force, the division was advancing in what many expected would be a swift attack with an overwhelming Russian victory as the inevitable outcome.

The division was a symbol of the new powerful Russian army. It had been created six years earlier and was fully manned, with more than 70 per cent of its soldiers on contract (Nicol'skiy, 2016). With its home garrison in Yelnya, close to Smolensk, the division was strategically well positioned in relation to the railway network and could quickly deploy along Russia's western border. However, just seven months into the invasion of Ukraine, the division was wiped out in the Ukrainian army's counteroffensive around Bakhmut (Axe, 2022). The 144th Division has thus become a symbol of the military failure of the Russian army in the invasion of Ukraine.

What we thought we knew about the capabilities of the Russian army¹ and what we could see on the battlefield in Ukraine have not matched up. The Russian army has failed to translate a quantitative difference in the amount of military assets – be this tanks, artillery, soldiers, etc. – into military success on the battlefield.

1. A distinction is made between military assets as an expression of the units and equipment – including weapons and ammunition – that are available, and military capability as an expression of the combat power that these can be converted into.

It is no new realisation that military capability is more than the sum of military assets (Renz, 2023, p. 10), and several assessments of the Russian army's capability have also examined intangible factors such as education or corruption. Nevertheless, the material or technological assessments – the fascination with *big shining objects*, as the somewhat tongue-in-cheek expression goes – have carried the most weight in the debate (Renz, 2023, pp. 6-7), both on the Western and Russian sides (German, 2023, p. 45).

However, as the Russian army's lack of military success has demonstrated, the outcome of a war cannot be predicted solely by a comparison of quantitative data. Qualitative judgements based on professional expertise should also be an integral part of military capability assessments, even though these will be subject to some uncertainty (Lundén et al., 2022, p. 23).

This chapter will present an analytical framework for qualitative assessment of land warfare capability. By analysing the doctrine and tactics of land units as they are expressed in practice, we believe the analytical framework allows us to say something about the military capability of said units. Based on this analytical framework, the Russian invasion of Ukraine is then examined. The aim is to identify possible reasons for the lack of military success in the initial phases of the war and to assess what lessons the war has taught the Russian military in terms of conducting land warfare operations.

Research overview

This chapter is based on an understanding of Russian military thinking established through reading openly available sources. Traditionally, Russia has had an open approach to the discussion of military doctrine and capability development, which is why a large part of Russian military-academic sources are publicly available. However, some of this literature is only available in Russian, which is why it is only possible to a limited extent for Western analysts without the necessary language skills to access it. However, some of this material is also available through English translations. For example, the Russian journal "*Voennaia Mysl*"² was published in

2. "*Voennaia Mysl*" is published by the General Staff's think tank, the Center for Military-Strategic Studies, where senior Russian officers and military thinkers present analyses of both historical and contemporary issues and provide recommendations for the use of military and non-military means.

English by East View Press in the journal "*Military Thought*" until the end of 2024.

If you want to learn more about the Russian army and Russian land warfare thinking, the Foreign Military Studies Office (FMSO) has published extensive literature on the subject. These writings are compiled by Western analysts but are largely based on literature that is only available in Russian. The main work is "*The Russian Way of War*", which is over 400 pages long and provides a thorough insight into Russian doctrine and organisation (Grau & Bartles, 2016). The book's authors have also published several supplementary articles, each delving deeper into specific topics, such as the Russian battalion combat groups (Grau & Bartles, 2021a, 2021b, 2022a, 2022b).

Timothy L. Thomas, also from FMSO, has published several articles and reports on Russian military thinking. Based on the aforementioned Russian-language literature, these seek to provide a Western audience with the Russian perspective on the understanding of war and the conduct of land warfare operations (2016a, 2016b, 2017, 2018, 2019b, 2019a, 2020).

The empirical insight into the war in Ukraine is mainly based on material published by international institutions, such as the Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), the Swedish Defence University (FHS), the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies (RUSI), the RAND Corporation, the Center for Naval Analysis (CNA)³ and the Institute for the Study of War (ISW).

Theory and methodology

If a quantitative comparison of the Ukrainian and Russian army's pre-invasion assets were conducted, it would most likely point to a quick and overwhelming Russian victory (Reuters, 2022). It is therefore the assumption in this chapter that a contributing factor to the Russian army not achieving its objectives with the invasion of Ukraine is the inability to translate military assets into military capability. Thus, a qualitative analysis of the Russian army's capabilities could provide an explanation for its lack of success.

3. Despite its name, CNA has produced several analyses focused on land warfare worth reading.

There are several approaches to structured qualitative analyses of military capability. In the Danish context, a frequently used model is the so-called "*Capability Cycle*". This model is based on the three elements – doctrine, technology and organisation – each of which says something about a unit's ability to fight, as well as the mutual relationship between each element (Jensen, 2004; Wegener, 2021, p. 183). Although the theoretical basis for the model is controversial, the model has nevertheless proven to possess good explanatory power in connection with analyses of internal dependencies and comparative analyses of opposing forces in a conflict (Sjøgren, 2020).

One of the places where the model is weak is when military capability needs to be explained in a given context. The simplicity of the model, which in some areas is its strength, requires it to be supplemented with – or replaced by – other theories or models (Sjøgren & Nørby, 2020).

One scholar who assesses military capability in relation to a given context is the American professor Stephen Biddle. In his 2004 book "*Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle*", he argues that the range and power of both weapons and sensors have been steadily increasing throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. Technological developments have thus led to increased lethality. Biddle further argues that implementing a particular pattern of force employment – *the modern system* – into doctrine and tactics can reduce the fatalities among one's own troops, thereby minimising the effects of the opponent's technological development. Thus, doctrine and tactics become more decisive on the modern battlefield than technology and the amount of materiel (2006, p. 190).

Biddle sets up an analytical apparatus that is mainly aimed at the tactical level but also includes the synchronisation of deployment that takes place at the operational level. He highlights nine doctrinal and tactical concepts – cover, concealment, dispersion, suppression, small-unit independent manoeuvre, combined arms⁴ at the tactical level, depth, reserves, and differential concentration at the operational level – which in combination dramatically reduce the vulnerability of military units to adversary weapon systems and sensors (2006, p. 3).

4. *Combined arms* is the integration of two or more types of weapons (such as tanks, infantry, artillery or engineers) in order to enhance the strengths and minimise the weaknesses of each element.

The nine doctrinal and tactical concepts – which are further elaborated below – are understood in the context of conventional warfare, but are otherwise agnostic to the land unit's understanding of doctrine and the nature of war. They are therefore also applicable to the Russian land forces in Ukraine.

Through concealment, the military unit limits the opponent's ability to gain insight into the unit's disposition and thus fire on it with both direct and indirect fires, while cover limits the opponent's ability to hit the military unit (2006, pp. 35-36).

Dividing the military unit into smaller units that can manoeuvre independently provides a greater opportunity to exploit the terrain for natural camouflage, making it less likely that the opponent will recognise the unit's movements. Should the units still be recognised by the opponent and come under fire, the dispersion among the units and the depth of the formation reduces the overall vulnerability to the opponent's attack (2006, p. 36). At the same time, the military unit can limit the opponent's movements and opportunities to observe and fire on the unit by delivering fire itself – including through the unit's use of combined arms – in order to suppress the opponent (2006, pp. 36-37).

Whether the military unit is attacking or defending, an unforeseen situation may arise as the battle develops. This may be a previously unrecognised enemy threat, or it may be an unexpected opportunity for the unit. If the unit has established an available reserve, this can be deployed to counter any threats or to capitalise on opportunities that arise. At the operational level, the emphasis can be shifted so that more units or more firepower is deployed to the areas of the battlefield where it is required. This maintains unit flexibility (2006, p. 41, 47-48).

The overall system is more than just the sum of the individual elements. It is the synchronisation and balancing of them that creates a system of doctrine and tactics (2006, p. 3). Biddle recommends keeping this in mind when using the system to assess military capability. This is despite the fact that the system is complex and thus difficult to assess. The complexity of the system also places demands on the practitioners of modern warfare. Training and routinising soldiers in the synchronised application of doctrine and tactics has become an important component of training soldiers for deployment on the modern battlefield (2006, pp. 49-51).

With this in mind, the nine doctrinal and tactical concepts can be categorised into four analytical variables, each contributing to the assessment of the military unit's overall capability:

1. Basic battle skills as individual soldiers
2. The ability of military units to co-operate⁵
3. Flexibility in military planning
4. The ability of military commanders to make decisions as the situation evolves

Using these four variables, the following section will analyse the war in Ukraine using openly available sources as listed in the research overview. The analysis is based on three different phases of the war, each representing different aspects of modern war.

The first phase is centred around the Russian invasion beginning on 24 February 2022 and lasting until the summer of the same year. This phase was characterised by the Russian military having the initiative and demonstrates the execution (or lack thereof) of the invasion plans and subsequent adjustment as the war developed. The second phase of the analysis is the Ukrainian counteroffensive at Kherson and Kharkiv from August until September 2022. In this phase, the Ukrainian forces regained the initiative – at least for a time – over a larger frontal section, and this provided an opportunity to analyse the Russian military's defensive capabilities. The third phase is from the winter of 2022 until the autumn of 2024. Since then, the war has largely been characterised by the fact that neither side has had continued success in transitioning from a war of attrition to a war of manoeuvre. Local superiority has only to a limited extent been translated into effects at the operational level.

However, there are several points that call for attention when applying the presented analytical framework. Firstly, Biddle takes less account of the cognitive effects of war. Combat morale also influences military capability, and it does not seem imprudent to conclude that effects in the cognitive domain can also spill over into the physical domain.

Secondly, Biddle's analytical framework is based on analyses of a number of operations. However, as has been demonstrated in Ukraine, there is

5. This includes both the interaction between the individual soldiers in the unit, as well as interaction with other units.

a difference between winning a battle and winning the war. The ability of the warring parties to generate forces and continuously support the war materially has become an important factor, especially in the war of attrition currently underway.

Finally, when assessing possible outcomes in a military conflict, it is important to recognise that there is more than one party to the conflict. Misjudgements of outcomes are not necessarily solely due to an overestimation of the capabilities of one party, but can also be partially explained by an underestimation of the other party (Renz, 2023, p. 9).

The Russian invasion

When looking at the first phase of the invasion of Ukraine, the images of long, stagnant columns of Russian military vehicles that hit the Western news media come to mind. Due to Ukrainian sabotage of railway lines and hubs, the Russian army – otherwise doctrinally dependent on railway lines for strategic troop transport and other logistics (Martin et al., 2023, pp. 2-3) – had to use Ukrainian roads instead (Engqvist, 2022, pp. 3-4; Jones, 2022, pp. 5-6). But these roads were too few and in poor condition, thus resulting in bottlenecks (Martin et al., 2023, p. 8).

When a military unit is held up on the road for various reasons, soldiers' basic battle skillset dictates that they take cover and hide their position. The military commander will then deploy parts of the unit for security. This is also Russian doctrine. So when they did not follow what they had learnt, they were easily recognised by both the news media and Ukrainian intelligence units, and failure to secure the columns left Russian forces vulnerable to Ukrainian attacks (Jones, 2022, pp. 5-6).

The blocked roads also meant that many of the Russian artillery units were stuck further back on the route. They therefore had difficulty getting far enough forward to suppress the Ukrainian forces with fire support to enable the manoeuvre of the combat units (Watling & Reynolds, 2022a, pp. 3-4, 2022b, p. 4).

The focal point of the Russian army – the so-called battalion tactical groups⁶ – was otherwise organised to handle situations like this, where divisional-level fire support could not reach the forward line of troops in the axes of attack. The battalion tactical groups were partly created based on analyses of Western forces deployed in Afghanistan and Iraq, where smaller units were assigned support and combat support units to enable the unit's independent execution of combined arms (Grau & Bartles, 2022b; Pluzhnikov & Usachev, 2022; Tsilko & Ivanov, 2023). However, the reality has proven different. Battalion tactical groups were understaffed – in some places with a manning percentage of 70 or less (Rasmussen, 2022). As a result, there were not enough riflemen to really utilise the unit's combat power when having to fight dismounted against the Ukrainian forces (Jones, 2022, p. 5; Kofman & Lee, 2022; Rasmussen, 2022).

Thus, there are several contributing explanations for why the Russian units failed to defeat the Ukrainian army already in this first critical phase of the war: Insufficient application of basic battle skills among the Russian soldiers and lack of co-operation between units. In addition, Russian commanders showed a pronounced lack of ability to make decisions – and especially to change their decisions – as the tactical situation evolved.

This was also evident at the higher tactical levels of the Russian army. Since the battalion tactical groups – as described above – were insufficiently manned, they were not robust enough to take even limited losses. As a result, several battalion tactical groups were declared unfit for combat despite no or few casualties among their dedicated support and combat support units. They could only be redeployed elsewhere in the battle with difficulty, as they were dedicated to the battalion tactical groups instead of being part of the higher tactical levels' available reserve (Zabrodskyi et al., 2022, p. 46). The Russian army therefore had limited opportunities to quickly and efficiently shift its weight by moving support and combat support units from one area of the battle to another.

This contributed to the Russian army suffering heavy losses in the first phase of the invasion. Within nine days of the invasion, one of the 144th Russian Division's manoeuvre units – the 488th Motor Rifle Regiment – had been destroyed (Charter97.org, 2022a), and the losses necessitated the

6. A Russian battalion tactical group consists of 700-800 soldiers, built around two to four manoeuvre units (typically motor rifle companies, possibly an armoured squadron), supported by artillery, anti-aircraft, anti-tank, engineers and electronic warfare units and others (Grau & Bartles, 2022b).

deployment of mobilised personnel to front-line units. The lack of routine among this type of personnel only added to the challenges of applying basic battle skills and co-operation among military units. More complex tasks, such as calling in artillery against recognised Ukrainian targets, were therefore centralised. This increased the reaction time of the Russian fire control system, thereby reducing its effectiveness when firing at moving Ukrainian units (Watling & Reynolds, 2022b, p. 5).

The basic battle skills of concealment also extend into the cyber domain. It has been found that several high-ranking Russian officers failed to adequately conceal their tactical communications. This made them easier to detect for Ukrainian intelligence. Once their location on the battlefield was recognised, they were vulnerable to Ukrainian artillery attacks or snipers (Watling & Reynolds, 2022a, p. 4). For example, on 8 April 2022, the commander of the 59th Armoured Regiment – another of the 144th Russian Division's manoeuvre units – was killed in a targeted Ukrainian attack (Drury, 2022). In 2021, the Russian forces introduced ERA – an encrypted mobile telephony system – which was supposed to obscure tactical communication. However, challenges with the functionality for non-experienced soldiers led many to either use the unencrypted functionality of ERA or resort to using their civilian mobile phones (Bryen, 2022; Jones, 2022, p. 7; Watling & Reynolds, 2022b, p. 5).

The ability of Russian units to conceal and disguise their movements and locations has also been challenged by the modern battlefield. It is widely known that the US has given the Ukrainian army access to intelligence such as satellite photos and signals intelligence (Cooper et al., 2024; Murauskaite, 2023). This, along with the use of drones by Ukrainian forces, has contributed to a more transparent battlefield. Western donations of long-range kinetic weapons, such as HIMARS, have made it possible for the Ukrainian army to translate intelligence into effects in the form of attacks on Russian units, even far away from the front units. This has led the Russian units to increasingly disperse their command posts in order to spread their locations more widely, or move them further rear to create more distance from Ukrainian reconnaissance and artillery (Watling & Reynolds, 2023a, p. 24). The increased dispersion and greater distances between the command posts and the front line have delayed the exchange of information and updates of situational awareness, further complicating the ability of military commanders to make decisions as the battle evolves.

As can be seen, the challenges faced by Russian units during the invasion related to the soldiers' basic battle skills and the ability of military units to work together. As Russian frontline unit casualties were replaced by less experienced personnel, the challenges of correctly applying doctrine and tactics increased, further compounding Russian casualties. The challenges at the operational level related to the prioritising of resources and shifting the centre of gravity as the war evolved led to the unification of Russian forces in Ukraine under one headquarters at the operational level on 10 April 2022. Until then, forward headquarters from the four Russian military districts deployed in Ukraine each had their own area of responsibility without overarching operational coordination (Rasmussen, 2022).

The Ukrainian counteroffensives in 2022

The creation of an overarching operational headquarters responsible for the overall Russian military effort in Ukraine resulted in a better operational focus. Russian forces were withdrawn from Kyiv, where they had suffered heavy losses, so they instead could reinforce the offensive in the Donbas region (Zabrodskiy et al., 2022, pp. 34-37).

This allowed the Ukrainian forces to reorganise and on 29 August 2022, they launched a counterattack against Kherson. If we consider the Russian units that the Ukrainian forces encountered there in terms of the analysis variable of flexibility in military planning, they appear more well-prepared than before. Russian doctrine dictates that military units that are not in motion should prepare their position for defence as quickly as possible – something that was bypassed in the first days of the invasion. This includes digging in, setting up positions for supporting weapons, establishing prepared firing positions along the opponent's expected axes of advance, and creating unoccupied position areas for deception (Romanchuk & Shigin, 2023; Watling & Reynolds, 2023a, p. 7). Dedicated units in reserve create flexibility by the ability to deploy as needed as the battle evolves (Grau & Bartles, 2016, pp. 95-96; Watling & Reynolds, 2023a, p. 25), while depth in the combat positions makes it difficult for the opponent to breach the positions (Watling & Reynolds, 2023a, p. 25).

The Russian preparations made it difficult for the Ukrainian forces, who advanced and regained ground, but with heavy losses (Biddle, 2022; Gettleman, 2022). However, the fierce fighting in the area meant that the

Russian army was forced to release units from other front sections to reinforce the defence in the south (Zagorodnyuk, 2022). As a result, the Russian front line in the north was more sparsely occupied. And before the Russian forces could reorganise and repair the defensive positions, taking into account the fewer units available, the Ukrainian forces launched another counterattack on 6 September, this time around Kharkiv.

Here, the Ukrainian forces met much less prepared resistance than they had at Kherson (Biddle, 2022). The more dispersed placement of Russian units and the quality of Russian equipment and ammunition delivered to the area clearly indicated that the Russian military's priority had been elsewhere on the front. For example, the artillery officer of the 254th Motor Rifle Regiment – the only remaining manoeuvre unit from the 144th Russian Division after the 59th Armoured Regiment was destroyed in August – reported severe problems with the ammunition supplied. Only 30 per cent of the available artillery ammunition was in sufficiently good condition to be fired, and even then with the risk of misfiring (Charter97.org, 2022b). A month later, the rest of the 144th Division fell (Axe, 2022).

Before the weather made further Ukrainian advances impossible, the Ukrainian forces had recaptured more land than the Russian army had captured earlier in the year. But while at Kharkiv they had successfully recaptured around 12,000 square kilometres, the recaptured area at Kherson was only about a tenth of that. A contributing factor to this was the Russian prioritisation of units, equipment and ammunition for the defence of the Kherson area. The Russian preparations and flexible military planning have also given the units here better conditions for deploying Russian defence doctrine with the use of concealment and dispersion, as well as positional depth and the establishment of dedicated reserves.

From manoeuvre to attritional warfare

When the weather in November 2022 froze the front lines between the fighting units, it also marked the transition from a war of manoeuvre to a war of attrition, which has largely continued ever since. Despite several attempts – such as the Ukrainian summer offensive of 2023 – neither side has succeeded in breaking through the opponent's defensive lines and capturing large areas of terrain.

From the Russian perspective, there are several reasons for this. In order to transition to manoeuvre warfare, it will be necessary for the Russian units to launch offensive operations that can open the Ukrainian defensive lines. Offensive operations have a higher degree of complexity than defensive operations and thus place greater demands on the soldiers' experience and training (Biddle, 2006, p. 38). When units are moving forward in attack, especially the interaction and synchronisation between them become more complex and require prior training and routines.

In the first year after the invasion, Russian casualties were massive, and it is estimated that they lost about half of their total combat capability during the period compared to the beginning of the invasion (Engqvist et al., 2023, p. 116). Mobilised former soldiers and recruits with no previous experience of soldiering have since replaced the experienced soldiers that the units lost at an earlier stage of the war. This has allowed previously destroyed units – such as the 144th Russian Division – to be re-established and re-inserted into the war.⁷

These new inadequately trained Russian soldiers have not had the necessary skills to conduct military operations with a minimum of complexity (Watling & Reynolds, 2023a, pp. 7-8) and have preferred to conduct massive artillery attacks against larger targets, such as Ukrainian cities, rather than manoeuvre warfare using basic battle skills (Jones, 2022, p. 8).

In stationary combat, Russian forces have had better success with the interaction between military units at the tactical level. In particular, the interaction between combat troops in dug-in positions and artillery has proven to work in the Russian forces' favour. Although shelling from Ukrainian HIMARS in the first year of the war made it difficult for Russian artillery to place artillery ammunition close to combat positions and contributed to Russian artillery units having to move further back from the front line than doctrine dictates, they have adapted their tactics according to battlefield experience, and the use of artillery remains the nexus of Russian land warfare doctrine (Watling & Reynolds, 2023a, pp. 11-12).

Another reason why Russian units have been successful in conducting defensive combat despite inadequate education and training of personnel has been flexibility in military planning. Dedicated reserves consisting of

7. The 144th Russian Division was re-established in early 2023 with mobilised soldiers, after which it took part in the failed Russian offensive around Terny in Donetsk in February 2024 (TSN.UA, 2024).

infantry units and tanks, supported by prepared artillery fires, have given Russian forces the flexibility to conduct successful counterattacks against Ukrainian units that had taken over Russian defensive positions (Watling et al., 2024, p. 21; Watling & Reynolds, 2023a, p. 12, 2023b, p. 16).

The use of depth in the layout of the positional areas is still being prioritised and this is also a significant factor in preventing Ukrainian breakthroughs (Watling et al., 2024, p. 20). This has also proven useful when poor morale among the inexperienced and insufficiently trained Russian soldiers causes the first defensive line to collapse under pressure from Ukrainian attacks (Watling et al., 2024, p. 20; Watling & Reynolds, 2023b, p. 8).

A brief account of Russian defence doctrine was provided earlier in this chapter. This suggests that since November 2022, the Russian units have been adapting and developing their doctrine based on the experience they have gained on the battlefield (Watling et al., 2024, p. 27; Watling & Reynolds, 2023b, p. 24). Among other things, it has been observed that they have managed to exploit the terrain to a greater extent by placing the defensive lines in connection with natural obstacle lines, such as large streams (Watling et al., 2024, p. 11). This has brought the advancing Ukrainian units to a temporary halt, whereby the combination of prepared fires from combat units and artillery has been able to wear down the Ukrainian forces.

This also suggests that Russian military commanders have become better at reacting to the evolving situation. Whether this is solely due to increased combat experience on the part of the commanders, or whether they have been granted greater freedom of action from the higher levels during the war, cannot be conclusively determined. It must therefore be assumed that both factors have had an influence.

Summary

To summarise, the analytical framework used has provided a perspective on the Russian military's efforts in the war in Ukraine. The framework has pointed to a number of areas that contributed to the lack of success in defeating the Ukrainian army, which is assumed to be part of the strategic objectives of the invasion. It has also highlighted several lessons that the war has taught the Russian military in terms of conducting land warfare operations.

The major challenge for Russian units now is that the ongoing war of attrition – and the high casualty rates for both personnel and equipment – requires force generation at such a rapid pace that Russian soldiers and units do not receive sufficient education and training in doctrine and tactics before being deployed in combat operations. Despite this, Russian units have been successful in implementing lessons learnt on the battlefield, retaining the elements of doctrine that have proven to work and developing the areas that did not work in the first year of the war.

This is especially true when it comes to flexibility in military planning and the ability of military leaders to make decisions as the situation evolves. From the perspective of this chapter, these elements help partially to compensate for the limited basic battle skills among the insufficiently experienced soldiers.

On the other hand, the Russian army still seems challenged in terms of the military units' ability to co-operate. Doctrinally, the foundations seem to be in place, and they have had better success with interoperability and synchronisation, especially in defensive combat. However, the assessment is that it will require education, training and routinisation of Russian soldiers and units with a special focus on these elements to achieve an improvement.

Currently, the majority of the Russian army's total combat power is engaged in Ukraine. The war exacts extremely high personnel and material costs for the Russian army, and it does not appear that it will be able to create sufficient military superiority to end the war in the near future. It is therefore also assessed that the Russian army does not have the resources to enter into a conventional war with NATO as long as the war in Ukraine continues.

However, the force generation and production of war materiel and ammunition that has been seen in connection with the war of attrition calls for reflection. According to the Ukrainian Defence Intelligence Service, the total number of Russian soldiers deployed in Ukraine from the start of the invasion until 22 November 2024 had grown from 360,000 to 580,000 (Interfax-Ukraine, 2024). The Ukrainian General Staff has estimated that the total Russian losses for the same period totalled 728,300 soldiers (The Kyiv Independent, 2024). In comparison, the American and British authorities put the total number of casualties at 600,000 and 700,000 respectively (AFP, 2024; Schmitt, 2024). If these figures are to be believed, Russia has

completed a total force generation of almost one million soldiers in less than three years.

The Russian army is second to none, both in recruiting, mobilising and equipping units to replace casualties, but also in producing the equipment that works on the battlefield. No other army in Europe – with the possible exception of Ukraine – is able to do this at the same speed as the Russian army. If Russia manages to maintain this after the end of the fighting in Ukraine, the Russian army can be rebuilt within a very short time period. If it is successful in translating the lessons learnt on the battlefield in Ukraine into education and training, the Russian army will be a highly capable opponent in any future conflict.

Conclusion

Several analysts have pointed out that modern war is a war of attrition, where the outcome depends on the ability of the parties involved to continuously send units and equipment to the front (Brennan et al., 2022). This also seems to be an obvious conclusion of the development of the war in Ukraine, and maintaining combat capability through the production of equipment and ammunition and force generation of units will naturally be an essential element of a protracted conflict.

But the war has also shown that land warfare doctrine and tactics are crucial in countering the devastating effects of technological development on the modern battlefield. Neither side has succeeded in introducing a *wunderwaffe* that can turn the tide of battle in their favour.

The Russian army is – along with the Ukrainian – the army in Europe with the most up-to-date experience in conducting modern large-scale combat operations. Doctrine and tactics have been continuously updated based on this experience. What currently contributes to the Russian army's failure to achieve final victory on the battlefield is the soldiers' lack of experience in applying basic battle skills and interacting with other units. This requires education, training and familiarisation. When the pressure from the front in Ukraine subsides, there will be more time for this.

Compared to the effective force generation that the Russian army has achieved, it is estimated that the Russian army has the potential to establish itself as a highly capable opponent within a few years, for example against Denmark and our alliance partners in NATO. This presupposes that the

Russian army can continue force generation at the current pace, that it continues to implement the lessons learnt from the battlefield in Ukraine, and that it is given the opportunity to train, educate and routinise soldiers and units based on these experiences.

In order for Danish land forces to keep up with this development, it will be necessary to pay continuous attention to the lessons learnt by the Russian and Ukrainian armies in Ukraine. The lessons learnt should be collected, studied and understood in context. Particular focus should be on the continued development of land warfare doctrine and tactics to be translated into lessons learnt and implemented in the education and training of Danish soldiers.

The lessons learnt from Ukraine must be acquired and learnt before the situation demands it. This will require resources to conduct training and exercise activities where the Danish army can develop the necessary skills in these areas. This build-up includes co-operation exercises and interoperability training with our alliance partners, as it must be expected that the Danish army in any future conflict will have to fight within the framework of NATO.

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CHAPTER 7

Sea power or maritime hide-and- seek – Russia's encounter with Ukrainian A2/AD

By Anders Puck Nielsen & Alexander With

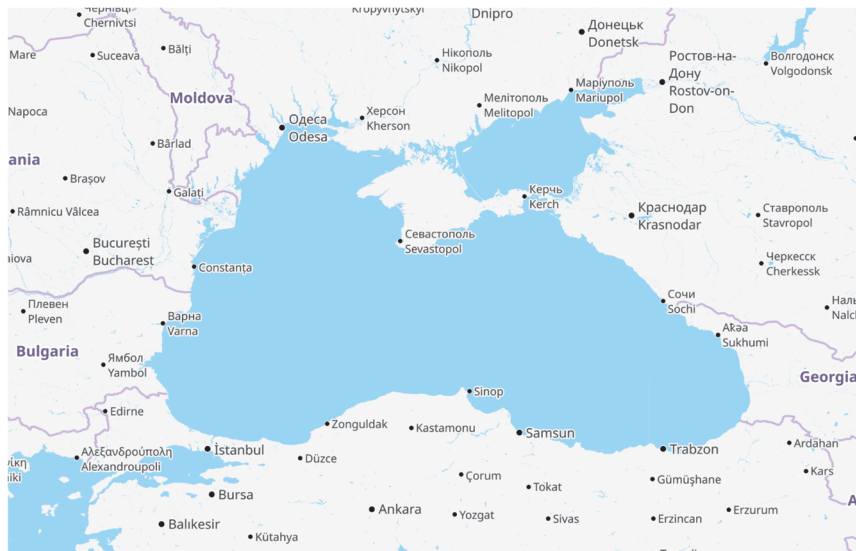
Introduction

It has become a cliché to say that the Russian Black Sea Fleet was beaten by a country without a navy. In reality, there are important nuances to this narrative, but the war in Ukraine nevertheless provides valuable insight into the Russian Navy's capabilities and challenges. By understanding the tasks the Russians wanted their navy to fulfil in the war, and the reasons why this didn't turn out as the naval leadership wanted, we can gain insights into both the Russian navy specifically and modern naval warfare in general.

The war will have far-reaching consequences for Russia's ability to conduct naval operations in the future, both in the Black Sea and around the world. Specifically, Russia has lost numerous ships, often in spectacular circumstances, and it will take a long time for them to rebuild that capability. This has shifted the balance of maritime power in the Black Sea, where Russia is no longer the undisputed maritime superpower. In addition, Russian military planners will also have to make difficult choices in prioritising across the different services when it comes to rebuilding the overall defence.

This chapter examines the Russian navy in light of the war in Ukraine. The chapter begins with a brief overview of research and sources of

information that may be of interest to the reader. This chapter builds on the conclusions of a similar naval chapter in the book *Russia as a Military Superpower*, published in 2021 – about a year before Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Poulsen & Staun, 2021). Therefore, the main conclusions from the previous book are outlined. This is followed by a theoretical section where the main concepts are introduced and explained. The theoretical framework does not differ significantly from that of the previous book, but there are some nuances in emphasis, as some of the long-term trends described earlier have played out in concrete ways during the war in Ukraine. This is followed by a longer empirical account and analysis of the events of the maritime war in the Black Sea. This leads to a discussion of what the war reveals about the Russian Navy and the long-term consequences it may have for its future development. Finally, we conclude by discussing what it means for Denmark and the Danish Defence.



Map of the Black Sea. From OpenStreetMap, 2024, [openstreetmap.org/copyright](https://openstreetmap.org/).

Research overview

The war in Ukraine has presented a number of challenges for researchers following the Russian Navy. Firstly, many analysts have primarily focused on the land specific dimensions of the war, while the maritime aspects have received less attention. Secondly, it has been a challenge that the picture of the Russian Navy has changed significantly during the war. It has been difficult for analysts to keep up when peer review processes have meant that analyses are published with a certain delay. As the war has developed, analyses written one year after the outbreak of war will typically conclude that the Russian Navy has been largely successful, while an analysis written after the second year of the war will show the exact opposite.

Therefore, as we write this in the autumn of 2024, little actual research has been published on the Russian Navy after the outbreak of war in 2022. We have now reached a point where the trajectory of the maritime war seems predictable and more stable conclusions can be drawn. However, it will be some time before this is reflected in published research.

The consequence is that research still primarily covers the Russian Navy before the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. This also applies to research published after 2022. On the other hand, it is worth noting that the Russian Navy was relatively well-covered in the research prior to the invasion of Ukraine. This is because, in the latter half of the 2010s, there was increased Western attention on the Russian Navy and the potential for a confrontation between NATO and Russia (Monaghan, 2023, p. 1).

Of significant works for a basic understanding of the Russian Navy, the anthology *The sea in Russian strategy* from 2023 (Monaghan & Connolly, 2023) is particularly noteworthy. Here, a number of prominent experts in both Russian military affairs and maritime strategy contribute to shedding light on the Russian Navy from different vantage points. This includes Andrew Lambert (2023), Geoffrey Till (2023), Michael Kofman (2023) and Dmitry Gorenburg (2023). In addition, Johannes Riber's article *Russia's Twenty-First-Century Naval Strategy* explains how the modern Russian navy was created with roots in the late Soviet period (Riber, 2022). Finally, the chapter in the predecessor to this book, which is probably the most comprehensive Danish-language analysis of the modern Russian navy (Nielsen, 2021), should also be mentioned. If you are interested in the individual Russian fleets, Jonas Kjellén has written about the Baltic Fleet and the Northern Fleet (Kjellén, 2021, 2022).

For a more database-oriented overview of the Russian Navy, we recommend the website RussianShips.info (RussianShips.info, 2024). For a chronological overview of the maritime events of the war against Ukraine, H I Sutton's website is recommended (Sutton, 2024a).

The background

When looking at the development of the Russian navy in a longer perspective, it is striking how much the interest in the sea has fluctuated and how this has translated into different strategic approaches. There have been periods when Russia had great maritime ambitions, but these have been followed by other periods when the navy has received less attention and the political focus shifted to land-based military challenges (Nielsen, 2021; Till, 2023).

The fluctuating interest in maritime affairs can largely be explained by Russia's geography. For countries like the United States and the United Kingdom, global great power ambitions must necessarily be accompanied by large naval investments, but the same is not true for Russia. Here, successive Russian leaders have found land-based military issues to be more pressing, and Russia has been able to exert significant influence across large parts of the world simply by projecting power over land. Investments in the navy have thus appealed to Russian politicians when aligned with their grand political ambitions, while at other times the navy has been allowed to languish.

This pendulum interest in the navy is important to keep in mind when understanding where the Russian navy is today. Throughout the 20th century, Russia and the Soviet Union experienced significant fluctuations in naval ambition and investment. In the early Soviet period, there was little interest in the sea, partly due to the scarce resources available after the First World War, the communist revolution and the civil war. The focus was therefore on the navy providing coastal defence to protect the Soviet Union from invasion, and it was not an ambition to have global maritime reach (Till, 2023, pp. 65-68).

This changed after World War II when the US and the Soviet Union were left as the world's two superpowers. In this situation, Soviet politicians wanted a navy that could compete globally with the US Navy. By the

1980s, the Soviet Navy had grown to become unquestionably the second strongest in the world – second only to the US Navy.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Russia inherited the strongest navy it had ever had. This happened at a time when its economy was in ruins and its geopolitical ambitions were significantly reduced almost overnight. From being a superpower with global reach in the 1980s, Russia shifted in the 1990s to focus on political and economic stability at home. At the same time, a number of domestic military issues, most notably the war in Chechnya, loomed large and demanded the attention of political leaders.

In these circumstances, it was not surprising that the navy had to be scaled down. It was simply unsustainable for the new Russian state to continue with a fleet of the size that the Soviet Union had had in the 1980s (Riber, 2022, p. 77). However, a key characteristic of navies is that it takes an enormous amount of time to replace their capabilities. It often takes over a decade to develop and phase in a new class of ship, and once built, a ship can remain in service for over 40 years.

The Russian Navy therefore inherited a large number of ships from the Soviet Union that were fundamentally designed for the wrong type of tasks. The Soviet Navy in the 1980s had focused on large ships that could operate on the world's oceans and project power far from their own shores. These were ships that the new Russian state could not afford to operate and were ill-suited to the more regional focus of its maritime strategy.

Due to a lack of resources, naval development was put on hold in many areas during the 1990s. However, in the 2000s, shipbuilding and the development of new vessel types began to pick up again. The focus was now on smaller ship types such as corvettes and frigates, and although there have been ongoing debates in Russian naval circles about the need for larger warships, such as cruisers and aircraft carriers, this has not materialised into much. Russia has a concrete programme to build landing helicopter docks, which qualifies as large surface units. But beyond that, the general trend is that the new ships are significantly smaller than the old Soviet warships that they replace.

Before the war in Ukraine, the Russian navy was thus characterised by being in a transition where the ships were getting smaller and the focus was shifting from global power projection to local coastal defence. It was a somewhat inharmonious mix of ships, with a large number of legacy units from the Soviet Union, combined with some modern ships that had typically been built within the last 10 years.

To compensate for the smaller size and shorter range of the ships, the Russians focused on utilising their vast capabilities in missile technology. They developed ship-based missiles with a very long range, so that even small corvettes would be able to hit an enemy from a great distance. Perhaps the best known is the Kalibr missile, capable of striking sea targets at distances over 600 kilometres and land targets at ranges of up to 2,500 kilometres. These long-range weapons have made it possible for Russia's modern warships to maintain a level of strategic importance despite their smaller size (Gorenburg, 2023, pp. 168-170). This is reinforced by the fact that these long-range missiles can also carry nuclear warheads, thereby adding a nuclear dimension to their role.

In one area, however, Russia has maintained its focus on large warships: nuclear submarines. Russia has considerable expertise in building nuclear submarines, and these platforms provide such unique capabilities that they have remained a priority for continued investment (Petersen, 2023, p. 214). There are basically two types of nuclear submarines. One type is the so-called strategic nuclear submarines, which carry intercontinental ballistic nuclear missiles. These submarines are part of Russia's nuclear deterrent and are designed to ensure that Russia can retaliate in case of a nuclear attack from NATO. The second type is the so-called attack submarines, which are designed to engage enemy ships. These attack submarines are sometimes referred to as "aircraft carrier killers" in Russian naval parlance, which pretty much sums up their intended role. Thus, although the nuclear submarines are impressive and capable, they still fit within an overall defensive naval concept, as their primary roles are to prevent the adversary from reaching Russia's shores and to safeguard its nuclear deterrent.

Thus, the overall picture of Russia's navy before the invasion of Ukraine was that there were two simultaneous developments going on. On the one hand, the fleet was undergoing an ambitious modernisation, replacing old Soviet ships with modern vessels. Russia had developed prototypes for nearly all categories of warships, and with serial production underway, the Russian navy was on track to be equipped with significantly newer and more modern ships in the coming years. On the other hand, there was also a development where Russian warships were getting smaller. The new ships were simply smaller than the old ones they replaced. Thus, in parallel with modernisation, the Russian navy was also evolving from being a great power fleet with global reach to becoming more of a coastal defence of Russia itself (Nielsen, 2021).

This modern Russian navy would still be able to project power, but not on the same scale and at the same distances as in Soviet times. It was more of a navy that would be able to assert itself as a local or regional power, for example in a conflict in the Black Sea or the Eastern Mediterranean. Russia demonstrated the latter, for example, during the wars in Syria and Libya, where the navy played a significant role in supporting military operations on land (Riber, 2022, p. 78).

Thus, Russia would still maintain a navy capable of dominating in areas such as the Russian Arctic, the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea. The rest of this chapter will explore how the war in Ukraine has affected the Russian Navy and what impact it will have on its future development.

The theory of Sea Control, Sea Denial and A2/AD

The basic conceptual framework in this chapter is the classic distinction between sea control and sea denial. These two concepts describe the two basic outcomes that navies can strive to achieve militarily at sea, and they frame the strategic choices that navies must make when developing capabilities. The difference is whether navies want to use the sea for something themselves or whether they just want to prevent the enemy from using it. In practice, there is a big difference between these two things. A completely different set of activities and capabilities are needed for achieving sea control or sea denial.

The basic premise of these concepts is that the normal state of affairs is that no one is in control of the sea (Corbett, 2012, p. 87). Humans cannot live at sea, and we can only travel at sea with the help of technical means such as a ship. This is very different from how things work on land. On land, it's normal for states to have good control over what happens within their territory. It is an exception that there are parts of the land that no state controls. But at sea, establishing control in a certain area requires active operations by a naval force. This requires securing the area on the surface, under water and in the air.

Sea control is therefore a highly demanding activity. It requires a naval force that can operate in three dimensions and that can control the threats posed by the enemy in a systematic manner. Sea control is thus limited in time and space because it only exists as long as the naval force is present (Speller, 2019, p. 117). Therefore, sea control is only something you

establish when you have a particular goal and there is something specific you want to achieve.

In a war, the parties will typically have an asymmetrical interest in the sea. It will often be the case that one party wants to travel across the ocean to project power against the other. This also means that they have different needs when it comes to the use of the sea. The party that needs to cross the sea and wants to project power will need to establish sea control to achieve its purpose. The defending party, on the other hand, can settle for sea denial to defend itself against the enemy. The defending party often has no use for the sea itself, but will have achieved its goal simply by spoiling it for the adversary.

The asymmetric interest in the sea naturally leads to an asymmetric need for resources. It is simply more expensive to do sea control than sea denial (Speller, 2019, p. 118). To conduct sea control, you need to be able to secure your naval force in all dimensions: on the surface, in the air and below the surface. This requires sophisticated platforms and typically a combination of surface ships, submarines and aircraft. For sea denial, you can do much less, and you can take advantage of the fact that the party conducting sea denial chooses the time, place and method of attack. Sea control requires you to be ready to counter all types of threats and demands an almost flawless success rate because the consequence of failure is the loss of expensive and sophisticated devices. With sea denial, however, you can simply send certain types of weapons against the enemy and there is no expectation that attacks will succeed every time.

This means that in naval warfare, it is possible for a small fleet to challenge a much larger opponent. This realisation is not new. After losing its navy in the early 1800s, Denmark switched to using small gunboats against the British fleet. The same logic was behind the French *Jeune École* or the Soviet Younger School, which advocated smaller torpedo boats and submarines as a tool against much larger cruisers and battleships in a traditional naval force (Riber, 2022). In a modern context, developments in weapons technology have created even more methods that a defending force can utilise to disrupt the opponent's sea control, including sea mines, long-range anti-ship missiles and most recently drones.

Conceptually, it makes sense to distinguish between sea control and sea denial both as tactical phenomena and as strategic choices. On a tactical level, it plays out in the specific encounter between platforms and weapons at sea, while on a strategic level, it is about how states understand their

maritime needs and what types of capabilities they choose to invest in. Today, the concept of sea denial is closely related to the slightly broader concept of A2/AD, which stands for Anti-Access/Area Denial. A2/AD is the phenomenon that with the enormously long range of modern weapon systems, it is possible to deny an opponent access to an operational area. This is the consequence of developments in long-range missile and drone technology in particular, which make it possible to hit enemy ships and aircraft from hundreds of kilometres away. While sea denial is an old concept that deals specifically with access to the sea, A2/AD is a newer term that embraces both sea and airspace and also takes into account the long range of modern weapons (Tangredi, 2013, pp. 32-74).

This makes sense because today it is virtually impossible to separate the maritime war from the air war. Aircraft are part of maritime warfare, missiles are the main weapon in naval warfare, and ships are used for surveillance of airspace. It therefore makes sense not to look at sea denial in isolation, but also to look at the phenomenon more broadly as A2/AD.

In relation to this chapter, the theory of sea control, sea denial and A2/AD serves a dual purpose. On the one hand, it is a suitable framework for understanding the maritime war as it has unfolded between Russia and Ukraine in the Black Sea. Here, it has been with Russia in the role of the power seeking sea control, while Ukraine has adopted a sea denial approach. On the other hand, the theory is also suitable for understanding Russia's maritime strategy in a broader light, where the primary opponent is not Ukraine, but NATO. In this perspective, the roles are reversed, with NATO as the maritime superpower, led by the US Navy, seeking sea control, and Russia focusing on sea denial and A2/AD.

The war in Ukraine and the maritime battles in the Black Sea

This section describes and analyses Russia's maritime operations in connection with the invasion of Ukraine. There are many different aspects of the naval war that deserve to be analysed, and the analysis is organized thematically to address the various dimensions. The themes are presented in an intended chronological order, so they are introduced in roughly the order in which they became relevant in the war. The aim is not to provide an in-depth account of the maritime war, but to describe what the Russian

navy tried to achieve and what we can learn from this about both the Russian navy and naval warfare in general.

The run-up to the war

Ukraine's navy, already inferior to Russia's, lost many of its vessels when Russia conquered Crimea in 2014, where the largest Ukrainian naval base was located. Thus, on paper, it was a very unequal battle from the start.

Nevertheless, Russia reinforced its naval presence in the Black Sea prior to the outbreak of war. The main addition of ships in the period leading up to the outbreak of war consisted of a total of six landing ships. Some of these Russian warships set sail from Kaliningrad and sailed through the Great Belt on 17 and 18 January 2022, while ships from the Russian Northern Fleet in the Arctic made a similar journey. They arrived in the Black Sea on 8-9 February. The Russians had initially stated that the landing ships were on their way to an exercise in the Mediterranean, but were escorted in several places by NATO ships suspecting them of heading towards the Black Sea and Ukraine (Kuczyński, 2022; Secher, 2022).

As a result, Russian amphibious capacity in the Black Sea more than doubled. Russia demonstrated that although its fleet is dispersed in peacetime, it can relatively easily increase its capacity locally by moving its ships.

It was important for Russia to provide the Black Sea Fleet with the capabilities it needed before the outbreak of war, as the 1936 Montreux Convention allows Turkey to deny warships of belligerent states passage through the Bosphorus Strait. Turkey invoked this provision three days after the outbreak of war. This meant that Russian (and Ukrainian) warships could no longer enter the Black Sea, and it meant that the Russian warships already in the Black Sea would de facto be forced to stay there for the duration of the war (Oral, 2022).

Russian sea control in the first months of the war

At the outbreak of war in 2022, the Russian Black Sea Fleet was far superior to the Ukrainian Navy in terms of number of ships and firepower. The Ukrainian navy was in a dilemma. It could either leave its bases to face the superior Russian navy at sea in a battle it could not possibly win, or it could

stay in port where it would be vulnerable to Russian attacks. Ukraine chose the latter. Most of the Ukrainian fleet was neutralised in the first days of the war, and when Russian troops reached Mykolaiv where the Ukrainian flagship, the frigate *Hetman Sahaidachny* was located, the Ukrainians chose to scuttle the ship to prevent it from falling into Russian hands (Myre, 2023).

Even before the war, the large presence of landing craft had sparked debate about whether Russia would conduct major landing operations against Ukraine, for example against Odesa (Axe, 2022). With the Ukrainian navy out of action and Russian sea control in the Black Sea, the possibility of a landing near Odesa had increased, and on several occasions silhouettes of landing ships could be seen from the coast in southern Ukraine.

However, the amphibious invasion never materialised. One explanation could be that the invasion was supposed to have been a joint operation, with the landings reinforcing or supporting the advancing Russian land forces. However, the land forces stalled in Mykolaiv and therefore never reached the Odesa area (Delanoë, 2024). Had the Russian marines landed, they would have had to fight the Ukrainians alone from a beachhead with no prospect of reinforcements and supplies beyond what could be sailed in. Russia had the capacity to land approximately one brigade of marines with associated vehicles and logistics in the first wave (Kaushal & Cranny-Evans, 2021). Against this, the Ukrainians had the 5th Tank Brigade in Odesa, which, although only partially manned, would have had the advantage of defending itself in urban combat (Lawrence, 2023). An invasion would be further complicated by the possibility of Ukrainian sea mines and potential Ukrainian attacks on landing ships as they disembark personnel and equipment. Finally, the Russian marines were neither trained nor equipped to attack strong defensive positions directly from the sea, but could rather reinforce an area that land troops had already secured or that was not defended by the Ukrainians.

It is therefore difficult to imagine how the Russians could have provided enough combat power to take Odesa from the sea alone. Amphibious operations are one of the most difficult tasks a military can perform; they require favourable conditions, and when they go wrong, they usually end in disaster (Woodward & Robinson, 2012, p. 331).

The most likely scenario is therefore that the Russians abandoned a landing near Odesa due to lack of progress on the ground. However, it is also possible that the Russians never planned to conduct a landing

operation around Odesa in the first place. The mere presence of Russian landing ships forced the Ukrainians to acknowledge the risk and commit forces to defend the coast and the important port city. The purpose would thus be a diversionary operation to tie up Ukrainian troops that could not be deployed elsewhere.

Specifically, it tied up a Ukrainian brigade in the city at a crucial time in the war when Ukraine was fighting to defend Kyiv. Such use of landing forces is not unprecedented in history. During the Gulf War, the US Marine Corps was used in a similar role to mislead the Iraqi military (Mills & Heck, 2022). That this psychological effect could have been the Russian plan is supported by the fact that it is hard to see the point of sailing your landing ships so close to the coast that they could be seen with the naked eye, unless you wanted them to be seen.

Although the landing at Odesa never materialised, there were several smaller amphibious operations at the start of the war. On the first day of the war, the Russians took control of Snake Island in the now famous incident where the 13 Ukrainian soldiers told the Black Sea Fleet flagship, the cruiser *Moscow*, to "go F... yourself" (Harding, 2022). The Russians probably also made small landings in the Sea of Azov to support the siege of Mariupol. After the Russians gained control of the port of Berdyansk, they also started sending supplies in that way. And in general, the landing ships were largely used for logistical support (Miltarnyi, 2024).

Russia's first maritime loss occurred when an Alligator-class landing ship was hit by a Ukrainian missile while docked in Berdyansk, loaded with ammunition (The Maritime Executive, 2023). This incident exposed for the first time in the war the vulnerability of Russian ships when stationary in harbour, at anchor or in a shipyard.

The sinking of Moskva and the loss of sea control

The threat of landing operations was primarily an issue during the first month and a half of the war, when the Russians could operate relatively undisturbed off the Ukrainian coast. This changed abruptly on 14 April 2022, when the cruiser *Moskva* sank after being hit by two Ukrainian Neptune anti-ship missiles fired from shore.

The sinking of the *Moskva* was a landmark event in many ways. For the Russians, losing the flagship of the Black Sea Fleet, which had just become

world-famous in the Snake Island incident, was a huge loss of prestige. Operationally, it meant that the Russians could no longer sail closer than about 100 kilometres from the Ukrainian coastline without incurring a high risk of attack with land-based anti-ship missiles. The Russians clearly did not expect this capability to be operational in the hands of the Ukrainians, but the sinking of the *Moskva* showed that it was. Shortly thereafter, Ukraine's Western supporters, including Denmark, also began donating Harpoon missiles, which were used for mobile coastal batteries mounted on trucks. Neptune and Harpoon have similar characteristics, so it was a significant reinforcement of Ukraine's sea denial capabilities.

The Black Sea Fleet therefore pulled their larger ships further away from the coast, but this created new problems as they could not control the coastal waters. The Russians had placed troops on Snake Island, strategically located near the sea lane to Odesa and close to the Ukrainian mainland, but without warships to protect the troops on the island and the ships supplying them, the island became a vulnerability for the Russians. Within range of Ukrainian artillery, aerial drones, fighter jets and missiles, the island was quickly littered with blast craters. Similarly, the Russians also lost several of the smaller vessels they were trying to use to bring supplies to the island. After losing about half of the Black Sea Fleet's smaller Raptor-class patrol vessels, as well as several smaller landing craft and a tug, the Russians ended up evacuating the island.

The Ukrainians had checkmated the Black Sea Fleet by presenting it with a dilemma. Either the Russians had to give up Snake Island and lose a fulcrum in the centre of the shipping lane to Odesa, or they had to use their larger warships to defend the island, but also put them at unacceptable risk from land-based missiles.

The grain initiative and a period of balanced sea power

The battle for Snake Island and Russia's loss of sea control on the Ukrainian coast led to a form of stability that lasted for over a year. The Ukrainians were able to challenge the Russians close to their own shores, but in the rest of the Black Sea, the Russians still enjoyed freedom of maneuver. This stability created the conditions for an agreement to export grain out of Ukrainian ports. Less than a month after the Russian evacuation from Snake Island, the parties signed the agreement that allowed ships to sail

from both Ukrainian and Russian ports with agricultural products for the world market.

There are undoubtedly several factors that led to Putin's acceptance of the grain deal, but a key point is that it allowed him to save face by accepting a situation that he had no attractive options to change by force anyway (Prokopenko, 2022). At the beginning of the war, one of the Black Sea Fleet's tasks was to blockade Ukrainian harbours (Delanoë, 2024). This largely halted Ukrainian grain exports, leading to global increases in food prices and a problematic food situation in several developing countries. With the loss of first *Moskva* and then Snake Island, the Russians could no longer enforce a blockade near Ukrainian harbours. A distant blockade was also not an option, because the geography allowed merchant ships to sail through the territorial waters of third countries all the way to the Turkish straits.

In principle, Russia could sink the merchant ships with missiles or use submarines to torpedo them. However, this would present the Russians with a number of legal and political challenges on the world stage. Before carrying out a blockade, it must be duly proclaimed and ships must be stopped and inspected. You can't just sink ships that you suspect of breaking a blockade. In addition, the ships were flying the flags of third countries and had crews from even more countries, so Russia could quickly get into trouble with many countries with this approach. Finally, it was turning into a PR disaster for Russia to be blamed for a famine in the developing world (Nielsen, 2022). Several countries that Russia wanted good relations with had already expressed their concerns about Russia's blockade (Prokopenko, 2022).

Russia therefore had no attractive options and ended up signing the grain deal, which was subsequently extended several times. Russia briefly withdrew from the agreement after a Ukrainian attack on the Sevastopol naval base in the autumn of 2022, but rejoined the agreement after Turkish mediation (Reuters, 2022).

The A2/AD bubble expands and Russia is forced on the defensive

The period of stability in the rules of the game at sea ended on 17 July 2023. On that day, the grain initiative was due to be extended once again, but on

the same day, Ukraine carried out a massive maritime drone attack on the Kerch Bridge between Crimea and Russia. Russia then withdrew from the grain initiative.

It's hard to say whether Russia was planning on withdrawing regardless. They had been threatening to do so for some time, and there was uncertainty until the end as to whether Turkey had managed to convince Putin to extend the agreement. But after the Ukrainian attack on the Kerch Bridge, it was impossible to imagine Putin making diplomatic agreements with Ukraine on the same day.

It was difficult to discern what deliberations the Ukrainians had undergone in relation to a link between the attack on the bridge and the renewal of the grain deal. In world opinion, the Russians were blamed for the collapse of the agreement, while the Ukrainians gained goodwill as the party that wanted to take responsibility for avoiding a global food crisis. On closer inspection, however, one could be forgiven for thinking that the Ukrainians had lured Putin into a diplomatic trap by getting him to cancel the grain deal.

In any case, two factors indicate that in the long run it was an advantage for Ukraine that the agreement was cancelled. The first is that by the summer of 2023, Ukraine had sufficiently developed its maritime drone capabilities to launch a major campaign against the Russian Black Sea Fleet. At the outbreak of war, the Ukrainians had quickly realised the potential of this type of weapon and launched ambitious development projects. Maritime drones had been used earlier in the war, though they were more akin to experimental prototypes.

In the autumn of 2022, a surface drone washed ashore in Crimea as a harbinger that a new phase in the naval war would begin (Gault, 2022). Just over a month later, Ukraine launched a major attack on the naval base in Sevastopol with a combination of aerial and surface drones (Bachega & Gregory, 2022). The exact impact of this attack is still unclear, but some Russian ships were damaged nonetheless, despite Russian security measures. This forced Russia to increase the protection of the naval base, which now includes two layers of netting and six layers of pontoon barges and air defence (Sutton, 2023).

By the summer of 2023, it was clear that the development of the drones had progressed to the point where they were ready for large-scale production. This was seen not only in the attack on the Kerch Bridge on 17 July but also in the drone attacks on the landing ship *Olenegorsky Gornyyak* at the

naval base in Novorossiysk and the naval tanker SIG off Crimea in early August (Al Jazeera, 2023; Walsh et al., 2023; Waterhouse & Armstrong, 2023). All of these were spectacular attacks, but the most remarkable was the range of the drones. The nearest Ukrainian coast was almost 700 kilometres away from Novorossiysk. Whether the drones travelled all the way by themselves or were launched from a mother ship is unknown. But whatever the method, the attacks demonstrated that the Ukrainians could now strike almost anywhere in the Black Sea against the Russian fleet.

The second factor was that the grain initiative was actually quite unfavourable to Ukraine. Despite the fact that it was often portrayed in Western media as a good deal that secured both food on the world market and a source of economic income for Ukraine, it was basically an unsustainable construction. In reality, the grain initiative was a kind of discount blockade that the Russians were allowed to maintain against Ukrainian ports. It meant that Ukraine had relinquished control of maritime transport to and from the country, and that the ports functioned solely as shipping points for grain. Under the agreement, Russia had the right to inspect all ships travelling to Ukraine and could reduce traffic by delaying inspections and creating logistical bottlenecks (Wintour, 2023).

In the early months of the war, this may have been a tolerable solution for Ukraine, but as a permanent construction it was completely unacceptable. It was therefore to be expected that Ukraine would eventually try to get out of the grain initiative to regain control of its maritime lines of communication. In practice, the Russians proved unable to enforce a real blockade. They tried a few times to deploy surface ships in forward positions to intercept merchant vessels, but the threat from Ukrainian drones was too great for the Russian ships to operate. Within a few months, the Ukrainians managed to establish a safe shipping route and make the necessary agreements with insurance companies for shipping to resume (Arhirova & Bonnell, 2023).

In the absence of a real blockade, Russia began bombing Ukrainian port infrastructure, although this has not stopped grain exports (Harmash, 2023). Bombing food and related port infrastructure is a war crime, but it has had the military effect of forcing Ukraine to deploy its air defences and straining its air defence missile stockpile (Dannenbaum, 2023).

Ukraine's combined arsenal of long-range maritime drones, aerial drones, sea-based missiles and long-range land-attack missiles – such as the British Storm Shadow – has put the Russians on the defensive at sea

(Allison, 2023; Roblin, 2024; The Economist, 2024; van Brugen, 2023). The role of land-attack missiles is to hit ships in harbour and destroy infrastructure on land, such as bases or shipyards.

It is unclear how the Ukrainians find their targets, but since the outbreak of war, the UK and the US in particular have intensified their flights in the Black Sea with various surveillance aircraft and drones (Korshak & Stewart, 2024). It is therefore possible that part of the Ukrainian success is actually due to intelligence provided by Western countries. At the time of writing, around 40 per cent of the Russian fleet in the Black Sea has been destroyed in terms of hulls, and this trend is likely to continue (Hoffman & Garrett, 2024). In this context, the Montreux Convention has taken on an almost opposite significance compared to the beginning of the war. Whereas earlier it prevented the Russians from reinforcing their fleet in the Black Sea, today the closure of the Turkish straits means that Russian ships cannot escape to safety.

When reviewing the losses, there are two clear trends. Firstly, there is an over-representation of landing ships. It is possible that landing ships are simply more often stationary and thus easier targets, as their job is inherently to transport material to shore. But there is also evidence to suggest that the Ukrainians are actively targeting the Russian ability to perform maritime logistics. Russia has lost almost half of its landing ships in the Black Sea, and they are thus significantly overrepresented among Russian losses (Eckel, 2024). This should be seen in the context that the Ukraine war is first and foremost a land war that will be decided by the ability of the warring parties to deploy and supply troops on land. This role can be supported by Russian landing ships, especially in the southern sectors of the front line.

The second trend in Russian losses is that a large number of the lost vessels were stationary when they were hit – either docked, anchored or in the shipyard. In addition, some of the targets that were not stationary were sailing in bays and similar waters with limited room to manoeuvre. Thus, there are indications that the Ukrainians have difficulty finding and attacking moving ships in the open sea. In the open sea, ships have more room to manoeuvre, can reach higher speeds and can be harder to locate. The waterborne drones, whose hulls are shaped like speedboats, will probably also find it easier to reach high speeds in bays where the waves are smaller, although waves can also serve to hide the drone from being detected by binoculars or radar. Finally, there may be a question of range. The size of

drones means there are limits to how far they can sail or fly, and if you are to attack at long range, you need to know where the target is, so you don't have to spend fuel looking for it. That's why the area around Crimea is particularly vulnerable, as it's simply closer to Ukrainian-controlled mainland.

One of the Russians' favourite ways of defending against the drones has so far been to engage them with aircraft or helicopters, which, unlike Russian ships, have been able to engage the drones without the risk of being attacked themselves. However, this situation may be changing. In 2024, the Ukrainians have developed the world's first surface-to-air missile drone, and if they can make this system work effectively, it could further limit the Russians' ability to defend against drones (Sutton, 2024b). Aerial targeting drones could also potentially challenge the Russians' overall air dominance over the waters around Crimea. This will make it easier for the Ukrainians to conduct raids with special forces, who until now have been exposed to air strikes while on the water in small boats and jet skis (Safronova, 2023).

Before the war, Crimea, with its central location and well-developed military infrastructure, was well suited as a base to dominate the Black Sea. However, now that Crimea is within range of a larger number of Ukrainian weapons that can attack with great precision, its location has become a vulnerability in several respects. The Ukrainians have been able to hit Russian air bases and ammunition depots and have also temporarily destroyed the Kerch bridge twice, most recently with a surface drone.

The Kerch bridge is vital for the support of Russian operations in Crimea, and to protect the bridge they have placed floating barriers, barges, radar reflectors and air defences around it, as well as patrolling warships. However, these efforts have seen limited success, and the Ukrainians have managed to sink a ship tasked with protecting the bridge (Sutton, 2024c). The Ukrainian attacks on the Kerch bridge should also be seen in the context of the Ukrainian attacks on the Russian landing ships. Should the bridge be destroyed again, Russian logistics to Crimea would be challenged as they have lost so much transport capacity in their landing ships. Given the many successful attacks, one might ask whether Crimea is simply too close to the front and the Ukrainian A2/AD bubble to be a suitable base for the Black Sea Fleet. There are indications that the Russians have come to the same conclusion. They have relocated the headquarters of the Black Sea Fleet from Sevastopol to Novorossiysk, further to the east (Hoffman & Garrett, 2024), and have also begun constructing a naval base

in occupied Abkhazia, Georgia (Demytrie et al., 2023). However, this is a relatively small base, and it is hardly realistic that it will be able to replace the naval base in Sevastopol. Similarly, the Russians are in the process of establishing a railway to Crimea across the mainland north of the Sea of Azov. Presumably because they realise that the Kerch bridge, like the rest of the infrastructure in Crimea, is vulnerable within the Ukrainian A2/AD bubble.

In practice, Ukraine has gradually established a solid A2/AD bubble. This has made it impossible for the Russians to carry out the majority of their maritime tasks. They cannot blockade Ukrainian ports, and they cannot contribute to surveillance and air defence around Crimea. This has left the peninsula vulnerable to air strikes and raids by Ukrainian special forces. The Black Sea Fleet can still help launch missiles against Ukraine, the remaining landing ships can provide logistical support, and the ships can help defend parts of Crimea and the Kerch bridge against drones. But beyond that, the Black Sea Fleet today is busy just surviving.

Can the Black Sea Fleet make a comeback?

A natural question is whether the current trend in the maritime war will continue or whether the Russians will manage to turn the tide. The Ukrainian navy is in many ways still weaker than the Russian navy, and if they can find a solution to the challenge of Ukrainian drones and missiles, it is conceivable that the Russians could regain sea control in the Black Sea.

However, reversing a negative trend in a maritime war is inherently difficult. Once a fleet is caught in a downward spiral, the direction is often irreversible. This is due to the long lead time for new ships and the high demands on infrastructure in the form of efficient shipyards. There is no indication that Russia will be able to re-establish shipyards in the Black Sea region in a timeframe relevant to the war, making it almost impossible for them to repair ships or build new ones. There is also no indication that Russia can find solutions to contain the drone threat, as the technological development of maritime drones is currently faster than the development of defence systems against them.

In other words, it is difficult to see how the Russians will be able to turn the tide, and most likely we are now in a phase of the maritime war where the direction is more or less set. Ukraine will not gain naval supremacy in

the Black Sea, because they do not have the capabilities to do so. But we are approaching a state of mutual sea denial, where neither side is able to use the sea freely (Nielsen, 2024).

Discussion of implications for Russia

The war in the Black Sea has been deeply damaging to the reputation and future prospects of the Russian Navy. It was expected that with the Black Sea Fleet, Russia would be able to dominate in the maritime domain and establish quite secure sea control. This followed naturally from the fact that the only other state with a strong navy in the Black Sea, Turkey, was not part of the conflict. On paper, the Black Sea Fleet was many times stronger than the Ukrainian Navy, and at the beginning of the war, the Russians also acted as if they had complete control of the situation.

After three years of war, the picture is the exact opposite. The Russian Black Sea Fleet is so challenged by the Ukrainian sea denial weapons that it has effectively lost much of its operational relevance. It is simply not possible for the Black Sea Fleet to fulfil many of the tasks for which it was intended. They cannot threaten the Ukrainian shores with a landing operation. They cannot maintain a maritime blockade of Ukrainian ports without unacceptable political and military risks. And they cannot protect Crimea from attack by monitoring the sea and airspace. The only major tasks the Black Sea Fleet can actually perform are firing long-range cruise missiles at targets ashore and ferrying supplies between a shrinking number of safe harbours.

So effective has the Ukrainian A2/AD bubble been that the meaning of the Montreux Convention has been turned on its head. When the war started, the general expectation was that the closure of the Turkish straits would mean that Russia could not reinforce its Black Sea Fleet with additional ships. As the war has progressed, the real effect has been the opposite: Russian ships cannot escape. This has meant that the Russian surface units have been trapped within range of the Ukrainian weapons, unable to sail to safety in the Mediterranean.

It's hard to see what the Russians can do to reverse this trend, and in practice the direction seems clear. The Russian navy will lose more and more ships and there is little they can do about it. The long-term consequences could be huge. Russia will potentially lose its position as the

regional maritime superpower in the Black Sea, and that title could go to Turkey in the future. Ukraine's targeted attacks on Russian landing ships will permanently reduce Russia's capacity to conduct amphibious operations and to use maritime transport for military purposes. As a result, it will be more difficult for Russia to support military operations like those we saw in Syria and Libya for many years to come.

The long-term prospects for rebuilding the Russian navy are not good either. The war in Ukraine has severely depleted the material stockpiles of all branches of the armed forces, and massive investments will be required, especially to rebuild the army. It can be expected that the navy as a whole will draw the short straw in the competition between the branches when it comes to resource allocation in the coming years. This is due to Russia's military geography and the greater urgency of land-based military challenges.

Before the war, the Russian navy was in a phase of development where ships were getting smaller and the focus was more on coastal defence than a fleet with global reach. This development will be accelerated by the war. Not only will Russia lose a number of ships to Ukrainian attacks, but there will be fewer resources to build new ships in the coming years. This will force Russian naval planners to focus even more on the same low-cost solutions that were already at the centre of naval development, while ambitions for new large surface combatants will be pushed even further into the future.

Implications for Denmark

The Russian naval operations in the Black Sea have provided valuable insight into the Russian Navy's capabilities and ways of operating. It is clear that although in peacetime the Russian ships are organised under four separate fleets and a flotilla, in practice they must be thought of as a coherent maritime capability. Prior to the start of the war against Ukraine, the Russian Navy assembled units from the Black Sea Fleet, Baltic Fleet, Northern Fleet and Caspian Flotilla in the Black Sea. Ships from the Pacific Fleet were also intended to play a role, but they did not arrive before Turkey closed the passage of the Turkish straits.

This illustrates a rather banal point that is often forgotten in naval discussions: ships are mobile. All too often, the ships in Russia's Baltic Fleet

are used as a starting point when assessing what kind of opponent the Danish navy might be up against. In reality, it will at least be a combination of the Northern Fleet and the Baltic Fleet that the Navy will have to deal with on both sides of the Danish straits. Even if Denmark closes the straits, Russia will be able to sail ships up to corvette size between the Baltic Sea and the White Sea through its system of artificial channels, locks and rivers – the so-called inland waterways.

In this respect, the events in the Turkish straits illustrate the importance of international maritime law. On a technical level, Turkish and Danish straits are governed by different rules. In Turkey it is the Montreux Convention, while the right of warships to pass through the Danish straits is regulated by the general principles in the law of the sea and the Danish Regime of Passage of 1999 (AND, 1999). But conceptually, it is a reminder that international law plays a role in defining the rules of the game. Until the moment war breaks out, Russian warships have the same right of passage through Danish straits as they have always had. Thus, there is nothing Denmark can do to restrict the mobility of Russian warships or prevent them from positioning their fleet ahead of a war.

Another rather banal reminder for Denmark is that warships can sink. Russia has lost several large warships in the war against Ukraine. Some of these have been supply ships, while others have been combatants. Much speculation has been made as to why the air defence cruiser *Moskva* failed to defend itself against two relatively simple cruise missiles. At first glance, one would have thought that a *Moskva-class* ship would be able to handle such a threat. Whatever the explanation, the lesson for Denmark should be that warships are vulnerable to missiles and drones and that in combat with land-based systems, it is usually the ship that draws the short straw (Hughes & Girrier, 2018, pp. 26-29).

In Denmark, naval strategic thinking has for many years focused on large, flexible frigates capable of performing a wide range of tasks. As a result, the Navy today consists of very few, but relatively valuable ships. This approach makes sense in many respects, but it is risky when fighting a war against a peer adversary in a coastal environment. The loss of a single frigate will represent a very large percentage of the Navy's total combat power, which is the military equivalent of putting all your eggs in one basket. If you want to create a resilient navy capable of continuing the fight despite losses, you would rather aim to distribute your combat power across more numerous and smaller platforms. This was also the Danish

approach during the Cold War, when the Navy was built around a large number of smaller units.

The observation that losses are part of modern naval warfare speaks to a dilemma that all European navies face: that there is a trade-off between having capable units and having sufficient quantity because the price of modern technology has become very high (Stöhs, 2021). In this threat environment, Denmark must strike a balance where the ships have sufficient capabilities to be relevant in operations with our NATO partners, but where there also is robustness to absorb losses.

The Russian experiences of the war in the Black Sea highlight the significant challenges navies face in relation to A2/AD, especially in confined waters such as the Black Sea and the Baltic Sea. This is probably the first practical demonstration of this concept that we are witnessing on a large scale. Until now, it has been mostly a theoretical idea, but Ukraine has demonstrated the vast potential of long-range missiles and drones which, in addition to being effective, are significantly cheaper to produce than the ships they destroy.

It is tempting to focus on the fact that the Russian Navy has handled the A2/AD threat rather poorly. It is quite obvious that the Russians have not managed to find good answers to the challenge of Ukrainian missiles and drones. However, the important question to ask is whether we would have been able to do better ourselves. If a war breaks out in the Baltic Sea, the roles will most likely be reversed. We will be the ones who need sea control in order to reinforce the defence of the Baltic states, and it will be our task to defend critical maritime infrastructure such as the Great Belt Bridge and the Øresund Bridge against attacks from drones and missiles. The Baltic Sea shares many characteristics with the Black Sea, including access through a strait, short operational distances and critical infrastructure within range of adversary weapon systems. Of course, not all lessons learnt from the Black Sea can be directly transferred to a scenario in the Baltic Sea. For example, the Russians will not receive the same extensive intelligence assistance from an external partner that Ukraine has received from the US and other Western countries. But the Russians will be able to use many of the same sea denial tactics that Ukraine has used, and it will be our job to find the solutions.

This discussion could lead to a reconsideration of the value of submarines or stealth-capable ships, such as those around which the Swedish Navy is built. In practice, Russian submarines have proven to be the only

ships that can operate despite the Ukrainian A2/AD bubble. Another important discussion is the need to deny the enemy access to a coastline. In practice, the long range of modern weapons and sensors has extended the littoral zone to hundreds of kilometres from the shoreline. Maritime operations within this zone may require constant surveillance of the enemy's coastline and the ability to counter any efforts to set up mobile radars or deploy drones. Ships must also be equipped with better defence systems against both aerial and maritime drones than they have today.

The long range and high precision of the weapons also have implications for the use of naval bases and harbours. The Ukrainians have de facto forced the Russians to vacate Sevastopol and move the fleet to safer harbours further east. Similarly, naval bases in and around the Baltic Sea will be vulnerable to attacks with long-range missiles, aircraft and drones. The Ukraine war has reminded us that warships are most vulnerable when they are stationary. Despite extensive protective measures, including multiple air defence systems, the Russians have been unable to defend the naval base in Sevastopol against drones and missiles. It is hard to imagine that Denmark, which currently has no air defence at all, will be able to defend Naval Base Korsør or Naval Base Frederikshavn against similar attacks. Just as the Russians have been forced to relocate to safer harbours further east, it is conceivable that the Danish Navy may also have to operate from civilian ports or foreign naval bases during a war. The challenge is exacerbated by the short engagement ranges in the Baltic Sea, which give an advantage to the side that strikes first. Since NATO is a defensive alliance, it will likely be Russia that determines where and when the war begins. Thus, it is possible that the Danish Navy will start a military confrontation with Russia by taking significant losses before we have time to even declare war ourselves.

A related challenge is that the Danish ships will also have a role in creating an air defence umbrella for NATO transport ships in Danish ports and on their journey through the Danish straits and across the Baltic Sea. This may also be the case while these ships are in port to unload their cargo in the Baltic countries, as these harbours are within range of a wide range of Russian weapons systems, not only from the Kaliningrad exclave, but from all of western Russia. Securing the ports against missiles and drones will require several layers of air defence, and it is likely that Danish ships can play a part in this effort.

A war in the Baltic Sea would likely involve Western countries fighting their way into the Baltic Sea and establishing sea control in order to support the Baltic States. If NATO concentrates its efforts on achieving this goal, it will probably succeed in breaking through the Russian A2/AD bubble over time. From the Russian perspective, the goal will therefore not be to stop NATO permanently, but rather to delay its advance long enough to create conditions for achieving other goals. These can be both political and military. For example, Russia's strategy in the Baltic Sea might be to keep NATO's maritime forces at bay long enough to achieve objectives in the land domain within the Baltic States. For this purpose, traditional warships are not necessarily the most obvious tool in the Russian toolbox. Hundreds of sea mines have been laid in the Black Sea during the Ukraine war. The Baltic Sea, along with the inner Danish waters, is well-suited for naval mining due to shallow depths and numerous maritime choke points.

Clearing naval mines at sea is an inherently slow and time-consuming process. If Russia were to mine strategic choke points in the run-up to a war, it could delay NATO's achievement of naval supremacy in the Baltic Sea. Minelaying operations also have the advantage that all vessels can, in principle, lay sea mines. It can be done from surface warships, research vessels, merchant ships, submarines and even aircraft. The mining of Danish waters could therefore potentially take place without Denmark even realising it.

Finally, it is also conceivable that in certain scenarios Russia could attempt to seize islands in the Baltic Sea for forward missile defence (Poulsen & Mathiesen, 2018). In the Ukraine war, the Russians attempted to place advanced missiles on a strategic island, Snake Island. The aim was to dominate the shipping route to Odessa. As mentioned above, the operation was not a success and the Russians had to vacate the island again. This was primarily due to the challenges of resupplying an island within range of a wide range of Ukrainian weapons systems and the fact that Snake Island was too small to hide on. The small, rocky island was quickly covered in blast craters. However, seizing strategically located islands is nothing new in Russian military thinking. In 1940, the Soviet Union felt vulnerable in the Baltic Sea region and planned to establish a forward defence in the newly annexed Baltic states, as well as to pre-emptively lay naval mines and seize strategic islands in the Baltic Sea through surprise attacks (Åselius, 2013). If a war breaks out today, Russia would likely consider doing something similar, meaning that the island of Bornholm may be exposed.

Russia's existing A2/AD bubble in the Baltic Sea emanates primarily from the Kaliningrad exclave. However, this exclave has some weaknesses. Firstly, the missile systems are vulnerable as they are sandwiched between Poland and Lithuania. For example, there is no area where they will not be within range of artillery from Poland or Lithuania. Secondly, the missiles themselves have limited range and would struggle to provide sufficient coverage of the Baltic Sea from Kaliningrad. This also applies to the ability to provide missile coverage over minefields that the Russians have deployed as obstacles. For a minefield to be truly effective, it must be supported by the ability to engage ships attempting to clear it. If the Russians can make NATO's mine clearance operations more difficult, they can gain valuable time to achieve their land domain objectives further east. Thirdly, missile defence and A2/AD bubbles are more effective when multiple bubbles overlap. Russian defences would be stronger if they had a forward presence with missile positions on the islands in the Baltic Sea than if all assets were concentrated in Kaliningrad.

However, an island invasion would depend on three factors to succeed. It would have to be conducted as a surprise attack, since an amphibious landing against a prepared defence is a highly complex operation that Russia is currently unlikely to be capable of pulling off. In addition, the Russians would have to accept a great risk for the forces landed on the island, as they would likely be isolated and eventually defeated. As with Snake Island, Russia would struggle to supply a force on a forward island on a permanent basis. The benefit of delaying NATO troop transports in the Baltic Sea from a forward island position would therefore have to outweigh the loss of the forces deployed there.

Finally, Russia must have the capacity to land both troops and missile systems. At the time of writing, this capacity is stretched as both Russia's marines and its landing ships have been deployed extensively in the Ukraine war and have taken heavy losses. This is a capability that Russia had in the Baltic Sea until 2022 but does not currently have. It will require a renewed buildup of these capabilities before they are operational, and that will provide some warning time.

These three factors make an island invasion in the Baltic Sea a viable operation only in specific scenarios and under certain conditions. The three most obvious targets are Gotland, the Åland Islands and Bornholm. Geographically, Gotland is the most exposed, as a simultaneous occupation of Latvia would give Russia favourable conditions for logistically supporting

a landing. For that reason, the Swedes have significantly strengthened the defence of Gotland. The Åland Islands are more sheltered and occupy a less strategically significant position, being farther away from major shipping lanes.

This can make Bornholm vulnerable in some cases, as the island is both strategically significant and less well-defended than Gotland. However, it is important to acknowledge that a Russian occupation of Bornholm would be difficult to maintain over time. The access routes run between Poland and Sweden, and the island is vulnerable to air strikes from Denmark and Germany. An occupation of Bornholm must therefore be considered a high-risk operation for Russia. Conversely, it is important to recognize that from a Russian perspective, the island's location will also be seen as a threat that must be addressed. NATO could use Bornholm as a logistics hub or a site for deploying sensors and weapons, and it is reasonable to assume that the Russians would at least attempt to prevent this. This suggests that the threat to Bornholm should also be viewed as an air defence challenge, as the Russians may regard the ports and airport on Bornholm as strategic infrastructure on par with Danish naval and air bases.

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CHAPTER 8

The downfall of Russia's air and space power – An analysis of Russian air and space weapon capabilities in light of the war in Ukraine

By Karsten Marrup

Introduction

The armed conflict between Ukraine and Russia has been ongoing since 2014, but on 24 February 2022, Russia launched what it hoped would be its decisive attack against Ukraine. The objective was to conduct a massive attack along multiple axes, including an airdrop in Hostomel, northwest of Kyiv, in order to deploy units in Kyiv to find and eliminate or drive out the Ukrainian government and then install a pro-Russian puppet government in Ukraine. As pointed out by several sources, Russia had bet on a blitzkrieg and a quick surrender (Fedorchak, 2024); (Haines, 2022); (Dalsjö et al., 2022); (Kofman, 2022a); (Collins et al., 2023). Some sources further point out that Russia expected to be received with enthusiasm by the Ukrainian population (Gould-Davies, 2022); (Barrington, 2022); (Shelest, 2022). These factors may not directly relate to the capabilities of the Russian Federation's Space and Air Force (Vozdushno-kosmicheskiye sily (VKS)), but they form

a crucial strategic backdrop for Russia's entire start to the war and thus VKS' opportunities and limitations for a successful attack. Russia, and thus VKS, was not prepared to fight a long war of attrition, nor was it ready for a fierce and coordinated defence by Ukraine. Therefore, there are a number of factors regarding VKS' effectiveness in the war that cannot be directly attributed to VKS' capabilities, but which in this context must nevertheless be counted as crucial to VKS' effectiveness. In a different context – in a different war – the same factors will probably not apply to the same extent, and VKS will therefore probably be more effective.

VKS has not delivered what it was supposed to in the war and has underperformed on many parameters compared to the expectations of both the Russian rulers and foreign observers: First and foremost by failing to gain control of the airspace in Ukraine and therefore, and just as significantly, failing to provide the necessary support to the Russian army as prescribed by Russian military doctrine (Kainikara, 2005). Despite this, however, there is hardly a basis for writing off the VKS as a significant power factor in an armed conflict in the Baltic Sea region and thus also not in Denmark or Denmark's neighbourhood. In the Danish context, Russia can pose a significant threat with its many long-range missiles and drones, which can navigate at low altitudes, probably relatively undetected, through the Baltic Sea region or be launched from Russian bombers, ships and/or submarines in the North Sea. Therefore, the threat of air strikes from Russia, or Russian units elsewhere in the regional vicinity, is a threat Denmark needs to take seriously.

Purpose of the chapter

This chapter analyses the VKS' operations in the war in Ukraine and highlights strengths and weaknesses that can form the basis for a more accurate perception of VKS capabilities than the analyses that characterised the perception of the VKS before February 2022. The purpose of the chapter is thus to contribute a qualitative assessment of Russia's military air and space capabilities based on observations from the war in Ukraine. However, it is based on the premise that every war is different and every conflict is unique in its own context. It would therefore not be advisable to transfer the lessons learnt from the war in Ukraine to assess future scenarios on a one-to-one basis, as the context may well have a significant impact on some of the conclusions.

Regardless, we should learn from the war as best we can. We will look at how Russia uses the VKS and what the VKS is capable in order to take

stock of how we in Denmark must be able to respond if we one day face Russia in an armed conflict.

Content

After a brief research overview, the chapter is divided into three main parts. Part 1 reviews the parameters on which the analysis of the VKS is based. Part 2 reviews the war chronologically, dividing it into five main phases¹ up to the present day² and analyses the use of VKS in each phase. Part 2 forms the basis for later assessing Russia's air power in light of the war in Ukraine. Part 3 concludes on where Russia's air power stands at the end of 2024 and what perspectives this has on the air threat to Denmark. All information in this chapter is based on unclassified sources.

Delimitation

Although there are also air military capabilities in the Russian navy, these are not treated independently here. The exception is the navy's deployment of cruise missiles, which is included because cruise missiles can be characterised as air power and have played a significant role in the war. The Russian Army's Surface Based Air and Missile Defence (SBAMD) has also played an important role in the use of air power in the war, so experiences with these systems are also included. In addition, small and medium-sized drones have played a significant role in the war. Drones are primarily used by the Russian army and are not discussed independently in this chapter but instead in Chapter 9 on Russia's use of drones in the war.

Research overview

Several publications have been published on VKS operations during the war. The most comprehensive and in-depth analyses are based on interviews with the Ukrainian air force and have been published by Dr Justin Bronk of the UK think tank Royal United Service Institute (RUSI), including "The Russian Air War and Ukrainian Requirements for Air Defence"

1. The phases are identified based on how the overall emphasis of the war has developed. The phases generally follow the Ukrainian presentations the author has had access to during the collection of empirical data for this chapter, including from Col Oleksandr Blyskun and LtCol Denys Smazhnyi, although these contain more sections than is necessary here.
2. Empirical data collection was completed in mid-August 2024.

(Bronk et al., 2022) and "Russian Combat Air Strengths and Limitations: Lessons from Ukraine" (Bronk, 2023). Another good source of data on the air war in Ukraine is Michael Kofman from the Center for Naval Analysis (CNA), who is a defence analyst focusing on Russia, including the publications "The Russia-Ukraine War 100 Days In" (Kofman, 2022a), "The Russo-Ukrainian war ten months in: taking stock" (Kofman, 2022b) and in collaboration with Collins and Spencer "The Battle of Hostomel Airport: A Key Moment in Russia's Defeat in Kyiv" (Collins et al., 2023). In the same category as Bronk and Kofman is the Israeli defence analyst Guy Plobsky, who specialises in analyses of Russian air power, especially the technological aspect. He has previously published analyses of Russian air power deployment in Syria and has in the current context also analysed Russian air power in the Ukraine war, "Analysis of Russian air power deployment in Ukraine" (Plobsky, 2022). All three of the aforementioned analysts regularly publish analyses on X (formerly known as Twitter), where they contribute short contextual analyses of events and more. Analysts from the Swedish think tank Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut (FOI) have been following developments in Russian defence for several years and have published a number of reports and analyses both before and during the war, including "The Aerial War Against Ukraine: The First Six Months" (Khan, 2023), "Russian air power in Ukraine – Nuisance or Menace?" (Dalsjö, 2023) and "Russian Military Capabilities at War: Reflections on Methodology and Sources Post-2022" (Engqvist, 2024). Furthermore, the chapter also builds on the publicly available insights on the tasks and capabilities of the VKS, which are reproduced in the publication "Russia's Military Might" in the chapter "The rise of Russian Air Power" (Marrup and Dahl, 2021).

There is general agreement among all the aforementioned analysts that there is a significant difference between what the perception of VKS' capabilities was before the war and what the reality has turned out to be after the war started. Everyone overestimated VKS' capabilities and at the same time underestimated the importance of the fact that, in addition to supporting the Russian army, VKS is primarily organised and equipped to defend Russian airspace and thus not organised, equipped or trained to fight an opponent with a strong air defence (Galamison & Petersen, 2023).

Other empirical data comes from a large number of analyses published on social media, as well as my own empirical data collected through participation in the NATO Air Command (Air COM) Lessons from Ukraine seminar on 8 June 2023, including the subsequent interview with the commander and deputy commander of Air COM after the same seminar

published as a podcast on the internet media War on the Rocks (Gen. James Hecker and Air Marshall Johnny Stringer, 2023). In addition, empirical data from a workshop with the National Defence University of Ukraine (NDUU) conducted at the Royal Danish Defence College in August 2023 and subsequent sparring and interviews with military analysts at NDUU. Finally, the Ukrainian side has published a book on "The Air War in Ukraine" (Zhirokhov, 2022), which in detail covers the air war in the first two months, and most recently the publication "The Russia-Ukraine War – Towards Resilient Fighting Power" by the Ukrainian-born researcher at the Swedish Defence University in Sweden, Viktoriya Fedorchak, which is also included as empirical data.

The casualty figures for various flying units that appear in the chapter notes are from the web media Oryxspioenkop.com (Oryx, 2023), which from the war's beginning in 2022 has maintained and continues to maintain a complete list of photo-documented Russian and Ukrainian losses during the war. Since all casualties must be photo-documented, the actual figures will probably be higher than those recorded, as not all casualties are necessarily photo-documented. For example, there may be damage from long-range attacks that cannot be detected by satellite imagery, but which is nevertheless fatal to aircraft or helicopters in the vicinity. Similarly, lost aircraft in Russian-controlled airspace are not necessarily photo-documented and/or publicly available. Data on the number of aircraft available at the start of the war comes from The Military Balance 2022 (IISS, 2022b).

Part 1: Parameters for the analysis

In order to carry out a qualitative analysis of how well the VKS is performing in the war against Ukraine, it is necessary to define some metrics. Ultimately, the effectiveness of VKS is about what tasks VKS must solve and how well VKS carries out said tasks (Marrup and Dahl, 2021). In this context, this translates into a number of types of operations, which are based on NATO doctrine, but which are universal when it comes to the use of air power. First and foremost is the achievement of control of the air, which, despite the traditional Russian focus on air power as support to land power, is also recognised in Russian doctrine as a necessary basis for success on the ground (Kainikara, 2005). Control of air is achieved by destroying or suppressing the adversary's air force and air defences to such an

extent that one can use the airspace as needed and ensure freedom of manoeuvre for one's own surface forces (both land and sea) by protecting them from air attack. Doctrinally, the term Counter Air³ is used, which in turn is divided into Offensive Counter Air (OCA) and Defensive Counter Air (DCA). OCA are offensive missions aimed at destroying or suppressing the opponent's air power capabilities in order to use the airspace without being engaged by aircraft and/or surface-based air defence units, thereby wresting control of air from the opponent. The missions comprise missile and bomb attacks, cyber and electronic warfare against air bases, including aircraft, runways, workshops, fuel depots, weapons storage, personnel, command and control facilities, which in turn include radars and communication facilities, as well as surface based air defence systems and their support facilities. DCA are missions intended to defend against adversary OCA missions in order to maintain control of one's own airspace (NATO, 2024a).

The ability to gain control of air is crucial to the outcome of land and sea battles. Generally speaking, it is not possible to win tactical victories on the battlefield against an opponent who has control of airspace and the means to use it by deploying attack helicopters, for example. However, it is important to note that control of air alone does not guarantee victory over an opponent on land or at sea. It is the actions taken afterwards that lead to victory or defeat.

Doctrinally, attacks against land and sea targets other than Counter Air belong in the Attack category, which in turn is divided into Counter Land and Counter Sea (NATO, 2024b). NATO doctrine also uses the operation type Strategic Attack, which is a form of attack intended to conduct attacks against targets that result in a strategic effect, meaning that it has a direct effect on the adversary decision-makers' willingness or ability to fight. However, it is not a mission type that Russia, nor previously the Soviet Union, has ever recognised as a possible way to win a war, whereas the West, strongly inspired by the US, doctrinally holds to and promotes this option (USAF, 2021).

In support of Counter Air and Attack as well as in support of land and maritime operations, the VKS conducts surveillance and intelligence gathering missions as well as transport and aerial refuelling operations doctrinally referred to as Joint Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) and Air Mobility. ISR operations in particular are crucial for both

3. NATO terms are used for the doctrinal terms discussed in the chapter, as these terms are also used directly in the Danish military context without being translated.

Counter Air and Attack, as data on the opponent's forces forms the basis for an effective attack as well as an effective defence, while Air Mobility is crucial for VKS' deployment of ground forces when they need to be moved over large distances.



Figure 1: Overview of air power operation types

The four doctrinal uses of air power: Counter Air, Attack, Joint ISR and Air Mobility are, as mentioned, applicable to all countries and all air forces on the basis that they embrace all forms of military aviation regardless of the country conducting them. Naturally, there are differences in how countries and alliances approach individual missions, partly based on how air power is generally viewed in the country in question. Therefore, an analysis of VKS' effectiveness in the war in Ukraine must be seen in the context of Russia's concept for the use of air power and VKS' ability to conduct Counter Air, Attack, Joint ISR and Air Mobility in this context.

The task of VKS is to secure and maintain control of the airspace in Russia and seek to gain control of the air in regions bordering Russia in a potential conflict that spreads beyond the country's borders to subsequently support the Russian army in winning the war on the ground (Marrup and Dahl, 2021; Grau and Charles, 2016). However, VKS is not geared either doctrinally or materially to defeat an opponent's air defences in order to take control of the airspace in a broader context, in this case all of Ukraine

(Choudhury, 2022). This can be seen in the inability of the VKS to suppress and destroy Ukrainian air defences.⁴

With this understanding of the general use of air power and Russia's concept of using VKS, we can now turn to analysing the operations of the war in Ukraine.

Part 2: Overall phases of the war

Strategic fallacies: The battle for control of air – the initial phase (24 February to mid-April 2022)

The initial air strike against Ukraine on 24 February was conducted as an intense Offensive Counter Air operation to gain control of the air over Ukraine (Zabrodskyi et al., 2022). In the first 24 hours of the operation, the Russian Navy attacked targets in Ukraine with 156 Kalibr cruise missiles;⁵ the Russian Army conducted five attacks with Iskander-M ballistic missiles;⁶ and the VKS conducted attacks with a number of Kh-101 cruise

4. The two concepts (suppress and destroy) are doctrinally called Suppression of Enemy Air Defence (SEAD) and Destruction of Enemy Air Defence (DEAD). To gain control of the airspace, SEAD is conducted for the purpose of DEAD. DEAD, to ensure a sustained effect. SEAD/DEAD missions are typically conducted with fighter aircraft dedicated to this type of mission, as it requires specialised radar, electronic warfare and missile capabilities. The US Air Force calls this version of a given fighter aircraft Wild Weasel.
5. A cruise missile is a missile that flies through the atmosphere and is pre-programmed to follow a specific route to its target. It can manoeuvre and flies much like a fighter jet. Therefore, it is not a given that the missile will fly the most direct and shortest route between where it is launched from and the target. For example, the missile may fly in an arc around and past the target to avoid an air defence unit, only to turn around and hit the target from behind the threat direction. Russia has used a wide range of cruise missiles, including the Kalibr 3M-54 (NATO call sign SS-N-27 Sizzler) used by the Russian Navy and the Kh-101 used by VKS. Cruise missiles typically fly low, are subsonic and typically have a conventional warhead of around 400kg. Almost all Russian cruise missiles can also be equipped with a nuclear warhead instead of the conventional one. Unlike older Russian cruise missiles, Kalibr and Kh-101 are quite accurate as they navigate by GPS/GLONASS data.
6. The Iskander system utilises two different types of missiles:
The Iskander-M 9M723 (NATO designator SS-26 Stone) is a short-range (about 500 km) quasi-ballistic missile. A ballistic missile usually flies in a trajectory similar to a throwing parabola, but as the Iskander can manoeuvre en route, the term quasi-

missiles and 80 sorties with helicopters and 90 sorties,⁷ including electronic warfare attacks, with combat aircraft up to 300 km into Ukrainian airspace. The targets were primarily fixed installations such as radars, runways, aircraft and air defence units on the ground (Zhirokhov, 2022; Blyskun, 2023; Bronk, 2023).

In general, during the initial phase, VKS, supported by the aforementioned systems of the Russian Navy and Army, had some success in suppressing Ukrainian air defences but failed to defeat them. Missiles and bombs were fairly accurate (Alberque et al., 2023), and VKS seemed to have good intelligence on the location of Ukrainian air defence units (Bronk, 2023). The challenge for VKS was, among other things, that the Ukrainian units had been warned of the impending attack in the run-up to the attack and that mobile air defence units moved to avoid being attacked in their normal locations (Collins, Kofman and Spencer, 2023; Blyskun, 2023). In addition, the vast majority of the operational Ukrainian fighter jets took off in the minutes leading up to the attack and were not at their bases where the Russian missiles struck. Instead they could engage the Russian aircraft and missiles (Blyskun, 2023). The Ukrainian fighter jets then landed at locations other than their normal bases, such as motorway sections and the like, which Ukraine had already designated and prepared for such operations. The extensive attacks resulted in VKS having air superiority⁸ in Ukraine for a very short period of time. However, when the mobile Ukrainian air defence systems became operational again after a few days, this advantage was gone, and VKS had not managed to gain control of the air in

ballistic is used. The missile flies hypersonically (March 6-7) and has a warhead (nuclear or conventional) of up to 700kg. The missile navigates by GPS/GLONASS data and also has an electro-optical seeker that assists with accuracy in the terminal phase, where the speed is reduced to around Mach 2-3 (which is why the missile is not labelled as a hypersonic missile).

Iskander-K 9M727/728/729 (NATO call sign SSC-8 Srewdriver) is a cruise missile in several variants with similar characteristics to the Kalibr and Kh-101. See (Sam Cranny-Evans & Sidharth Kaushal, 2023) and (Globalsecurity, n.d.)

7. A sortie is an aeroplane/helicopter in the air once. If the same aircraft flies twice on the same day, it has flown two sorties. If an aircraft flies two missions on the same trip, it has flown one sortie.
8. Control of the air is the military term for who has freedom of manoeuvre in airspace. Doctrinally, there are three degrees of control: Parity (lack of control), Air Superiority (control with few restrictions) and Air Dominance (control without restrictions). Control of air is primarily significant if the controlling party is able to enforce and utilise said control.

Ukrainian airspace (Bronk, Reynolds and Watling 2022; Khan, 2023; Blyskun, 2023).

Three factors regarding the VKS are seen to have had a decisive influence on the outcome. First and foremost, as previously mentioned, Russia had expected Ukraine to surrender quickly and that the war would be over after a short, initial phase (Miller and Belton, 2022). Russia had a much larger arsenal of long-range precision strike weapons than what was deployed in the initial phase. One hundred and sixty cruise missiles plus the rest is a negligible number in terms of defeating an entire country's well-equipped air defence. In comparison, the US used 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles to attack a single base in Syria in 2017 (Zhirokhov, 2022, p. 17), and one U.S. Army unit alone used 102 ATACMS⁹ on the first day of the Iraq war in 2003 (Pitts, 2003). One explanation for why the attack was not much more massive may lie in the expectation that the war would be won quickly. The VKS, in cooperation with the other services, chose to use only a minimum of missiles based on a political assumption that Ukraine would surrender anyway and it was therefore not necessary to use more.

Secondly, Russia also appears to have been challenged in obtaining up-to-date intelligence and translating it into action (General James Hecker and Air Marshall Johnny Stringer, 2023; Alberque et al., 2023), which is crucial for assessing the impact of the attacks carried out and planning new ones. VKS should have conducted intelligence gathering and data collection (ISR) after the initial attacks to realise that they were far from achieving the impact they had hoped for. After which they could have planned new offensive missions to completely destroy the Ukrainian air defences. Russia has more than 100 military satellites (Luzin, 2023), the vast majority of which are communication satellites (64) and GLONASS¹⁰-satellites (24) (IISS, 2022b), but there are also electro-optical satellites¹¹ and electronic intelligence satellites¹² that can be used to collect data on Ukrainian troop units, radar locations etc., and ISR collection could have been done with Persona and Resurs-P electro-optical satellites, which VKS possesses (IISS,

9. Army Tactical Missile Systems – US short-range ballistic missile system similar to Russia's Iskander-M.

10. GLONASS (Global'naya Navigatsionnaya Sputnikovaya Sistema) is a satellite constellation similar to the US GPS (Global Positioning System).

11. Satellites that can take pictures.

12. Satellites that pick up signals in the electromagnetic spectrum, e.g. radio communication.

2022b). However, there is no indication that VKS was able to utilise data from satellites and convert it into target data in time for VKS to engage non-stationary targets (Peck, 2023).

½ISR data can also be collected with drones, but VKS does not have long-range drones that can penetrate deep enough into Ukrainian airspace to make a difference. VKS' long-range Forpost drones¹³ only have a range of 250 kilometres. Finally, VKS has a number of ISR aircraft such as the IL-22M¹⁴, An-30¹⁵ and Su-24MR¹⁶, but none of these are capable of conducting ISR intercepts in hostile airspace.

½The last of the three factors is that the VKS has proven incapable of planning and executing large complex offensive air operations of the kind required to defeat an air force capable of defending itself (Bronk et al., 2022; Galamison & Petersen, 2023). This requires a carefully coordinated interaction between several different types of capabilities including aircraft assigned to attack a given target; aircraft capable of countering (suppressing or destroying) the air defence systems protecting the target (e.g., with missiles and/or electronic warfare); aircraft capable of countering the air defence's radar surveillance systems; aircraft capable of engaging the opponent's fighter jets in the air; aircraft capable of monitoring the air situation and supporting and coordinating the overall effort; and tanker aircraft ensuring that the fighter jets can remain airborne for the necessary duration of such missions.¹⁷ These are capabilities that VKS possesses to a greater or

13. Outpost is the Russian version of the Israeli drone Seacher Mk II. It is also said to be available in an updated Forpost-R version, with an increased range of 400 km and the ability to carry weapons up to 100kg. According to open sources, VKS has received two of these before the invasion in 2022. See <https://www.military-today.com/aircraft/forpost.htm>.
14. The IL-22M (NATO designator Coot B) is built on an Il-18 platform (transport aircraft developed in the 1960s with four turboprop engines). Its role is electronic intelligence gathering, perform radio relay and act as a command platform. VKS had 17 Coot Bs (in two different variants) at the start of the war and at the time of writing has lost at least three.
15. The An-30 (NATO designator Clank) is a photo reconnaissance aircraft from the late 1960s, of which VKS had four in 2022. No losses of this aircraft type have been recorded.
16. The Su-24MR (NATO designator Fencer-E) is the ISR version of the Su-24M fighter-bomber. The aircraft entered service in the 1970s, and in 2022 VKS had 70 Su-24M and 50 Su-24MR aircraft. VKS has lost at least 14 Su-24M/MR aircraft to date.
17. This type of operation is known in NATO as Composite Air Operations (COMAO) and often involves up to 100 aircraft in the same "package".

lesser extent (Marrup & Dahl, 2021) and should therefore theoretically be able to deploy. However, in addition to supporting the army, VKS' doctrine is focused on the defence of Russia and thus defensive air operations, which is why VKS has not trained offensive operations in large complex air operations against an opponent with an integrated air and missile defence. Thus, the VKS has neither the doctrine nor the experience in how to perform this (Bronk, 2023; Galamison & Petersen, 2023), and therefore the VKS has not been able to plan or conduct operations where up to 100 aircraft with different capabilities support each other in one large complex operation to seize control of the air. An observation that could have been made earlier, as the VKS has never been seen training such operations, but instead has only flown in attack packages with two or four fighter aircraft on the large Zapad exercises.

Overall, the VKS proved capable of precision strikes against stationary targets in the initial period. But the VKS was unable to conduct effective ISR gathering and target designation. It was also unable to plan and conduct complex air operations, including combating surface-based air defences, indicating a limited Offensive Counter Air (OCA) capability and thus a limited ability to win the battle for control of air.

Another observation from the initial phase that may be indicative of the VKS capability is the air assault on Hostomel airbase. The battle at Hostomel is described as the first major battle of the war and as a decisive moment (Collins et al., 2023). Hostomel, also known as Antonov Airport, is located approximately 18 kilometres from Kyiv. It is believed that Russia's plan was to airdrop around 300 Spetsnaz soldiers to take over the airport – see more about the Spetsnaz operation in Chapter 10: *Russia's special operations forces and military spetsnaz units*. Then another 1,000 soldiers would be deployed with 18 Il-76 transport planes to make a rapid entry into Kyiv and kill, capture or expel the Ukrainian president and his government. The idea of taking over a base and then using it to move forces forward is not new to VKS (Kainikara, 2005). VKS has experience with similar operations, including the occupation of Crimea in 2014, when 10 transport aircraft landed in Sevastopol with paratroopers from the 76th Pskov division (Zygar, 2016).

VKS deployed around 34 helicopters in the Hostomel air assault in a mix of Mi-8 Hip transport helicopters and Ka-52 Hokum¹⁸ and Mi-24 Hind¹⁹ combat helicopters.²⁰ Despite losses, VKS managed to land upward of 300 soldiers in two waves of 10 helicopters each (Collins et al., 2023); Blyskun, 2023). However, the landed Spetsnaz soldiers could not secure the base as they were only lightly equipped and were met with artillery fire and, due to a lack of air superiority, did not have the necessary air support from combat helicopters to defeat the Ukrainian ground forces. It is unclear exactly why VKS gave up sending the 18 transport planes that were ready to leave for Hostomel. But the fact that the base was vulnerable to Ukrainian artillery fire probably had a decisive influence on the decision.

Despite the failure of the operation, it shows that the VKS can support landing and rapid advance of the Russian army. What was crucial here was the lack of control of the air which determined the final outcome, not an inability to move large numbers of troops from A to B.

Parity in the air: Ground-based air defence proves decisive in the battle for control of the air – phases two and three (April to September 2022)

Following the defeat in the north and the Russians' failed attempt to take Kyiv, Russia shifted its emphasis on the ground and withdrew its forces from the entire northern part of Ukraine. Instead, Russia sought a decisive offensive in the areas around Donbas and Kherson. The situation in the air was and still is that both Russia and Ukraine have relatively well-

18. The Ka-52 Alligator (NATO designator Hokum) is VKS' newest (designed in the late 1980s) and most favoured combat helicopter in the war. At the time of writing, VKS has lost more than 59 of the 133 they had at the start of the war.
19. The Mi-24 (NATO designator Hind) is VKS' oldest combat helicopter. It was designed back in the 1960s. More than 2,650 versions have been produced and it has been used worldwide, including by the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s. The helicopter is large and heavy and can carry a group of eight soldiers. The VKS had 100 of them in various configurations at the start of the war and has lost at least eight at the time of writing. The Mi-24 also exists in an upgraded version called the Mi-35. VKS had around 63 of these at the start of the war and has lost at least 10 at the time of writing.
20. In addition to the Ka-52 and Mi-24/Mi-35 combat helicopters mentioned here, VKS also uses Mi-28 (NATO designator Havoc) combat helicopters designed in the early 1980s. VKS had more than 100 at the start of the war and has lost at least 14 at the time of writing.

developed ground-based air defence systems that make flying close to the fronts problematic and make flying across the fronts very dangerous.

It should be noted that the Russian air defence systems deployed in Ukraine largely belong to the Russian army and not to the VKS. VKS' most capable systems (S-400 and S-500)²¹ have not been deployed to the areas occupied after the 2022 offensive (Dalsjö, 2023) and are therefore located at a fairly safe distance in Belarus, Russia and the part of Donbas that Russia occupied in 2014. There are also a few systems in occupied Crimea, where they are protecting the Kerch Bridge (Altman, 2024). On the other hand, a number of VKS Pantsir²² short-range systems have been observed with the Russian army in Ukraine, of which at least 26 have been lost (Oryx, 2023). Russia only had 50 of these systems before the outbreak of the full scale war (IISS, 2022a) and has kept some at home in Russia to secure government buildings in Moscow against air attacks (Roth, 2023). It is therefore difficult to conclude much about the VKS' ability to conduct air defence, but it can be concluded with some certainty that the Russian army with its S-300V and -V4, Buk-M1, -M2 and -M3 and Tor systems has effectively prevented Ukraine from flying over the occupied areas. However, numerous drone strikes and a few missile strikes into Russia in the later part of the conflict suggest that the VKS may be prepared for defence against aircraft, cruise missiles and helicopters, but not against the slower flying one-way-attack (OWA) drones.

Due to Ukraine's air defences, VKS only flew at very low altitudes close to the fronts during the period (Bronk et al., 2022) and was not able to conduct Close Air Support (CAS), which doctrinally is a necessary support function for the Russian army. The risk of being shot down continuously increased due to Western donations of air defence equipment to Ukraine – including a massive number of shoulder-launched Man-Portable Air

21. The S-400 Triumph (NATO designator SA-21 Growler) and S-500 Triumph-M (not yet named in NATO) are VKS' most modern ground-based air and missile defence systems. According to Russian information, they have a range of 400-600 kilometres, but in reality the systems are estimated to be able to shoot down aircraft at a maximum range of 250 kilometres. See <https://www.foi.se/re-st-api/report/FOI-R-4651--SE>.

22. Pantsir (NATO designator SA-22 Greyhound) is a mobile, short-range (approx. 18 km) air defence system with up to 12 missiles and two 30mm anti-aircraft guns.

Defence Systems (MANPADS²³). Instead, the VKS provided more indirect support to the fight, using primarily the Su-25 Frogfoot²⁴ and Ka-52 Hokum to approach the front at low altitude, pulling the nose of the platform up and firing rockets in a slightly upward direction to increase range. This was by no means a particularly effective use of these capabilities, as the rockets are already imprecise and in this application have an even lower probability of hitting a specific target. VKS also delivered a number of bombs in the same way and with the same expected accuracy (Dalsjö, 2023).

At the beginning of this period, the conflict, or at least the media coverage of it, was characterised by the battle for Mariupol. The city had been under attack since 24 February and a small group of Ukrainian soldiers had entrenched themselves in the Azovstal steelworks. VKS contributed to the defeat of the Ukrainian soldiers by carpet bombing the city in early April (Axe, 2022). The bombings were carried out with Tu-22M3 Backfire²⁵ bombers, which until then had only fired cruise missiles from Russian airspace against targets in Ukraine. The bombings were primarily carried out with non-precision bombs, probably FAB-3000M-46²⁶ (Cooper, 2022) and a few laser-guided KAB-500Ls²⁷.

23. The Man-Portable Air Defence System (MANPADS) are short-range air defence missiles that can be fired by a single person. Most have an infrared seeker that directs the missile towards the heat signature of an aircraft's or helicopter's engines.
24. The Su-25 (NATO designator Frogfoot) was developed for, and is still used as a fire support aircraft for the Russian Army (Close Air Support). The aircraft was developed in the 1970s and over 1,000 units have been built. At the beginning of the war, VKS had 194 of these in different variants and at the time of writing has lost at least 33.
25. The Tu-22M3 (NATO designator Backfire) is a twin-engine strategic bomber capable of supersonic flight. The aircraft was originally designed in the late 1960s and entered operational service in the Soviet Union in 1972. A total of 497 Tu-22s have been built, and by 2022, according to the IISS, the VKS had 60 and has lost at least three at the time of writing. The aircraft was originally intended to deploy nuclear weapons against NATO countries and to carry out attacks on ships. Today, it can still be used in the same roles, but in recent years it has also been modernised to use a wide range of missiles with different purposes and warheads in addition to the old iron bombs.
26. A 3,000kg bomb with approximately 1,400kg of explosives.
27. KAB is the abbreviation for "Korrektiruemaja Aviatsionnaja Bomba" or corrected air bomb. The KAB-500L is a laser-guided version of the FAB-500 and thus a precision bomb with approximately 450 kg of explosives.

What is interesting in this mission is not that Tu-22M3 Backfire bombers are used for carpet bombing, as they have done this several times before in Syria (Newdick, 2021). Rather, the planes were deployed despite Russia not having control over the air in that part of Ukraine at the time. Contrary to the common perception of an absent Russian air force (Bronk, 2022), this mission shows that the truth may be different (Bronk et al., 2022). In addition, the mission also shows that VKS continued what they had successfully carried out in Syria – attacks against surface targets with a large number of inaccurate bombs with no distinction between military targets and civilians.

As the situation in the air was and still is characterised by mutual denial of overflight access, VKS instead increasingly used its extensive arsenal of long-range precision weapons, including the previously unused Kinzjal air-launched ballistic missile.²⁸ The missile is essentially an Iskander-M ballistic missile, modernised for launch from the MiG-31K Foxhound²⁹ or Tu-22M3 Backfire. Regardless of whether the missile should have hypersonic status or not, it is interesting to note that the capability works. However, it is by no means invincible, as is claimed by Russia (The Economist, 2023), as Ukrainian air defences have managed to shoot down some of them (Kika, 2023).

During this period, the VKS began using unprecedented tactics to engage Ukrainian air defence systems. Su-35 Flanker³⁰ fighter aircraft carried

28. Kinzhal (NATO designator AS-24 Killjoy) Air Launched Ballistic Missile (ALBM) is also known as a hypersonic missile, as the missile reaches a speed of up to Mach 10 or 12,000 km/h on its way to its target. However, the missile has a much lower speed as it approaches the target and is probably not hypersonic at this stage. Ukraine has successfully shot down a number of Kinzhal missiles with the Patriot air defence system. The downings, published by Ukraine and confirmed by the US, point to the lower speed of the missile in the attack phase as one of the reasons why this was possible.
29. The MiG-31 (NATO designator Foxhound) is a supersonic fighter aircraft designed in the 1970s. With a top speed of around 3,000 km/h, it is one of the fastest fighter jets in the world. The aircraft was originally developed to shoot down cruise missiles. Today, the aircraft is still used in an air defence role, but is also capable of carrying out offensive missions with various missiles, including anti-radiation missiles (see below) and Kinzhal. In 2022, the VKS had 85 aircraft at its disposal and, at the time of writing, has lost at least three during the war.
30. The Su-35 (NATO designator Flanker M (sometimes also referred to as Super Flanker)) is VKS' most modern operational fighter aircraft and is designed to shoot

out Combat Air Patrol (CAP) patrols at 30,000 to 50,000 feet on the Russian side of the front in order to get the Ukrainian air defence systems to radiate (turn on and illuminate surveillance and target tracking radars). Russian aircraft then would fire Kh-31P and Kh-58 anti-radiation missiles³¹ (ARM) at the radars of the Ukrainian air defence systems, forcing the Ukrainians to turn off the radars so that the missiles cannot search for them and hopefully miss their target. With the radars switched off, the ground-based air defence system is incapacitated, and VKS coordinated the attacks with Su-25 Frogfoot attack aircraft that could fly into Ukrainian airspace simultaneously with the missile strikes and attack the now incapacitated air defence systems. However, the attacks had limited success as VKS Su-25 pilots were generally unable to hit the Ukrainian systems with rockets and were instead met and in several cases shot down by MANPADS (Bronk et al., 2022).

The Russian ground offensive ran out of momentum at the end of August and was replaced by a Ukrainian counteroffensive in early September, where the fighting and the fronts soon entered a stalemate phase. During this period, VKS primarily flew defensive CAP missions with long-range air-to-air missiles, including the R-37.³² VKS had eight CAPs manned daily with two aircraft. Since VKS does not have the capacity to conduct sufficient aerial refuelling, this meant that VKS had to produce a minimum of 96³³ fighter sorties daily to man their CAPs in daylight (Bronk et al., 2022). The missions were effective as they succeeded in shooting down a number of Ukrainian aircraft and were able to keep the Ukrainian aircraft at a safe distance away from the front.

One observation from this phase is that although the VKS did not gain control of the air in Ukraine, they still attempted various operations to

down other aircraft in the battle for control of air (Air Superiority Fighter). The aircraft is a redesign of the classic Su-27 Flanker fighter and has been improved in a number of ways, including a significantly enhanced radar. At the time of writing, VKS has lost at least seven of the 97 aircraft it had at its disposal at the start of the full scale war.

31. ARM is a missile that seeks out a radar that emits radar beams in order to hit and destroy the radar.
32. The R-37 missile (NATO designator AA-13 Axehead) has a range of over 300 km and a flight speed of up to 7,000 km/h.
33. Without aerial refuelling, the VKS fighter aircraft can only be on patrol for a maximum of two hours at a time, requiring six times two aircraft in each of the eight CAPs daily.

support the Russian army and fight the Ukrainian air defence forces. The combination of Su-35s and Su-25s to attack Ukrainian ground-based air defence forces shows an evolution in the tactical doctrine of the VKS and an ability to adapt to the situation in the air. On the other hand, the ineffectiveness of these strikes speaks to the lack of precision weapons and skills among Russian Su-25 pilots.

**Coordinated missile and drone strikes: The situation in the air forces
Russia to prioritise long-range missile and drone strikes – fourth phase
(September 2022 to September 2023)**

Despite Russia's lack of faith in Strategic Attack and the idea of influencing decision-makers through terrorist bombings of the population (Marrup & Dahl, 2021), this was the tactic they resorted to in the winter of 2022-2023. Russia systematically began attacking civilian infrastructure using a wide array of long-range missiles and drones. These were mainly attacks on power, water and heating infrastructure. The desired effect seemed to be an attempt to freeze the Ukrainian civilian population half to death and make life so unbearable for them that they would force the Ukrainian leadership to give up. A theory based on Douhet³⁴ and to some extent other early air power theorists' theories of victory through strategic bombardment of the adversary's population, which Soviet and later Russian air power theorists initially rejected outright as a possibility (Sterrett, 2007); (Kainikara, 2005). Nevertheless, it was the primary activity carried out by the VKS during the winter months. Between September and January, Russia (primarily VKS) carried out 142 attacks³⁵ on the Ukrainian electricity supply alone (Blyskun, 2023). During this period, VKS carried out a large number of attacks, where especially Kh-101, Kh-555 and Kalibr missiles (from the Russian Navy), combined with the Iranian-produced OWA drone Shahed 131/136,³⁶ attacked in waves to overwhelm the Ukrainian air

34. Giulio Douhet (1869-1930) was an Italian air power theorist who advocated bombing the civilian population so heavily that the population would revolt and seize power, if those in power did not stop the war themselves by surrendering.

35. 142 is the number of targets in the electricity supply that were hit – not the number that were attempted to be hit, which is much higher.

36. The Shahed drone is technically not a drone, as it cannot be controlled in flight and is not reusable. Instead, it has the characteristics of a cruise missile and, like a cruise missile, can fly on a pre-programmed route. However, with its small propeller

defence. VKS was particularly active in October where Russia launched more than 420 missiles and drones at Ukraine (Blyskun, 2023).

However, the many attacks did not have the desired effect. The Ukrainian air defence shot down around 75% of the incoming missiles and drones, and the Ukrainian population did not succumb. However, VKS seemed to learn from the many shootdowns and began programming other routes for missiles and drones to avoid the Ukrainian air defences, which may partly explain the approximately 25% of attacks that got through (Blyskun, 2023).

VKS' pattern of behaviour from the winter months continued in the following months. However, the targets changed when Russia realised that if attacks on critical infrastructure did not have the desired effect during the winter months, they would not have the desired effect during the summer months either. VKS subsequently tried to target Ukrainian logistics, industry, and other military targets, although terrorist attacks on cities such as Kyiv, Odessa and Kharkiv were still carried out. In May 2023 alone, 133 cruise missile attacks, 369 Shahed drone attacks and seven Kinzjal air launched ballistic missile attacks were carried out. In addition, the Russian army carried out 13 attacks with Iskander-M missiles (Blyskun, 2023). VKS still carried out air strikes with aircraft against Ukrainian forces along the front, although not in a form that can be characterised as direct support (Close Air Support), but rather as a form of flying artillery fire on selected targets (Air Interdiction). The vast majority of weapons deliveries were with rockets and inaccurate bombs with questionable effect.

VKS' attacks during this period show that Russia does not prioritise compliance with the laws of war, which unequivocally prohibit attacks against civilian targets. It also shows that VKS has the means, ability and will to continue to carry out air strikes despite the lack of control of the air. The ineffectiveness of the air strikes can be attributed to many factors such as poor intelligence, high Ukrainian resistance and resilience, but ultimately not a lack of ability of the VKS to conduct attacks with long-range precision strike missiles and drones.

engine, Shahed has a maximum speed of approximately 185 km/h and a small warhead weighing between 30 and 50 kg, making it less of a threat than a typical cruise missile. The Shahed 131 is an older and slightly smaller model of the Shahed 136. The Shahed 136 drone is copied and produced in Russia under the designation Geran-2.

Introduction of glide bombs: VKS is dealt a new hand and is back as flying artillery for the Russian army – fifth phase (with September 2023 to August 2024)

As concluded earlier, throughout this period, the VKS was unable to provide the support to the Russian ground forces as Russian doctrine prescribes. This gradually changed during 2023 and was particularly evident from September onwards, when VKS developed UMPK³⁷ glide kits for their bombs. The UMPK was and is still seen used on a wide range of bombs such as the FAB-250, FAB-500, FAB-1,500 and later also on the FAB-3,000 and RBK-500.³⁸ The UMPK is a kit with a set of wings and a precision device that attaches to an otherwise dumb bomb (Conflict Armament Research, 2024). The glide kit gives the bomb the ability to glide towards its target instead of just falling, and to be guided to hit the target by a satellite-guided precision device. The wings, which unfold after the bomb is dropped, allow the bomb to glide for 20-70 kilometres, which is much longer than when the bomb is in free fall (Barrie, 2024); (Werstka, 2024). The aim was to be able to drop bombs from a greater and safer distance and was increasingly utilised during this period. The bombs allowed VKS to provide direct support to the Russian ground offensive by using relatively precise, high-explosive bombs against Ukrainian positions (and Ukrainian habitation) without coming within the range of Ukrainian ground based air defence systems. To date, there are no publicised records of glide bombs being shot down en route to their targets.

The bombs were highly effective in the battle for Avdiivka and were seen used against Kharkiv when Russia reopened the front line there (Stern, 2024; Blyskun, 2024). Similarly, at least 300 glide bombs were used in and around the small town of Vovchansk when it was part of the front line in May-June (Werstka, 2024).

The introduction of glide bombs and their use shows that despite challenges with Ukrainian air defence, VKS has not given up on its role as fire support to the Russian army. And it shows that despite a well equipped Ukrainian air defence, VKS is able to perform parts of their fire support

37. Unifitsirovanny modul planirovaniya i korrektsii (YMPK) – Unified gliding and correction module.

38. FAB bombs are ordinary dumb bombs (a bomb without a precision device) and are named according to weight in kilograms, such that a FAB-500 weighs 500 kg and a FAB-3,000 weighs three tonnes. The RBK-500 is a 500kg cluster bomb with between 14 and 286 bomblets depending on the type of sub-munitions.

mission. It also shows that VKS is able to develop new tactical doctrines as new technology is introduced, and that Russia as a nation is still able to develop and produce new weapons technology adapted to the combat situation.

Despite VKS's precautions, the Ukrainian air defence managed to shoot down a few Su-30³⁹, Su-34⁴⁰ and Su-35 combat aircraft during this period. In addition, the VKS also lost two Beriev A-50⁴¹ ISR platforms, the Russian version of the NATO E-3 AWACS, as well as an Il-22M⁴² electronic acquisition and command platform (Cenciotti, 2024). In isolation, these shootdowns may say less about the capability of the VKS and more about the Ukrainian defence's ability to innovate and exploit air defence mobility, but the loss of the three ISR platforms must be seen as a serious blow to the VKS as they are very costly and only available in very scarce quantities. In addition, the loss of perhaps three out of a total of nine A-50s is likely to be a problem for the execution of dynamic offensive air operations with VKS fighter aircraft, as Russian fighter pilots are dependent on receiving instructions from an air control unit. While Western fighter pilots are trained to plan their missions and act independently in various situations, Russian

39. The Su-30 (NATO designator Flanker G or H depending on the version) is an upgraded version of the Su-27 Flanker, which is probably more modern than the Su-27, but technically not on par with the Su-35. In 2022, the VKS had 110 units and has lost at least 11 at the time of writing.
40. The Su-34 (NATO designator Fullback) is a completely different platform from the Flanker series and was designed in the 1990s as a modern fighter-bomber. The two pilots sit next to each other and have a small toilet in the cockpit. The aircraft is VKS' favourite fighter-bomber and is used for delivering glide bombs, among other things. In 2022, VKS had 125 of these and at the time of writing has lost at least 32.
41. The Beriev A-50 (NATO designator Mainstay) is a flying air surveillance radar and control station developed in the 1970s and continuously updated since then. The capability is built on the platform of an Ilyushin Il-76 and the 15-man crew is tasked with monitoring the airspace, identifying aircraft, and performing control and other support to own aircraft. In total, around 40 aircraft were built until the early 1990s and by the start of the war in 2022, VKS had nine aircraft left. To date, they have lost at least two, and a third is presumed damaged after a Ukrainian drone landed on radar on a parked A-50 in Belarus in March 2023 (Newdick, 2023).
42. The Ilyushin-22M (NATO designator Coot B) is an electronic reconnaissance (ISR) and command aircraft, built on an Il-18 platform, which is a four-engine turboprop. VKS had 12 of these in 2022 and has lost at least three at the time of writing.

pilots are trained to primarily do what they are told and not analyse the situation and make decisions independently (Bill Flynn, 2024).

Part 3: Conclusion and perspectives for Denmark

The downfall of Russia's air and space power: The VKS has not delivered in Ukraine and cannot do what is expected with the capabilities at its disposal

Many things have worked for VKS in the war. Their fighter jets, especially the Su-30 and Su-35, have proven superior against Ukrainian fighters. Their ability to suppress Ukrainian air defences with jamming and anti-radiation missile strikes has worked more or less as expected, but has not defeated the systems. Their long-range missiles seem to be doing their job and have generally performed as expected.

The VKS has evolved and learned from the conflict, proving itself capable of implementing new mission types such as the listed attempts to defeat Ukrainian air defences, as well as adapting new updates to their equipment such as glide kits that turn dumb bombs into smart bombs and provide increased range. In addition, the Shahed /Grean 2 drone is a new capability that has been continuously deployed in increasingly complex operations.

VKS' ability to conduct intelligence gathering and/or to translate the gathered data into action seems to leave a lot to be desired. VKS has electro-optical satellites, surveillance drones and aircraft and should be able to gather information on Ukrainian troop movements, weapons depots, supply routes, etc. However, it appears that the VKS is not able to conduct intelligence gathering with a subsequent target selection process that enables them to respond quickly and effectively to observations from Ukraine.

VKS has largely left the air defence of the areas occupied after 24 February 2022 to the Russian army, so it is difficult to conclude much other than that the army appears to be performing this task effectively. However, the VKS S-400 air defence system has had several successful shootdowns of Ukrainian aircraft, whereas there are indications that the VKS air defence has had problems dealing with Ukrainian long-range drone and missile attacks in Russia.

But the overall conclusion from the war is that the VKS is not capable of planning and executing major complex air operations. Therefore, they have

not been able to gain control of air against an adversary that possesses an integrated air and missile defence system.

As a result of the above, the main task of the VKS as flying artillery and support to the Russian army has not even come close to being fulfilled, as control of the air is a prerequisite for the deployment of combat helicopters and aircraft with laser or TV-guided missiles of the type used to support army forces in direct combat with the opponent (Close Air Support). Instead, it has mostly carried out attacks with inaccurate rockets and bombs at a safe distance but with limited effect, and in the latter part of the war, the use of glide bombs with more success.

VKS has experimented with long-range precision weapons, with some effect but without decisive success. The weapons seem to have the quality and characteristics that were expected, but the success did not materialise. Some of this is due to a poor target selection process, some is the result of an effective Ukrainian air defence and some is due to a resolute Ukrainian will to resist in both the Ukrainian defence and the civilian population.

VKS also lost some of the lustre and mystique surrounding its latest weapons. The Kinzjal air-launched ballistic missile had not seen use before the beginning of the war and had been politically articulated as invincible to such an extent that it had become almost mythical (Putin, 2018; Trevithick, 2022). However, the claims of the missile did not prove to be true. Ukraine managed to shoot down most Kinzjal missiles with the US Patriot air defence system (Kim & Schmitt, 2023), without having the latest and most capable Patriot missiles available.

However, it is necessary to keep in mind that the context of VKS' deployment in Ukraine may well have had a negative impact on VKS' effectiveness. VKS was not given optimal conditions to either plan or execute the initial attack on 24 February 2022. Had VKS utilised its extensive capabilities to a greater extent, and had they approached things differently, it is highly likely that they could have been more effective in their battle for control of the airspace. Had they achieved this, there is little to suggest that they would not have been able to fulfil their other tasks as expected, which would have put the Russian army's chances of success on the ground in a completely different light.

Lessons from the war in Ukraine: What can we learn from the war and what are the implications for Denmark and the Danish Defence?

Every war is different and every conflict is unique in its context, but the opponent in this war will be the same in a Danish context for a long time, unless a radical regime change with a new strategic outlook is implemented in Russia. When learning the lessons from the war, it is therefore important to realise that the war in Ukraine is a war – not the war. In turn, the adversary is not just any adversary – it is the adversary.

The idea of a Russian amphibious assault on Danish territory is almost unthinkable. With Finland and Sweden joining NATO, it must be assumed that offensive Russian maritime operations of this type in the Baltic Sea are no longer possible. Likewise, an airdrop of Russian forces in Denmark would be difficult to realise for the same reason. Similarly, the idea of bombardments from bomber and fighter aircraft is hard to see unfolding, as the aircraft have to fly far in an airspace where numerous NATO fighter jets and ground-based air defence systems have the opportunity to engage them. Therefore, the conventional threat to Denmark is primarily, if not exclusively, long-range precision strikes from missiles and drones. These are weapons that are frequently used in Ukraine, and which therefore allow us to observe what they are capable of, how they are used by Russia and, not least thanks to the Ukrainians' struggle, how we must defend us against them.

Naturally, when the threat comes from the air, the answer is air defence. Be it ground-based air defence that can see and engage cruise missiles like the Kalibr and Kh-101 and ballistic missiles like the Iskander and Kinzjal, as well as air defence capabilities suitable for defending against small, slow-flying and long-range drones like the Shahed/Geran-2. These capabilities represent the most likely immediate threat in the context of the war in Ukraine and exist and are used to an extent where the threat should be taken seriously.

What is also clear from the war is that Russia is not limited by petty distinctions between military and civilian targets. This means that in a Danish context, it is far from enough to focus on the protection and defence of military installations, but that critical civilian infrastructure and civilian buildings can also be targeted by Russia and should therefore be protected.

Even with a very robust air defence, it cannot be guaranteed that no missiles or drones will penetrate it, as Hamas' attack on Israel in October 2023 as well as Iran's attack on Israel in April 2024 also testify (Petras et al., 2023). Therefore, another observation that should influence Denmark is that passive air defence, which aims at minimising the impact of capabilities that slip through the active air defence, is as important a part of air defence as the active part. Principles from passive air defence such as camouflage, concealment, dispersion, deception and hardened facilities, and not least the ability to quickly and efficiently repair damaged structures, should be incorporated into both the military and civilian preparedness in Denmark. The less prepared we are in the event of an attack, the greater the likelihood that the attack will achieve the effect our opponent wants. We should do what we can to avoid this.

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CHAPTER 9

Russia's use of drones in the Ukraine war – a technological development with doctrinal implications

By Karsten Marrup

Introduction

The development of an already known technology has really taken off during the war in Ukraine, and the consequences for both land and air operations are clear. The use of drones of all shapes and sizes has had significant consequences on the battlefield.

When it comes to the terminology of this technology there are quite a number of terms to choose from. Unmanned Aircraft Systems (UAS), Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV), Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicles (UCAV), Remotely Piloted Vehicle (RPV), Remotely Piloted Aircraft (RPA), Loitering Munitions or Drone – are all English terms that cover the same phenomenon – a flying unmanned object controlled via radio signals. In general, the term drone is most commonly used, although this is a misnomer as it does not capture the different functions of the capabilities. For example, a flying object that is used as a target and is not controlled via radio signals, but flies on a pre-programmed route, is also called a (target) drone. In addition, the term drone is also used for other types of objects that are controlled remotely, such as vehicles or sailing objects, which is

why the term drone does not distinguish between the various domains in which drones are used.

In this chapter, however, the term drone is used nonetheless, as it is the term that is widely used in Denmark and, for that matter, also internationally. This is despite the fact that the term does not sufficiently distinguish between small and large drones, nor between reusable drones and the so-called kamikaze drones, which are often also called one-way-attack (OWA) drones. Instead, the text will specify which particular capabilities of drones are being discussed under the broad term 'drone.'

In the war in Ukraine, drones play a significant role. Both Russia and Ukraine are using drones on a scale that far exceeds what previous wars and conflicts have seen, and the massive spread and use of drones by both parties of the war shows a clear revolution in the use of drones in armed conflicts (Franke, 2023; Probasco, 2023; Bronk, 2023). Although the massive use can be considered revolutionary, the use of drones in wars and conflicts is not new, and Russia has long been developing different types of drones for military use (Bendett et al., 2021). However, the extensive use of both commercial off-the-shelf (COTS)¹ drones and home-built First-person view (FPV) drones is new. And this most likely shows a development in warfare that is here to stay, which is why it is also something Denmark must relate to.

The use of land-based drones has been seen only sporadically in the war in Ukraine, but recently² it is a capability that Russia seems to be experimenting with (Bendett, 2024) and is increasingly utilising. Sailing drones have been used somewhat more in connection with Ukraine's attack on the Russian fleet in the Black Sea (Voitovych, 2023), but this type of drone has not been observed in use by Russia.

Purpose

Based on observations from the war in Ukraine, this chapter reviews the most common types of drones used by the Russian armed forces in Ukraine in order to contribute to a classification and understanding of the use of drones in war. This is done in order to put into perspective the question of what threat Russian use of drones may pose in a Danish context, and what

1. COTS is an American term that covers capabilities that are not militarily produced, but instead can be purchased from civilian providers. Also known as off-the-shelf products.
2. Empirical data collection was completed at the beginning of December 2024.

doctrinal implications the use of drones in the Ukraine war is seen to have in the long term.

Contents

The review of Russian drones is structured by size and classifies Russian drones based on the same classification of drones that NATO uses in its doctrines (NATO, 2024a; NATO, 2024b).

Delimitation

As previously mentioned, this chapter only deals with flying drones and not ground or maritime drones, as Russian drones have not yet been observed to be used on a scale that could be said to pose a significant threat to Denmark or Danish units stationed near Russia.

Research overview

The chapter's empirical data is drawn from a broad array of unclassified sources, including insights from Samuel Bendett from the US Center for Naval Analysis (CNA), who writes for CNA's Russia Studies Program focusing on Russia's development and use of military robots, drones and artificial intelligence and has also published on the use of drones in the war in Ukraine (Edmonds & Bendett, 2023). The British think tank Royal United Service Institute (RUSI) has also included the use of drones in their publications on Russia's use of air power in the war in Ukraine (Watling, Danylyuk and Reynolds, 2023) (Bronk, 2023) – the latter published by CNA. The German researcher Ulrike Franke, who researches the development and use of drones and has published articles on the use of drones in the war in Ukraine (Franke, 2023). A substantial amount of empirical data comes from a wide range of news and analyses published on social media, primarily X, including NOELReports (@NOELreports), which daily publishes videos of Ukrainian use of drones; WarMonitor (@WarMonitor3), which daily publishes the status of the fighting at the front including the use of drones; and Special Kherson Cat (@bayraktor_1love), which regularly reports on fighting at the front in the area around Kherson. Other empirical data is gathered through contacts at the National Defence University of Ukraine (NDUU) in Kyiv, NATO reports from e.g., Enhanced Forward Presence Command in Tallinn, and the UK Army 11th Security Force

Assistance Force Brigade, whose task it is to train Ukrainian forces in England.

Finally, NATO doctrine is used as the basis for the review of Russian drones, both as a reference for definitions and categorisation of drones according to the division below. The doctrinal division and categorisation is widely used in Europe and the US (NATO) and also forms the basis for the Danish approach to drones in both military and civilian (police, traffic authorities, etc.) contexts

UAS CLASSIFICATION						
Class	Category	Normal Employment	Normal Operating Altitude	Normal Mission Radius	Primary Supported Commander	Example Platform
Class III (> 600 kg)	Strike/ Combat *	Strategic/National	Up to 65,000 ft	Unlimited (BLOS)	Theatre	Reaper
	HALE	Strategic/National	Up to 65,000 ft	Unlimited (BLOS)	Theatre	Global Hawk
	MALE	Operational/Theatre	Up to 45,000 ft MSL	Unlimited (BLOS)	JTF	Heron
Class II (150 kg - 600 kg)	Tactical	Tactical Formation	Up to 18,000 ft AGL	200 km (LOS)	Brigade	Hermes 450
Class I (< 150 kg)	Small (>15 kg)	Tactical Unit	Up to 5,000 ft AGL	50 km (LOS)	Battalion, Regiment	Scan Eagle
	Mini (<15 kg)	Tactical Sub -unit (manual or hand launch)	Up to 3,000 ft AGL	Up to 25 km (LOS)	Company, Platoon, Squad	Skylark
	Micro ** (<66 J)	Tactical Sub -unit (manual or hand launch)	Up to 200 ft AGL	Up to 5 km (LOS)	Platoon, Squad	Black Widow

Figure 1: NATO classification of drones³

The figure above shows the NATO classification of drones, which is also used in Denmark and the US. The left column shows the classification of drones by weight. The column to the right shows a description of the drone; micro, mini, small, tactical, MALE (Medium Altitude Long

3. The figure is found in several NATO doctrines, including ATP-117 Countering Class I Unmanned Aircraft Systems (UAS) Doctrine.

Endurance) and HALE (High Altitude Long Endurance) (both types are drones that can fly long distances and are controlled via satellite), as well as attack and combat drones that have the same size and flight characteristics as HALE drones. The following column provides an overview of the level (tactical, operational or strategic) at which the deployment of the drone type is controlled. This is followed by a column indicating the maximum altitude at which the drones in each classification can fly. AGL (Above Ground Level) and MSL (Main Sea Level) indicate the surface of the earth and altitude is then given in feet, as this is the typical unit of measurement for aircraft and helicopters. The distance designation column shows the distance the drone can travel in relation to the location from which it is being controlled. The difference between LOS (Line of Sight) and BLOS (Beyond Line of Sight) is that the antenna used by the operator at LOS must be able to "see" the drone, whereas BLOS does not have the same limitation as it uses communication satellites to control the drone. The last two columns show which unit commander is deploying the drone and an example of the type of drone in each class.

Part 1: Class I drones (<150kg)

Small, cheap and accessible drones with great effect

Small, cheap COTS drones are basically built as hobby drones and sold with a camera. They can be purchased on the internet and in electronics, hobby and toy stores. In a military context, COTS drones are used in multiple roles in Ukraine, including surveillance and targeting (Fedorchak, 2024). Surveillance drones are used to locate and identify targets such as personnel, vehicles, weapons depots, headquarters, etc. And in the front-line area, due to the widespread use of small surveillance drones, it has become extremely difficult for ground forces to remain unseen (Pickrell, 2023). The drones can also be used for observation when, for example, artillery is firing, where the drones can see if the shells are hitting the intended target or if the fire needs to be adjusted in length or direction to hit the target.

In addition to observation, the small COTS drones are also used for attack, either by dropping small improvised explosive devices (Gault, 2022) or by flying into a target and detonating its explosive on impact. There are plenty of observations on social media of Russian use of COTS drones

dropping small improvised explosive devices,⁴ but it is primarily small OWA drones that detonate on impact with their target that the Russian army relies on (Bendett, 2023b).

An FPV drone which is the most common OWA drone is controlled by an operator wearing a Virtual Reality (VR) headset, which means that the operator sees the world through the drone's camera as if the operator is flying the drone. FPV is a term familiar from computer games, where the player is presented with the game on the screen as if the player is actually present in the game. The drones are either converted COTS drones or home-built drones built for the purpose in Russia (Samuel Bendett 2023). Home-built drones currently make up the vast majority of FPV drones and are delivered to the Russian forces as donations (Hambling, 2023). FPV drones can be used against personnel, but are also used against all kinds of vehicles, artillery, and air defence systems (Andrei, 2023) (Axe, 2023b). FPV drones have the unique ability to fly with high precision through various openings in vehicles, houses, fortifications, etc. before detonating.

As a result, personnel who would normally seek protection behind house walls, in armoured vehicles or trenches are no longer protected against precision attacks because FPV drones, as long as there is a signal connection between the drone and the operator, can follow virtually anywhere. For the same reason, drones are used extensively by both Ukraine and Russia. It is difficult to find an accurate figure for Russia's production and use of FPV drones. At the time of writing, open sources vary between 25,000 (Roblin, 2023) and 40,000 (Hambling, 2024) per month, with Russia itself reporting as many as 120,000 per month (Savage, 2024). The production is done by volunteers and not as such produced by the official Russian state. FPV drones are most effective in daylight, with very few of them also using infrared or similar cameras that can be used in the dark, partly because the cost of an infrared or similar camera is higher than a regular camera.

Russia also has several surveillance drones in this class (<150kg) that have been developed and manufactured for military use, including the

4. Social media such as Telegram and X both have some video documentation of Russian drones bombing Ukrainian targets, e.g. <https://x.com/MaimunkaNews/status/1728830751473537208?s=20> and <https://x.com/MaimunkaNews/status/1728321018064998445?s=20>.

Eleron-3,⁵ Supercam S350,⁶ Zala 421⁷ and Orlan-10. The Orlan 10 is the most widely used and started as an intelligence gathering (ISR)⁸ drone, but is also available in an upgraded version that can conduct electronic warfare (jamming and spoofing⁹) (Fedorchak, 2024). The drone weighs approximately 18 kg including payload¹⁰, has a small petrol engine and a range of up to approximately 120 km (Bendett et al., 2021). If the drone flies autonomously and is not dependent on radio communication, it can fly up to 600 km in total (Globalsecurity, n.d.). At the time of writing, Russia has lost at least 190 Orlan-10 drones in Ukraine (Oryx, 2023).

Another drone type in this weight class is Loitering Munitions. These drones are developed for military use and basically work in the same way as FPV drones, as they are also designed to detonate on impact with a target. However, they are controlled without a VR headset, and the smallest of them, such as the Russian KUB – which was observed being used against targets in Kyiv at the beginning of the war (Harding, 2022) – is designed to

5. The Eleron-3 is a short-range tactical drone with a maximum weight of 5.3kg, a flight time of up to 2 hours and a range of around 25km. It can fly around 100 km/h at a maximum altitude of 4,000 m (approximately 13,000 feet). The Eleron-3 can perform autonomous and remotely piloted patrol flights as well as point observation missions. At the time of writing, Russia has lost at least 35 of these since 2022. See <https://odin.tradoc.army.mil/Search/WEG/eleron>
6. The Supercam S350 is a newer intelligence gathering/surveillance drone with a maximum weight of 11.5kg, a flight time of up to 4.5 hours and a range of up to 100km. It can fly at around 120 km/h at a maximum altitude of 5,000 metres (approximately 16,000 feet). At the time of writing, Russia has lost at least 35 of these since 2022. See [https://odin.tradoc.army.mil/WEG/Asset/Supercam_S350_Russian_Unmanned_Aerial_Vehicle_\(UAV\)](https://odin.tradoc.army.mil/WEG/Asset/Supercam_S350_Russian_Unmanned_Aerial_Vehicle_(UAV))
7. The Zala 421 comes in a number of variants, all of which have in common that they are Class-I intelligence gathering/surveillance drones with limited range and time in the air. The most commonly used is the Zala 421-16E, which weighs 10.5kg, has a flight time of around 4 hours, a range of around 100km at a maximum altitude of 5,000m (around 16,000ft). At the time of writing, Russia has lost at least 73 of these since 2022. See <https://odin.tradoc.army.mil/WEG/Asset/05d9afa567eae90c99ac76b72fc035cf>
8. Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance.
9. Jamming is the emission of radio waves in the electromagnetic spectrum in order to disrupt or obstruct an adversary's communications or to disrupt/blind radars. Spoofing is the emission of signals that pretend to be something other than what they really are, e.g. false messages, signals, etc.
10. Payload is the technical term for the things you put on an aircraft such as bombs, surveillance cameras, radio transmitters, etc. that are not part of the aircraft itself.

attack "soft" targets such as personnel and unarmoured vehicles, but can also be used against artillery. The KUB drone has a small electric motor, which means it is relatively silent. It can fly for about 30 minutes at a top speed of around 100 km/h (Bendett et al., 2021). It is equipped with a warhead of about three kilograms and has a range of about 40 kilometres (Army Technology, 2023).

Loitering munitions, like FPV drones, can loiter in the air over a given area for an extended period while searching for a target or tracking one until it is engaged. The drones are most often used in conjunction with an ISR drone, where the ISR drone operator finds and designates a target for the loitering munitions drone to attack. The same applies to FPV drones. This ensures that the loitering munitions and FPV drones do not run out of power or fuel while searching for a target and that the ISR drone can observe what happens to the target after it has been hit by loitering munitions or FPV drones. Since loitering munitions and FPV drones are remotely controlled, they can also be used against moving targets.

Another Russian loitering munitions drone often seen in Ukraine is the Lancet-3. Like the KUB, it is part of a larger strategic investment in more modern Russian weapons (Bendett et al., 2021). Lancet has roughly the same payload and range as KUB, but has a longer flight time (approx. 40 minutes) and a top speed of around 300 km/h (Forssell & Carlstedt, 2024). The drone has been further developed to be used against targets up to a 70-km range and carry a heavier warhead of around five kilograms that can also be used against armour (Shoaib, 2023). This upgrade has resulted in Ukraine losing at least one fighter aircraft that was placed too close to the front in relation to the increased range (Axe, 2023a; Blyskun, 2023),

The above presents a picture of an ever-increasing use of small and relatively cheap drones that have a major impact on the outcome of battles. FPV drones cost many casualties on both sides of the front,¹¹ and combined with ISR drones, they make it very difficult to hide from the opponent outside of forests and dense settlements. The drones are significantly cheaper than the systems they attack and destroy, and while it may take two or three FPV drones to destroy an armoured infantry fighting vehicle or tank,

11. Even though several drones do not hit or destroy their targets, it is reported that up to 60 per cent of the equipment destroyed at the front is due to FPV drones, 20 per cent artillery and 20 per cent other weapons (Blyskun 2024).

there is still a multi-million dollar difference between the cost of the equipment being destroyed and the cost of destroying it.

The long-range loitering munitions drones are equivalent to small precision bombs and despite the fact that, due to the amount of ground-based air defence, both sides can only rarely use laser-guided aerial bombs against the opponent, in the way F-16 aircraft have done on numerous deployments, both sides are to some extent able to carry out similar attacks with loitering munitions drones. In addition, the self-flying Shahed bombs discussed in the next section also carry out attacks that are otherwise primarily known from air-launched cruise missiles. Taken together, these capabilities represent a threat that the West has hitherto only seen to a very limited extent¹² (Atherton, 2023) – a threat that was previously only seen from aeroplanes and helicopters, but which today can be manifested without a given adversary having a functional air force.

Overall, the use and ongoing development of small attack and surveillance drones means that land warfare operations in particular are increasingly affected by this new technology – and the implications are many. On the one hand, ground forces must protect themselves against the adversary's use of these drones. As mentioned, this is difficult to achieve, but concealment and cloaking can still have some effect. In addition, ground forces must be able to protect themselves against drones that have recognised them and subsequently attack. Both Russian and Ukrainian vehicles, especially tanks, have been seen with improvised cages that cover the tank so an attacking drone will hit the cage and not the tank when it detonates. On the other hand, ground forces must be able to defend themselves against adversary's drones. There are many options here, but the most important thing is to recognise when the drones are in the air and then deploy measures to combat them. This requires capabilities that monitor the airspace with, for example, radars optimised to find small drones or passive systems that listen for the drones' propellers. The actual combat is largely carried out with electronic warfare, where the Russian forces try to disrupt the signals that the Ukrainian drones depend on in order to be controlled and vice versa. In addition, the drones are fought with weapons such as machine guns and machine cannons. Most recently, drones have also been used to attack other drones in the air. In addition to protecting themselves

12. ISIS made limited use of homemade drones with small customised bombs against coalition forces in Syria in 2016.

from the adversary's drones, ground forces also need to be able to take advantage of the technology to observe and attack with their own drones. As mentioned above, loitering munitions, and to some extent FPV drones, can perform tasks that somewhat correspond to the operations we have seen combat aircraft and helicopters perform as direct support to units in combat, also known as Close Air Support.¹³ In the long term, this will probably mean that the doctrinal task CAS will to some extent be performed by land forces and not as today in close cooperation between air and land forces.

Part 2: Class II drones (150-600kg)

Cruise missiles with drone status are used strategically in the war

As described in the introduction, Class II drones have a somewhat greater capability than Class I, as the category includes drones between 150 and 600kg. These are not capabilities that are directly used by soldiers at the front line, but rather capabilities that either use a runway or are sent off with an auxiliary engine or booster to get airborne.

One of these capabilities is the aforementioned Shahed 131/136 drone, which Russia has been operating since September 2022. Technically, the Iranian-produced capability is not a drone, but instead a cruise missile or self-flying bomb, as the Shahed cannot be controlled while flying, which is otherwise characteristic of a drone. It is also not a loitering munition as it cannot loiter while searching for a target. Instead, like a cruise missile, it flies to a GPS/GLONASS¹⁴ coordinate and can be programmed to follow a specific route, e.g. flying in an arc around known locations of air defence systems. The Shahed drone comes in different variants, with the model most commonly used by Russia being the 200kg Shahed-136. A 3.5-metre-long drone with a wingspan of 2.5 metres. It has a 40-50kg warhead and a reported range of up to 2,500km (Binnie, 2023). Since the drone navigates by GPS/GLONASS signal, it can only be used against stationary targets and is therefore used by the Russians against targets far behind the front line in order to achieve an operational military effect (military logistics,

13. Close Air Support (CAS) is the doctrinal term for combat aircraft or helicopters supporting ground forces in direct combat.

14. GLONASS is a satellite constellation of 24 Russian satellites that forms a global navigation system similar to the US Global Positioning System (GPS) and can provide satellite navigation with an accuracy of up to approximately three metres.

headquarters, etc.) or a strategic effect on the Ukrainian civilian population (terrorist bombing of civilian targets including energy supply).

Russia has also started producing the drone itself under the name Geran-2 (Hardie, 2023) and is estimated to be able to produce up to 1,200 per month (MacDonald & Lytvynenko, 2024). In February 2024, Ukraine estimated that Russia had used over 4,600 Shahed/Geran drones in the war since their introduction in 2022 (Terajima, 2024). A later estimate from December 2024 shows that from January to December 2024, Russia used more than 8,900 Shahed/Geran drones in attacks on Ukraine (York, 2024). Subtracting the January number from the February 2024 figure and adding the two figures together suggests that by December 2024, Russia had used more than 13,000 Shahed/Geran drones against Ukraine since their introduction in 2022.

The small Chinese MD550 propeller motor that powers both the Iranian Shahed-136 and the Russian Geran-2 makes a very distinctive sound and its noise is one of several means used by the Ukrainians to detect and shoot the drone down. The Russians have therefore begun programming the drone to fly over roads and motorways in Ukraine so the traffic noise will mask the noise of the drone (Blyskun, 2023). In addition, Iran has developed a new version with a small jet engine that makes less noise and flies faster. The new model, named Shahed-238, is claimed by Iran to be able to be equipped with different search heads so it can find and attack specific targets such as radars (Rogoway & Newdick, 2023). At the time of writing, only one sighting of the Shahed-238 in Ukraine has been reported in open sources (Defence Express, 2024).

In addition to attack drones, Russia also has a larger ISR drone in this weight class. The Forpost drone is basically an ISR drone, but over time it has also been developed to carry out attacks. Forpost is the Russian-built version of the Israeli ISR drone Searcher Mk. II. The drone weighs 350 kg and can weigh up to 500 kg when fully loaded. It is just under six metres long and has a wingspan of just over 8.5 metres. Outpost has a range of 250 kilometres¹⁵ and is controlled via line of sight. This means that the radio signal from the operator must be able to find the drone in a straight line, either by the drone being very high up when it is furthest away, or by the

15. Forpost is also said to be available in an updated Forpost-R version, where the range has been increased to 400 km and it can also carry weapons up to 100kg. According to open sources, VKS had received two of these before the 2022 invasion.

operator's antenna being placed so high that the drone does not disappear below the horizon due to the curvature of the earth. The drone can fly up to an altitude of around 18,000 feet (about six kilometres) and has a flight time of around 15 hours. This makes the drone very useful for monitoring an area for a long time. Russia has modified the drone to also carry bombs weighing up to 120kg. At the start of the war in 2022, Russia had a total of 35 Forpost drones (Military Factory, 2022), and at the time of writing, Russia has lost at least one UCAV version of Forpost and five UAS versions (Oryx, 2023).

The more traditional Russian Class II drones are not as new or revolutionary in armed conflict as the smaller drones. ISR drones have been deployed in countless conflicts in a myriad of different versions over the past 20 years, which is why their use does not herald changes in doctrine for either air or ground military forces. The fact that some of them are or can be armed is also no longer new or crucial.

The Shahed/Geran drones, on the other hand, are a new technology that could have several implications for both military units and civil society. The cheap, mass-produced, self-flying bombs can be used over long distances and are relatively accurate. Russia's use of them in large strike packages, combining them with a range of other long-range precision strike weapons such as cruise or ballistic missiles, heralds new times for the use of long-range precision strike weapons (Altman, 2024) (York, 2024).¹⁶ The sheer volume of targets that these strike packages represent helps to dry up the missile stockpile in Ukraine and saturate Ukrainian air defences, exceeding the number of targets that can be engaged simultaneously, ensuring that some of the attacking drones and/or missiles reach their targets. The consequence is that as long as the adversary is not only attacking military targets but also, as Russia is doing to a large extent in Ukraine, civilian infrastructure, this places great demands on the number of air defence units and the number of air defence missiles in the overall air defence. In addition, it is critical for both military units and civil society to be able to protect themselves against the consequences of these attacks. Either by establishing passive protection in the form of concrete or other structural

16. For example, on 26 August, Russia used a combination of 127 missiles and 109 Shahed/Geran drones in one coordinated attack. From January to December 2024, Russia has used more than 8,900 Shahed/Geran drones and more than 2,500 missiles in attacks on Ukraine.

measures and/or through the ability to effectively restore damaged infrastructure such as substations or similar after an attack.

Part 3: Class III (> 600kg)

Large and expensive but not very useful in this conflict

Russia does not possess drones of the same size and capabilities as the well-known US drones Predator, Reaper and Global Hawk. These are all characterised by the fact that they are controlled via a satellite link and are therefore only limited in their range by the amount of fuel they can carry. However, Russia still has a drone that sneaks up a little into the same class. Orion is Russia's largest operational drone. It comes in a few different variants, all of which are larger than the original and most common version, which is 8 metres long and 16 metres wide.¹⁷ It can fly for up to 24 hours at a maximum altitude of 24,600 feet (about 7.5 km), but as the Forpost it is limited to line-of-sight control, and its maximum range is about 250 km (Bendett et al., 2021). It can carry up to four KAB-20¹⁸ bombs or four Kh-50 missiles (TRADOC, n.d.). This makes the drone a flexible multirole tool that can perform both ISR and attack missions, but the air situation in Ukraine places major limitations on the use of drones of this type, as Russia does not have control of the air in Ukraine. This means that if the drone flies in non-Russian-controlled airspace in Ukraine, it will most likely be shot down by the Ukrainian ground-based air defence or by a Ukrainian fighter jet. Russia had 48 Orion drones at the beginning of the war and has lost at least six at the time of writing (Oryx, 2023).

Russia is in possession of one more Class III drone. The S-70 Okhotnik-B, also known as Hunter-B. The drone, which is a delta-winged (triangular), jet-powered drone, with a width of 20 metres and a maximum weight of 25,000 kg, is most comparable to a fighter jet. The drone has only been developed in two prototypes and is not yet operational, nor has it been used in Ukraine. However, it is built to be low-observable (hard to detect

17. In comparison, a Cessna 172 sports plane is 8.3 metres long and 11 metres wide.

18. KAB is the abbreviation for "*Korrektiruyemaya Aviatsionnaya Bomba*" or corrected air bomb, and 20 designates the the weight of the bomb in kilogrammes. Russia generally uses the kg designation for its bombs, where the West uses lb. A KAB-1000 is thus a 1,000kg bomb, whereas a Western Mk-83 1,000lb bomb weighs approximately 500kg.

by a radar) and can carry up to 2,000kg of ammunition internally, thereby maintaining its low-observable characteristics in combat. Due to the air situation in Ukraine, this is a drone that could be used despite Ukraine's well-developed air defences. It is intended to be used alongside the Russian Su-57 Felon fighter jet, which is also low-observable but also not yet operational, despite having seen limited use in Syria in 2018. If these capabilities become operational in the near future, they could be used both together and separately in the conflict, where Russia clearly lacks a response to Ukrainian ground-based air defence.

Part 4: Conclusion and perspectives for Denmark

Russia possesses several drone capabilities that Denmark should be wary of

The war in Ukraine has shown that drones are likely to play a significant if not decisive role in future, comparable conflicts. The small, cheap yet highly effective surveillance and FPV attack drones have changed the dynamics of the battlefield, where hiding from your opponent has become difficult, where taking cover and armoured vehicles costing millions of dollars are not enough to protect against drones costing thousands of dollars. Loitering munitions and self-flying bombs like Shahed/Geran can to some extent replace the aircraft that previously carried out close air support to ground forces in combat or long-range missile attacks. And countries or organisations without an air force can use loitering munitions and self-flying bombs to carry out attacks previously reserved for countries with an air force with precision weapons. What drones have in common is that, in addition to being precise, they are also relatively cheap and are already available in large numbers on the world market today. It is therefore highly likely that in the future, Denmark will face adversaries that use drones on a scale we have never seen before. Not only in relation to Russia, but also in relation to international missions against both state and non-state actors in the Middle East and/or Africa (Danish Defence Intelligence Service, 2023).

When it comes to Russia, Denmark faces two real threats. Just as the war in Ukraine has evolved into two wars in one – a land war where small drones play a major role and an air war where long-range OWA drones are used to achieve operational and strategic effects – Denmark will also be

challenged in two different ways by Russia's drones in the event of an armed conflict. Firstly, Danish army units deployed to the Baltics will be threatened by ISR drones, FPV drone strikes and attacks by loitering munitions. Secondly, Denmark could be hit by Shahed/Geran drones launched from Russian territory, a capability that Russia is using against both military and civilian targets in Ukraine. Small, slow drones flying low over the Baltic Sea are likely to appear more or less undetected in Danish airspace and pose a serious threat to military units and installations as well as critical Danish infrastructure.

For the Danish army, this means that C-UAS¹⁹ could be crucial for survival in a land war against the Russian army and be of great importance in an operation in the Middle East and/or Africa against a non-state actor, which is why C-UAS must be a discipline the Army must master. In addition, the Army should also build and master a drone capability for both surveillance and attack, so Army units can take advantage of the opportunities this new technology offers.

For Denmark as a whole, this means that air defence against small slow-flying targets must be included in the development of a national air defence. Expensive, modern and otherwise very capable ground-based air defence systems, such as Patriot, are not a good match against Shahed/Geran-like targets. Other radars and effectors are required. Should a Patriot-like air defence system be able to find, track and shoot down a Shahed/Geran drone, the cost of shooting it down would far exceed the value of the drone, which is why one or more extensive drone attacks could dry up Danish air defence capacity, at huge cost if a cheaper and more suitable alternative is not available. Therefore, Denmark should acquire/develop air defences against Class I and Class II drones to counter such attacks. In addition, combined attacks with large numbers of drones and missiles can saturate even the most capable air defences, which is why passive air defence to minimise the consequences of such attacks is also seen as a necessity for both the military and civil society.

19. Counter UAS – defence against Class I drones.

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CHAPTER 10

Russia's special operations forces and military spetsnaz units

By Claus Mathiesen

Introduction

The heart rates were higher than usual for most of the 300 or so Russian paratroopers aboard the dozen helicopters heading for Ukraine. The target was Hostomel airfield, just 30 kilometres from the heart of the Ukrainian capital Kyiv. The airfield was used by the Antonov aircraft factories as an exhibition area and for testing new and old aircraft types. Now the spetsnaz force was to seize and secure it so that a follow-on force of 1,000 troops could be landed using the extraordinarily long runway of more than 3 kilometres, and then immediately deploy in the planned lightning assault on Kyiv.

This was a far cry from the ritual smashing of piles of bricks with the forehead and jumping through rings of fire with a knife in the mouth at military anniversaries and city celebrations. Now, the soldiers of the legendary 45th Spetsnaz Brigade of the Airborne Troops would face real combat. The brigade commander was in one of the helicopters both to encourage his men along the way and to intervene if something did not go as expected. Little did they realise that the course of this operation would have serious consequences for Russia's war in Ukraine.¹ Special operations and the forces that carry them out have always been the subject of both myth-

1. For more on the role of the Russian Air Force in this action, see Chapter 8. The decline of Russia's air and space power.

making and secrecy. The Soviet Spetsnaz units are no exception in this regard. Their reputation during the Cold War was fearsome, and in Soviet and current Russian military culture, spetsnaz units and spetsnaz soldiers enjoy a special status. While propaganda portrays their capabilities and skills as unsurpassed, reliable and detailed information about their tasks, organisation, recruitment and training is hard to come by. In both Soviet, modern Russian and Western military forces, the personnel of such units occupy an almost superhuman status, with even traditional elite units such as the Airborne Troops and Marines relegated to second place.

This chapter will attempt to provide an overview of the various spetsnaz units that have been part of the Soviet and now Russian military since the 1950s, as well as the special operations forces that were officially established in 2009 as part of the reform process initiated at the time.

Other spetsnaz units, for example under the Russian security service FSB and the National Guard Rosgvardia, are probably relevant in the war in Ukraine, where combating partisan activity and maintaining law and order is of great importance for safe transport routes, undisturbed logistics and the implementation of effective Russification in the occupied territories. However, they will not be discussed in detail in this chapter, as their organisation, equipment and tasks differ somewhat from the military units described here. We will take a closer look at the tasks that, according to Russian military doctrine and thinking, spetsnaz and special operations units are expected to fulfil. The description and analysis will focus on their use in the "special military operation", the term that has been used officially by Russia to describe the Russian invasion of Ukraine from 24 February 2022 until now. But also the deployment of units in the earlier phases of the war, including the annexation of Crimea in February-March 2014 and the war in Donbas from March-April 2014 will be discussed. In both cases, these are tasks that are characteristic of both spetsnaz and special operations forces. The use of special forces in the civil war in Syria since September 2015 will not be discussed as it falls outside the scope of this chapter and involves a different theatre of operations.

The chapter will culminate in a qualitative assessment of the Russian Spetsnaz and special operations forces, their deployment in the war in Ukraine and possible implications for the Russian and Danish armed forces.

Research, theory and literature on the subject

There is some literature on spetsnaz and special operations units but little available that deals with theories on their use. Of general interest is the American William H. McRaven's "Spec Ops. Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare: Theory and Practice" from 1995. The book begins with a chapter on the theory of special operations, after which several specific operations from the period 1940 to 1976 are described. In the introductory chapter, the author notes that there are theories on virtually all forms of warfare other than special operations. The study aims to remedy this by extracting some common features from the operations analysed. The concept of special operations is broad, and the author therefore proposes a more precise term: "direct-action mission", which can be conducted by both specially trained and untrained personnel to achieve "specific, well-defined, often time-sensitive results of strategic, operational or critical tactical importance". The author derives and describes six basic principles for special operations of this type: simplicity, safety and rehearsal in the planning and preparation phase, and surprise, speed and clarity of purpose in the execution (and planning) phase. The same six principles are also found in current American doctrines, with a seventh: continuous planning of subsequent actions.

British author Alastair Finlan has a similar theoretical introduction in "Special Forces, Strategy and the War on Terror" from 2008, which focuses on the role of special forces in counter-terrorism. Finlan points out that the very strict security regulations on special forces and their operations are a challenge when it comes to researching the subject. There is not much reliable material available. However, he points out that there is a great danger that military commanders may be tempted to deploy special forces for tactical tasks that do not utilise their special skills. This can waste precious capabilities. Finally, he points out that there are differences in the tasks that different formations, known as special operations forces, can perform. The spectrum here ranges from advanced special operations to simpler retrieval or reconnaissance operations. Both considerations are relevant when discussing the various Russian special forces formations and their deployment in the war in Ukraine.

Lars R. Møller's "Specialoperationer [Special Operations]" from 2017 should be mentioned, especially the two introductory sections on special operations today and military thinking. The author explains that special

forces can operate openly, but often operate covertly. Reconnaissance, direct action and military assistance in the sense of advising and training other nations' security forces are mentioned as tasks for special forces. Examples of what the author calls "surgical strikes" against infrastructure and human targets are also given. In a special section of the book, Soviet and Russian special forces' efforts in Czechoslovakia in 1968 and the Afghanistan War, as well as in Chechnya and Crimea are described.

Spetsnaz and special operations units in a broader Russian reconnaissance context are discussed in Lester Grau and Charles Bartle's "The Russian Way of War" (2016), which explains how reconnaissance and collection/intelligence, three concepts for which the Russian word "razvedka" is used interchangeably, are organised in ground forces from low tactical level to brigade and division level. At the highest tactical level, which in Russian doctrine is the division, there are specially equipped reconnaissance companies and battalions. When discussing spetsnaz units and special operations forces (SOF), the authors draw attention to the meaning of the Russian term "spetsnaz". This is a very broad term used to describe a variety of special purpose forces, which includes forces that fulfil tasks of special importance, such as sensitive political and clandestine tasks. Therefore, spetsnaz units as a whole should not be compared to Western special operations forces. Furthermore, the authors point out that perhaps the most important difference between Western SOF and Russian Spetsnaz units is the degree to which they can be considered elite troops. According to the authors, the Airborne Forces (Russian: VDV = Vozdushno-desantnye Voiska) rank higher than the Russian military intelligence service GRU's spetsnaz units. This is justified by the fact that the Airborne Forces' units have been staffed with a higher proportion of contract personnel than those of the GRU. This difference could be linked to the fact that the GRU's various units are not "direct action forces", but are primarily intended to be used for ISR, i.e., performing intelligence gathering, surveillance and reconnaissance tasks for conventional forces. Spetsnaz units are also highly specialised, with, for example, frogman units deployed exclusively for naval operations. Similarly, the Russian security service FSB's various spetsnaz units carry out tasks related to the liberation of hostages, while the Ministry of the Interior's units carry out tasks that require special weapons and tactics (SWAT) and riot control. This is a division of labour based on specialisation, which is not as characteristic of Western SOF. Only with the creation of a distinct Special Operations Command with subordinate

units in 2013 may we begin to talk about units similar to Western SOF. When the command was established, it was stated that its task was to act as a joint command for the primary SOF units, both military and other, and to exercise command and control over the units in wartime. However, the development seems to have been that the Russian SOF units under this command constitute a special operations force directly under the Russian General Staff, while the GRU spetsnaz units are under the military intelligence service.

The most detailed descriptions can be found in various publications by British historian and author Mark Galeotti. He is the author of several books in the popular Elite series, the oldest of which deals exclusively with Russian Spetsnaz units: "Spetsnaz: Russia's Special Forces". Spetsnaz units are also mentioned in his "The Modern Russian Army" as part of what Galeotti refers to as "intervention forces", which also include the Airborne Troops and the Russian Marines. Galeotti, like Grau and Bartels, warns against comparing them to Western SOF and estimated that the GRU's spetsnaz units had as many as 20-30% conscripts. They should therefore be considered light infantry specialising in reconnaissance and sabotage (Galeotti, 2017, pp. 54-55). The third booklet, "Armies of Russia's War in Ukraine", describes both Ukrainian and Russian forces. It mentions Russian Spetsnaz units and the newly established Special Operations Forces (SOF) in connection with both the annexation of Crimea in February-March 2014 and the war in Donbas from 2014. Among other things, the author estimates that all Spetsnaz units have at some point been deployed in Donbas and thus gained useful wartime experience. It should be said about the Elite series that it is aimed at a broad readership and does not contain source references. However, the booklets are provided with a bibliography.

The reference work "The Elite. The A-Z of Modern Special Operations Forces" offers a comprehensive overview of special forces from around the world, their weapons, equipment, vehicles and tactics. It also features a number of special forces operations. Among the dozen or so task types mentioned in the tactics section are Direct Action and Special Reconnaissance. Direct Action is defined by the US Special Operations Command (US SOCOM) as "short-term attacks and other limited offensive actions employing specialized military capabilities to seize, destroy, capture, exploit, recover, or damage designated targets". Special reconnaissance is defined as "actions conducted in sensitive environments to collect or verify

information of strategic or operational importance". Russian units include the Special Operations Command (KSSO), which according to the source can be equated with the American Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC). The American JSOC was established as early as 1980, while the Russian command was only established in 2012-13 on the basis of the 346th Spetsnaz Brigade. The Russian designation for forces belonging to this command is different from the spetsnaz name to emphasise the difference. It is also reported that the special operations forces reportedly operate in small teams of up to 16 men. According to this source, Russian military spetsnaz units cannot be compared to US Special Forces, but should rather be characterised as "a well-trained, expeditionary light infantry force".

Mark Galeotti again discusses Russian Special Forces in his book "Putin's Wars. From Chechnya to Ukraine" from 2022. He points out that despite much writing about spetsnaz, not least in Russian, very little is known for certain. He reiterates that spetsnaz are not "special forces" in the Western sense. Galeotti attributes the Russian term to the fact that it is used for units that have a special role. The proportion of conscripts in the units also indicates a difference. Galeotti states that the primary task of spetsnaz units is reconnaissance and sabotage, the latter typically in the enemy hinterland against communication and supply lines, and especially NATO tactical nuclear weapons. Spetsnaz units have also been used to train elite forces in Cuba, protect civilian shipping and in counter-insurgency operations, both in Hungary 1956 and Czechoslovakia 1968. Spetsnaz played an important role in the regime change in Afghanistan, and spetsnaz were also tasked with finding and fighting the American Stinger anti-aircraft missiles that the US had supplied to the Afghan mujahideen. According to Galeotti, spetsnaz in Afghanistan were occasionally deployed as regular infantry, which was repeated in Chechnya. According to Galeotti, the proportion of conscripts is decreasing in today's spetsnaz units, partly as a result of the increased intake of contract soldiers. By 2020, it should be down to 20 per cent, and these are often specially selected conscripts in good physical shape. Half of the conscripts sign a contract after completing their military service.

In terms of mission, spetsnaz units fill the gap between standard military intelligence units and the intelligence gathering resources and units of various security and intelligence services. According to Galeotti, Russia's political leadership is increasingly using so-called "active measures" and "political warfare". They have been used in Georgia in 2008, and in Crimea

in 2014 they played a leading role, while in Donbas they provided crucial capabilities to the rebels. Galeotti hesitates to put Spetsnaz units on a par with the most advanced Western special operations forces and suggests they should be seen as deployable and forward-positioned light infantry. On the other hand, Galeotti believes that units directly under the Special Operations Forces Command (KSSO for short), established in 2012, are comparable to the best Western counterparts.

Therefore, there seems to be good reason to distinguish between Spetsnaz units and the special operations forces under the KSSO, despite some similarities and presumed interaction.

Russian military spetsnaz units

The various sources' overviews of existing units are not entirely identical. It appears that there are at least eight so-called brigades and one regiment with the designation spetsnaz GRU. Galeotti estimates that while these units currently report to the military intelligence service GRU, they may be subject to the operational commanders when deployed in the field. They are considered by others as belonging to the ground forces, for example, who placed them under the strategic unit commands West, South, Centre and East (Joint Strategic Command, JSC). Two brigades, the 2nd and 16th, belonged to Strategic Command West. In February 2024, when the subordinate territories of Joint Strategic Command West were divided between the Leningrad and Moscow Military Districts, the 2nd Brigade in Pskov was placed in the territory of Leningrad Military District, the 16th Brigade in Tambov in the territory of Moscow Military District. Unit Command South has three brigades, 10th, 22nd, and 346th, as well as the 25th Regiment, which some say is subordinate to the 49th Army. The large number of units in the South can be explained by their support for anti-terrorist operations in the troubled North Caucasus and the war in Ukraine since 2014. Three more spetsnaz brigades can be found in the unified commands Centre, 3rd Brigade, and East 14th and 24th. These are the spetsnaz units whose deployment and engagement in the war in Ukraine have been tracked by the website WarMapper since May 2022.

The Spetsnaz brigades consist of between two and four battalion-sized sub-units, which in turn consist of three company-level units of approximately 140 men. The companies operate in teams of approximately 14 men.

The sources mention four frogman units, referred to in Russian as "independent maritime reconnaissance point" (Rus.: *otdelnyy morskoy razvedyvatelnyy punkt*), one unit under each of the four Russian fleets, the Northern Fleet, the Pacific Fleet, the Black Sea Fleet and the Baltic Fleet. Here, too, they operate in teams of 14 men. A fifth such unit seems to exist under the 1st Army Corps in the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic, which is called the 384th Independent Maritime Reconnaissance Point and operates in Donbas. In a video clip on YouTube, it can be seen taking part in an operation against suspected Ukrainian agents somewhere on the Sea of Azov. The size of the frogman units is disputed, but probably closer to company strength than battalion size, probably with 100-120 men in each.

All sources mention the 45th Spetsnaz Brigade of the Airborne Troops. The unit is located in Kubinka about 60 km west of Moscow city centre, close to the large Kubinka airbase. Considering the elite status of the Airborne Troops, also compared to the GRU's spetsnaz brigades, it can be assumed that this unit is among the most capable. The unit has participated in every Russian war since the collapse of the Soviet Union, from the two Chechen wars to Georgia in 2008, the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Syrian civil war from 2015, the deployment of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) in Kazakhstan in January 2020, to the major invasion of Ukraine from February 2022.

Since 2014, the lessons learnt from the war in Ukraine are estimated to have led to an increase in special reconnaissance capabilities in the Airborne Troops. Until 2014, the 45th Spetsnaz Brigade was only a regiment, and the number of special reconnaissance companies has increased from six to eighteen, some of which are part of the Airborne Troops' "divisions and brigades" reconnaissance battalions.

Galeotti estimates the total strength of all military Spetsnaz units at around 17,000. The personnel strength of the individual Spetsnaz brigades seems to vary from 500 to 1,500 men.

The Russian special operations forces (SOF, Rus.: SSO = *sily spetsialnykh operatsiy*)

It was probably the negative experiences from various anti-terrorist and hostage liberation operations, not least in the North Caucasian city of Beslan on 1-3 September 2004 during the Second Chechen War, that in

earnest started the discussion about the need for better communication and coordination of different special formations' efforts. More than 300 people were killed and several hundred wounded during the liberation operation in which 30 Chechen rebels held more than 1,000 hostages in a local school. Concrete measures were taken after the war in Georgia in 2008, when a Department of Special Operations Forces was established in 2009 under the General Staff. The department became an actual SOF command in 2012 and is located in the city of Solnechnogorsk 60 km northwest of Moscow on a military installation known as "Senezh", the name of the lake on which the centre is located.

According to Galeotti, the first SOF unit was based on part of the 346th Spetsnaz Brigade to ensure it was of the highest quality. The first task was to secure the Winter Olympics in the Black Sea city of Sochi in February 2014, which took place at the same time as the so-called Maidan uprising in Ukraine led to the Russian invasion of Crimea on 20 February and the change of power in Kyiv on 22 February. The Olympics ended on 23 February. In addition to security around Sochi, SOF were used to evacuate Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, who fled Kyiv via Crimea to Rostov-na-Donu in southern Russia on the night of 21-22 February. They were also deployed in connection with the annexation of Crimea.

The sources do not agree on which units are permanent parts of SOF. In addition to the Special Operations Command, there is probably both a training base for SOF and a battalion-sized SOF unit in Senezh. It is also believed that a permanent unit is based at the Kubinka base, in the same location as the Airborne Troops' 45th Spetsnaz Brigade. SOF personnel are also trained here, while frogman and diver training is conducted on the annexed Crimean Peninsula in Sevastopol.

The Russian military formally distinguishes between spetsnaz units and SOF. This is reflected in the fact that the two types of units have their own professional annual anniversaries. Since 2006, 24 October has been officially used to commemorate the spetsnaz. On this date in 1950, a directive was issued to establish spetsnaz companies for deployment in the enemy's rear in the then military districts and groups of Soviet forces abroad, as well as in the fleets. The Special Operations Forces' professional anniversary is 27 February, commemorating the occupation of the Crimean parliament on this date in 2014. The peaceful course of events also marked the beginning of the operators being referred to as "the polite people", an image that has

since been cultivated by the Russian authorities. The anniversary was officially introduced in 2015.

Russian definitions of spetsnaz forces and special operations forces

You can find Russian definitions for both spetsnaz forces and special operations forces. Spetsnaz forces are defined as specially trained units of all three military services and other force structures. The most important tasks performed by military units include: reconnaissance against and destruction of offensive nuclear means, conducting reconnaissance at the operational level in the enemy's rear, guidance and correction of cruise missiles, drones and aircraft, reconnaissance and diversionary actions in the enemy's rear, and sabotage in occupied areas. They also include organising partisan and resistance movements, conducting information operations and psychological warfare, search and evacuation of pilots and aircrews, and liquidation of political and national actors on enemy territory.

Of Russian units, one source only mentions the GRU units, which according to the source are operationally subordinate to the military intelligence service GU (GRU), which is part of the Russian General Staff. Since February 2022, the spetsnaz units of the military intelligence service have been participating in the special military operation for the "demilitarisation and denazification of Ukraine".

A video about the 45th Spetsnaz Brigade of the Airborne Troops from November 2015 shows parts of the training, including that of conscripted soldiers. The conscripts are specially selected, with an emphasis on physical criteria. According to the video, the aim is for 20-30 per cent of conscripts to subsequently sign a contract. Apart from parachute training, the programme does not differ from regular marksmanship training for reconnaissance soldiers. However, one training situation simulates that a reconnaissance group with special listening equipment has determined the location of a small enemy force. Using a drone with camera equipment, the target is further identified and an ambush is organised, which includes the capture of documents – all of which seems to fall within the scope of normal reconnaissance missions.

A recruitment film for contract service produced by the Russian Ministry of Defence in 2015 tells of the Southern Military District's 22nd GRU

Spetsnaz Brigade, which in 2001 became the only unit since World War II to be awarded the Guard title for special action in combat. Among its achievements is the fight against terrorism in the North Caucasus. Here too there are conscripts, and the video emphasises this GRU brigade's kinship with the Airborne Troops, including the parachute training.

Special Operations Forces are described in the aforementioned internet encyclopaedia as "highly mobile spetsnaz units that are specially trained and equipped with special material and equipment on constant readiness for immediate deployment". They are intended to perform special tasks related to the defence of Russia's national interests, using military force if necessary within Russia's borders or abroad, both in peacetime and in wartime. SOF operates in co-operation with other Russian Spetsnaz units, both the military's own and those belonging to other force structures. The primary tasks of the special operations forces are described as: in peacetime, performing reconnaissance and diversionary tasks, sabotage and special operations on the territory of foreign countries; in wartime, performing reconnaissance, capture and neutralisation of important targets, psychological operations, organisation of sabotage, partisan and insurgent activities.

In April 2013, Russian Channel 24 reported on the creation of the Special Operations Forces in a news report. It was emphasised that for the first time, the Ministry of Defence was talking about the possibility of operating illegally abroad in peacetime in order to achieve political and economic goals. Clips were shown from an exercise in the mountains of the North Caucasus, where the scenario involved deployment from high altitude with oxygen masks (8-10 km) in a foreign country. The task was to defeat a small special forces unit from another foreign country. Destabilising the situation in a foreign country, often via third parties, is mentioned in the clip as part of the mission, which can also include the liquidation of "unwanted leaders".

From these definitions, the main difference seems to be that special operations forces are intended for deployment anywhere, including peacetime, in support of Russian national interests, while spetsnaz units are intended for deployment in support of military operations, possibly in support of counter-terrorism. In wartime, the tasks seem to overlap to some extent.

Russian Spetsnaz units and special operations forces in Crimea in 2014 and in Donbas before February 2022.

It is no secret that special operations forces and spetsnaz units have played an important role in both the annexation of Crimea in February-March 2014 and the subsequent war in Donbas that began in early April 2014. Norwegian researcher Tor Bukkvoll addressed the subject in an article from 2016. Bukkvoll, like others, points out the difficulties of finding open and reliable information in Russian sources, which is why his article is primarily based on Ukrainian sources, with the reservations that naturally follow. In the article, the term "special operations forces" is used generically and includes both the nominal Russian special operations forces and spetsnaz units. The article estimates the number of special operations forces to be no more than 1,500, while the number of GRU spetsnaz forces is estimated at around 12,000. Bukkvoll summarises that during the annexation of Crimea, special operations forces primarily performed "covert action" tasks, while in Donbas they performed more traditional tasks such as special reconnaissance, military support and direct action.

The deployment in Crimea is believed to be based on intelligence gathered in advance by units related to the Russian Black Sea Fleet and by local agents recruited by the FSB and GRU. The takeover of Crimea is believed to be the first military operation in which the newly established Special Operations Command and subordinate forces played a central role. This is especially true of the takeover of the local parliament on 27 September 2014, but also the seizure of various Ukrainian military headquarters and installations on the peninsula. The special operations forces are believed to have been supported by GRU spetsnaz units and marines. Speed and surprise were key elements of the operation.

In Donbas, Ukrainian sources have identified service members from all GRU Spetsnaz units, the 45th Spetsnaz Brigade of the Airborne Troops and the Russian security service FSB. There are no open sources to confirm the possible overall role of Special Operations Command in this regard, nor the deployment of the nominal special operations forces. This is taken as an indication that this capability is particularly valuable and will only be utilised when "no one else can do the job". It is not known when the first actual GRU spetsnaz personnel were present in Ukraine, but according to one source, possibly already in significant numbers in the eastern Ukrainian city of Slovyansk from mid-March 2014. They may also have played a

decisive role in the occupation of the Donetsk City Hall building in early April 2014. From July-August 2014, between 700 and 1,200 Spetsnaz soldiers from all GRU brigades were deployed, performing the full spectrum of special forces tasks, operating in teams of 10 to 12 men. Local forces were trained and received intelligence from them. Ukrainian sources also point to sabotage operations involving spetsnaz personnel.

Russian Spetsnaz units and special operations forces in Ukraine after February 2022

There are many suggestions as to how the large-scale invasion launched on 24 February 2022 against Ukrainian territory was planned and by whom. There are indications that the actual planning and perhaps also the final decision was made in a narrow circle, primarily with the participation of the Russian security apparatus. The involvement of military forces in the preparations was limited, at least at lower levels. There are indications that the order to launch the operation was either received very late or was limited to the very top echelons of the military. In a report, the British Royal United Services Institute RUSI suggests that the poor military preparation and chaotic execution in the first phase of the war are linked to the fact that Russia had counted on a quick resolution to the war, partly as a result of the unconventional warfare Russia had been waging with Ukraine for several years. According to the report, the Russian plan was to utilise connections in the Ukrainian political and administrative top to force a quick surrender to avoid bloodshed. Already in the first hours of the invasion, the political leadership was contacted and urged to surrender. And on the second day of the war, the Ukrainian military was urged not to resist and instead launch a mutiny and demand negotiations to end the war.

As we know, this did not happen. However, it is well documented that the military effort was chaotic and that the war did not end quickly. See, for example, the Russian contract soldier in the Airborne Troops Pavel Filachev's diary entries from the first months of the war. The attacking units barely knew why Ukraine was being attacked and what the goal of the operation was. According to his own account, Filachev was part of the forces that advanced from Crimea towards Kherson in the first 24 hours of the invasion. It was quite chaotic and the unit's equipment was not prepared. For example, the lorry he himself was in was not able to brake. In addition,

the unit was undermanned and lacked both winter jackets and sleeping bags. Cooperation with the other attacking units was absent and improvised.

According to the aforementioned RUSI report, the plan was to occupy Kyiv within the first 72 hours. The first units were to take control of the access roads to the city, and airborne forces were to be flown into Hostomel airfield, 30 km northwest of Kyiv city centre, from where they would advance and occupy key areas of Kyiv. Only then would Russian special operations forces and other units enter the city to ensure order in the occupied areas, including units from the Russian National Guard Rosgvardia and the Chechen Kadyrov forces. According to RUSI, this was a different approach than usual, but the reason for this was that the areas they planned to occupy had not been infiltrated beforehand, as would otherwise have been the case. For the same reason, most spetsnaz units were deployed in ordinary reconnaissance missions in support of the attacking battalion combat groups. In Kyiv, Special Operations Forces were tasked with apprehending prominent members of the Ukrainian government and parliament. Subsequently, SOF, together with units from the Airborne Troops, were to take over the National Bank of Ukraine, target water and power supply infrastructure and the parliament. This was to be followed by a takeover of political power and an end to hostilities. As we now know, things did not go according to plan.

The deployment of SOF and spetsnaz personnel in this way, which was inappropriate according to current theories and doctrine, is confirmed by the so-called "Discord" leak, a leak of a series of highly classified documents by an officer of the Massachusetts Air National Guard. Some of the documents concerned the war in Ukraine. Based on the documents, the *Washington Post* newspaper writes that the Russian military leadership had placed excessive faith in the spetsnaz units, which had largely been deployed as front-line infantry. This is because the military leadership did not have sufficient confidence in the regular units' ability to fulfil their tasks. However, according to the same newspaper, Russian special forces were tasked with removing Ukrainian President Zelensky and, if necessary, killing him, a typical task for units of this type.

The rest of the deployment, not least of the spetsnaz units, has led to very high casualties. According to the leaked documents, the losses were so high that they resulted in severely limited opportunities to use the

Spetsnaz units for their intended purpose of gathering intelligence and conducting reconnaissance in support of conventional operations.

The high losses have been documented, among other means, through satellite images of the 22nd GRU Spetsnaz Brigade's vehicle parking area taken in November 2021 and November 2022, after the unit had returned to its home base in the Southern Military District from the war in Ukraine. The article mentions that four out of five deployed brigades have suffered extensive losses and that three of them, including the 22nd GRU brigade, have suffered losses of 90-95 per cent. The 346th GRU Spetsnaz Brigade, which US intelligence agencies have been tracking, reportedly lost 775 out of 900 deployed troops.

Similarly high losses are mentioned in a report on the Russian-language TV channel "Dozhd" from October 2022 in connection with the counteroffensive that Ukrainian forces at the time carried out with some success. The 3rd GRU Spetsnaz Brigade, based in the Central Military District in the town of Togliatti on the Volga River, was at the time deployed in defence of the eastern Ukrainian town of Lyman, about 15 km northeast of Sloviansk. The losses are said to be significant, up to a third of the personnel strength. The commentary directly mentions that many units, not least the elite units to which the GRU brigades belong, were not used in accordance with their training and intended tasks. The commentator, a military analyst, believes that this was due to a general lack of manpower in the Russian military at the time. He also points out that these personnel take a long time to train.

BBC News mentions the high losses, including in elite units, in an article from April 2023. It lists confirmed casualties during the first fourteen months of the war, including 3,401 killed in various elite units. The article mentions again that due to a lack of confidence in the regular units, various elite units were deployed to solve ordinary combat tasks. Casualties among officers amount to 18 per cent. It takes at least 4 years to train a replacement for a killed company commander in a GRU brigade.

The attempt to end the war in a few days – the operation against Hostomel airfield

In the first phase of the war, the capture of the Hostomel airfield at the Antonov factories northwest of Kyiv was crucial. There are several

accounts of the events, including from the Kazakh military newspaper Sarbaz news site from February 2024 and the American news site War on the Rocks from August 2023.

The US description mentions that Russian intelligence services had infiltrated the suburbs of Irpin and Bucha before the landing northwest of Kyiv to ensure that the airborne units and spetsnaz forces could reach the Ukrainian capital quickly. The intention was to mark landing areas and ensure control over necessary infrastructure. This was essentially prevented by Ukrainian police and security services. At the same time, the units' preparation for deployment from Belarus was rushed and knowledge of the overall plan and its execution was insufficient. The 45th Airborne Spetsnaz Brigade was deployed alongside other airborne forces with helicopters. Although the Ukrainian military leadership had focused on a possible Russian attack from the east in Donbas, a force of 200 men from a newly created brigade of the Ukrainian National Guard was available to defend the airport. When the Russian landing force arrived, the airport was better defended than expected. At the same time, the Ukrainians had parked a number of vehicles on the runway so that it could not immediately be used by fixed-wing aircraft. The helicopter-borne Russian force consisted of around 300 men in a dozen helicopters. Initially, the Russian forces managed to take control of the airport. However, a follow-up force of around 1,000 men, who were to land in 18 Ilyushin-76 transport aircraft, never arrived. The reason for this is unclear, but lack of runway control is a likely explanation, including the risk of being fired upon by Ukrainian artillery. Similarly, mechanised follow-on forces who were supposed to advance on the west side of the Dnipro River did not arrive as quickly as necessary. At the same time, recognising the risk that Russian control of the airfield would pose, Ukrainian forces launched an effective counterattack. According to reports from Ukrainian participants, the counter-attack went quite smoothly and many of the deployed airborne soldiers were defeated. Recognising that Russian forces were approaching over land, Ukrainian forces abandoned their attempt to hold the airfield, but before retreating destroyed the runway with artillery and aerial bombs so that it would be unusable for the Russians. A month later, around 1 April 2022, Russian forces withdrew from Hostomel as part of the overall withdrawal from the Kyiv area and the temporary abandonment of the plan to capture the capital.

The American analysis attributes part of the blame for the failure of what was in fact a crucial operation to poor planning and hasty execution.

The attempt to take Kyiv and seize political control in a matter of days had failed.

The two accounts of the course of events are generally quite consistent. According to the Kazakh description of events, the airborne follow-on force was to be deployed via an air bridge from Pskov, the home of the 76th Guards Air Assault Division and 2nd GRU Spetsnaz Brigade.

Two of the participating soldiers from the 45th Spetsnaz Brigade of the Airborne Troops give their version of events in an article from a Russian media outlet based in the Belgorod region of Russia. According to them, a possible war with Ukraine had been prepared for more than a year. When it was announced that Ukrainian forces would attack in Donbas on 26 February and then move towards Crimea, they were in a state of high readiness. According to them, preparations for the landing operation were quite thorough, "as always in spetsnaz". They report that the commander of the 45th Brigade participated in the landing and led the force on the ground. The follow-up force was expected to arrive within two hours, but they ended up being in combat for four days. They were fired on from the Ukrainian side with both chemical and phosphorus munitions. But they held the airfield.

When the follow-on force finally arrived, they carried out various tasks over the next month, including reconnaissance, surveillance of crossing points, and locating enemy equipment. The unit was inside Irpin, Ozyora and Bucha. Unexpectedly for them, at the end of March 2022, they received orders to be moved to Iziium in the Kharkiv region. Here they performed various tasks, including reconnaissance, artillery and aircraft targeting, ambushes and demolitions. Often they were ordered to attack enemy defensive positions. "It is customary to pound nails with a microscope here, but orders are not up for discussion," went one pithy remark.

The Russian account differs in some respects from the other two. It is difficult to say how much of it is propaganda, post-rationalisation or subject to restrictions not to write negatively about the Russian military efforts. But it certainly confirms that this spetsnaz unit has also been deployed in ordinary combat missions.

Implications for the Russian military

With the necessary reservations about the limitations and reliability of the various sources, not least when it comes to casualty figures, it can be concluded from the above that important tasks for which it was relevant to use special operations forces and spetsnaz units in the initial phase of the war were not fully realised.

They did not succeed in eliminating the Ukrainian political leadership as planned. Why this did not happen is not fully described in open sources, but the belief that the political leadership could either be persuaded to give up the war or flee the country was strong. Perhaps this is why special forces operators in the capital did not act effectively in an otherwise favourable deployment environment, where they had advantages in the form of a presumably loyal agent network and good opportunities to blend in linguistically with the locals. Patrols of Ukrainian Territorial Defence Forces in Kyiv have certainly been very aware of this particular threat.

The deployment of one of the most effective and experienced spetsnaz units did not succeed in capturing and keeping the important Hostomel airfield intact. Therefore, it was not utilised for the rapid deployment of larger follow-on forces via a planned airlift. Although these were not the only factors, both were significant in the failure of the Russian plan for a short-term war lasting a few days. This has had a strategic effect and has forced Russia into a long-term war of attrition of a completely different nature than expected by Russia's political leadership.

All GRU spetsnaz units have been or are deployed in the war in Ukraine. As of 19 May 2024, WarMapper places seven of eight GRU brigades and a single regiment in different locations at the front in Ukraine and one brigade in the Russian Belgorod region. On WarMapper you can track the location of units back to May 2022. The 45th Spetsnaz Brigade of the Airborne Troops is also deployed at the front.

Their deployment in regular combat missions has not been effective. According to sources, this is due to a lack of confidence in the combat power and ability of regular units to fulfil tasks that would otherwise be in accordance with their purpose. Although described as light infantry, the GRU's spetsnaz brigades are hardly educated, trained or equipped with the necessary equipment for this. Therefore, they have suffered very heavy losses.

This should lead to doctrinal considerations in the Russian military leadership regarding the use of spetsnaz units. They have fallen for the temptation to deploy the units to solve ordinary combat tasks, which is precisely what several of the theorists mentioned earlier in the chapter warn against. Capabilities of the kind found in spetsnaz units take a long time to build or recreate. According to the leaked documents, the US military estimates that it will take up to ten years to restore pre-war capabilities. This is because it is estimated that it takes at least four years to train an effective spetsnaz soldier and as long or longer to train a company commander-level spetsnaz officer. The US documents indicate that due to the high casualties, there will be a lack of capacity to educate and train forces around the world. To a certain extent, this task can be expected to be taken over by private military companies.

It is unclear whether the necessary considerations and changes will take place. There may be a tendency to maintain the cultivation of special operations forces and spetsnaz units' well-established status and image as elite alongside airborne units and marines – and thus also at the risk of repeating mistakes from the past. A more thoroughly prepared start to a future war could change this situation and favour the use of Russian elite units according to their training, equipment and destination.

Implications for Danish Defence

It is appropriate to distinguish between possible Russian use of special operations forces and spetsnaz units in the Baltic countries in a hybrid warfare or in a possible open aggression by Russia against NATO, and possible use against Danish territory. The likelihood of these scenarios will not be discussed further here, as the reader is referred to the Danish Defence Intelligence Service's threat assessment from February 2024 and subsequent updates.

Among other things, it states that it is "likely that within two to five years, Russia will be able to rebuild military forces that could pose a credible military threat to the Baltic countries". Furthermore, in the Baltic Sea region, "it is also highly likely that Russia intends to use its military force against NATO countries to challenge NATO countries below the Article 5 threshold."

In a hybrid scenario in the Baltic countries, the obvious comparison is Crimea and Donbas. Estonia and Latvia have significant Russian minorities. In both countries, Russian minorities make up 20-25 per cent of the population. Despite significant differences between the situation in Ukraine and Estonia and Latvia, the minorities enable infiltration as part of a hybrid war or in preparation for conventional aggression. The methods will be similar to those used in Ukraine, including labelling the countries' national governments and policies towards minorities as "Nazi-like" and threatening minorities' rights to use their own language or even their continued existence. Such hybrid activities are already taking place to some extent. Surveys in Latvia described in the cited reports show that 42 per cent of Russian speakers surveyed in 2023 believed that the West and Ukraine threaten Russia's security. Twenty-three per cent believed that Russia had the right to use military force against Ukraine. This indicates that there is a pro-Russian environment that can be influenced in various ways.

In the event of a conventional armed conflict, it is likely that special operations forces and spetsnaz units would be deployed to carry out tasks similar to those they were tasked with at the start of the large-scale invasion in February 2022, including attacks on political and military leaders and taking control of key military points. Unlike Ukraine, where it has not been possible to document the deployment of naval GRU seaman companies, deployment at key harbour and naval installations on the Baltic Sea coast is to be expected.

Whether we will see spetsnaz units deployed in regular combat will depend on the extent to which the military leadership has learnt the lessons of the failed use of spetsnaz units in Ukraine and how thoroughly a possible Russian attack will be prepared. There is no doubt that Sweden's and Finland's membership of NATO places very high demands on a Russian military operation against the Baltic countries. At the same time, it will be more difficult than in Ukraine to blend in with the local population, partly due to language differences.

In a situation where it is decided to deploy NATO reinforcements to the Baltic countries, transport hubs on Danish territory, especially ports and air bases, will be targets for Russian aggression. Most likely, long-range weapons, especially rockets and missiles, will be used. However, the deployment of sabotage groups, for example using the Russian navy's GRU frogman companies or spetsnaz units, cannot be ruled out.

Conventional Russian aggression directly against Danish territory is currently considered highly unlikely. Should this happen, the deployment of elite units in a broad sense, including airborne units, marines, special operations forces, spetsnaz units, including the aforementioned frogman companies, would be conceivable. There will thus be similarities with the attack scenarios for a possible Warsaw Pact aggression known from the Cold War, but also crucial differences.

Russia's military capabilities and capacities are obviously far from those of the Soviet Union, not to mention the entire Warsaw Pact. The Russian defence leadership has on several occasions presented plans to increase Russia's armed forces. The number of forces is expected to increase from 1,320,000 in 2023 to approximately 1,500,000 in 2026. There is no specific mention of special operations forces or the number of spetsnaz units, which would be unexpected given the nature of the units. On the other hand, the same news item mentions that the navy's five marine brigades will be upgraded to five divisions in the medium term. Already in 2019, several improvements to the Airborne Troops units were announced, including an increase in the number of divisions from four to five, both of which indicate an increased focus on mobility. The extensive losses in the war in Ukraine of elite units in a broad sense, the American estimates of a very time-consuming reconstruction process, along with the risk of inertia in changing doctrine and methods of deployment sooner, mean that legitimate doubts must be raised about the extent to which the stated goals can be achieved. Tor Bukkvoll points to three general facts that are worth noting as a conclusion to the Russian use of SOF and Spetsnaz in Crimea and Donbas.

Firstly, in hybrid warfare, the Russian response will be flexible and adapted to the circumstances. It is therefore important not only to practice countering hybrid warfare as in Ukraine, training should target the areas that each country identifies as sensitive and relevant targets.

The speed with which Russia was able to deploy its special operations forces in Crimea was a direct effect of the creation of the Special Operations Command. Thus, in 2014, it managed to establish a *fait accompli* that was difficult to respond to. In the event of a similar operation, NATO countries' differing perceptions of the nature and scope of the threat could delay any response to a degree that could prove fatal. As described here, the success in Kyiv could not be replicated. However, with a sufficiently high level of preparedness in the Baltic countries, something similar could probably be prevented in the event of a confrontation.

The third factor to consider is that the operation will be accompanied by a targeted information campaign, as was the case in Crimea and Donbas. Therefore, one must be prepared for a coordinated effort in several areas of the hybrid warfare and war spectrum.

All three perspectives on the use of special operations forces and spetsnaz units must therefore also apply to Denmark, regardless of any development scenario.

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CHAPTER 11

Russia's nuclear weapons: Before and after the invasion of Ukraine

By Carina Meyn

Introduction

A great deal has changed since Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. First and foremost, the awareness of a possible nuclear war has once again become a salient topic and a matter of public concern. From the earliest days of the conflict, this was made clear by Putin's statements and has since – through the various phases of the conflict – manifested in different ways.

By its very nature, it is important to actively address both the general concern of nuclear war and the more specific threat-based diplomatic communication between the main actors in the war – because whether underestimating *or* overestimating the potential for a nuclear exchange, both can lead to dangerous misunderstandings and a critical destabilisation of security for all parties involved.

Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, Russia has also decided to (i) forward deploy so-called "tactical" nuclear weapons to Belarus, (ii) de-ratify the *Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty* (CTBT) and (iii) suspend its participation in New START, the last remaining arms control agreement between Russia and the United States, which regulates the size and deployment of their respective nuclear arsenals.

In terms of Russia's overall nuclear capabilities and delivery systems, not much has changed since the outbreak of the war. However, nuclear threat signalling and the broader public debate on nuclear weapons have intensified significantly since February 2022. Doctrinally, Putin's 2020 presidential decree – commonly referred to as the nuclear doctrine – was updated on 19 November 2024, following extended public debates and nuclear threat diplomacy. The revision makes it clear that Russia now reserves the right to nuclear retaliation against a conventional attack from an adversary supported behind the scenes by a nuclear-armed power.

What, then, does this imply for Danish and European security? And what might we reasonably expect from the future? Firstly, the new nuclear doctrine has made it clear that there is a significant risk of escalation whenever the authorisation for Ukraine's use of long-range weapon systems is expanded. Secondly, the war in Ukraine has made it clear that international arms control is currently in a deep state of crisis. In the longer term, this suggests that the major security dilemmas and arms races already underway between the United States, Russia, and China may well intensify further. Thirdly, the re-election of Donald J. Trump as the 47th President of the United States puts more pressure on European leaders to think independently, strategically, and nuclear deterrence-based about how to best prepare for the future. On a more positive note, one might say that a collective awakening is currently taking place in the West: one that will hopefully lead to an improved culture of strategic analysis and timely action, whether aimed at improved defence capabilities or improved crisis communication with adversaries.

Research overview

The following analysis of Russia's nuclear capabilities and doctrine is based on respected and recognised research data from, among others, *the Federation of American Scientists* (FAS). Each year, FAS publishes detailed summaries of the world's nuclear arsenals, drawing on data collected from the US intelligence community via *Freedom of Information (FOI) request acts* (Kristensen et al., 2024a, 2024b). As the FAS team themselves make clear in their summaries, their method of collecting information on the world's nuclear weapons stockpiles is not necessarily completely error-free or without bias, but it does represent the most accurate assessment that the

US intelligence agencies have been able to arrive at in their work to assess other countries' nuclear weapons stockpiles – and it can thus be used as a general baseline when open (and unclassified) research communities need to consider and analyse ongoing developments. In addition, this chapter draws extensively on relevant peer-reviewed literature on Russia's nuclear doctrine and thinking in the decades since the end of the Cold War. Within this body of literature, there is one group of researchers in particular who work in a highly logical-deductive manner with analyses of Russia's capabilities and intentions (Colby, 2015a, 2018; Davis et al, 2019; Ford, 2017; Payne, 2018; Roberts, 2016, 2017; Shlapak & Johnson, 2016; Zysk, 2018) – and another group of researchers who work much more contextually and interpretively with the same questions (Adamsky, 2018, 2019; Arbatov, 2015, 2018; Bruusgaard, 2016, 2017, 2023; Gottemoeller, 2019, 2020; Oliker, 2016, 2020; Oliker & Baklitsky, 2018).

Analytically, this chapter does not take a position on who is right in their assessment of the nature of Russia's nuclear thinking – but instead seeks to present the full breadth of the available research interpretations.

Method and theory

Theoretically and methodologically, this analysis is grounded in an anti-essentialist understanding of how the security dilemma operates in practice within international politics (cf. Booth & Wheeler, 2008; Bourdieu, 1977; Herz, 1950). This means that, rather than adopting a fixed interpretation or a uniform conception of how the security dilemma functions across time and actors – as is commonly the case in various neorealist accounts – this chapter takes a more modest and empirically inquisitive approach to that very question. In practice, the originator of the whole idea of the security dilemma did not believe that insecurity between different actors *automatically* leads to arms races and deteriorating mutual relations (Herz, 1950:157):

"Whether man is by nature peaceful and cooperative, or domineering and aggressive, is not the question. The condition that concerns us here is not a biological or anthropological but a social one. This homo homini lupus situation [the security dilemma] does not preclude social cooperation as another fundamental fact of social life. But even cooperation and solidarity tend to become elements in the conflict situation, part of their function being the consolidation of particular groups in their competition with other groups".

Methodologically, the chapter also uses news sources from leading international media outlets such as *The New York Times* and *Reuters* to create a necessary overview of Russian crisis communication and threat diplomacy from February 2022 to the spring/summer of 2024. Due to the author's lack of proficiency in Russian, no comparable empirical work based on Russian-language news media has been undertaken. However, in Lawrence Freedman's recent overview article "The Russo-Ukrainian War and the Durability of Deterrence," the question of Russian public discourse on nuclear weapons is very thoroughly analyzed across various different phases of the war (Freedman, 2023). With regard to primary sources, this chapter is based on the Kremlin's official statements and decrees on the purpose of nuclear weapons policy (Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Nuclear Deterrence, No. 991, 2024; Putin, 2020), as well as the recent specialised academic debates on "limited nuclear wars" (Karaganov, 2023; Timofeev, 2023; Trenin, 2023), accessed in their translated form via the *Russia in Global Affairs* platform.

Analysis

Russia's nuclear capabilities and current deterrence doctrine

Russia has long been one of the world's foremost nuclear powers—and this will endure even after any eventual resolution of the war in Ukraine with all of its attendant implications for power and order on the broader geopolitical stage. According to the most recent scholarly estimates, Russia has around 4,380 nuclear weapons, divided between strategic weapon systems and various shorter-range weapon systems (Kristensen et al., 2024a). By comparison, the US maintains 3,708 warheads available for its strategic weapon systems, along with approximately 100 tactical bombs stationed at various bases around Europe (Kristensen et al., 2024b). In this context, Russia distinguishes itself by holding significantly more tactical nuclear weapons – approximately 1,558 warheads – distributed across land-, air-, and sea-based weapon systems. These tactical nuclear weapons are, in principle, kept in storage and are thus decoupled from their respective delivery systems (Kristensen et al., 2024a). Importantly, however, the nuclear warheads are stored close enough to relevant delivery platforms that they could be readied for use in a crisis or conflict scenario with relatively short notice (Kristensen et al., 2024a: 119–120).

Out of Russia's total estimated stockpile of 4,380 nuclear weapons, approximately 1,710 are deployed strategic warheads, while around 1,112 strategic warheads remain in storage. Of the operationally deployed strategic warheads, 870 are assigned to land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles, 640 are carried by submarine-launched ballistic missiles, and approximately 200 gravity bombs are assigned to the air force's deterrent forces (Kristensen et al., 2024a).

Over the past decade, Russia has been modernising all parts of its nuclear arsenal to maintain strategic deterrence for decades to come (Kristensen et al., 2024a). This clear prioritisation of the nuclear arsenal is partly motivated by a desire to maintain strategic parity with the US – and partly motivated by Russia's relatively weaker conventional military capabilities, particularly in relation to NATO. Given Russia's mixed experiences in the ongoing war in Ukraine, this strong linkage between national security and an upgraded nuclear arsenal is unlikely to diminish in the years ahead. If anything, it is likely to grow stronger.

According to Russia's official deterrence doctrine, which was summarised in a 2020 presidential decree (and most recently updated in November 2024), Russia will only use its nuclear strike force in the event of:

1. Arrival of reliable data on a launch of ballistic missiles attacking the territory of the Russian Federation and/or its allies.
2. Use of nuclear weapons or other types of weapons of mass destruction by an adversary against the Russian Federation and/or its allies.
3. Attack by adversary against critical governmental or military sites of the Russian Federation, disruption of which would undermine nuclear actions.
4. Aggression against the Russian Federation with the use of conventional weapons when the very existence of the state is in jeopardy (Putin, 2020:III, 19: a, b, c, d).

In this view, Russia itself has defined its deterrence policy as a predominantly defensive affair (Putin, 2020: I, 4-5) – and according to Russia's own conceptualisation of the nuclear force, it serves as a strategic guarantor of the state's continued survival, especially in a more challenging context where:

- Strategic competitors are building up general forces and nuclear capabilities along the borders or waterways of the Russian Federation.
- Strategic competitors are deploying missile defence systems, conventional high-precision weapons, hypersonic weapon systems, as well as drones and high-energy weapon systems.
- New defensive and offensive weapon systems are deployed in outer space.
- Many other countries maintain and develop their stockpiles of nuclear weapons and delivery systems.
- New actors acquire critical technology and the ability to develop nuclear weapons.
- Formal non-nuclear weapon states harbour nuclear weapons and delivery systems (Putin, 2020:II, 12).

In the latest additions to the doctrine, published in November 2024, it has been further clarified that Russia reserves the right to use nuclear weapons:

- Against an aggressor state acting in coordination and cooperation with a nuclear-armed ally (Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Nuclear Deterrence, No. 991, 2024, Section II, 10) and
- In the event of an attack by a non-nuclear weapon state co-operating with a nuclear-armed power, this type of aggression will be considered a single joint attack (Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Nuclear Deterrence, No. 991, 2024, Section II, 10).

These new additions clearly demonstrate that Russia's nuclear threat diplomacy has now been more explicitly integrated into the country's official nuclear doctrine. The clarifications are also a response to the years-long debate among nuclear policy analysts about whether Russia could conceivably use nuclear weapons in an *escalate-to-de-escalate* scenario – to make NATO withdraw its support and commitment to Europe's continued freedom on the eastern flank of NATO (Colby, 2014, 2015b, 2015a; Kroenig, 2016; Payne, 2017, 2018; Roberts, 2016; Shlapak & Johnson, 2016; Zysk, 2017, 2018).

The updated Russian doctrine makes it clear that yes: Russia considers this very option a legitimate course of action for re-establishing a new form of deterrence vis-à-vis its strategic adversaries. Has the likelihood of Russia

using nuclear weapons therefore increased since the war began? On a formal and factual level: yes. At the overarching strategic level: probably not. As Andrey Baklitsky summarised it during the summer of 2024:

"By and large, Western countries do not assess the likelihood of Russia using nuclear weapons as high. They believe it would mean many deaths, the destruction of infrastructure, and, perhaps most significantly, massive reputational damage for the Russian authorities. Nor is it a given that a nuclear strike would help Russia achieve its goals. Either way, the risks of escalation and a nuclear response would be very high." (Baklitskiy, 2023)

Nevertheless, it is worth taking a closer look at broader Russian threat diplomacy since the outbreak of the war, as well as the rather spectacular debate among Russia's intellectuals about the value and need to think about more "tactical" uses of Russia's nuclear force (see Karaganov, 2023; Timofeev, 2023; Trenin, 2023).

Russian nuclear threat diplomacy

Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine on 24 February 2022, Russia has issued nuclear threats at three decisive moments: (i) right at the start of the conflict, in Putin's televised speech about the "special military operation" in which no other powers were to interfere; then (ii) at a particularly tense moment in October 2022, when Russia's military was losing its footing – and Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu expressed concerns about the imminent use of a so-called "dirty bomb" by Ukraine; and most recently (iii) in the wake of President Macron's expressed willingness to send NATO forces to Ukraine.

The most serious of these three cases was the October 2022 crisis. According to New York Times reporting, the US government worked intensively behind the scenes to prevent a Russian nuclear strike under the pretext of the fabricated "dirty bomb" narrative (Sanger, 2024b). At the time, the situation was characterised by what President Joe Biden described as the most direct threat of nuclear weapons use since the Cuban Missile Crisis (Sanger, 2024b). Specifically, the White House had been presented with intelligence indicating that elements within the Russian military had begun discussing how nuclear capabilities could be brought into play within a relatively short time frame (Sciutto, 2024). As reported by David E. Sanger:

" [A few of the intercepts] involved the units that would be responsible for moving or deploying the weapons. The most alarming of the intercepts revealed that one of the most senior Russian military commanders was explicitly discussing the logistics of detonating a weapon on the battlefield. Fortunately, Mr. Biden was told in his briefings, there was no evidence of weapons being moved. But soon the CIA was warning that under a singular scenario in which Ukrainian forces decimated Russian defensive lines and looked as if they would retake Crimea – a possibility that seemed unimaginable that fall – the likelihood of nuclear use could rise to 50 percent or even higher." (Sanger, 2024b)

The concern in the White House during this phase of the war was so profound that task forces were established to propose potential responses to a possible Russian use of nuclear weapons. According to Sanger, these responses were intended to be non-nuclear, but nevertheless sufficiently grave and dramatic to impact the Kremlin in the weeks that followed (Sanger, 2024b).

At this time, former CIA Director General Petraeus made it clear in the wider media landscape that Russian nuclear weapons use in the conflict with Ukraine would result in a large-scale US conventional attack on Russia's forces in Ukraine and the sinking of the entire Black Sea Fleet (Helmore, 2022).

Through more formal diplomatic channels, Secretary of State Antony Blinken conveyed the seriousness of the matter to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, while Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley contacted Russian Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov. Finally, CIA Director William Burns met with SVR Director Sergei Naryshkin in November 2022 to convey in no uncertain terms the grave consequences that any use of nuclear weapons would have for every aspect of Russia's war effort (Sciutto, 2024). According to a number of unnamed sources in the US government, these actions, as well as significant diplomatic pressure from China's Xi Jinping and India's Narendra Modi, helped avert the acute crisis in autumn 2022 (Sciutto, 2024). "We've been less concerned about the imminent prospect since that period, but it's not something that is ever far from our thoughts. We continue to refine plans and [...] it's not inconceivable that we will face at least an increasing risk of this again in the coming months" (Sciutto, 2024).

At the slightly less severe end of the conflict scale is Putin's initial warning to the international community not to interfere in the "special military operation" at the beginning of the conflict on 24 February 2022. Here Putin made it clear that:

"No matter who tries to stand in our way or all the more so create threats for our country and our people, they must know that Russia will respond immediately and the consequences will be such as you have never seen in your entire history. No matter how the events unfold, we are ready." (Putin, 2022:10)

Three days later, this was followed by a comment from Putin that he had ordered Russia's nuclear weapons on "special combat readiness" (Sanger & Broad, 2022). However, official Pentagon sources soon denied that the Russian nuclear strike force had been raised to a threat level for imminent use (Gould, 2022). White House spokesperson Jen Psaki also commented on the episode in the public media as a pattern from Putin: "which is manufacturing threats that don't exist in order to justify further aggression" (Gittleson, 2022).

Similarly, most recently – in the wake of Emmanuel Macron's consideration of sending NATO ground forces to Ukraine – Putin made it very clear in his speech to the Federal Assembly on 9 February 2024 that Russia's "strategic nuclear forces are on full combat readiness" (Putin, 2024:5) and that Russia clearly remembers "what happened to those who sent their contingents to the territory of our country once before. Today, any potential aggressors will face far graver consequences. They must grasp that we also have weapons – yes, they know this, as I have just said – capable of striking targets on their territory" (Putin, 2024:7). The French idea should thus, in Putin's view, be of serious concern to a wider international audience, as it increases the risk of "a conflict with nuclear weapons, which potentially means the end of civilisation" (Putin, 2024:7).

However, on the same occasion, Putin invited negotiations with the US on "strategic stability" – i.e. negotiations on the strategic-nuclear balance between the two countries – on one key condition in particular: "If you want to discuss security and stability issues that are critical for the entire planet, this must be done as a package including, of course, all aspects that have a direct bearing on the security of our country, the security of Russia" (Putin, 2024:6).

The Karaganov debate

A final example of a particularly distinct form of Russian signalling regarding the use of nuclear weapons is the public debate that has taken place

between a number of the country's leading analysts in the journal *Russia in Global Affairs*.

In June 2023, prominent political scientist Sergey Karaganov openly advocated for the direct use of Russian nuclear weapons to persuade the West to withdraw its military support for Ukraine. In a key passage from the article "A Difficult but Necessary Decision," he argues that:

" [I]t is necessary to arouse the instinct of self-preservation that the West has lost and convince it that its attempts to wear Russia out by arming Ukrainians is counterproductive for the West itself. We will have to make nuclear deterrence a convincing argument again by lowering the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons set unacceptably high, and by rapidly but prudently moving up the escalatory ladder [...] I have said and written many times that if we correctly build a strategy of intimidation and deterrence and even use of nuclear weapons, the risk of a "retaliatory" nuclear or any other strike on our territory can be reduced to an absolute minimum. Only a madman, who, above all hates America, will have the guts to strike back in "defense" of Europeans, thus putting his own country at risk and sacrificing conditional Boston for conditional Poznan. Both the U.S. and Europe know this very well, but they just prefer not to think about it" (Karaganov, 2023)

Unless the West lost its desire to continue supporting Ukraine after such an action, the next logical step in Karaganov's scenario would be to strike "a lot of targets in a number of countries to make those who have lost their minds come to their senses" – and while none of this would gain international acceptance or approval in the first place in Karaganov's view, he bases his proposal on the experience that in the end, no one really judges the victorious power in a conflict (Karaganov, 2023).

Quite predictably, Karaganov's article caused heated debate among Russia's security policy analysts. However, most have responded by challenging the naivety of his analysis and call to the Russian rulers (Lukyanov, 2023; Timofeev, 2023). Only one other prominent political scientist – Dmitri Trenin, who is otherwise highly regarded in the West – has restated some of Karaganov's key points, but – and this is not unimportant – in much more *conditional* and *hypothetical* language.

"We should send our main adversary an unambiguous – not verbal any more – signal that Moscow will not play at giveaway and by the rules set by the opposite side [...] The possibility of using nuclear weapons during the current conflict should not be hushed up. Such a perspective, real not theoretical, should serve as an incentive to curb and stop conflict escalation and ultimately pave the way for a strategic equilibrium in Europe that suits us.

As for possible strikes on NATO countries, hypothetically speaking, Washington is unlikely to respond to these strikes by attacking Russia for fear of its retaliation against the United States [...] But there is likely to be some kind of response from the United States. This non-nuclear response [...] in all probability will be sensitive and painful for us. It will probably pursue a goal similar to ours: paralysing the will of the Russian leadership to continue the war and creating panic in Russian society" (Trenin, 2023:4-5).

With all these possible outcomes in mind, Trenin summarises his argument to this central point:

"The "nuclear bullet" must necessarily and demonstratively be put into the "revolver drum" the U.S. leadership is recklessly playing with [...] In order to avoid a global catastrophe, fear must be brought back into politics and public consciousness: in the nuclear age, this is the only guarantee of humanity's survival" (Trenin, 2023:5-6).

In practice, Trenin argues that Russia needs to make its strategic posture *more worrisome* to the West. In practice, this can mean several different things at both the doctrinal and practical-operational levels: all of which he knows the West is watching very closely.

At the other end of the scale, Karaganov's (and to a lesser extent Trenin's) ideas have been thoroughly debated by fellow political scientists Fyodor Lukyanov and Ivan Timofeev.

Lukyanov first of all critically questions whether a nuclear attack could be kept at a level that could be effectively controlled by Russian rulers. Secondly, he challenges Karaganov's idea that a limited use of nuclear weapons would make the West relent and take Russian security concerns/interests more seriously. As he sees it, a similar logic was already at work at the beginning of the war – and there it became clear that the West is not threatened by Russian military ultimatums (Lukyanov, 2023:6). Overall, Lukyanov summarises the situation that the West and Russia are currently facing as a crisis in the old institutional security structures, especially deterrence policy. In this new context, it may of course be useful to talk through different possible war scenarios among Russian intellectuals – but the purpose of this, in Lukyanov's view, should hopefully be to arrive at "a new understanding of strategic stability in place of the one that cannot be restored any more" (Lukyanov, 2023:8).

In an even stronger critique of Karaganov's proposal to Russian rulers, Ivan Timofeev characterises the idea of resorting to nuclear weapons as

"extremely dangerous" and in many ways misjudged – both by the West and its elites, as well as by Russia's allies in the international political landscape:

"There is no obvious reason to believe that the Western elites will lose nerve when it comes to responding to a nuclear strike, let alone surrender and "get lost", leaving Russia alone. Rather the opposite. They will only get more arguments in support of their position, consolidate, and mobilize themselves [...] It should also be remembered that standing behind Western public politicians [...] are the professional military and bureaucratic machines. Joe Biden may stumble on the stairs or miss the door. But his age and eccentricities are more than compensated by an army of disciplined and qualified officials with a low level of corruption on top of it all. Formally, the final decision will be made by the president. In reality, it will be prepared, and pushed through where necessary, by officials. This is a dangerous opponent. The same can be said of the U.S. military, intelligence, and other security services" (Timofeev, 2023).

Similarly, Timofeev emphasises that if Russia chooses to use nuclear weapons to get the West to withdraw its support for Ukraine, it will lead to widespread international condemnation:

"Russia will turn into a toxic asset for Beijing, New Delhi, Riyadh, and many other capitals. No one will accept our arguments that we had no other choice, that we were forced to make such a decision." (Timofeev, 2023)

His conclusion, therefore, is that Russia will have to come to terms with the fact that it is bleeding heavily – in both military and human terms – on the battlefield in Ukraine. But so is Ukraine, despite the full backing of the West (Timofeev, 2023). In the longer term, he expects that Western support for Ukraine will be overtaken by other pressing issues in international politics. And here Russia will have the opportunity to tighten the "bleeding wound" and reduce the large flow of resources that the Ukraine effort requires (Timofeev, 2023). Until then, his assessment is that nuclear weapons remain far too fateful to be employed, particularly in a conflict that, at present, does not pose an existential threat to the very survival of the Russian state. Therefore, he instead recommends to consider other foreign policy instruments to achieve Russia's objectives (Timofeev, 2023).

The president and the doctrine critic

Should one in a quiet moment doubt the real significance of the Karaganov debate for the thinking of Russia's political leadership on nuclear weapons,

it is worth reflecting on how many academics are typically afforded the opportunity to pose direct—and even critical—questions to President Vladimir Putin on matters of military strategy? In this specific instance, Sergey Karaganov was provided with exactly that: the opportunity to ask Vladimir Putin a critical and concerned question in the wake of his thought-provoking article at the Valdai conference in 2023. What Karaganov especially wanted Putin's assessment of was whether the time had come to lower the threshold for nuclear weapons use? (Karaganov to Putin, 2023).

After a respectful acknowledgement of Karaganov's broader analysis and his patriotic concern for strengthening Russia's deterrence, President Putin made it clear that Russia only considers it necessary and justifiable to use nuclear weapons in two very specific cases:

"The first is the use of nuclear weapons against us, which would entail a so-called retaliatory strike [...] The second reason for the potential use of these weapons is an existential threat to the Russian state – even if conventional weapons are used against Russia, but the very existence of Russia as a state is threatened. These are the two possible reasons for the use of the weapons you mentioned. Do we need to change this? Why would we? Everything can be changed, but I just don't see that we need to. There is no situation imaginable today where something would threaten Russian statehood [...] Nevertheless, we do respect your point of view and the views of other experts." (Putin, 2023)

In contrast to Karaganov's characterisation of Russia's deterrence policy as a failed strategy that no longer instills sufficient fear, Putin assured his audience that Russia's potential adversary "already knows everything and is aware of what we are capable of" (Putin, 2023).

This very well-coordinated exchange between Putin and one of the country's most prominent policy analysts has led *The New York Times* to summarise the entire Karaganov debate as an indirect form of Russian signalling that – once again – should make Western analysts concerned about the potential for possible Russian escalation (Sonne & Sanger, 2023). Russia has thus on the one hand wanted to highlight its nuclear doctrine as being clearly defensive (and thus stabilising) for a long time (Putin, 2020) – and on the other hand urged caution and restraint through a much more uncertainty-inducing rhetoric (Sonne & Sanger, 2023). Only recently has this dual approach been consolidated and formalised in a new doctrine that more clearly embraces the long-term threat diplomacy element into the broader deterrence policy (Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Nuclear Deterrence, No. 991, 2024).

Implications of the Ukraine war on international arms control

One of the most significant areas impacted by the war in Ukraine is the bilateral arms control regime between the United States and Russia, as well as the broader international approach to nuclear non-proliferation. On the bilateral front, Russia in 2023 chose to suspend its participation in the last remaining arms control treaty regulating US-Russian strategic nuclear weapons, the New START agreement from 2010 (which was extended for a 5-year period in 2021) (Kristensen et al., 2024a). In a broader international context, Russia has also gone from being an active international player in the non-proliferation field to forming practical and strategic partnerships with Iran and North Korea on weapons technologies now being used on the battlefield in Ukraine (Dalton et al., 2024).

As a result, the developmental trajectory of international arms control has changed significantly since the war's onset. Most recently, Russia has chosen to forward-deploy tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus (Detsch & Gramer, 2024), and, at the initiative of President Putin and with the approval of the Russian Duma, decided to withdraw from the *Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty* (CTBT) (Lebedev & Trevelyan, 2023). Furthermore, it became clear during the spring of 2024 that Russia has plans to deploy nuclear weapons in outer space, according to US intelligence warnings (Barnes et al., 2024; Sanger, 2024a).

Despite all these developments, President Biden's National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan made it clear that the US was ready to talk to Russia about nuclear arms control, even though there were many disagreements and tensions between the two countries (Woolf, 2024). For the US's part, it would like the next rounds of arms control to include all types of Russian nuclear weapons as well as Russia's newer delivery vehicles such as the Poseidon underwater drone and the Burevestnik nuclear-powered missile (cf. Hopkins & Mellen, 2023; Hruby, 2019; Woolf, 2024). Russia, by contrast, would prefer new arms control negotiations to adopt a much broader focus – encompassing the full spectrum of offensive and defensive weapons systems. This would include everything from conventional strategic weapons, ballistic missile defence and space strike capabilities to the nuclear arsenals of the UK and France (Woolf, 2024).

However, it seems relatively unlikely that the US would suddenly become interested in accommodating all of Russia's wide-ranging demands for a new negotiating framework on strategic weapons. This certainly did not happen during the previous presidency of Donald J. Trump. On the

contrary, the "America First" agenda led to the dismantling of many longstanding arms control agreements that the administration no longer deemed relevant or viable. According to the first Trump administration, there was little reason to constrain future U.S. weapons development in exchange for what it viewed as weak and unreliable commitments from international actors concerning strategic restraint. As a result, the United States withdrew from the so-called Iran Nuclear Deal on 8 May 2018. The following year, in August 2019, it also pulled out of the INF Treaty after extensive reporting on alleged Russian violations.

In light of a potential continuation of the "America First" approach, a very important and principled debate has emerged in recent years about Europe's ability to engage in strategic deterrence on its own (Kühn, 2024). Firstly, traditionally nuclear-sceptical Germany has become markedly more attuned to the necessity of robust nuclear deterrence. Secondly, France has invited its European neighbours into a new strategic debate on the role of French nuclear weapons within a broader European deterrence posture (Kühn, 2024:2). Finally, a player like Poland, which is on the front line of the Russian threat, remains very focused on strengthening the hard military deterrence against Russia in a fast and effective way. In a smaller country like Denmark, the public debate about nuclear weapons in this new security policy era has been more muted. Nevertheless, there is a growing awareness – especially among working military and diplomatic personnel – that Denmark needs to re-visit the fundamental security policy issues and development perspectives that exist for the general nuclear deterrence – especially of Russia in the European neighbourhood (cf. Analysis Group, 2022; Breitenbauch, 2024; Søby Kristensen & Byrjalsen, 2022).

Politically and practically, it is still too early to determine where the general European debate on a strengthened independent deterrence capability will end up, practically and institutionally speaking (see, for example, Kühn, 2024). What is certain, however, is that the overarching issue of nuclear weapons in relation to European security has once again become a matter that requires a clear and coherent policy – both in the short and long term (see Barfoed, 2023; Breitenbauch, 2024; Moestrup et al., 2023; Rynning, 2021a, 2021b). Strategic ambiguity and a lack of coordination can themselves generate insecurity – and, most importantly, constitute an open flank that strategic competitors may exploit, whether through direct aggression or indirect forms of coercion. From this perspective, it is crucial to continue the reflective efforts and development work in the nuclear field,

if the goal in Europe is to maintain an effective defence and successful containment of Russia for many years to come.

Conclusion and perspective

Russia remains a leading nuclear power in the world – a status it has consciously decided to maintain for many years to come. By 2025, the years-long modernisation of the Russian nuclear strike force is closer to its final conclusion than at the outbreak of the Ukraine war in 2022. This, however, mirrors a similar effort by all other major powers in international politics, all of whom are seeking to maintain nuclear deterrence as a pillar of future security policy in an increasingly unpredictable international context.

In terms of the size and composition of Russia's nuclear arsenal, no fundamental changes have occurred since the war in Ukraine began. However, at the diplomatic threat level, there has been a marked increase in references to potential nuclear use in a manner unprecedented since the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. The West is particularly aware that if Ukraine were to regain control of the Crimean Peninsula, this could provoke Russia to escalate to the nuclear level.

From Putin's official statements and the updated nuclear doctrine, we can conclude that Russia's willingness to use nuclear weapons should not be underestimated. On the other hand, there are still significant strategic risks associated with resorting to nuclear solutions to regional territorial disputes. Overall, it is important to recognise that the nuclear threat from Russia is formulated across many different tonalities – as was the case during the Cold War, when President Eisenhower very clearly threatened the use of nuclear weapons on several occasions, but also took a much more conciliatory and cooperative line within the United Nations framework.

What, then, becomes the key task going forward? First and foremost, we must not lose sight of the nuances in the hostile and ambiguous security discourse between great powers. Second, it is to act with strategic foresight and ensure that we remain ahead of the curve in both strategic thinking and practical defense planning. This might include developing a new approach to strategic deterrence in which Europe more convincingly advocates for a coordinated minimum deterrence to complement the large and broad NATO deterrence (Breitenbauch, 2024; Fayet et al., 2024). In this instance, European nations could consider the value of holding strategic

exercises involving both nuclear and non-nuclear states – as a complement to NATO's collective defense framework – to signal unity and a new form of resilience at the regional level (Breitenbauch, 2024; Fayet et al., 2024). Finally, we must place greater emphasis on knowledge and preparedness. We are entering a new era and must think beyond the habitual peace logic that has shaped our societal structures over the past three decades – otherwise we risk making ourselves unnecessarily vulnerable to a wider range of conventional, nuclear and hybrid threats.

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Willingness but not ability: Russia's limited results in the world's first cyber war

By Mikkel Storm Jensen

Cyber: The invisible front

When Russian helicopter gunships flew towards Hostomel airport outside Kyiv in the early morning of 24 February, it was the first time in history that two technologically advanced, digitised countries came to open war. While planes, tanks and warships attacked Ukraine by land, sea and air, Russian "hackers" attacked targets through the cyber domain to undermine or eliminate Ukraine's ability to defend itself. The cyber weapon¹ is nothing

1. This chapter uses the categories of cyberattacks used by the Danish Defence Intelligence Service (FE) and the Centre for Cyber Security: Cyber espionage is intelligence gathering via the internet. Destructive cyber attacks are attacks where data or physical devices connected to the internet are destroyed. For example, by deleting or encrypting data. In addition, cyberattacks where the effects are temporary and reversible. For example, certain functionalities or websites can be blocked or become very slow because the attacker can overload the system for a period of time. The Joint Doctrine for Military Cyberspace Operations defines the formal military terms (2019) (FAK, 2019, p. 19).
 - Cyberspace: the total global set of entities that process, store and transmit digital information and code, whether connected or not. Cyberspace consists of three layers: the physical layer, the logical layer and the cyber personnel. Cyberspace is a military operational environment on par with land, sea and air.

new and has been in use for decades. But this has always been between states that were not at war, and who therefore used cyber weapons rather than other means to avoid going to war. Now the gloves are off and cyberspace has been transformed into a new military operating environment as part of the overall invasion.

Expectations – or fears – among those of us who deal with the subject as military analysts were high: Russia has for many years demonstrated a willingness and ability to conduct disruptive and highly destructive cyberattacks. Widespread paralysis of Ukrainian IT systems would have supported Russia's shock-and-awe approach by complicating defence coordination and spreading confusion, uncertainty and even panic among both military defenders and the civilian hinterland. At the same time, such a "cyber Pearl Harbor", as military theorists have discussed for decades, would have left Ukraine's critical infrastructure paralysed but largely intact, and thus ready again once a new regime was in place in Kyiv (Stone, 2019).

But there was no cyber Pearl Harbor. And since then, Russia has not succeeded in achieving major, let alone decisive effects on the outcome of the battle through cyberattacks, not on a tactical, operational or strategic level. Russia has had a few, and sometimes quite serious successes, but in general, Ukraine has been able to overcome the effects of the Russian attacks and continue both the battle and the other functions of society.

This chapter explores why. It also highlights some of the other secondary effects of the war, including how Russian "active patriots" and criminals subject the West, including Denmark, to disruptive attacks to undermine support for Ukraine and the increased threat of devastating Russian attacks (CFCS, 2023b, 2024a). The chapter does not address Russian propaganda and information operations, although these are often disseminated

- Cyberspace operations (CO): military activities in or through cyberspace that, delimited in time and space and through the use of cyberspace capabilities, are intended to achieve military objectives. The crucial intersection between the definitions of offensive and defensive operations is whether they involve the use of force in or through the adversary's portions of cyberspace.
- Offensive cyberspace operations (OCO): CO that intends to use force in or through an adversary's portion of cyberspace.
- Defensive cyberspace operations (DCO): CO that intends to maintain or restore its own freedom of movement and action in cyberspace without the use of force.
- Cyber weapon: computer code used to achieve the desired effect on the target.

through the cyber domain – refer instead to Chapter 14. The Battle in the Information Space.

The cyber front is important – and it's not standing still

Despite there being little to see on the surface, there is an intense battle going on daily in the cyber domain. Russia's warfare in cyberspace is "bad television" – to quote from a discussion prior to one of DR's "Days of War" programmes. But it is only because Ukraine, supported by both states and large private companies, has been able to mitigate the effects of Russian cyberattacks.

Russia continuously attempts to create chaos in Ukraine through cyberattacks and carries out the full range of offensive cyberattacks against Ukraine and its supporters. As described in Chapter 14 The Battle in the Information Space, Russia spreads propaganda and disinformation through the cyber domain of social media. Furthermore, cyber espionage makes up a very significant proportion of Russian cyber attacks (Bateman, 2022, p. 22). Disinformation and espionage are serious attacks that can undermine state cohesion over time. However, this chapter focuses on Russia's use of destructive cyberattacks because they can have the most serious consequences for Ukraine and other states that Russia views as adversaries. Russia's destructive attacks (OCO) range from temporary nuisance, disruptive and functionality-impairing attacks to attacks where data or physical systems are irreversibly destroyed.

The course of the war in cyberspace has given us a number of significant new insights, which this chapter will review: First, Russia's ability to conduct crippling and devastating cyberattacks on Ukraine is seemingly insufficient to overcome Ukraine's cyber defence and resilience. Russia has demonstrated an inability, but great willingness, to conduct potentially devastating attacks on Ukraine and, through proxy groups, has conducted numerous small-scale but disruptive attacks on Ukraine's Western supporters. Russia's demonstrated willingness to use offensive cyber attacks both against Ukraine itself and against the states that support Ukraine's struggle makes it essential to revisit the status of the implementation of Denmark's cyber and information security strategy and our national preparedness.

Secondly, the war has provided analysts with the first empirical observations from a digital battlefield. Observations that can validate the previously theorised potential of offensive cyber weapons and their strategic role in warfare between modern industrialised and digitalised societies. It will influence the way Denmark and our allies think about the future roles of cyber operations. Initial observations suggest that our conceptual understanding is moving from a "cyber Pearl Harbor", where states must prepare for large-scale surprise attacks, to "death by a thousand cuts". The latter is where offensive cyberattacks to a lower degree seek out short-term tactical or operational outcomes, but rather over time and through attacks on targets of opportunity, for example weakly defended parts of critical infrastructure, seek to undermine a state's ability and will to defend itself. Thirdly, the Ukraine war involves both familiar and new categories of non-state and semi-state actors. Not unexpectedly, Russian cybercriminals and "active patriots" have attacked targets in the West, including Denmark. But also in the West, private "hackers" have joined forces with Ukraine under the umbrella of "Ukraine IT-army" and attacked targets in Russia. This is done with a sympathetic purpose from a Danish point of view. However, the West's passivity is problematic in relation to the norms that the West, including Denmark, is trying to establish, namely that states are obliged to intervene when private individuals from their own territory attack foreign targets through cyberspace.

Finally, the war has drawn attention to the huge role played by a special category of non-state actors, that of private companies. Companies such as Starlink, Microsoft, Google and Amazon have played a major role in Ukraine's ability to defend against, mitigate and overcome the effects of Russian attacks.

After a brief review of the current research on the cyber aspects of the war and the methodology used, the chapter reviews the above points, discusses the reasons behind the course of the war, and concludes what implications the preliminary experiences have for Denmark and the Danish Defence. The most significant observation is Russia's readiness to use offensive cyberattacks both against Ukraine and against its international supporters. This demonstrates how important it is for the Danish state to lead the necessary private-public cooperation so that Danish society can minimise and resist the effects of cyber attacks from hostile states and their criminal proxies.

Research overview, empirical data and methodology: Preliminary insights into the cyber aspects of war

Since 2009 or so, when cyber attacks such as STUXNET brought the new technology to wider attention as a new military option, there has been an academic debate between "enthusiasts" and "sceptics". Douhet theorised in 1921 about the potential of the air force and air power in future wars based on the then-limited experience of the nascent air force of the First World War (Douhet & Ferrari, 2019). Similarly, the strategic, operational and tactical military potential of cyber weapons as "cyber power", in line with other technologically based strategic means of power such as land, sea and air power, has so far been theorised based on the understanding of the underlying technology and limited empirical experience. Enthusiasts have great faith in the ability of cyber weapons to influence the outcome of conflicts between digitised societies. Sceptics place more emphasis on how the tactical and operational limitations of cyberattacks reduce the strategic potential of military cyber power and its impact on international relations and the balance of power. The debate largely centres on the balance between the offensive and defensive in cyberspace (Jervis, 2017).

The enthusiasts are represented, for example, by (Stiennon, 2015), (Kallberg, 2016) and (Schneider, 2019). They estimate that due to the technical properties of cyberspace, cyberattacks will generally be able to overcome and breach cyber defences. Others, such as (Smeets, 2018; Taillat, 2019), represent a more nuanced but still "enthusiastic" understanding. The enthusiasts' argument is primarily that the online interface and thus the number of possible attack vectors is enormous and unmanageable for the defender. And therefore the attacker can always find a way and surprise his opponent. These views, even before they were formulated in the academic literature, have influenced the political debate on cyber as a weapon, for example when US Secretary of Defence Leon Panetta warned in 2012 of the danger of a "cyber Pearl Harbor" – an extensive campaign of offensive cyber operations that would leave the country unable to defend itself or its allies for a period of time – for example in the event of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan.

Opposing the enthusiasts are sceptics such as (Libicki, 2009), (Rid, 2013) and (Valeriano, 2022; Valeriano & Maness, 2018), who, often based on the limited empirical evidence available, argue that although offensive cyber weapons have great theoretical potential, actual cyber attacks must

overcome significant difficulties in terms of intelligence gathering, identifying weaknesses, developing weapons and delivering them. At the same time, the effects of offensive cyberattacks are often limited and temporary, and it can be difficult or impossible to reuse the developed means after the adversary has recognised their existence and the weaknesses they exploit. This doesn't mean that cyberattacks can be ignored or that their potential is trivial. But it does mean that offensive cyber weapons as a weapon system at the tactical and operational levels are difficult to bring into play against an adversary that is actively defending and building its ability to defend against cyber attacks. This is referred to as states building their cyber resilience.

Russia's expansion of the war in Ukraine with the attack in February 2022 is the first time an armed conflict between two relatively modern and digitalised states has reached a level where all conventional and digital weapons are being used.

Not much scientific research (in the sense of peer-reviewed articles) is yet available on the effects of the Russian cyberattacks. However, there is some material available from, for example, the Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), the British Royal United Service Institute (RUSI) and the American Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), as well as from private companies involved in Ukraine's cyber defence, such as Microsoft, which will be cited in the analysis. In addition, pertinent articles can be found in reputable journals, such as *War on The Rocks*, which are not peer-reviewed. At present, there is consensus in the academic debate between "enthusiasts" and "sceptics" that offensive cyber weapons have not had a decisive, let alone major, impact on the outcome of the battle in Ukraine (Bateman, 2022, p. 6; E. D. Lonergan & Brooking, 2023). This does not settle the overall debate on the offensive potential of cyber power, but qualifies and moderates expectations of cyber power and gives weight to the sceptics' arguments. However, the available literature is not evenly distributed over time: While relatively many detailed articles and reports were published in 2022 and 2023, there has been very limited reporting on Russian operations and their effects in 2024.

In addition, there is a growing literature discussing the effects of the semi-state cyber actors on both sides of this conflict: Ukraine's IT Army, and the Russian criminals and "active patriots", see for example (Lewis et al., 2022, pp. 5-14; Soesanto, 2022; Vu et al., 2022). A particular branch of this debate concerns the role of these actors and the international

responses, or lack thereof, in the development of norms of state behaviour in cyberspace and the interpretation of international law in the aspects of the conflict fought there (Soesanto, 2023).

Methodologically, the chapter has compared the limited available empirical evidence against the theorising literature in order to assess whether the enthusiastic or sceptical arguments of the academic literature should be given more weight. Furthermore, based on the available empirical evidence, the chapter summarises and assesses a number of hypotheses about the causes of the war in cyberspace. As the empirical data is based on an ongoing conflict, it is still limited and is likely to be characterised by significant omissions and propaganda. For example, there is very limited information on the extent and nature of direct US and UK support for Ukraine's cyber defence (Schmitt, 2022; UK Government, 2022).

Analysis: The battle for Ukraine in cyberspace

Before the war, Russia was feared as an opponent in the absolute super league of cyber powers (Jensen, 2021). Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia has carried out disruptive and sometimes extremely extensive, devastating cyberattacks against Ukraine's critical infrastructure. The most well-known and widespread was NotPetya, which in addition to extensive disruption and economic losses in Ukraine also spread to Western companies, including Danish Maersk, which lost at least USD 300 million in connection with the attack (Greenberg, 2018a). The attack was carried out by Russia's military intelligence service, the GRU (Greenberg, 2018b; UK Foreign Office, 2018). It demonstrated an unprecedented level of recklessness and indifference to whether cyberattacks could spread to other targets. It also emphasised Russia's "readiness for violence" and indifference to emerging norms of international law on the use of military means in cyberspace. Other attacks, such as SolarWinds, likely carried out by the Russian foreign intelligence service, SVR, demonstrated Russia's ability to infiltrate and reside very discreetly in Western networks and from there facilitate espionage or prepare sabotage (Schmitt, 2020).

There was therefore a widespread expectation among Western analysts and intelligence services that Russia would be able to significantly reduce Ukraine's ability to defend itself through offensive cyberattacks against, for example, military and civilian communication systems and logistics

during the February 2022 operations (Givens et al., 2023, p. 102; Kostyuk & Gartzke, 2022). Theoretically, such attacks would support and create synergy with conventional operations: Paralysed or reduced communication and logistics would reduce the Ukrainian defence's ability to coordinate the fight and contribute to creating fear and confusion, thereby supporting the "shock and awe" effect of the extensive conventional attacks. At the same time, the effects of offensive cyberattacks would generally be limited and temporary, leaving Ukraine with a relatively intact infrastructure after a victorious Russian blitzkrieg. However, Russia has so far shown only limited ability and endurance in achieving results and maintaining pressure on Ukrainian cyber defences.

In this context, it is worth emphasising that there is a fundamental difference between Russian and Western military doctrines' understanding of the role of offensive cyber operations. Western doctrines focus on the technological aspects of cyber attacks: they are a means of delivering technical and tactical first-order effects through cyberspace. Russian doctrines take a more holistic perspective and see cyber weapons as an element in a struggle for dominance in what they term the cognitive domain. In this struggle, offensive cyberattacks must contribute to undermining the opponent's confidence in their own systems and perception of reality, thereby destabilising the entire society's will and ability to resist attacks (Jensen, 2021, pp. 336-338; Wilde, 2022, p. 4). Disinformation and espionage play a significant role in this fight, but as mentioned above, this analysis focuses on the part of the Russian offensive cyberattacks that aimed to reduce or destroy the functionality of Internet-based systems.

In the month leading up to the 2022 invasion, the number of these attacks increased, which, like NotPetya, primarily sought to deliver an effect by deleting data on the attacked systems, creating crashes, chaos and other second-order effects when the affected targets no longer had any information base to operate from – for example, stocks, customers, orders, patients, etc. On 24 February, the day of the invasion, Russian cyberattacks succeeded in reducing the Ukrainian defence's ability to communicate and conduct the defensive battle by disabling a specific type of VIASAT modems. The attack also had effects outside Ukraine, for example in Germany, where the disruption of the VIASAT system affected German energy supplies to the UK and France.

In February 2022, immediately after the invasion, Russia carried out the highest number of potentially devastating cyberattacks, 21. But by March,

the number had almost halved, and since April 2022, the published number of potentially devastating attacks has been between 0 and 7 per month. Many of the attacks that have come after the first wave have utilised software and methods used previously. Therefore, they can be expected to achieve little or no effect against well-prepared defenders. For a detailed analysis, see for example (Bateman, 2022; Grossman et al., 2023; Microsoft, 2023). Subsequent analyses have shown that in some cases there was a geographical overlap between invasion ground operations and cyberattacks. For example, Russia attacked the electricity supply in Ukraine simultaneously with both missiles and cyber weapons in October 2022 (Forescout, 2024, p. 12). However, it remains unclear whether these coincidences were coordinated operations in cyberspace and the physical land domain or coincidental overlaps (Bateman, 2022, p. 35).

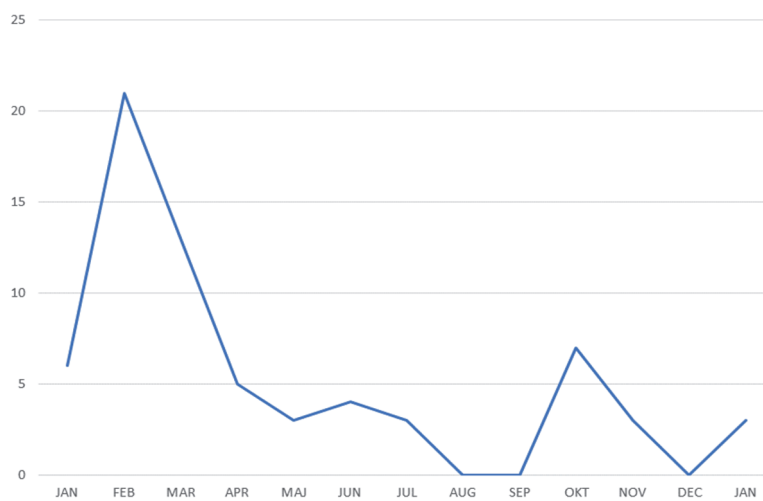


Figure 3: Potentially devastating Russian offensive cyberspace operations (OCO) against Ukraine 2022 (Microsoft, 2023). The author is not aware of detailed estimates for 2023 or 2024.

Initially, Russia achieved some effect: As mentioned, the attack on the VI-ASAT routers reduced the Ukrainian leadership's ability to coordinate their defence. However, these effects were quickly mitigated, for example, by Elon Musk's private company, Starlink, providing satellite-based communications assets to Ukraine shortly after the invasion – largely funded

by the US, UK and Poland (Antoniuk, 2022; Lokot, 2022). Subsequently, according to the available information, Russia has not succeeded in significantly influencing the course of the battle with destructive cyberattacks. However, there are indications that Russia, including especially units under the GRU,² is working to develop and improve its ability to carry out destructive attacks against, for example, critical infrastructure (Giles, 2023, p. 10, 53; Proska et al., 2023).

Kyivstar, May-December 2023: A successful Russian cyberattack

Ukraine has managed to prevent or minimise the scale of the vast majority of Russian cyberattacks. The successful attack on Ukraine's largest mobile provider, Kyivstar, acknowledged on 12 December 2023, is an example of the effects Russia has tried to achieve with its repeated attacks on critical infrastructure and the methods behind them.

The attack and Kyivstar's actions to contain and counter it resulted in up to 24 million users partially losing access to communications and the internet and at least 1.1 million being completely cut off. This meant that many could not be alerted to Russian airstrikes, something that Ukrainian authorities do via apps on citizens' smartphones. At the same time, other parts of critical infrastructure linked to Kyivstar's systems were also disabled, including some air raid sirens. Alongside the attack, other, less extensive attacks were carried out, temporarily disabling ATMs and information boards at Ukrainian train stations (Hunder et al., 2023; Santora, 2023).

According to Ukrainian intelligence, subsequent investigations show that Russian attackers had likely conducted an initial reconnaissance in early 2023 and had established a presence in Kyivstar's systems by May of that year. It is unclear how the attackers got in: it could have been through phishing (emails that trigger an attack if the content is opened) or by a Kyivstar employee bringing the malware directly into the system. Ukrainian intelligence estimates that in the months leading up to the devastating attack on 12 December, the Russians were able to exploit their presence to conduct cyber espionage, including accessing personal information, text messages, communications on the telegram app and, not least, the geographical location of phones. On 12 December, the Russian attackers chose to delete large amounts of data, which destroyed large parts of Kyivstar's digital infrastructure (Balmforth, 2024).

One possible explanation for the attackers abandoning cyber espionage in favour of a destructive cyber attack could be that they feared being recognised and thus losing access. However, the serious attack also shows a very positive side of Ukrainian cyber defence, namely the ability to re-establish the attacked systems: By 20 December, Kyivstar had already restored its ability to provide communication and internet (Polytiuk & Dysa, 2023).

2. For a review of Russian military cyber capabilities and units, see (Jensen, 2021, pp. 344-347).

Russian cyberattacks on Denmark since the invasion

Russian proxies – individuals or groups that are not directly affiliated with the Russian state but occasionally act on its behalf – have directed a wide range of attacks both against Ukraine and against countries supporting Ukraine's struggle (TAG, 2023, p. 13). These proxies can be groups of nationalistically motivated "hacktivists", so-called "active patriots". Or they can be criminals who, under normal circumstances, carry out cybercrime from Russian territory. The Russian state tolerates these groups attacking targets outside of Russia and a number of countries (for example, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan) (CFCS, 2023c, p. 12). Several cyber-criminal groups declared during the invasion that they would increasingly target countries that opposed the "de-Nazification" of Ukraine (CISA, 2022). These groups have means ranging from DDoS³ attacks, where the direct effects are purely temporary, to potentially highly destructive "ransom" or "wiper"⁴ attacks that can do irreparable damage to data and have extensive knock-on effects. A typical attack consists of overloading an identified, preferably high-profile target so that the target's website becomes inaccessible for the duration of the attack, which is typically a few minutes to a few hours. While the site is unavailable, the attackers photograph the error messages and post them on social media as evidence of their ability to deliver cyber effects and to support the propagandistic purpose of creating uncertainty and insecurity in the affected countries' populations (CFCS, 2023c, p. 15). The disruptive DDoS attacks attract a lot of attention and may incite general insecurity, especially when they are directed at

3. Distributed Denial of Service: A large number of computers are set for a period of time to all contact the same address, which is therefore overloaded and becomes unavailable. When the attack stops, functions are back to normal and data and systems are intact.
4. In ransom or wiper attacks, attackers gain access to data by breaking into systems and then encrypt the data so that the systems can no longer be used. If the attack is carried out with criminal intent, a decryption key can be handed over for a ransom. If the attack is done to cause harm to the adversary, data can be encrypted or destroyed with so-called wiper software to make it irretrievably inaccessible. Not-Petya in 2016 was one such attack.

targets such as government websites, banks, hospitals or other critical infrastructure, as has happened in Denmark (Friis, 2022; Meesenburg, 2023; Mezouri, 2023). The groups' purely criminally motivated ransomware attacks have caused serious disruption and economic losses in the past, such as the attack on the US company Colonial Pipeline in 2021, when 14 states along the US East Coast had to declare martial law for several weeks due to fuel shortages (Panettieri, 2021). The attacks are sometimes carried out with a clear sender, other times as "false flag" operations. For example, both Denmark and Sweden have suffered DDoS attacks from a group calling itself Anonymous Sudan, pretending to be Islamist, but likely hiding a Russian group (Robertson & Rolander, 2023). There is no evidence to suggest that Russian offensive cyberattacks, whether state-sponsored or carried out by proxies, have been able to influence the willingness and ability to support the defence of Ukraine in the states that have made that choice.

In 2023, the National Bank of Denmark, the Danish Parliament, the Ministries of Taxation, Defence and Finance, Copenhagen Airport and hospitals in the Capital Region were among the targets of Russian DDoS attacks (Fazliu, 2023; Friis, 2022; Meesenburg, 2023; Ritzau, 2023; Stephensen, 2023). Based on the Russian activities, shortly after the invasion in 2022, the Danish Defence Intelligence Service (FE) raised the threat level from cyber activism from LOW to MEDIUM and in January 2023 to HIGH (CFCS, 2022, 2023b). For the first time, FE has also published a number of specific cyber threat assessments for different parts of Denmark's critical infrastructure and for Greenland (CFCS, 2023a).

In 2024, FE raised the threat level from destructive attacks from LOW to MEDIUM for the first time ever because "Russia is likely to have become more risk tolerant in terms of using hybrid means with destructive effects in European NATO countries. The CFCS assesses that this risk appetite also includes destructive cyber attacks." (CFCS, 2024a). However, FE still assesses (in December 2024) that it is less likely that "in the current situation, Russia will carry out destructive cyber attacks against Denmark, where the intention is to create serious and extensive consequences for vital societal functions." (CFCS, 2024a). The service also assesses that it is likely that Russia is preparing to carry out destructive attacks, which is why the threat may change rapidly (CFCS, 2024b, p. 22).

The heightened threat level comes after a series of physical sabotage incidents in 2023 and 2024 across Europe, which Russia is accused of being behind and which led to a general warning from the Danish intelligence

services about "hybrid attacks" (Ritzau, 2024). The cyber aspect of this threat is illustrated by a series of highly targeted and advanced cyber attacks on parts of the utility sector in the spring of 2023. These attacks, which occurred in several phases, were presumably aimed at establishing technical prerequisites for the attacker to later sabotage energy supplies for up to 100,000 Danes. The technical and tactical characteristics of the initial phase of the attacks in particular suggest that a state rather than criminal actors was behind them. Danish authorities have not attributed the attack, but the private cyber organisation SektorCERT, which acknowledged and handled the attack, found technical traces pointing to the hacker group *Sandworm* (SektorCERT, 2023). Sandworm has been identified as a unit of the Russian military intelligence service, GRU, which has previously carried out a number of high-profile and devastating attacks. However, SektorCERT's attribution is not definitive, and other security firms estimate that criminal actors were behind at least the second phase of the attacks (Forescout, 2024).

Denmark's preparedness and resilience against cyberattacks is still under development. Denmark should have implemented the EU Directive on measures to ensure a high common level of cybersecurity across the Union (NIS2 Directive) by October 2024. However, this has been postponed, provisionally twice, until 1 July 2025 at the latest (Horsager, 2024). The directive significantly expands the EU's first measures from 2016 and increases both the proportion of companies covered, the requirements for them, the authorities' sanction options and, not least, the authorities' duty of supervision (Danish Industry, 2023; EU, 2022). The latter in particular is a challenge for Denmark, where the duty of supervision is largely delegated in accordance with the sector responsibility principle, and therefore there is no central authority with an overview of the sectors' preparedness and resilience, as in Finland, for example⁵.

Cyber resilience is highly prioritised in many parts of Denmark's critical infrastructure. SektorCERT's response to the spring attacks is a good example. However, there is room for significant improvement and the already established national strategies are not fully implemented. This was demonstrated, for example, when in 2022, 2023 and 2024, the Danish National Audit Office criticised IT security and preparedness at a large number of

5. For a review of Denmark's approach to the role of the state in societal cyber resilience, see (Jensen, 2022)

public authorities (Rigsrevisionen, 2022, 2023b, 2023a, 2024a, 2024b). Some of the serious issues raised should have been addressed already in 2016 had the authorities followed the guidelines in Denmark's first strategy for cyber and information security (Ministry of Defence, 2014). Denmark's cyber resilience is not only of domestic political importance, it is also part of our NATO obligations in relation to Article 3 of the Atlantic Charter on the ability to defend itself (NATO, 1949). NATO assesses that a national overview will benefit Denmark's resilience (NATO, 2020a, p. 5). In August 2024, there was a significant change in the governmental organisation and division of tasks when the government created a new Ministry of National Security and Emergency Preparedness. In this connection, the Centre for Cyber Security was moved from the Danish Defence Intelligence Service into the new ministry (Andersen, 2024). However, it is still not clear how and with what powers the new ministry will fulfil its extensive tasks. Among other things, the fact that the minister is not part of the government's security committee has been criticised (Fonseca, 2024). The fact that the role of the ministry and its ability to implement measures is unclear is also illustrated by the fact that the minister has found it necessary to set up a commission to clarify what mandate the ministry has in relation to the sectors (Bach, 2024; Klinge, 2024). Furthermore, since its relocation, the Danish Centre for Cyber Security has been hit by cuts despite the increasingly serious assessments of cyber threats by the Danish Defence Intelligence Service (Just et al., 2024). Therefore, at the time of writing (December 2024), it is too early to assess whether the new ministry will actually strengthen the state's overview and ability to develop and implement resilience strategies, including in the cyber domain, as NATO has called for (NATO, 2020b, p. 5).

Possible reasons for Russia's lack of results

There are several hypotheses that, individually or in combination, could explain the course of the observed Russian cyberattacks and the very limited results they have achieved. These hypotheses have been analysed and argued by for example (Aviv & Ferri, 2023; Bateman, 2022; E. Lonergan & Poznansky, 2023; Mueller et al, 2023; Nilsson, 2023; Ormrod et al, 2023), but also other analysts have come to similar conclusions, see for example (Giles, 2023; Hüscher & Jarnecki, 2023; Jakobsson & Nielsen, 2023).

1. Russia may have kept cyberweapons in reserve in the same way they have only deployed parts of their air force. Cyber weapons lose a significant part of their potential once they have been used once, as the adversary is now familiar with the weapon and the weaknesses it exploits. The advantage of attacking critical infrastructure with cyber weapons rather than cruise missiles, for example, is that the risk of civilian casualties is significantly lower. At the same time, the effects of a cyberattack are often limited and temporary, which is an advantage if you want to be able to use the attacked infrastructure after the fighting is over. Russia has shown considerable indifference to civilian casualties and after the failed attempt to force a quick resolution of the battle, has deliberately tried to destroy significant parts of Ukraine's critical infrastructure (UN, 2024). It is therefore possible that Russia is deliberately not deploying its entire arsenal of offensive cyber weapons and is keeping parts of it in reserve, as it did initially with cruise missiles (for more on this, see chapter 8 in this book *The downfall of Russia's air and space power*).
2. Russia may be less able to coordinate cyberattacks with other military operations than previously thought. Conventional operations during the initial stages of the invasion were conducted with an unexpectedly low level of coordination at the operational level between land and air forces, for example in terms of ground-based air defence. Lack of coordination and the use of, for example, tanks without supporting infantry took place at the lowest tactical levels in violation of Russian doctrine. When the deployed forces were largely unable to coordinate at the lowest tactical levels, it is reasonable to wonder whether the military leadership was able to fulfil the complex task of coordinating cyber attacks conducted by strategic-level units with tactical military operations in the land, air and maritime domains. At the same time, although cyber attacks work instantly when the attacker "presses enter", there is often a significant time lag between the need to deliver a cyber effect and the development of a cyber weapon that can deliver said effect. The process requires intelligence gathering against the target, recognising weaknesses and then developing software that can exploit these to deliver the effect. This time-consuming process has likely made it even more difficult to coordinate cyberattacks with the rapidly changing tactical needs in the early months of the war when the fronts shifted a lot.

3. Russia's capability and ability to generate new attacks may be fully utilised and it may be unable to escalate. Russia may have exhausted its stockpile of developed cyber weapons. And the personnel to develop new ones and carry out the attacks may be worn out. As cyber weapons are usually relatively easy to defend against once recognised, there is a constant need to develop new ones. However, as mentioned above, new cyber weapons often take months to develop and can become increasingly ineffective if the adversary changes the technology, software or procedures of the targeted systems. The course of the Russian operations is consistent with a hypothesis that Russia has had a number of "stockpiled" cyber capabilities that were used in the initial phase of the war, after which Russia has been forced to reuse them and has only introduced new ones to a limited extent (Microsoft, 2023). At the same time, the course of events could suggest that there is only a limited number of personnel available and that they are not able to permanently maintain the high level of activity seen in February and March 2022. The same limited capacity is suggested by the activities of Russian proxies, as they have attacked targets in many countries, but only for periods – the attention and attack activities change over time.
4. Ukraine's ability to establish and maintain cyber resilience through state-private cooperation with the support of Western states and private companies has been more than the Russian attacks have been able to overcome. As described, it has not been a lack of Russian will, but rather an inability to damage Ukraine's communication systems and critical infrastructure with cyberattacks that keeps Ukraine functioning. In this context, the Ukrainian state's efforts to strengthen society's resilience to attacks in cyberspace, including public-private cooperation with the rest of the Ukrainian defence, have evolved a lot since 2015. Ukraine's resilience has played a crucial role here. At the same time, large private companies such as Starlink, Microsoft, Google and Amazon have contributed by, for example, providing capabilities and supporting attack detection and mitigation. They have also helped to mitigate the effects of attacks while building the resilience of the Ukrainian IT infrastructure by moving data to foreign servers. In addition, state support from, for example, the US and the UK to a partially unknown extent. Some of the support in the form of defensive cyberspace operations has been highlighted, see for example (Beecroft, 2022; Giles, 2023, pp. 14-24). However, there is no information on

whether, and if so, to which extent, Western espionage and any Western cyberattacks have contributed to reducing the impact of the Russian attacks.

Offensive cyber weapons are less effective than first thought

At this point, the initial experience from Ukraine has given more weight to the sceptics' argument that cyber weapons are less suitable for achieving results at the tactical and operational levels in military operations. Another realisation is that it is highly unlikely that offensive cyberattacks alone can force a decision (see for example Bateman, 2022, p. 6; E. Lonergan & Poznansky, 2023).

However, there is consensus that offensive cyber weapons still have a significant role to play as a military instrument both above and below the level of armed conflict. It is also agreed that offensive cyberattacks have great potential to undermine the cohesion of digitised societies through attacks on, for example, critical infrastructure if attention and preparedness are relaxed (E. D. Lonergan & Brooking, 2023; Mueller et al., 2023).

Tacit Western acceptance of the Ukraine IT Army could set an unfortunate precedent

In addition to the expected involvement of proxies in the form of Russian cybercriminals and "active patriots", the war has introduced a whole new category of semi-state actors in the form of the Ukraine IT Army (*IT-Armiya Ukraini*). Although many Western states sympathise with the purpose of the Ukraine IT Army's offensive cyberattacks, the West's tacit acceptance of their existence may set a precedent that can be turned against us later, in the same way that Russia invoked the "responsibility to protect" and conducted referendums to legitimise the annexation of Crimea with reference to NATO's recognition of Kosovo in 1999 (Millar, 2019; Soesanto, 2023).

The categorisation used here is confusing and unclear, but it describes the Ukraine IT Army's actor status in relation to international law: It is an organisation that emerged in the days following the outbreak of war, when both loosely organised, politically motivated hackers – "hacktivists", for example affiliated with Anonymous, and other civilian, individual hackers in and outside Ukraine – declared their support for Ukraine's defence

struggle and began attacking targets in Russia. Ukraine's defence minister seized on the idea and soon after, the Ministry of Defence published lists of targets that pro-Ukrainian hackers could profitably attack. The organisation, best described in detail by (Soesanto, 2022), has fluctuated in size, but has reached over 300,000 affiliated cyber personae.⁶ Over time, the Ukrainian military has become more formally involved, but the status of loosely affiliated members remains unclear and ambiguous. It is also unclear where responsibility for the legality of individual attacks under the laws of war lies. The organisation has allegedly carried out disruptive and nuisance attacks in Russia, sometimes as part of information operations. However, like its Russian counterparts, it has had little impact on Russia's willingness and ability to fight in Ukraine (Vu et al., 2022).

The new and significant role of private companies

Finally, the war has demonstrated a whole new scale for the role of private companies in the defence and resilience of warring states. As described above, Elon Musk's Starlink's support of Ukraine's communications network played a significant role, especially at the beginning of the war. In December 2023, Ukraine found itself in the position of having to find alternative means of communication again when Elon Musk withdrew Starlink from parts of Ukraine because he was dissatisfied with Ukraine's degree of willingness to negotiate peace with Russia (Kim, 2023). This has made significant parts of Ukraine's military infrastructure dependent on a foreign private individual's attitude towards the conflict. Unlike Elon Musk, Microsoft has been a stable partner that has contributed significantly to Ukraine's defence and resilience alongside companies like Google, BitDefender, Cisco, Cloudflare, ESET, Amazon and many others. (Beecroft, 2022). In addition to possible altruistic motives, these companies also have the motive to limit the spread of any Russian offensive cyberattacks against Ukraine as much as possible to avoid damage outside the war zone, such as NotPetya caused. Some companies have gone even further: For example, Microsoft no longer sells and supports products in Russia, which means that the many Russian users of platforms and programmes, such as Windows and the Office suite, do not receive updates and thus become

6. Virtual representations are not necessarily a reflection of identities in the physical world. A single virtual representation (cyberpersona) can be used by multiple physical persons/organisations. Similarly, a single person/organisation can have multiple virtual representations (cyberpersonas) (FAK, 2019, p. 9).

more vulnerable to attacks that exploit new, recognised weaknesses (Antoniuk, 2023). From a strategic perspective, the large role of companies gives rise to a number of considerations: For example, what does it mean if the state cannot count on support from private tech companies? This could be for political or economic reasons: If one of the parties to the conflict – China, for example – is too important or too dangerous for companies to take sides. Or it could be because companies have limited resources and therefore choose to prioritise the defence of other states in a crisis or war – what does the state do then?

Conclusion and perspective

In summary, Russia's use of offensive cyber attacks against Ukraine and the states that have supported Ukraine has given rise to a number of observations that are all relevant to Denmark's cyber resilience and the role of the Danish Defence.

Firstly, Ukraine's digitised infrastructure is still functioning despite Russia's determination to destroy it. Russia has not shown the ability or had the resources to degrade Ukraine's resilience. Russia has not been able to degrade Ukrainians' ability to work around, through and past the effects of Russian attacks with external private and governmental supporters. At the same time, Russia has demonstrated a renewed willingness and ability to allow proxies in the form of cyber criminals or activists to attack targets outside of Ukraine. Russia's lack of results should therefore not become a sleeping pillow for Western governments, but should be an incentive to follow up and possibly expand existing cyber and information security strategies, including the EU's NIS directives. This is a difficult, expensive, complex and politically difficult task. In Denmark, which in 2021 received its third strategy in this area, the first strategy from 2014 is still not fully implemented. There are serious shortcomings in the state's own domain alone, and Denmark – like many other EU countries – is behind in implementing NIS2. It remains to be seen (December 2024) to what extent the creation of a dedicated Ministry for Societal Security and Preparedness and the relocation of the Centre for Cybersecurity in 2024 will improve the implementation of national and EU-dictated cyber resilience strategies.

Secondly, the war has strengthened the more moderate arguments in the debate on offensive cyber weapons and military cyber power that

emphasise the limitations of cyber attacks at the tactical and operational levels, especially in situations where the battlefield is characterised by rapid developments. At the same time, the war experience so far has demonstrated how well-prepared cyberattacks, such as the Russian attacks on the VIASAT routers, can support conventional operations. It is also clear that offensive cyberattacks have the potential to undermine the cohesion of digitalised societies at a strategic level through attacks on, for example, communications and critical infrastructure – if the adversary does not maintain a high level of resilience. However, the debate is not settled: The war has not demonstrated what capabilities the two arguably most powerful players, China and the US, are capable of bringing into play. However, the US's recent cyber strategy reflects the moderate arguments to some extent.

Third, the war has introduced a new category of non-state or semi-state actors, such as the Ukraine IT Army, whose influence on the interpretation of international law and the establishment of new norms for state behaviour in conflicts in cyberspace remains to be seen. The West's passivity in this context implies a risk that we ourselves will be confronted by such organisations in future conflicts, especially the so-called grey zone conflicts below the level of armed conflict (Jensen, forthcoming).

Fourthly, the war has shed new light on the central role of private firms in the cyber resilience of states – an area that is still too academically under-researched to draw preliminary conclusions about implications for Denmark.

In any case, the lessons learnt from the Ukraine war so far give Denmark a strong incentive to strengthen its cyber resilience.

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An irregular invasion. How separatists, military contractors and volunteers are part of Russia's combined forces

By Niklas Rendboe

Introduction

In December 2021, Russian investigative journalist Lilia Yapparova reported on worrying rumours from Russia's veteran community. According to her sources, a highly questionable offer was circulating among veterans with ties to paramilitary groups. Secretive recruiters were seeking their skills and experience for an unspecified operation that would begin with training at the military base in Vesely, Rostov. But the recruitment was met with great scepticism. In 2014-15, Vesely was the place where paramilitary groups were prepared for deployment in Ukraine. Memories of a bloody history of high casualty rates, ineffective tactics and impenetrable legal conditions were enough to keep many respondents away from the recruiters and their offers. Joining them to storm a Ukraine that had been preparing militarily for eight years would be suicide in the eyes of many (Yapparova, 2021; Sanders, 2023).

However, the recruitment campaign did not relent. Inmates in the prisons of the breakaway republics were extracted and formed into brigades (Yapparova, 2021), Russia's Ministry of Defence increased arms support to the separatist militias in occupied Eastern Ukraine (Al Jazeera, 2022), and

the military intelligence service, GRU, created several military companies inspired by the Wagner Group mercenary army. However, the Wagner Group itself was left out of the equation – allegedly due to bad blood between Wagner's owner Yevgeny Prigozhin and Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu. (Barabanov & Korotkov, 2024, pp. 248-252). Thus, on 24 February, when the invasion of Ukraine began, Russia's regular military was accompanied by the soldiers of the "shadow mobilisation" – a rapidly growing patchwork of separatist militias, military companies, volunteer units, mercenaries and convicts (Yapparova, 2021; 2022).

But the invasion force quickly ran out of manpower, so the Wagner Group was eventually called in anyway, and already in March, Prigozhin moved units from his several ongoing international operations to Ukraine (Obaji, 2022; UK FAC, 2022; Barabanov & Korotkov, 2024, p. 251). For a period from September 2022 to May 2023, the Wagner Group played a key role as the Russian and international media's focal point in the narrative of the only Russian organisation that could demonstrate achievements in Ukraine.

But as the reader may know, the story had a dramatic ending. In June 2023, the conflict between Prigozhin and Shoigu flared up further, and Prigozhin launched a short-lived mutiny against the Ministry of Defence, capturing the city of Rostov-on-Don and sending forces towards Moscow to apprehend the minister. Twenty-seven hours later, Prigozhin abandoned his mission, and two months later he ended his days when he, his chief of staff and his chief of operations were killed in a plane crash that is widely believed to have been a bombing ordered by the Kremlin (ISW, 2023b; 2023d; 2023e).

The above trajectory exemplifies what this chapter addresses, in particular, Russia's irregular militias and how the state's need for soldiers for the invasion has been the driving force in a process that has transformed the militias from relatively secretive and limited forces to a significant capability.

The chapter's second section below continues with a research overview, the third section sets out the structure and methodology of the analysis. Sections four to seven are all analysis sections, each of which assesses the outside world's expectations of militias before the war, the realities of the war, and what can be concluded in light of the war. Finally, the chapter concludes with an assessment of the implications of irregular militias for Denmark's security and NATO's interests.

Research overview

The fact that many researchers today are interested in Russia's irregular militias is primarily due to Russia's operations against Ukraine in 2014-15. At the time, Russia did not conduct a full-scale conventional invasion. Instead, it supported local rebels, sponsored volunteer Russian militias and deployed soldiers in unmarked uniforms, even as the president officially denied the operations. Policymakers and researchers in the West lacked words for what was happening and how to respond, which created a need to scrutinise Russia's methods in a research programme collectively known as "hybrid war".¹ As a result, researchers interested in Russia's irregular militias have typically worked in the field of hybrid war, focusing on one of the following three topics:

1. Pro-Russian separatists from Eastern Ukraine who have been supported and used by Russia since 2014 (Katchanovski, 2016; Holcomb, 2017; Aliyev, 2022; Potočňák & Mares, 2023; Aratunyan, 2023). The separatists are typically portrayed as idealists driven by Russian national sentiment.
2. Volunteer Russian militias consisting of veterans who come together in voluntary organisations to wage war on behalf of the nation, such as the enthusiasts who assisted the separatists in 2014 under the leadership of Igor Girkin, or the Great Don Army consisting of veterans from the Cossack community² (Galeotti, 2017; Bristow, 2019; Aratunyan, 2023; Harris, 2023). The volunteer militias are portrayed as "turbo-patriots" who want a militaristic and expanded Russia.

1. Although the term "hybrid war" is widely used, it is controversial. Many scholars have problematised the use of the term for Russian operations because it is far from its original use in research, misrepresents Russian military thinking, and blurs the boundaries between different types of operations (Bērziņš, 2015; Westerlund & Norberg, 2016; Galeotti, 2018; Lauder, 2019; Rauta, 2020).
2. The "Cossack milieu" refers to the social environment in Russia that traces its local traditions to the horse-mounted Cossack warriors of the Tsarist era. In modern Russia, this community has taken on a formalised, legally protected function as responsible for the home guard, border guard, youth camps and various cultural events (Russian Federation (2024).

3. Private military companies and mercenaries,³ which mainly operate in Ukraine, Africa and the Middle East and can be officially denied (Kononov & Valetsky, 2013; Østensen & Bukkvoll, 2018; 2020; Marten, 2019; Sukhankin, 2019; 2019b; Galeotti, 2016; 2019 Ch. 8; 2022, Ch. 17-18; Rondeaux, 2019). They are typically portrayed as particularly brutal and profit-motivated.

In addition, researchers on Russia's irregular militias generally disagree on three major questions: "How independent are the groups from the Kremlin?", "How militarily effective are the groups?" and "How big a military breakthrough do the groups represent?" The first two questions require the ability to penetrate the secrecy and propaganda that surrounds military and political matters in Russia. This is why we see that the "research literature" is actually more akin to investigative journalism and intelligence work than to political science and war studies. In particular, Rondeaux (2019), Margolin (2024) and Barabanov & Korotkov (2024) have made use of so-called OSINT methods, whereby publicly available data is correlated and scrutinised to reveal precise details of actors' activities, such as whereabouts, travel, cash flows and business. In addition, ongoing work is done to cultivate first-hand sources, something which has been used successfully by Arutunyan (2023), Galeotti (2019), Galeotti & Arutunyan (2024) and Barabanov & Korotkov (2024).

As for the third question about the military novelty of the groups, the question is initially military theoretical. Spearin (2018b), Sukhankin (2019a; 2019b) and Lauder (2019), for example, emphasise how military companies and volunteer militias build on an old Russian tradition of using proxies and covert operations, while Galeotti (2019) and Currie (2022) emphasise the strategic novelty of the groups.

Quantitative analyses have not featured prominently in the literature, which has therefore not had clear answers to how many soldiers are involved, their casualty rates or the economic figures behind it all. The quantitative analyses are hampered by the secrecy of anyone with access to the data. The foundation on which this chapter is based in terms of research is

3. Soldiers fighting alongside regular forces from their home country are not considered mercenaries in international law and research – even if they are employed by for-profit companies. Instead, the company is referred to as a military company.

thus largely qualitative studies of a number of different armed groups and analyses of how the Russian regime uses them to achieve its goals.

Methodology and structure

This chapter addresses the broad sector of Russia's irregular militias and describes them as a unified military capability based on the best available written sources, which are primarily from Russia, Ukraine and the West. In order to focus the analysis and make the most of the previous research literature, the chapter is structured into three themes that are relevant to the current conflict and also feature in the existing research:

1. The organisation of militias
Irregular militias are first and foremost a unique way of organising soldiers – and one that would hardly be possible in the West. Therefore, the first section delves into their form of organisation and the institutions that support it to give the reader a basic understanding of the research object in its context.
2. The tactics of the militias
This section presents the information available on the roles and tactics of militias in combat, which are primarily known from the battles for the Ukrainian city of Bakhmut but have implications for Russia's use of militias in general.
3. The militias' threat to Russia
This section discusses the potential of militias to damage Russia and its cohesion, particularly in light of the Wagner Group mutiny against the defence minister in June 2024.

One topic not prioritised in these pages is the involvement of Russian military companies in Africa. Although this involvement is central to the story of the military companies, it is not a focal point of this analysis.

The organisation of the militias – shadow mobilisation

Russia's irregular militias stand in striking contrast to how Denmark organises its forces exclusively in state institutions with clear lines of command and political control. With the use of irregular militias, Russia has opened the door to supplement its regular forces with self-organised

groups that combine political and economic interests in relatively opaque ways. The phenomenon covers a wide range of groups with great differences, but some clear commonalities can be gleaned from Russian accounts since the 2022 invasion: Irregular militias start with some initiators gathering a group of willing recruits. The initiators are usually businessmen, officials or nationalist activists, and the recruits range from specially trained soldiers to young football hooligans. Successful creation apparently requires the organisers to recruit a critical mass of 200-600 men, provide them with equipment and training, and sell their services to an authority that can send them to war.⁴ Although research literature and media coverage typically understand irregular militias to be divided into three distinct types consisting of separatists, volunteers and military companies, in practice these concepts overlap almost completely. Both the volunteers and the military companies are part of business models where the initiators function as conflict entrepreneurs who run businesses to supply the Russian war effort (Yapparova, 2022; Arutunyan, 2023; Galeotti, 2023b; Galeotti & Arutunyan, 2024). Much the same can be said about the separatists, with the difference that, on paper, they were incorporated into the Russian regular forces in February 2023 (ISW, 2023a). Depending on who the initiators are, whom they recruit, and what agreements they make with the authorities, the militias vary greatly in their internal culture, military effectiveness and methods.

The irregular militias were a marginal and relatively unknown phenomenon in Russia before the 2022 invasion, but since the beginning of the invasion they have grown to become a loosely structured "social institution" that the average Russian is familiar with (Larsen 2023). Especially in 2022-23, companies and authorities were encouraged to recruit from civil society and create units that could be sent to the front (Yapparova, 2022; Galeotti, 2023a). In this way, a multitude of smaller militias have emerged, which have relied on cooperation with larger actors that can organise the war effort so that the Ministry of Defence does not have to coordinate with each

4. The evidence for this description is not one single source, but extensive studies of open sources such as messages in militia groups on the medium Telegram. However, the most accessible sources to come to the same conclusion can be found in publications such as: Yapparova (2021; 2022), Shemelov et al. (2022), Lysenko & Skok (2022), Sologub (2022), Vostok Media (2022), Volodin (2023), TASS (2023), Objasnjajem (2023).

small militia. Five of the most significant institutions in this coordination effort are as follows:

1. BARS (Boevoy Armeiskiy Reserv Strany), which is formally the system of Russia's combat reserve that enables the maintenance, retraining and deployment of reservists (Sosnitsky, 2021). In practice, BARS more closely links the Ministry of Defence with conflict entrepreneurs and military companies that create autonomous irregular forces for political and economic interests, such as BARS-13 and Convoy (Shemelov et al., 2022; Galeotti, 2023b; Nikitina, 2023).
2. Until the mutiny, the Wagner military company set up its own units and incorporated existing groups into its network and deployed them directly in Ukraine and could coordinate with the regular military directly at the general level (Molfar, 2023a).
3. Rosgvardiya, Russia's National Guard, is also used to channel irregular forces into Ukraine with a mandate not subordinate to the Ministry of Defence. This includes the Chechen Akhmat Battalion and, most recently, groups formerly under Wagner (Galeotti, 2023b; Astrakhansev, 2023).
4. FSIN (Federalnaya Sluzhba Iсполneniya Nakazaniy) Russia's federal correctional service, which has taken on the secondary task of recruiting criminal inmates for the front in Ukraine (Torotejsnikova, 2023). A task that previously fell to Wagner. When the Ministry of Defence receives the recruits, they are deployed in so-called "Storm-Z" units, which are notorious for simply delivering cannon fodder to enemy front lines.
5. The Volunteer Assault Corps, supposedly a Ministry of Defence scheme for volunteer formations led by the Wagner leader's former chief of staff, Andrei Troshev, which, following the Wagner mutiny in June 2023, is intended to ensure that the Ministry of Defence can deploy volunteer units in large numbers, high quality and quickly, without losing control over them (Nakhimov, 2023). There is little available and almost no credible information about the group, which is said to work closely with the military company Redut, set up by the GRU military intelligence service, but which also receives funds and manpower from the oil and gas industry, including for the formation of the Potok, Plamya and Fakel militias (Molfar, 2023a).

Open intelligence reports have mapped how these networks are connected to various power bases in Russia, such as the oil industry, the Ministry of Defence, the Russian Orthodox Church and the regime in Chechnya. In addition, Russian public workplaces, such as the country's space agency Roskosmos, are creating militias that can be sent to the front (Molfar, 2023a; 2023b; Bauer & Mueller, 2023; Cyprus Daily News, 2023). Overall, the reports and research since 2022 paint a picture of an alternative mobilisation effort that ignores the distinction between public and private. With the so-called shadow mobilisation, the Ministry of Defence ensures that it receives soldiers but is relieved of the burden of integrating them operationally and culturally. In return, some private and public power actors gain business opportunities that motivate them to support the war effort.

Militia tactics

Because militias are a diverse group, they are also tactically very different. Much of the media coverage has focused on how militias have been used in the role of storm troops and cannon fodder, and these cases cannot reasonably be judged on the same terms as regular forces with other tasks (Mirovalev, 2023). Militias are not created for random tasks but are recruited, trained and deployed for specific weapon types and areas of operation, such as small arms, mortars, drones, artillery positions and tanks, with either Ukraine, Africa or the Middle East as their destination. The Wagner Group was once known as the group that refined the art of setting up units for multifaceted operations in Africa and the Middle East, while the infamous prisoner brigades are known for their lack of training and focus on running directly at the enemy in Ukraine (Mirovalev, 2023). This variation helps to confuse the media narrative of the so-called Russian mercenaries, who one moment seem to exhibit great efficiency and the next seem to sacrifice a horde of soldiers in senseless attacks. However, several sources indicate that the Wagner Group and several of the more capable militias have developed tactics that have since inspired the regular military, and that these tactics were used by Wagner in the battle for the Ukrainian city of Bakhmut in 2022-23 (Battersby & Boyer, 2023). It is therefore these tactics that this section examines.

Reconnaissance and assault

At the front, irregular militias are usually divided into so-called reconnaissance and assault brigades,⁵ which aim to reconnoitre behind enemy defence lines, sneak up on them and storm their positions in surprise attacks (Chernyshova, 2023). The task requires training, specialisation and personal equipment on a scale not generally available to the Russian invasion force. Outsourcing this task gives the Russian military leadership the option of pushing losses to expendable outsiders or having the job done by expensive, dedicated specialist forces⁶ or, more effectively, by a military company that can combine both.

Deploying expendable personnel

Since many irregular (and regular) units were ill-equipped for the planned reconnaissance and attacks, they became notorious in the early years of the war for instead deploying "human waves", whereby personnel they considered expendable were ordered to advance toward the enemy to verify with their own bodies whether a given route was safe or not. This has since evolved into a more sophisticated method with fewer people spread out over larger areas who can react quickly and more effectively if they make contact with the enemy (Watling & Reynolds, 2023, pp. 3-4). Wagner and other major military firms have been driving the development of these tactics, which despite their enormous cost are recognised as highly valuable by Russian commentators (Corbishley, 2023; Tatar Inform, 2023).

Breaking down lines of defence

In the early years of the conflict, the military companies, led by Wagner, gained a reputation for being the people to call in when a stubborn line of defence needed to be broken (Ber, 2023). Their effectiveness in this regard is deeply debated. For example, regarding Wagner's capture of the city of Bakhmut, it is stated that the city was overcome by "human wave assaults (...) backed by massive, nearly round-the-clock artillery and mortar fire as well as air strikes." After which, "Wagner has been bled dry by colossal losses of manpower and equipment in their slow, street-by-street advance."

5. This rather irregular phrasing is translated from "Razvedyvatelno-shturmoviye brigady".
6. Here the term "special forces" is avoided so that the reader does not mistake them for the so-called "spetsnaz", but in reality the irregular militias may well use "spetsnaz" to designate themselves.

(Mirovalev, 2023). The counterargument to this is that Wagner was more adaptable than the regular forces. And with personnel with fresh experience from Africa and expertise in the use of drones, Wagner's specialists and commanders were significantly better qualified than most regular units (Ber, 2023; Meduza, 2023).

The militias' threat to Russia

Maintaining discipline in irregular militias does not come without difficulties, as militias tend to gather people with strong opinions and little impulse control. The defunct leader of the Wagner Group, Prigozhin, was very successful in building a vast and diverse network of business and government contacts that he could use to favour his soldiers and win contracts. However, he was ultimately unable to circumvent the defence minister's role as gatekeeper for ammunition, heavy equipment and access to the front, which was an unacceptable obstacle in his eyes (Galeotti & Arutunyan, 2024). Add to this the fact that Putin arbitrated the dispute in favour of Shoigu by introducing a requirement that PMC employees would have to contract directly with the Ministry of Defence. This modest requirement formally meant that Shoigu could one day choose to remove all of Prigozhin's employees in one fell swoop.

On 23 June 2023, Wagner rebelled against the Russian Ministry of Defence. The military company had just withdrawn from the Ukrainian city of Bakhmut, which it had recently wrested from Ukraine with heavy losses, and was on its way to the staging area by the city of Rostov-on-Don on the Russian side of the border to deliver equipment supplied by the Ministry of Defence. Instead of handing over their weapons, Wagner used them to threaten their way to take control of Rostov. The military company then dispatched around 4,000 soldiers, who moved in a column towards Moscow to demand the removal of the Ministry of Defence's leadership. They never got that far, however. After a brief skirmish in which Wagner shot down a number of Russian Air Force aircraft near the city of Voronezh, the rebellion ended at the negotiating table. The message to the public was that Prigozhin had negotiated with the Russian presidential office, mediated by Belarusian President Lukashenko, and escaped unscathed under the condition of being exiled to Belarus (ISW, 2023c; 2023d; 2023e). Commentators outside of Russia were stunned, yet relatively unanimous that a long aftermath was in store with great risk for Prigozhin and the Wagner Group. Surely enough, Prigozhin himself died in a plane crash two months later,

while the Ministry of Defence introduced several measures to take control of their operations and redeploy their soldiers (Faucon et al., 2023). The whole sequence of events seems to stand as a fateful warning to the Kremlin, but about what? The obvious lesson seems to be that the Kremlin cannot let private actors become too powerful. However, this lesson overlooks the fact that Wagner could hardly really have imposed its objectives with 4,000 men, that Wagner has never really been private, but always a semi-state entity, and that Russia's security apparatus is already fragmented and patrimonial, so in principle a "public" actor could just as easily have rebelled.

Perhaps the Kremlin's mistake is rather that they were so busy with shadow mobilisation that their control of the forces could not keep up. The companies, and Wagner in particular, have grown faster than Russia's institutional framework could accommodate. In this light, the Ministry of Defence's preference for the use of Redut makes sense, as the company is a much looser network of armed groups that does not appear to have a unified command structure independent of the military in the same way as Wagner (RFE/RL, 2023).

In addition, many of the soldiers experience such harsh treatment that minor mutinies are certainly conceivable. However, large-scale rebellion at the hands of the irregulars is highly unlikely, as groups of Wagner's size no longer operate independently. There is also conflict potential in the presence of charismatic leaders among the irregulars, who create moods that cannot be controlled by the Kremlin. In addition to Prigozhin, it seems likely that E.N.O.T. leader Igor Mangushev in Donetsk was killed by the Russians, while Igor Girkin of 2014 invasion fame was imprisoned shortly after the Wagner Uprising for his role as leader of the Angry Patriots Club, an interest group with a radical pro-war agenda. The potential for conflict between the irregular militias on the one side and Russian authorities and military on the other is thus present but without the risk of societal collapse.

Conclusion and implications for Western security

Russia's use of irregular militias works, but it is risky. Overall, shadow mobilisation achieves the goal of sparing the civilian masses and sparing the Kremlin from the potential conflict or lack of control that an attempt to

mobilise the masses could expose in Russia. The military companies have brought experience from abroad, which is being adapted to the battlefield in Ukraine and spread among Russian armed units. However, the groups are generally no more sophisticated than applying tactics that still involve high casualty rates and heavy use of ammunition.

Significance for Denmark

As far as is known, the militias do not operate in Scandinavia, the Baltic Sea or the Arctic and as such have no direct effect on Denmark's territorial threat picture in the short term, if the security guarantee in the NATO alliance remains credible. However, Denmark has already felt the security implications of the Wagner Group, as they were part of the reason why Denmark had to leave its military engagement in Mali in 2021. After a military coup d'état, a new government took office, which initiated a new and strengthened cooperation with the Wagner Group and shortly afterwards banned Western forces from the country. This was an example of how an irregular militia can outcompete Western forces diplomatically and thus assert Russian interests in (yet another) area of security policy importance to Denmark.

Significance for NATO

From a NATO perspective, Russian irregular militias have the effect of lowering the threshold for when Russia has the political option of using violence. This is partly because irregular militias (using Wagner as an example) are demonstrably capable of acting against the Kremlin's orders, and thus could conceivably carry out an attack against foreign states that the Kremlin does not want, and partly because the Kremlin can hope that a Western country would hesitate to respond if an attack is launched by an irregular militia. Finally, it matters that the Ministry of Defence has expendable soldiers at its disposal who are outside the regular structures of the ministry and can therefore be more easily pushed in front of the regular forces should this become relevant. However, all of this should matter less as long as NATO countries are determined to treat the irregular militias as real Russian actors.

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CHAPTER 14

Russia's war in the information space

By Jeanette Serritzlev

Introduction

"First, demand the maximum: Do not ask, but demand something that has never been yours. Second, present ultimatums, you know, threaten. And third, do not give one inch in negotiations, because there will always be people in the West who will offer you something. And in the end, you will have one third or even one half of something you didn't have before."

These are the words of the then Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas, paraphrasing former Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko's negotiating technique with the West (Munich Security Conference, 2022). This is also a very concise way to describe Russian use of so-called reflexive control; the ability – or at least the attempt – to influence or shape an adversary's decision in your own favour, whether it relates to support for Ukraine, fear of nuclear weapons or the perception of the impact of economic sanctions on Russia. All of this is part of Russia's war in the information space, which is the subject of this chapter.

The war in Ukraine has shown that while the physical battlefield is geographically limited, the cognitive battlefield is global. Russia is targeting its activities at its own population, at Ukraine, and at audiences outside the geographical boundaries of the battlefield. This includes Africa, China, India and the Middle East – and it includes the West. The targets are civilian, political and military. The objectives can vary, but the common deno-

minator is to support Russia's strategic interests. Sometimes the aim is to gain support; at others it is simply to sow division.

It is nothing new that Russia pursues its strategic interests. But Russia's ability to maximise its sphere of influence outside the West, along with an increasingly confrontational stance toward the West – all while fighting the war in Ukraine – indicates that Russia is well prepared for a new security reality of constant strategic competition and rivalry.

The research question driving the chapter can therefore be summarised as: What have we learned from Russia's ability to wage information warfare in light of the war in Ukraine, and what does this mean for the Danish Defence? The chapter attempts to answer these questions by describing Russia's approach to information warfare in the conceptual framework of reflexive control towards four essentially different target audiences: its own population, the population of Ukraine, the West and global audiences.

Research overview

For a general understanding of Russia's approach to the cognitive domain and the use of information as a weapon, two authors are hard to ignore, and they form the basis of this author's understanding of Russian information warfare: Timothy Thomas, a retired American officer who has spent decades studying the Soviet Union and Russia, has authored a long list of publications, several of which are included in this chapter's reference list. His publications demonstrate a broad understanding of Russian military thinking, including how the cognitive domain should be understood. Thomas' writing offers an in-depth review of the Russian approach to information warfare over time as it unfolds in both Russian military academic literature and in practice. Thomas has also written extensively on the concept of reflexive control.

Keir Giles is a Russia expert specialising in information warfare and hybrid threats. Among many works, he has written *Handbook of Russian Information Warfare* (Giles, 2016), which provides a very readable introduction to how Russia thinks about information warfare, what means it uses and why. Giles' great insight and access to a broad variety of sources enable him to offer deep insight into both the thinking and the actual execution of information warfare. In comparison, Thomas emphasises reflexive control significantly more than Giles. When this chapter describes reflexive

control, it is largely based on Thomas' understanding. The concept is presented and discussed later in the chapter.

The chapter also includes a large number of reports published after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, including from the RAND Corporation, an American think tank, which among a broad variety of other topics does research within in the field of information warfare. The chapter particularly utilises *Rivalry in the Information Sphere – Russian Conceptions of Information Confrontation* (Grisé et al., 2022a) and *Russian and Ukrainian Perspectives on the Concept of Information Confrontation* (Grisé et al., 2022b). The reports are based on a large body of sources, including Russian military literature.

Methodological approach

The chapter first seeks to provide an introduction to the Russian approach to information warfare. In this context, the concept of reflexive control is used as a framework for understanding Russian thinking in this area. Other general concepts could have been chosen, such as information confrontation. However, reflexive control is considered to be best because this concept comprises both offensive and defensive means and methods, including attempts to deter the West from supporting Ukraine. Using reflexive control as a general concept, Russian influence on four different target audiences is analysed with specific examples that collectively illustrate the wide range of means and methods Russia uses as part of its information warfare. The four target audiences are Russia's own population, Ukraine, the West and global audiences, with emphasis on Ukraine and the West. Reflexive control as an analytical focal point has been chosen because the concept appears to be the most adequate term to describe the observed strategies from the Russian side.

Russia's approach to information as a weapon

Information warfare contains both offensive and defensive elements and is used against both external audiences as well as its own population. In relation to its own population, there are defensive means such as censorship and other forms of information control – but also offensive means such as state-controlled propaganda and an effective apparatus of repression, as we have witnessed unfold, especially since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. In essence, Russian information warfare includes:

- defensive as well as offensive means
- internal as well as external target audiences
- psychological as well as technological aspects

And it is continuously conducted throughout the continuum of competition, including war.

Information warfare takes place at all levels of warfare – strategic, operational and tactical – but information also transcends these levels and is therefore not always easy to place at a specific level. Information warfare at the strategic level can be about influencing the leadership of one or more countries or trying to influence an election or public opinion. At the operational level, information warfare is more a matter of synchronising and coordinating information means with other military means, while at the tactical level it is the specific activities aimed at both soldiers and civilians.

Russian literature traditionally divides information warfare into two parts: information-psychological warfare and information-technology warfare. Information-psychological warfare is the influence on the personnel of the adversary's armed forces and the civilian population. This is a process that is conducted permanently, across the entire continuum of competition (Thomas, 2014, p. 101; Giles, 2016, p. 9).

Information-technology warfare is the impact on systems that receive, collect or transmit information. Traditionally, this has been restrained to wars and armed conflicts, because it used to refer to electronic warfare (EW). Today, this part also covers the cyber domain, which in a Russian understanding is not considered a separate domain, but a part of the information domain. With cyberattacks as part of the everyday threat landscape, it indicates that this division, of activities that are conducted in peace and activities that are conducted in war, should be seen as a continuum rather than clearly delineated.

"The information space opens wide asymmetrical possibilities for reducing the fighting potential of the enemy", wrote Valery Gerasimov, the Chief of the Russian General Staff, in his now famous 2013 article (Gerasimov, 2016, p. 27). In the same article, Gerasimov described future international conflicts in a six-phase model, where "information confrontation" is the only element that appears in all phases (Gerasimov, 2016, p. 28).¹ Russian

1. This chapter does not distinguish between the concepts of information war and information confrontation.

information warfare is a combination of propaganda, disinformation, deception, information pollution and the deliberate use of lies to prevent, confuse or delay an adversary. Along with other destabilising activities such as cyberattacks and intelligence operations, these influence activities contribute to weakening societies and alliances, making them individually and collectively weaker against Russia (Danish Defence Intelligence Service, 2023).

The next section will be based on the concept of reflexive control as a framework for understanding Russia's use of these various means to influence the perceptions, attitudes and actions of a specific target audience.

Reflexive control as a framework for understanding

The concept of reflexive control is about influencing or shaping an adversary's decision in one's own favour and can be seen as a core element of information warfare (Thomas, 2016, p. 15). Nevertheless, it is also a controversial concept because it raises the question: Does the concept itself contribute to promoting Russia's capability in the cognitive domain? A sort of mythical figure that we have come to fear, but that only exists when we talk about it?

Timothy Thomas defines reflexive control as "a means of conveying to a partner or an adversary specially prepared information to incline him to voluntarily make the predetermined decision desired by the initiator of the action" (Thomas, 2004, p. 237). With this definition, he aligns with the Russian researcher Vladimir Lefebvre, who is often credited as the originator of the concept and whom Thomas calls the most authoritative voice in the field of reflexive control. In his 2010 book *Lectures on the Reflexive Games Theory*, Lefebvre defines reflexive control as "a way to influence subjects to make decisions predetermined by the controlling party" (Lefebvre, 2010, p. 82). "Subject" here is understood as the acting person or entity; the subject who performs an action.

Reflexive control is therefore about more than influencing an actor's perception, for example in their attitude towards Ukraine; it is also about getting the actor to make a decision without realising that they are being influenced. This coercive behaviour will often be to one's own disadvantage when it comes to an adversary, but this is not necessarily inherent in the concept itself. The essential part is that the sender is able to influence the decision space of the acting subject in a way that causes the person or entity to act as the sender wants.

The intention of this chapter is not to use reflexive control as a mythical concept. Rather, the chapter uses reflexive control as a framework for understanding Russian influence activities because the idea of the ability to control the adversary's outcome space is indicative of Russia's approach to the cognitive domain and military thinking (Adamsky, 2024, p. 131). That is how the concept is used here – and not as some *Deus Ex Machina* to exercise mind control over an adversary. The chapter thus follows the definition of reflexive control used by Timothy Thomas.

Reflexive control as a concept is linked to both information warfare and traditional military deception. NATO's definition of psychological operations (PsyOps) is about influencing perceptions, attitudes and behaviour to achieve political and military objectives (NATO, 2023, LEX-7); in that sense, the two concepts relate, as the wanted outcome may be the same. However, they fundamentally differ, as in regards to reflexive control the adversary does not realise that he or she is under foreign influence. There are Western concepts that resemble reflexive control or have similarities – such as the American concept of "Perception Management" (Giles, 2016, p. 21; Thomas, 2004, p. 237). Similarly, in the Western understanding of deterrence theory, *deterrence* is about deterring an adversary from acting, i.e. narrowing his scope of action (Adamsky, 2024, p. 30). However, reflexive control differs by being a clandestine form of manipulation, whereas traditional deterrence is about clear signalling (Wilde, 2022).

Organisation and capabilities

Russia's comprehensive information efforts are organised at different levels and across different areas of government. In addition, both state and non-state actors participate as part of the information apparatus. State actors include military units, all three security services and other government agencies, while non-state actors include "patriotic hackers", as Putin called them back in 2017 (McKirdy & Ilyushina, 2017), companies such as Yevgeny Prigozhin's now dismantled Internet Research Agency and state-controlled media (Grisé et al., 2022a, p. 17ff). This range of actors and activities is described as Russia's disinformation and propaganda ecosystem in the form of five pillars by the Global Engagement Centre of the US State Department (Global Engagement Center, 2020, p. 8), as shown in Figure 14.1.

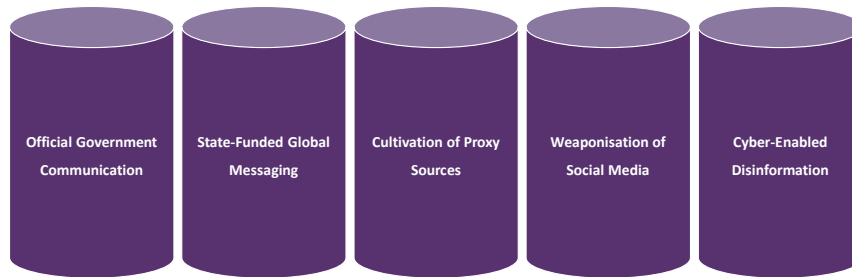


Figure 14.1: Five pillars of Russia's disinformation and propaganda ecosystem.

The first pillar includes official government communications from the Kremlin, ministries or authorities, including embassies. The second pillar covers state-funded media platforms and cultural institutions such as RT (*Russia Today*) and Sputnik. The third pillar, proxy actors, covers both friendly states and individuals as amplifiers of pro-Kremlin messages. The fourth pillar includes, for example, attempts to influence public debates and incite discord and division. Finally, the fifth pillar of cyber-enabled disinformation includes fake or cloned media websites. These five pillars constitute Russia's comprehensive information apparatus, which plays an integral role in the cognitive dimension of the war in Ukraine.

After the 2008 war in Georgia, the Russian military's own cognitive capabilities were recognised as a weakness. Consequently, the need to develop the information warfare capabilities of the armed forces is addressed in both the 2014 military doctrine (paragraph 46(C)) and the 2016 federal doctrine on information security (paragraph 21(B)). Specifically, the experience from Georgia led to the creation of dedicated information operations troops (Giles & Seaboyer, 2019, pp. 26ff). According to the Chief of the Russian General Staff Valery Gerasimov, the Information Operations Troops (*Vojska Informatсионnykh Operatsiy, VIO*) first participated in the strategic exercise KAVKAZ in 2016 (Defence Intelligence Agency, 2017, p. 38).

Colonel K. A. Trotsenko writes in a 2017 article in *Military Thought* that information warfare at the tactical and operational levels will often concern command and control systems, electronic warfare, deception, tactical camouflage, and information security (Trotsenko, 2017, pp. 13ff). Each military district also has dedicated resources for psychological operations, information confrontation and tactical camouflage, as well as language and

cultural competencies (Grisé et al., 2022a, p. 19). Finally, the Russian military has dedicated resources for what is called "Moral Psychological Support", which according to Grau and Bartles includes elements such as "culture and leisure" and "counter PsyOps" (Psychological Operations) (Grau & Bartles, 2017, p. 232). All three Russian security services are involved in information activities outside Russia. Within these three, Wilde and Sherman identify the following entities (Wilde & Sherman, 2023, pp. 5-6):

- GRU: Russia's military intelligence service has at least one unit, 74455, dedicated to psychological, disinformation and influence operations abroad. The GRU carries out these operations abroad using front organisations, proxies and fake online accounts (see e.g. Biljana & Cheravitch, 2020 for a more thorough examination).
- SVR: The Russian Foreign Intelligence Service has a directorate, Directorate MS,² dedicated to "Active Measures", including the use of front organisations.
- The FSB is also assessed to conduct digital information manipulation beyond Russia's borders. This includes, among others, the Centre for Information Security, also known as Centre 18.

For an elaboration of tasks and military entities involved in information operations, see Grisé et al. (2022a, p. 16ff) and Giles & Seaboyer (2019).

Expectations before the war

In the 2017 report *Russia Military Power*, the US Defense Intelligence Agency describes how Russia since 2010 has prioritised the development of forces and methods to engage in information confrontation (Defense Intelligence Agency, 2017, p. 38). In a 2018 report from the RAND Corporation, Paul, et al. assessed several actors' ability and prioritisation of "operations in the information environment" (Paul et al., 2018, pp. 11-12). The actors included the US, NATO, Russia and China, among others. The assessment took into account both information technology and

2. Measures of support. For more see Riehle (2022): *Russian Intelligence*.

psychological capabilities as well as allocated resources and prioritisation. The two state actors that excelled the most were China and Russia. However, Russia was rated better than China at propagating its own narrative, but worse than China at operational and information security. Expectations of Russia's ability to fight in the information space were therefore high on the one hand, while there was also an expectation leading up to the war and in the first phase of the war that Russia would lose the battle of narratives, as soon as Russia sent troops across the Ukrainian border. From an overall Western perspective, that was an expectation that held reasonably true in the first period of the war, but which did not or does not apply globally.

Before the war, Russia seemed to have rather free access into the Western information space. Before the invasion it was difficult to imagine the impact of the EU stepping in and shutting down access to certain Russian platforms. It is assessed to have reduced the outreach of content, but it obviously did not prevent Russia from distributing pro-Kremlin narratives to a European audience (Danish Defence Intelligence Service & Danish Security and Intelligence Service, 2024).

Russia's information efforts during the war: Generating support, division or fear

The following section is divided into four subsections on Russian influence on the information space in Russia, Ukraine, the West and globally – with emphasis on the subsections on Ukraine and the West. The four target audiences are obviously very different: Russia covers the domestic Russian audience. Ukraine is the direct adversary; the West the indirect. The last grouping of audiences is labelled "global" and covers a more diverse set of countries.³

The framework of reflexive control is not necessarily explicit in every single activity, but in the overall impact on each actor's perception and resulting actions (including actions not taken), i.e. in terms of the view of

3. The term "Global South" is deliberately omitted as it is a metaphor that tends to support an understanding of unification among parts of the world in Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America with converging strategic interests, which is not necessarily the case.

Ukraine, fear of Russia and confidence in the effect of sanctions. Reflexive control in relation to Russia's own population can thus be seen as acceptance of the war due to the perceived threat and the image of Ukraine (and the West) built up by the Kremlin and conveyed in the media, popular culture and, among other things, in the school system.

Influencing the information space in Russia

Up to and during the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russia tried to legitimise the war to its own population with arguments about protecting ethnic Russians in Ukraine. Patriotism was used instrumentally by looking at the war in Ukraine in the perspective of the Great Patriotic War. "We can do it again" ("Mozhem povtorit") was one slogan, referring to the Red Army's victory over Nazi Germany in 1945. The letter Z became the symbol of Russia's war and quickly spread to the public sphere, from stickers on cars to symbols on clothes worn by truly patriotic Russians.

Simultaneously with the military invasion of Ukraine, the Russian state put great efforts into establishing a digital iron curtain. Russian social media was shut down, and official directives explained which sources Russian mass media should use to report about the war. The most well-known example might be the fact that the war was not allowed to be called a war, but should be labelled a "special military operation". Critical media were closed down or chose to close down themselves, such as the weekly newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*. Protesters on the streets were ruthlessly removed, regardless of whether they were holding anti-war messages in their hands or even holding blank papers (van Brugen, 2022).

Efforts towards one's own population thus rest on several pillars: information control, including censorship, state propaganda in the media, culture and education, and an increasingly heavy-handed repression. Efforts towards one's own population thus also involve offensive and defensive measures as means of information technology and information psychology. Given all the reservations about Russian opinion polls since the 2022 invasion, this may explain why such a large portion of the Russian population is supportive of the war – or at least chooses to conform. It should of course be acknowledged that resistance exists, but only to a very limited extent. As the war continues, the cost of the Russian war effort increases. Still, at the end of 2024, support still seems to be fairly stable. The liberal opposition media *Meduza*, based in Riga, noticed that some of its Russian readers supported the war. The media outlet asked how this could

be. One answer repeatedly came up – in paraphrase: "It was a mistake to go in, but now we have to win" (Meduza, 2023). This acceptance and, not least, continued support for the war among the civilian population was difficult to predict prior to the invasion.

Based on Timothy Thomas' definition of reflexive control, it can be argued that it is also a tool used towards its own population. It's not as obvious as when dealing with an adversary. But the Kremlin needs the Russian civilian population to support its framing of the war and subscribe to the narrative in order to accept the price for it. This can be achieved by generating a clear image of the enemy and by articulating the war as a struggle for existence, appealing to patriotism and support for the armed forces. This also serves to strengthen the divide between "us" and "them", understood as the divide between the true patriots and those who are against the war and thus do not support the Russian soldiers. By articulating an increased risk of war between Russia and NATO, it is easier to convince the population of the necessity of the current war and thus accept the costs of waging it, both in terms of human lives and economically.

Influencing the information space in Ukraine

The 2014 experience in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine proved costly for Ukraine. Due to that, Ukraine had adjusted and was prepared for the war in the information space. Among other things, Ukraine had restrained Russia's access in the Ukrainian information space (Carvin, 2023, p. 11). However, Russia's war in the information space has many voices and it is fought with many means. One of the consistent themes has been the attempt to undermine trust in Ukraine (ISD, 2024, p. 2; Carvin, 2023, p. 2). In the Atlantic Council's report *Undermining Ukraine – How the Kremlin Employs Information Operations to Erode Global Confidence in Ukraine*, it is described this way (Carvin, 2023, p. 2):

"Undermining Ukraine on all fronts became the primary objective in the information domain of Russia's war, as well as a primary corollary to its military strategy: undermining global support for the Ukrainian war effort; undermining Ukrainian morale; undermining trust in Ukraine as a reliable partner; undermining sympathy for its people; undermining its relationships with its neighbours; and undermining financial support and military aid."

This undermining of Ukraine on all fronts is not only done through information. It is also done by the use of all classic instruments of national power: diplomacy, information, military and economy, also known as DIME (Serritzlev, 2023, p. 15ff). As the following examples will show, the instruments of power are also intertwined, so that one example can affect several. The examples are relevant because they are recurring themes used by Russia in Ukraine. They are also relevant because they challenge both Ukraine's and the West's countermeasures, not only in the specific context but also in the long term.

During the first months of the war, there were numerous examples of Russian disinformation campaigns that tried to convince the Ukrainian population that the government had resigned or that the Ukrainian military had surrendered. President Zelensky's handheld video outside the presidential palace in Kyiv on the evening of 24 February 2022 was itself in order to debunk Russian disinformation that he had fled (Hopkins, 2022). Throughout the war, there have been examples of Russian psychological operations and disinformation campaigns aimed at weakening the resistance of Ukrainians, which have since been dismissed as false by official Ukrainian channels. As early as 1 March 2022, then-Defence Minister Oleksiy Reznikov warned on several social media platforms that Russia would try to spread false information to destabilise the situation and spread false information that the government had surrendered (Reznikov, 2022). The false stories were shared with forged documents and manipulated videos to "prove" the claims. On 3 March 2022, Russia hacked regional websites and uploaded a manipulated version of Zelensky claiming that Ukraine had capitulated (Carvin, 2023, p. 12). Several official sources warned that it was a fake, including the Ukrainian National Security Service SBU (SBU, 2022), as shown in Figure 14.2.

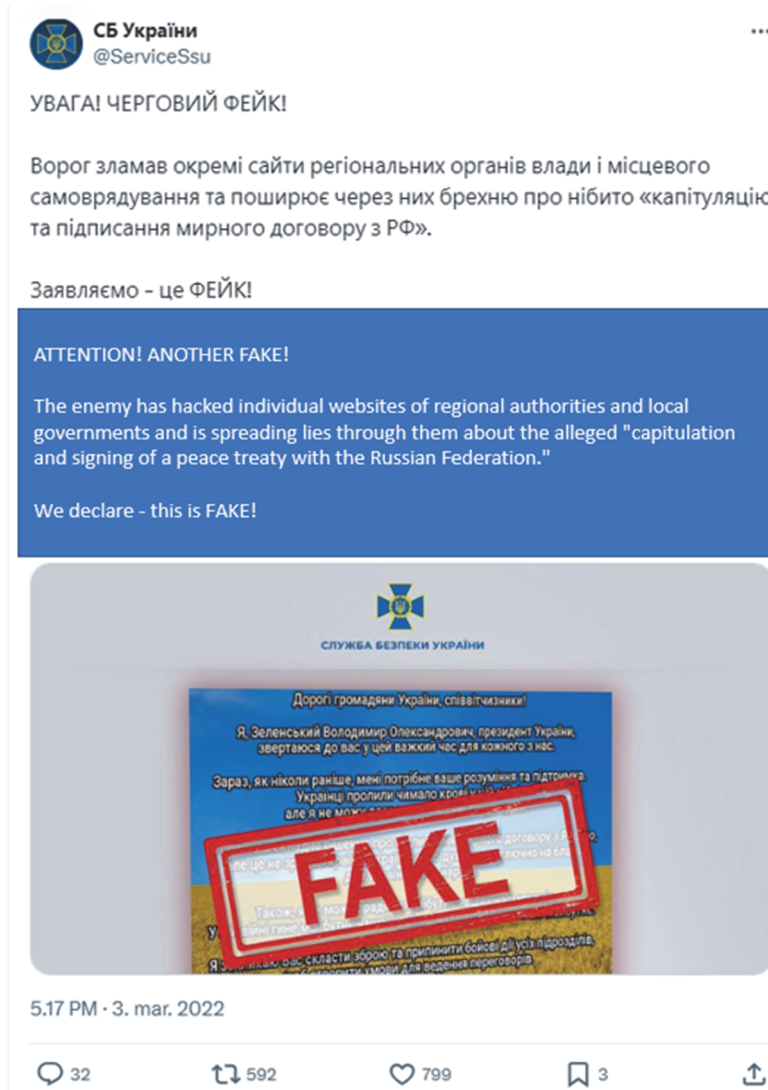


Figure 14.2: Screenshot from X (formerly Twitter).

In this early phase of the war, when society was in a state of shock, this kind of disinformation could have had a detrimental impact, had the Ukrainian authorities not so effectively been able to counter it, for example in the form of *pre-bunking*, i.e. warning of upcoming Russian

disinformation. This is been of great importance in advance of Russia's physical attacks on the information infrastructure, causing limitation in the population's access to information. False stories, videos and profiles not only appeared at the beginning of the war, but have been ongoing. In February 2024, as an example, the SBU was able to uncover fake profiles on several social media sites of the then newly appointed head of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, General Syrskyi, which were attributed to Russian intelligence (Centre for Countering Disinformation, 2024).

Throughout the war, false stories about Zelensky's alleged wealth abroad have regularly surfaced. Most recently during his visit to Washington, D.C., in December 2023, a false story claimed that the Ukrainian president had used US aid funds to buy two yachts for \$75 million (Robinson et al., 2023). TikTok was at the centre of another smear campaign against then-Defence Minister Oleksiy Reznikov, with Reznikov and his daughter allegedly buying expensive villas in Europe. TikTok itself described it as "the largest information operation ever revealed on the platform" (Osadchuk, 2023). The Ukrainian First Lady, Olena Zelenska, has also been subject to several stories, including claims of extravagant spending at Cartier in New York. The story was relayed by the Russian embassy in London, among others. The story was pure fiction, but BBC Verify has described how the story went viral, spreading on Facebook, TikTok and Telegram (Robinson et al., 2023). The individual stories may be less important, but collectively, a clear picture emerges of a disinformation strategy aimed at undermining the Ukrainian leadership.

Russia has also actively sought to control the information space in the occupied territories, including through control of telecommunications infrastructure, which meant that the civilian population had difficulty obtaining information from the outside. They were thus forced to obtain their information through the information channels of the Russian occupying power (Watling et al., 2023, pp. 22-23). In the Ukrainian city of Melitopol, which fell to Russian forces on 1 March 2022, the Russian occupiers distributed flyers with messages telling residents not to believe "propaganda and disinformation" from Kyiv, but to inform themselves on recommended Telegram channels (Alperovitch, 2022). This form of information control is very precisely described by Mstyslav Chernov, a Ukrainian journalist and the director of the film *20 Days in Mariupol* (Chernov, 2022):

"The absence of information in a blockade accomplishes two goals. Chaos is the first. People don't know what's going on, and they panic. At first I couldn't understand why Mariupol fell apart so quickly. Now I know it was because of the lack of communication. [...] The propaganda was so strong that some people we talked to believed it despite the evidence of their own eyes."

Information control also extends to journalists trying to work in the occupied territories. The organisation Reporters sans Frontières (RSF) describes how independent journalists are arrested or "disappear", as well as how "propaganda schools", as RSF labels them, have been set up in cities like Melitopol (Reporters Without Borders, 2023). A representative from RSF puts it this way (Reporters Without Borders, 2023):

"In the absence of journalists willing to cooperate, the new Kremlin-controlled propaganda organisations are trying to recruit their future 'information soldiers' among the local youth. We condemn the use of such methods, which aim to integrate Ukrainian territories through a media landscape controlled by the occupying authorities."

Ability to control the information space can affect perception surprisingly quickly, as the Mariupol example showed. Information control can also limit the outside world's knowledge of what is going on in a certain area – even nowadays, when the free and critical press is denied access. Pseudo-elections in the occupied territories, Russification of the school system, restrictions, threats and punishment for not accepting Russian citizenship and the migration of Russian citizens to the occupied territories are all means to influence and change the perception and thus the narrative of an area's cultural and legitimate belonging. This is not only the case today, but it is equally important in a longer perspective: in 10, 20 or 50 years. The modus operandi in occupied territories is thus similar to that used against its own population in Russia: information control and propaganda together with restrictions, threats and punishment.

Russia's ability to achieve full or partial information control in a given area or for a given period of time is an important reminder for NATO. This applies to the ability to communicate to the Russian civilian population and the population in occupied territories, as well as the ability to penetrate a digital iron curtain (information technology) and to understand cognitive influences on the target audience (information psychology).

Ukraine was prepared and had taken initiatives to mitigate and counter Russian propaganda and disinformation based on the experiences from Crimea and Eastern Ukraine in 2014. In other words, Ukraine was relatively well prepared. Ukraine's experience shows the importance of critical information infrastructure and serves as an important reminder that the information space *can be* dominated, and that access *can be* restricted.

Timothy Thomas' definition of reflexive control, "the predetermined decision desired by the initiator of the action", is about weakening the will to fight and morale. The examples in this subsection are thus all about causing the Ukrainian civilian population to flee or surrender while losing confidence in the Ukrainian leadership and authorities.

Influencing the information space in the West

The following examples are common themes spread by Russia in the West. The examples in this section show the variety of themes, means and methods. A common denominator for these examples is that they are about reducing Western support for Ukraine, either through deterrence (fear), division or doubt and information pollution (Mărășoiu, 2023, p. 10).

The three common narratives of Russian disinformation in the West are: 1) undermining Ukraine, 2) nuclear threats and 3) sanctions against Russia are not working. They are discussed individually in the following.

Undermining Ukraine: Undermining Ukraine became the primary information target for Russia in order to weaken Western support (Carvin, 2023, p. 2). Russia quickly distributed content about corruption issues in Ukraine and stories about Western donations that were not passed on to the Ukrainian soldiers, but instead were resold etc. (Carvin, 2023, p. 13-14). There were stories that recalled past Western experiences from Afghanistan. In a video distributed on social media in the autumn of 2023, it was claimed that the Ukrainian military had delivered Western weapons to Hamas (Bahl, 2023). Another example tells of Ukrainians allegedly reselling French equipment to the Russian military (Detector Media, 2022). A third example, pretending to be from *Euronews*, was about Andriy Yermak, Head of the President's Office and a close advisor to Zelensky, who allegedly had kept money for himself hidden in cryptocurrency (Khatsenkova, 2023). This sort of disinformation content can be targeting both politicians and civilian populations in the West but would probably have the greatest impact on civilians.

Nuclear threats: Threatening the use of nuclear weapons in order to deter the West and thus try to weaken support for Ukraine is a well-known Russian tactic (Danish Defence Intelligence Service, 2023, p. 13). When Putin articulates the possibility of – or threatens to use – nuclear weapons, it is a way to get state actors in the West to act differently than they otherwise would. In this sense, it fits with Thomas' understanding of reflexive control. The nuclear threat has been part of the Kremlin's rhetoric towards the West both before and after the invasion. Three days into the war, on 27 February 2022, Putin sent a clear message to the West when, during a televised meeting, he asked his Chief of the Russian General Staff to put the nuclear forces on what he called "special combat readiness" (Burcharth, 2022). The nuclear rhetoric has since been used continuously. Official statements, from Putin or others, are typically amplified through Russian media, for example with extreme statements on state television that are repeated in the West (Carvin, 2023, p. 18), each time causing concern in Western governmental offices. It is reasonable to assume that the initial reluctance of Washington's acceptance of giving Ukraine long-range weapon systems and F-16 fighter jets has been at least partly due to fear of the Kremlin's nuclear threats (Cole, 2023). Despite the Kremlin's nuclear threats often being considered and phrased as sabre-rattling, it has proven itself as an effective tool to create enough uncertainty to influence the decisions of Western governments.

Sanctions against Russia are not working: Throughout the war, Russia has tried to convince the West that Western sanctions have no impact on the Russian economy, as described by the US State Department's Global Engagement Centre (2022). This can be seen in the context of the related theme: that it costs Europeans dearly to support Ukraine (ISD, 2024, p. 16ff). The Danish Defence Intelligence Service had formulated it quite clearly in the 2018 edition of the annual intelligence risk assessment: Russia intends to "undermine the notion of objective truth" because Russia can thus generate "confusion in the information space to undermine the credibility of Western politicians, authorities and opinion makers". It's not about convincing Western citizens that Putin is right – it's about getting them to doubt if their own politicians are right. This kind of information pollution is a regular feature of Russian information activities, including drowning essential information in informational noise (Giles, 2023, p. 73).

While citizens in Europe struggled to pay their electricity bills, the Kremlin ramped up the narrative that the sanctions had no effect on the Russian economy and that the price was paid by the Europeans (De-bunk.org, 2023). In December 2022, RT distributed a "Christmas greeting" to Europeans (Figure 14.3) in which RT wished the viewers a "Merry anti-Russian Christmas" in a short film sending the message that fighting Russia would only lead to European poverty. In the film, this is illustrated by a family celebrating Christmas without heating, wearing coats and hats inside and ending up eating their daughter's hamster.

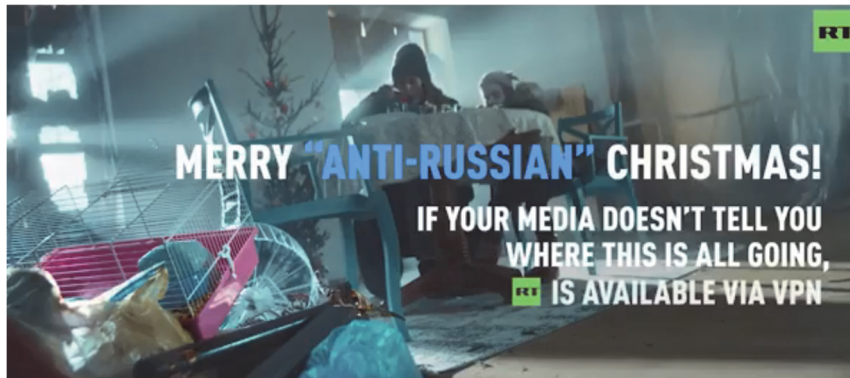


Figure 14.3: Screen print from RT's propaganda film from Christmas 2022

"Moscow has made economic statistics a central part of its information war," reads an analysis in Foreign Policy (Demarais, 2023). Once again, it is all about generating confusion and doubt. The energy crisis in 2022, resulting in soaring prices, served as a launch pad for the Kremlin's anti-sanctions messages (ISD, 2024, p. 16) – despite the fact that the crisis was largely originated due to Russia's war of aggression (European Council, 2024).

It is difficult to unambiguously determine the value and impact of Russian influence in relation to the West. Russia's goal of undermining Western support for Ukraine has been achieved through a number of recurring themes across the Russian information apparatus: limiting Western donations by appealing to nuclear fears; creating discord between Western supporters; and continuously discrediting Ukraine (Danish Defence Intelligence Service, 2023, p. 341). Western arms deliveries to Ukraine have most likely been affected. In particular, decisions on the delivery of specific weapon systems seem to have been influenced by the fear of escalation of

the war. Russian information efforts have thus influenced Western decision-making. The relatively short duration of the high energy prices reduced Russia's ability to effectively generate division, but nevertheless, Russia managed to incite the flames, and pro-Kremlin messages are widely echoed on social media, whether they are about corruption issues in Ukraine or the cost of the war.

After Russia's invasion in February, the EU reacted quickly by banning RT and Sputnik, among others (European Council, 2022). These sanctions led to a drastic decline in RT's access to European audiences (ISD, 2024, p. 10). This was, of course, a way of sending a strategic message to Russia, along with the other sanctions in other areas. However, it was a deliberate decision to protect European populations from direct Russian influence. Sanctions against RT in themselves are obviously not a sufficient tool to stop the distribution of Russian influence products in Europe. But it sent a strong message of EU's will to act with tougher measures than seen before in order to protect its own information space. The impact and cost of these measures should be studied by both the EU and NATO and be of interest to nation-states in order to assess how to prevent, mitigate and counter future information attacks.

Impact on the global information space

Since the invasion of Ukraine, Russia has actively – and with some success – appealed to countries outside the West in order to circumvent sanctions and avoid the isolation that Russia might otherwise have faced. In 2023, Russia organised the first International Parliamentary Conference, "Russia – Latin America", in Moscow (Sukhankin, 2024). In 2024, Russia hosted the first "For the Freedom of Nations" forum with the participation of more than 60 countries united against "Western neocolonialism". Similarly, in 2024, Russia hosted the "Russia and Islamic World Kazan" forum with an estimated participation of almost 80 countries (Sabanadze, 2024). Finally, Russia actively utilises BRICS in order to strengthen the forum as an international voice. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who unlike his president is not subject to an international arrest warrant, has had a busy travel calendar throughout the war – including to many destinations in the Middle East, Asia and Africa.

In Africa, Russia has increased its propaganda effort through Kremlin propaganda platforms, including RT, and by the use of local voices. As *The New York Times* writes in 2023 (Peltier et al., 2023):

"Over the past year, a flood of pro-Russian content has increasingly been surfacing on news outlets and social media platforms in Africa. The messages aim to drum up support for the invasion of Ukraine, and to frame Russia's growing presence on the African continent as beneficial, while vilifying American and European – especially French – involvement in Africa."

Russia's information campaigns in Africa serve multiple purposes: one is to generate global division over Ukraine; another is to undermine trust in the EU and the West. Reflexive control can therefore also be seen in the anti-colonialist narratives that Russia is spreading in Africa, helping African countries to act in Russia's interests and resist the West on the international political stage.

Russia has shown an ability to mobilise support and cooperate with partners globally to an extent that seemed to surprise the Western allies. While Western logic expected a unified opposition to Russia's illegitimate invasion of Ukraine, Russia, through anti-colonialist rhetoric, anti-Americanism, and accusations of Western double standards, managed to assemble a counter-bloc that was and continues to be expressed in UN votes (for more on this topic, see Morley-Davies et al., 2024). Western states and organisations such as the EU and NATO should learn from what could be framed as a Western blind spot in order to mitigate similar situations in the future.

Conclusion. Lessons for NATO and Denmark: In the information space, Russia is already at war with the West

Russia has both short-term and long-term objectives in regards to its information efforts. Influence activities do not necessarily lead to a change here and now, but can influence perceptions over time. Russia manages to strike while we in NATO and Denmark still debate whether we are at peace or in crisis and whether a given task belongs to a specific sector or agency – or to a specific level of government. Meanwhile, Russia is achieving exactly what it wants: That our decision-making ability is disrupted, worsened or delayed while we try to understand the rules of the game. In other words: that we make the predetermined decision that the initiator of the action wants. Russia's use of hybrid means can also be seen from a reflexive control perspective: It is not only a question of engaging in destabilising

activities below the threshold of activating Article 5 of NATO, but also targeting individual states' response measures. A state can be exposed to a variety of activities, some of which can be attributed, while others may not. This can be conducted over a long period of time and vary in the choice of instrument of power and level of intensity. This leaves the attacked state, if not paralysed, at least with reduced room for manoeuvre.

Russia's comprehensive information efforts since the invasion of Ukraine have had an impact as deception and information pollution – and indirectly on the West's willingness and courage to support Ukraine. The Kremlin's nuclear rhetoric has had an impact on Western donations and restriction on use, such as the long-standing ban on using Western donated weapons against targets inside Russia's territory. Russia's comprehensive information weapon arsenal has thus not necessarily had an impact on Ukraine's willingness to fight, but indirectly on Ukraine's ability to do so.

Likewise, Russia has been successful to a certain extent in influencing parts of the West to subscribe to Russian narratives. Russia's ability to generate support on a global scale also seems to have come as a surprise to Western decision-makers. The expectation in the West seemed to have been that Russia's war of aggression would speak for itself and thus activate a global opposition to Russia. Instead, Russia has managed to adjust the discourse into a discussion about Western double standards, Western imperialism and post-colonialism. Russia's strategic efforts to strengthen non-Western international forums in order to counterbalance to Western-dominated international institutions and organizations are something that goes beyond the war in Ukraine. It is thus a lesson NATO needs to take into consideration in regards to future wars and conflicts in terms of support and legitimacy.

From a military perspective, if we are to analyse the impact of the Russian information apparatus, it is not enough to assess the information capabilities of the Russian military alone. This is not how the war in the information space unfolds. Whether a given subversive or harmful information activity is carried out by units within the GRU, propaganda platforms such as RT, or privately owned troll factories, is not the most important issue. A single activity or campaign poses a specific threat, but it is also a part of a strategic cognitive threat from Russia conducted as a comprehensive effort through various means and actors.

Ukraine has succeeded in countering Russia in the information space. Preparation, resources and prioritisation of the information space has had

an effect on Ukraine's own population and has contributed to long-term support in the West. However, Ukraine has not managed to influence the Russian population's support for the war or to reduce Russian diplomatic outreach globally. An obvious question is what would have happened if Ukraine, based on the experience of 2014-2015, had ignored the information threat and thus not prepared for a future confrontation when the full-scale invasion began in February 2022. How would the war in the information space have unfolded?

Ignoring reflexive control "invites being controlled by the Russians" wrote Timothy Thomas (2019, p. 41). Has NATO learnt the lesson? It is easy to pose the question, but the answer is more complex. It depends, among other things, on whether NATO accepts "Russian reflexive control" as embedded in doctrinal thinking. NATO as an organisation has strengthened its efforts in the field of information in recent years, both in terms of structure and doctrine. NATO's efforts within strategic communication and cognitive warfare are crucial in that context. Russia's war in Ukraine has clearly illustrated how strategic communication should be considered an essential element of a society's resilience, and an important tool in regards to sustaining the morale of the armed forces, as well the support of the civilian population and foreign partners.

The question is, though, within the context of NATO, if the framework of strategic communication and cognitive warfare is sufficient in order to counter and mitigate Russian cognitive attacks. As Mark Galeotti said at a presentation at the Royal Danish Defence College back in 2018: "We may not be at war with Russia, but Russia is definitely at war with us." The war Galeotti was referring to at the time was not a conventional war on European soil, as is happening in Ukraine, but a war below the threshold of armed conflict and with means other than conventional weapons. If the Danish military is to fight effectively in the information space and defend itself in this area, it requires prioritisation, training and structure. And it requires an understanding of the adversary's approach. The information space is part of the modern battlefield – and it is a part of the battlefield that never pauses. Information war does not only take part during the armed conflict, but also in the deterrence or shaping phase as well as in the aftermath, where the battle of narratives continues.

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Military strategic adaptation in Russia

By Jonas Gejl Kaas

Introduction

Barely a year after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the then Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu announced extensive reforms of Russia's armed forces. The reason for Shoigu's announcement was that Russia's invasion of Ukraine had not gone as many Western and Russian observers had feared and hoped, respectively. Since then, similar announcements have followed from the Kremlin about new reform initiatives for the Russian military and defence industry. Furthermore, on 14 May 2024, Andrei Belousov took over the Ministry of Defence from Shoigu, who had held the post for more than 11 years. Regardless of whether the outcome of the ongoing war in Ukraine is perceived as a victory or a defeat by the Kremlin, its decision-makers have embarked on a *declared* transformation of Russia's armed forces.¹

The Kremlin's increasing reformism has been accompanied by a growing number of statements from Western governments, think tanks and intelligence services. They warn that Russia is assessed to have the ability

1. Across presidents, defence ministers and chiefs of general staff, implementing fundamental changes to Russia's armed forces since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991 has proved exceedingly difficult. A major reason is that the Russian security apparatus, like those of so many other countries, is not a unitary actor, but instead a conglomerate of more or less connected institutions and individuals with the Russian president at the top (Kaas, 2019; Sergunin, 2016, Chapter 4; Zygar, 2016).

and willingness not only to replace what it has lost in personnel and equipment during the war in Ukraine, but within "two to five years"² of the end of the current war to field an even larger force than before the war (Danish Defence Intelligence Service, 2024; Mölling & Schütz, 2023; see also Roth, 2024). British Russia expert Mark Galeotti (2024) even talks about the Kremlin transforming the Russian state and society into a permanent mobilisation state.

Russia's wars against Ukraine have shown that the West has both *overestimated and underestimated* Russia's military capabilities. After the invasion of Ukraine in 2014, only a small number of scholars did not consider Russia's military combat power to have significantly improved. The majority concluded that Russia's political and military decision-makers had drawn the necessary conclusions from the operational and tactical challenges exposed by the Georgian war in August 2008. (For a discussion of the overestimation of Russia's military capabilities before 2022, see Cunningham, 2022; Dalsjö et al, 2022; Dougherty, 2022; Kulesa, 2022; Massicot, 2023; Renz, 2023) On the other hand, as the ongoing war has progressed in Ukraine, several researchers and observers have seemingly underestimated Russia's ability and willingness to continue the war (The Economist, 2024a). The Western sanctions have not yet created challenges that Russia has failed to overcome. Similarly, there are several indications that the Russian military's recruitment and equipment challenges are not of a magnitude that means the war cannot continue.

Whether such estimates prove to overestimate Russia's real ambition and capability, only time will tell. Regardless of the future, the chapter seeks to promote the ability and willingness of researchers and observers to continuously analyse observable indications of military strategic adaptation in Russia; for now defined as *adaptation*. Therefore, the chapter examines *whether and how Russia has demonstrated the ability and willingness to adapt its military strategy after the invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022*. To answer the question, the chapter looks for observable indications of Russia's *willingness and ability to adapt* its military strategy since the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. In other words, the analysis seeks to examine whether and how Russia's military and political decision-

2. Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen, head of intelligence at the Danish Defence Intelligence Service, estimates that Russia can maintain "its war effort in Ukraine and at the same time rearm in the Baltic Sea region over a number of years" (cited in Skjoldager & Beim, 2024).

makers have the ability and willingness to translate lessons learned on the battlefield in Ukraine into *real* changes in the military strategic relationship between *ends* (what is to be realised), *ways* (how are the ends to be realised) and *means* (by what means are they to be realised) (on strategy as a relationship between ends, ways and means, see Lykke, 1989). First, however, the chapter will define its understanding of military strategic adaptation based on a selection of literature on military strategy and adaptation in and outside Russia.

If Denmark wants to contribute to making the collective deterrence of Russia credible, it is essential that it – together with its NATO and EU allies – is able to identify and assess adaptations in Russia's military strategy. Without continuous analyses of Russia's ability and willingness to adapt its military strategy, the risk of the Kingdom either over- or underestimating Russia's military capabilities as a premise for its own force development and military adaptation processes increases. Furthermore, the Danish Defence risks missing opportunities to increase its own adaptability. Thus, the chapter agrees with those who argue that military strategic adaptability will also be crucial in twenty-first-century wars (e.g. Barno & Bensahel, 2023; Ryan, 2024a). The conclusion elaborates on the relevance of the chapter for the Danish Defence.

Military strategy and military adaptation in Russia

The understanding of military strategy used in this chapter is based on the British military theorist B. H. Liddell Hart's main work *Strategy* (1967 [1954]). Here Liddell Hart (1967, p. 321) defines military strategy as "the art of allocating and employing military means to achieve political ends." Military strategy is distinguished from overall national strategy by its focus on the distribution and use of *military* power to realise politically determined objectives (see also Gray 2010, pp. 19, 29).

Thus, Liddell Hart's understanding also emphasises that the essential aspect of military power – in a military strategic sense – concerns its quantity and quality. To put it bluntly, it is not of military strategic interest to know Russia's number of personnel, equipment and ammunition without understanding how these are distributed and can be utilised. However, it is of military strategic interest to consider whether and how Russian personnel are able to use their equipment in a way that supports the Kremlin's

political objectives, and whether the equipment is in a condition and possesses characteristics that are relevant to fulfilling these objectives. Moreover, the question arises whether the relevant equipment can be produced in the quality and quantities needed to support the ends and ways. In addition to Liddell Hart's emphasis on the distribution and application of military means, the chapter therefore adds the production of military means to its definition of military strategy. Thus, military strategy is defined here as the *production, distribution and use* of military force to achieve political ends.

Thus, the focal point of this analysis of Russia's ability and willingness to adapt military strategy is to examine whether and how Russia *adapts* its production, distribution and use of military force to realise political objectives, taking into account the changing nature and friction of war. The starting point for the chapter's understanding of adaptation as adjustment is Jan Frelin et al. (2023, p. 3), who define adaptation as "any action taken to address unforeseen circumstances or to change a military capability in the midst of an ongoing war." Thus, it is not crucial to the chapter's understanding of adaptation whether the concrete handling of unforeseen circumstances or changes in military capability involves a break with or a return to past production, distribution and use of military power (for a similar conceptual discussion on the definition of military innovation, see Horowitz & Pindyck, 2023). In other words, the chapter is not interested in assessing how innovative a Russian adaptation might be, but whether and how Russia is able to adapt its military strategy as the war evolves.

Before the chapter proceeds to operationalise the definition of military strategic adaptation, an introduction to the existing literature on military adaptation in Russia follows (for references to the general literature on military adaptation, see especially Barno & Bensahel, 2023; Griffin, 2017; Grisom, 2006; Hoffman, 2021; Horowitz & Pindyck, 2023; Murray, 2011).

Military adaptation in Russia – a research overview

Regardless of the debate on whether the cause and impact of military adaptation in Russia is to be found in cultural factors (Adamsky, 2010; Gjerstad, 2023; Gjerstad & Poulsen, 2021) or civil-military relations (Renz, 2018; Taylor, 2003), there is a consensus in the research on military adaptation in Russia that it is generally difficult to implement change in the Russian military. There is an inherent rigidity in military institutions – especially in the

Russian General Staff – that makes it extremely difficult to implement changes in military means, ways and ends in practice (Arbatov, 1998; Golts, 2019). Therefore, in Russia, there is often a considerable gap between *desired* and *actual change* in its armed forces.³

In particular, the literature emphasises that widespread corruption hampers the possibilities for adaptation and streamlining of the Russian military (e.g. Henningsson et al., 2022, pp. 19-24; Kepe, 2023). There are numerous examples of corruption permeating the Russian military from top to bottom. One example of corruption at the top of the Russian armed forces and the Ministry of Defence is the channelling of funds from the military that should have been used for the establishment and maintenance of Russian barracks and the construction of official housing. In this context, a number of arrests of high-ranking officers have been made during 2024 (Burrows, 2024). Moving towards the bottom of the Russian military, there are numerous examples of funds allocated for the purchase of equipment, fuel and ammunition being channelled into private fortunes. There are several examples of military equipment, weapons and fuel being sold by Russian soldiers (Cranny-Evans & Ivshina, 2022). Dissatisfaction with unfair treatment, exploitation, poor garrisoning, and lack of material and equipment among enlisted personnel has historically been dealt with through harsh discipline, especially in the relationship between younger and older soldiers (*dedovshchina*) (Coffey, 2023; Kjellén, 2023).

Another factor that is emphasised as inhibiting military adaptation in Russia is that the Russian military has traditionally been characterised by very hierarchical management. Although one can imagine that top-down management is an advantage in a military context, in practice – as pointed out by Gjerstad 2023; Gjerstad and Poulsen 2021) – it is a significant obstacle to adaptation, as limited delegation of responsibility and competence to lower – and typically younger – officers inhibits valuable practice-oriented feedback. As a result, there are many good initiatives and suggestions for improvement among younger officers that are not presented in forums where decisions can be made to test and possibly disseminate them. In other words, it is difficult for the Russian military to benefit from the local experience and learning that occurs when existing strategy, doctrine and

3. This situation is not unique to Russia, but an assessment of other armed forces' ability and willingness to change is beyond the scope of this chapter.

tactics are put into practice within the Russian barracks, training grounds or in Ukraine, Syria and Africa. The lack of a culture of delegating responsibility and competence to younger officers and commanders also means that mission command – i.e., *Auftragstaktik* – and delegation of responsibility are not widely practised in the Russian military. As a consequence, a relatively high number of Russian generals – compared to Western forces' loss of senior generals in war – have been killed in the ongoing Ukrainian war, in the context of forward command of their own units.

Finally, there is a fundamentally ineffective culture of experience gathering and sharing from bottom to top in the Russian military; as well as from the military to the political decision-makers (Shamiev, 2024, pp. 6-13). This includes a lack of willingness to admit and learn from their own and others' mistakes, a state of affairs that also existed in the Red Army (Poulsen, 2018). Thus, there seems to be a more general problem with the exchange of knowledge and learning in the Russian military (Gjerstad, 2023, pp. 54-55), which sends misleading feedback from the battlefield or exercise terrain back to the political and military decision-makers.

However, a number of publications since Russia's invasion of Ukraine cast doubt on the assumption that the Russian military is unable to adapt its production, distribution and use of military force. For example, Dara Massicot (2023) observes that despite heavy losses of equipment and personnel, the Russian military remains capable of conducting "complex operations, adaptive learning, and withstanding a level of combat that few militaries in the world can". At the military strategic level, Massicot also points to the extensive adaptation that the Russian defence industry is undergoing.

Similar to Massicot, Australian Major General Mick Ryan (2024b) argues that the Ukrainians were faster and better at making military adaptations at the tactical level at the start of the war, increasing their military effectiveness on the battlefield during a critical phase of the invasion. And while the Ukrainians' tactical adaptation remains superior to that of the Russians, the Russians' strategic adaptation – including the ability to systematically implement these in the military and defence industry – is superior to that of the Ukrainians (see Ryan, 2024b, p. 2).

In summary, the established pre-war literature indicates that the Russian military has generally been challenged in its ability and willingness to adapt militarily, which is rooted in a number of deep-seated conditions. These include inadequate command and control, corruption, and misleading intelligence gathering and processing. In 2024, however, recent

contributions have argued that not only do the Russians appear to learn and adapt appropriately, but that in some areas – such as the strategic level – their adaptability surpasses that of the Ukrainians. The next section will identify the observable indications of military strategic adaptation in order to qualify the assessment of Russia's ability and willingness to adapt.

Indications of military strategic adaptation after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022

This section examines whether and how Russia has adapted its military strategy since the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. To structure the analysis of Russia's military strategy, the American military theorist Arthur Lykke Jr.'s (1989) ends-ways-means framework is used.

In short, Lykke understands any strategy – including military strategy – as consisting of ends (what is to be achieved), ways (how this is to be achieved) and means (by what is this to be achieved). What separates good strategy from bad is the coherence between the strategy's end, way and means. The less coherent, the riskier the strategy. Lykke's approach to analysis has been criticised for favouring the link between ends and means (Meiser, 2016; Miller et al., 2017). Furthermore, this understanding of strategy can result in analyses where the connection between ends, ways and means is over- or underemphasised; especially in cases where the outcome is already known to the investigator (see also Hoffman, 2020; Jakobsen, 2022). In an attempt to preserve the explanatory power of the Lykke model while recognising the criticisms, indications of change in means and ways will initially be treated separately from ends. Thus, this analytical approach seeks to prevent the ends that the analyst may attribute to Russia from guiding the analysis of the relationship with means and ways.

Military strategic means

One indication of military strategic adaptation of means that becomes clearer as the war progresses is that Russia increasingly focuses on winning the war through *superior mass* rather than quality (see also Kofman, 2024); in other words, superior production and the use of large amounts of personnel and materiel. This does not exclude qualitative adjustments (for the better) in the way personnel are trained and materiel is developed over time, but emphasises a clear primacy of quantity over quality in the

Ukrainian war. Observable indications of this adjustment can be seen in the declaration by then Defence Minister Shoigu that the Russian standing force will be expanded to 1.5 million men by 2026, as well as the "partial" (and sustained) mobilisation of the Russian reserve force and the recruitment in Russian prisons. During the summer of 2024, there were indications that Russia had managed to further increase its lead over Ukraine in terms of the war-critical production of personnel, equipment and ammunition (Kofman, 2024, p. 118). However, as will be shown below, the increased war production is not unproblematic for the Kremlin to maintain.

If the Kremlin manages to realise its stated end of increasing the number of personnel to a total of 1.5 million by the end of 2026, this represents a not insignificant expansion of the force structure by 58 per cent, compared to the estimated 900,000-1,000,000 men in 2021 (Hakvåg, 2023). Such a significant increase in the Russian force numbers cannot be realised – if at all – with contract soldiers alone, which is why the number of Russian conscripts must increase significantly. Here, Russian demographics are a key obstacle, as the proportion of Russian men aged 18 to 40 is expected to decline over the next 10 to 15 years. Assuming that there will continue to be a lack of appetite for contract labour in the Russian military and the demographic challenges persist, up to 80 per cent of 18-year-old men will have to serve in 2026 (Hakvåg, 2023, p. 25).

Since Defence Minister Shoigu announced the expansion of the force structure, a number of organisational and legislative changes have been made to support the force expansion. For example, Shoigu announced the re-emergence of two military districts – Moscow and Leningrad – to replace the Western Military District. On the legislative side, with effect from 1 January 2024, the upper limit for military service was changed from 27 to 30 years of age (Reuters, 2024). By shifting the age of conscription to 30 – and keeping the lower limit at 18 – the Russian military is presumably trying to prevent a disproportionate part of the population from avoiding military service, for example by postponing on educational grounds. Furthermore, it is currently unknown whether and to what extent the Russian military will succeed in conscripting and training conscripts and contract soldiers from the annexed territories of Ukraine.⁴ There has been some success in

4. In May 2024, Radio Free Europe reported, based on interviews with local residents of Donetsk and Luhansk, that the Russian military is actively recruiting personnel in Russian-annexed areas of Ukraine (Modina, 2024).

recruiting or conscripting foreign nationals, primarily from the Central Asian republics, to serve in the Russian defence. The promise of better pay – compared to their home country – and citizenship is particularly attractive to many. In the autumn of 2024, North Korea also decided to send its own forces to support Russia's war effort. The number was estimated to be around 10,000 soldiers. Whether this will have an effect on the battlefield will depend on whether the deployment is followed by more troops. Even if Shoigu's 2022 target of 1.5 million soldiers is not met, it is likely that the future Russian military will consist of a force in the range of 1.1 to 1.3 million men, excluding mobilised personnel, which would represent an expansion of between 30 and 40 per cent compared to the estimated 2021 strength (Hakvåg, 2023, p. 30; The Director of National Intelligence, 2024, p. 15).

One key military strategic tool is personnel, another is materiel. Since the beginning of the war, Russia has mobilised not only a large part of the population but also of the industry. The war in Ukraine requires significant public investment in the purchase and production of equipment inside and outside of Russia. In 2023, Russia's estimated defence spending amounted to 10 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) (Prokopenko & Luzin, 2023). In comparison, the Russian state's defence spending was around 3-4 per cent of GDP in the period 2019-2021 (Grozovski, 2023). Thus, the Russian state is now estimated to be spending the equivalent of approximately 40 per cent of its state budget on the Russian military.

The massive investments in military equipment and increasing wage costs for the standing and mobilised forces are expected to increase Russian GDP by 2.6 per cent in 2024, while unemployment is historically low at three per cent (Prokopenko & Luzin, 2023). Currently, 2.5 per cent of the Russian population finds employment in the Russian defence industry (Roth, 2024). The Russian central bank is trying to keep the increased inflationary pressure in check with high lending rates (in July 2024, the central bank's lending rate was increased from 16 to 18 per cent and in October to 21 per cent), while the considerable expenditure on personnel and equipment has been financed without major issuance of Russian government debt, partly due to well-padded currency reserves – despite Western freezes – and a considerable sovereign wealth fund (Vakulenko, 2024). Thus, the Russian economy is in a state where it would be able to bear the costs of war even in the near future, despite Western sanctions and limited access to advanced technology (Bergmann et al., 2023; Shatz & Reach, 2023).

On the output side, Russian industrial production – related to the war – has increased significantly in several areas in the period 2022-2023 (Prokopenko & Luzin, 2023). In February 2024, the think tank The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) estimated that the Russian defence industry has largely succeeded in replacing lost equipment in Ukraine with an equivalent number of reactivated, refurbished and new equipment (Michel & Gjerstad, 2024). Thus, it is likely that Russia can continue the war in Ukraine with the current casualty figures "2-3 years, and maybe even longer" (Michel & Gjerstad, 2024). However, the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies (RUSI) also estimated that from 2025 onwards, the Russian military will experience increasing difficulties in replacing materiel losses. By 2026, Russia will have exhausted its (Soviet) materiel stocks and will thus be forced to replace lost equipment with new equipment that is both more expensive and more time-consuming to produce. This is not least due to supply difficulties resulting from Western sanctions on advanced technology (Bergmann et al., 2023; Watling & Reynolds, 2024). A key unknown in assessing the Russian defence industry's ability to produce new equipment is whether and to what extent China currently has – and will continue to have – the willingness and ability to supply advanced technology (The Economist, 2024b).

Military strategic ways

The previous section's review of indications of a military strategic adaptation where means – in the form of personnel and equipment – must be numerically *superior* to that of opponents is also reflected in indications of adaptations in military strategic ways since the beginning of the invasion. Thus, the war in Ukraine seems to demonstrate a growing interest in the idea of numerical superiority in the use of military force. Basically, there is a movement towards military strategic ways where the core idea is that the opponent must be gradually exhausted and finally overwhelmed through repeated attacks in first larger and later smaller attack groups (Gjerstad, 2023, pp. 53-54).

The idea of the importance of numerical superiority and the demands it places on the size and use of Russia's armed forces was one that former Defence Minister Anatoly Serdyukov (2007-2012) tackled in the comprehensive reform programme that the Russian military was subjected to in the wake of the – from the Kremlin's perspective – disappointing war against Georgia in August 2008 (see also Mathiesen, 2018). After the Georgian war, Defence

Minister Serdyukov announced a reform of the armed forces, which basically aimed to create a more capable and faster deployable Russian military through modernisation of equipment and professionalisation of the armed forces (Gjerstad, 2023, p. 50). This meant moving away from a military with a large land-based mobilisation force of conscripts towards a deployable, professionalised military that would largely consist of contract employees. Furthermore, a number of reorganisations of existing military and command structures followed, including the training of personnel (Gjerstad & Poulsen, 2021; Mathiesen, 2018). The 2008 reform programme thus shared several similarities with the military reforms that several Western countries – including Denmark – underwent after the end of the Cold War.

From the beginning, the reform programme was opposed by parts of the Russian General Staff, who did not believe it was realistic that a smaller and more professional Russian military could be implemented and be useful in practice (Blanc et al., 2023). In particular, the introduction of battalion tactical groups (for an introduction, see Grau & Bartles, 2022; Kofman & Lee, 2022) was met with scepticism. In this context, the Russian military's performance in Ukraine has shown that the General Staff's concerns about the usability of battalion tactical groups when deployed in a conventional war, instead of a regional conflict, did not prove unfounded. What should have been a limited military operation conducted by professional soldiers in battalion tactical groups evolved into a war where partial mobilisation of the reserves, the use of private military companies and the recruitment of prisoners and migrant workers have been necessary to attain the strategic depth to continue the war.⁵

For Russia, the 2023 war year was characterised by the military compensating for the lack of capable combat soldiers and the increasing shortage of artillery shells by deploying mobilised reservists and prisoners with little experience and fire support against the Ukrainian positions, resulting in heavy losses for the Russians (Kofman, 2024, pp. 101-102). The idea was to wrest the initiative back from the Ukrainians by a way of deploying expendable assault troops in smaller attack groups, with varying degrees of fire support,

5. It is relevant to add that Anatoly Serdyukov's military reform was based on the assumption that the wars Russia would participate in in the future were small and medium-sized regional deployments, for which battalion tactical groups were deemed suitable. Thus, the ongoing Ukrainian war has developed into a war between two almost equal opponents, which breaks with the strategic and operational assumptions underlying Serdyukov's reform programme, including the assessment of the military strategic suitability of the battalion tactical groups.

to capture the Ukrainian positions, after which more experienced contract soldiers would hold and consolidate said positions (Kofman, 2024, pp. 114-115; Panella, 2023). So far, such Russian attacks have shown some success – albeit still with high casualties – against Ukrainian defenders in and around Bakhmut and Avdiivka, where Russia has gradually gained ground from spring 2023 onwards. Similar deployments were observed in spring 2024 in connection with Russian attacks against Kharkiv.

Yet another indication of the Russians' adaptation of a different military strategic way for the use of military force is numerical superiority. Whereas Russia started the war in February 2022 with between 150,000 and 200,000 soldiers, by February 2024 they are estimated to have increased this number to around 470,000 soldiers deployed in Ukraine (Kofman, 2024, p. 111; Watling & Reynolds, 2024). Dara Massicot (2023) highlights a similar indication of the adaptation of a military strategic way of using military force that favours quantity over quality in relation to Russian missile strikes against Ukraine. Initially relying on firing one or a few expensive precision missiles per target, the number of different types of missiles of varying age, accuracy and cost per target increased as the Ukrainians built up a more capable air defence with Western assistance.

Military strategic ends

Russia's military strategic objectives have also changed as the war in Ukraine has evolved. This section identifies three key adaptations in Russia's military strategic ends. Judging from Putin's declaration of war speech on 24 February 2022, where the desire for "denazification" of Ukraine's political leadership was central, combined with a modest Russian invasion force, it is assessed that the primary military strategic end of the invasion itself was regime change. That regime change was the end is further supported by the fact that Russia refrained from conducting a prolonged air and missile campaign against Ukrainian targets in depth, which would otherwise have been expected in an actual invasion intended to conquer large land areas (Massicot, 2023).⁶

6. Others have also argued that the reason Russia refrained from a more extensive offensive was that there was a mistaken expectation among Russian decision-makers that Ukraine would not be willing or able to resist (e.g. Reynolds & Watling, 2022). Thus, it was not a limited end (regime change), but rather faulty intelligence that led Russia not to invade Ukraine with a larger attack force.

As we know, the Russians did not succeed in capturing Zelensky or taking Kyiv to force a regime change and a peace agreement on Russian terms. Therefore, the Russian military – for the first time – adjusted its military strategic objective towards the conquest of Ukrainian territory in order to pressure the government in Kyiv to conclude an agreement on favourable Russian terms. This is supported by the fact that between the beginning of the invasion and April 2022, negotiations between Russian and Ukrainian representatives took place in Belarus and later in Turkey, while the Russians gradually – but more slowly than expected – occupied more and more Ukrainian territory.

However, Ukraine's reluctance for a negotiated solution to the war with Russia was reinforced in April 2022 when it was revealed that Russian soldiers had committed war crimes in the Kyiv suburb of Butja. Along with the exposure of the Russian war crimes, the number and strength of Western pledges to support Ukraine with much-needed lethal arms assistance increased (Charap & Radchenko, 2024). In September 2022, Ukraine launched a successful counteroffensive, hastily pushing Russian troops out of the eastern Ukrainian city of Kharkiv. Following the Ukrainian counteroffensive, Russian General Sergei Surovikin was given unified command of Russian troops in Ukraine in October 2022, after which Russian positions west of the Dnieper River, including the city of Kherson, were cleared. In addition, the Russians constructed a series of fortified positions in eastern Ukraine – also known as the Surovikin Line. Thus, giving General Surovikin unified command of Russian troops in Ukraine marked the second time Russia adapted its military strategic end, this time with the end of conquering Ukrainian territory for an improved negotiating position to the consolidation of Russian forces.

Following the consolidation of Russian forces, a gradual intensification of Russian attacks against Ukrainian positions was initiated from January 2023, marking the third military strategic adaptation of the strategic objectives, this time with a transition from the end of consolidation of the Russian defensive lines to one of long-term Ukrainian attrition. The adaptation of the military strategic objectives was followed by the appointment of Chief of the General Staff Gerasimov as Commander-in-Chief of the Russian forces in Ukraine in January 2023 (Vernon & Gozzi, 2023). After a long period of sustained attrition of Ukrainian troops, from January 2024, Russian forces managed to gradually advance in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Several analysts point out that the attrition – despite heavy Russian losses – continues to challenge Ukraine in the form of lacking Western arms

assistance, but especially on the personnel side, where it seems increasingly difficult to mobilise the required number of Ukrainian soldiers. This was a challenge that became greater for the Ukrainians after Russia launched an offensive in the Kharkiv region in May 2024, forcing the Ukrainians to deploy their limited human and material resources across a frontline of over 1,000 kilometres. In this context, it is worth noting that Ukraine's Kursk Offensive, launched in August 2024, was presumably aimed at getting Russia to reprioritise how its units were distributed and deployed against Ukraine, so that advances to the southeast could be slowed. At the time of writing (January 2025), such a purpose has yet to be realised, as Russian forces – despite heavy losses – continue their advance, while parts of Kursk remain under Ukrainian occupation.

Looking to the future, from the Russian perspective, at least two scenarios with different military strategic objectives and rationales are currently emerging. The first scenario suggests that Russia will once again seek a negotiated solution – on the most favourable terms possible – to the war in Ukraine (for a discussion of increasing Russian willingness to negotiate, see Faulconbridge & Osborn, 2024). According to this scenario, it is possible that a fourth military strategic adaptation is underway, where the end of attrition is replaced by conquest again. This is in order to achieve a negotiated solution as close as possible to Russia's wishes. A possible Russian rationale behind the end of a negotiated solution is to stop a war that is taking a significant toll on Russian society and economy – and furthermore, a war that makes Russia more dependent on international partners (e.g. China, North Korea and Iran) and could potentially escalate into a war between Russia and the West.

The second scenario is that Russia – despite previous statements of interest in a ceasefire agreement – does not yet truly want a negotiated solution. A possible Russian rationale here is that the Ukrainians' reserves must be depleted before a new Russian offensive is launched; an offensive that is intended to conquer additional territory in an effort to collapse the Ukrainian military, with Ukrainian politicians largely accepting the Kremlin's conditions for a ceasefire agreement and a subsequent peace agreement. In other words, there will not be a negotiated solution between Russia and Ukraine, but rather Ukrainian acceptance of Russia's conditions. As written before, some analysts (e.g. Watling & Reynolds, 2024) suggest that from 2025 the Russian military will begin to experience increasing difficulties in replacing equipment losses, and by 2026 it is predicted that Russia will have

exhausted its stocks of older Soviet equipment. Losing the numerical superiority of personnel and equipment means that the connection between military strategic means, ways and resources is undermined. Thus, the preconditions for the existing Russian military strategy disappear.

In summary, regardless of the scenario, it will be crucial that Russia ends the active part of its war against Ukraine before the end of 2025. Of course, this does not mean that the war will actually end there. Furthermore, regardless of what military strategic ends Russia has in mind, whether and for how long the Ukrainians can resist the continued Russian advances in southeastern Ukraine will be crucial to Ukraine's future position. At the time of writing (January 2025), Russia has the advantage of not being challenged in terms of personnel and ammunition in the same way as Ukraine. Thus, one framework for understanding the launch of Ukraine's Kursk Offensive in August 2024 could be that Ukraine wants to expand and bring forward a window of opportunity for a negotiated solution with Russia, which puts Ukraine in a better negotiating position than if the Russian attrition strategy had continued unchallenged. Whether the Ukrainians will succeed in extending and advancing such an opportunity remains to be seen.

Discussion and conclusion

The Kremlin's increasing reformism in security and defence policy has been accompanied by a growing number of assessments from Western governments, think tanks and intelligence agencies warning that Russia has a greater ability and willingness than previously thought to adapt its production, distribution and use of military power to achieve its political ends (e.g. Danish Defence Intelligence Service, 2024).

Therefore, the chapter has examined *whether* and *how* Russia has demonstrated the ability and willingness to adapt its military strategy after the invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. Based on the chapter's analysis, it is assessed that Russia has demonstrated both the ability and willingness to translate lessons learnt on the battlefield in Ukraine into *real* adaptation of Russia's military strategic ends (what to achieve), ways (how to achieve them) and means (by what means to achieve them). Thus, the Russian military has managed to adapt the coherence between its production of means and the use of its ways to support the changing military strategic objectives over the course of the war. This adaptation of means and ways is primarily

based on a fundamental assumption that the path to victory over Ukraine involves prioritising quantity of equipment and personnel over quality.

It is also estimated that until 2026, Russia will not be challenged in its recruitment or defence industrial production to such an extent that the preconditions for Russia's current military strategy no longer apply. On the personnel side, the prerequisites for Russia's current military strategy do not appear to be challenged in the short term. However, from 2026, the military strategy will be more challenged in terms of *whether* and *to what extent* the defence industry can produce the sufficient quantities of equipment (means) necessary to support the use of military force (ways) on which the achievement of the current military strategic end of attrition depends.

Thus, the defence industry's ability to deliver the quantities of equipment that are prerequisites for the current military strategy's theory of success will also be increasingly dependent on the continued ability and willingness of foreign partners – such as China, Iran and North Korea – to supply the necessary components, rare materials and advanced technology; including sanctioned dual-use components.

In summary, the Russian military has demonstrated the ability and willingness to adapt militarily and strategically, which reduces the likelihood that Russia will not have the ability and willingness for a more fundamental transformation of its armed forces and defence industry. On the other hand, there are still no indications that the Russian military has addressed the structural problems – well described in the pre-war literature – such as corruption. Although a few high-ranking officials and several Russian generals (including Deputy Defence Minister Timur Ivanov, former Deputy Defence Minister Dmitry Bulgakov and Deputy Chief of the Russian General Staff Vadim Shamarin) have been arrested on corruption charges during 2024, there is little evidence of a fundamental crackdown on corruption in the Russian military. Rather, the Kremlin is signalling that the most rampant forms of corruption – with direct impact on the war effort – will no longer be tolerated (Burrows, 2024). The failure to address the known structural problems thus increases the likelihood that Russia lacks the will and ability for a fundamental military transformation.

However, the fact that the Russian military does not show indications of a more fundamental transformation being possible does not mean that the Russian military is not capable of improving its military capability within the aforementioned structural problems. It is beyond any reasonable doubt that the Russian military has demonstrated a greater degree of

military adaptability⁷ than before 24 February 2022. As the chapter has shown, there are several observable indications that the Russian military has been able to adapt its military strategy as the war has evolved.

Whether the Russian military's adaptability will diminish after the war ends should be the subject of further investigation by Western academics, intelligence services and armed forces. It is particularly relevant to uncover whether and to what extent the Russian military has built an organisationally anchored memory and a learning system where the painful lessons from high-intensity and gruelling joint operations in Ukraine can be stored and processed for decisions and implementation of military adaptation processes at the tactical, operational and strategic levels.

How to increase the Danish Defence's adaptability in light of the war in Ukraine

Our expectations of when and how future wars will be fought are often flawed, if not outright erroneous (Freedman, 2017). As the future is difficult to predict, the chapter argues that states should focus more on how to increase the military adaptability of their armed forces; that is, increasing the willingness and ability of the armed forces to adapt to the conditions of the next transformative war, so that the inevitable gap between the war you expected to fight and the war you end up fighting is minimised as quickly as possible (Barno & Bensahel, 2020, pp. 245-247).

Based on the lessons learnt from the war in Ukraine, the chapter concludes with three recommendations on how the Danish Defence can increase its adaptability. The recommendations are based on insights from new studies on how two NATO allies – the US (Barno & Bensahel, 2023, Chapter 11) and Sweden (Jarl & Frelin, 2024) – can improve their ability and willingness to adapt. Regardless of the outcome of the war in Ukraine – and whether Russia's ability and willingness to adapt will decrease, increase or remain unchanged – the Danish Defence should focus on how it can increase the speed of adaptation in order to reduce the aforementioned gap between the expected and actual future war.

7. The chapter's understanding of military adaptability is based on David Barno and Nora Bensahel's (2020, p. 9) definition of *military adaptability*, which, based on Amy Zegart's (2009, pp. 16-17) two-part definition, is understood as the ability to "transform what an organisation can do and how it does it", in order to create a "better fit between the organisation and the environment it operates in".

The following identifies three key ways in which the Danish Defence can increase its adaptability. The *first* is to promote the fundamental idea of the armed forces as a learning organisation. This would take the form of an organisation characterised by a high level of knowledge and education that contributes to defence personnel at all levels being able to identify and disseminate experiences with potential for military adaptation. How can defence personnel learn adaptive thinking in a more concrete way? Existing research (see Mun et al., 2017; Walters, 2021) has shown that war gaming in particular has great potential for training adaptive thinking and familiarity with the volatility of war and conflict (see also Barno & Bensahel, 2020, pp. 252-255).

In addition to strengthening the armed forces as a learning organisation, a *second* key way to increase adaptability is to ensure that the armed forces have a varied mix of capabilities that enable adaptation at tactical, operational and strategic levels (Jarl & Frelin, 2024, p. 7). In other words, the Danish Defence must have the military room for manoeuvre to adapt when the preconditions of the existing military strategy cease to apply as the actual development and nature of war changes. In order to be able to adapt without high transaction costs, it is therefore also deemed necessary not only to possess different capabilities but also to maintain the necessary capability to effectively utilise them during an armed conflict. In other words, it is not enough for the Danish Defence to have different weapon systems. It also requires personnel who are continuously trained on such systems so that they can operate them in the best possible way.

Finally, and *thirdly*, it is crucial that the connection between the armed forces and the domestic and international defence industry is developed (Jarl & Frelin, 2024, p. 8). In order to produce the relevant types, quantities and quality of equipment currently in demand – and more importantly, to produce what will be in demand as a result of military adaptation – it is crucial that the armed forces and the defence industry develop a confidential peacetime relationship. This will minimise, as much as possible, the time it takes from adaptation-triggering experiences on the battlefield to adapting the defence industry's production until the new equipment can be used on the battlefield (Barno & Bensahel, 2020, pp. 278-279; see also Ryan, 2024b).

In summary, the ongoing war in Ukraine has demonstrated that the speed of military adaptation processes remains essential for the outcome on the modern battlefield (see also Barno & Bensahel, 2023; Ryan, 2024a).

Thus, the Ukrainian war is symptomatic of the fact that the ability and willingness to adapt military strategy will also determine the wars that the armed forces must fight in the twenty-first century.

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CHAPTER 16

Can adaptation be the key to ending war?

By Lennart Schou Jeppesen

Introduction

The war did not go as planned.

The war is not going as planned.

The Russians keep trying to change tactics, change the composition of forces, allocate new resources, rethink the laws of war, optimise where to fight, adjust the objective and, not least, change when the objective is achieved. All of these are signs of adaptation, where the military opportunity space is explored for new solutions. Military operational commanders have a special toolbox that allows them to solve the tasks of war by adjusting doctrine, legitimate limitations, resources, time, task/mission, terrain and enemy options (Jarl & Frelin, 2024). However, the military options for creating a decisive outcome on the battlefield seem to diminish as time passes. This means that the two forces may end up co-adapting in tandem without making significant progress and the war becomes frozen. So can adaptation still be the key to ending the war?

War is considered one of the biggest drivers of adaptation for military organisations (Barno & Bensahel, 2020). Military adaptation is defined in this chapter as change in military strategy, force generation, and/or military plans and operations applied in response to operational challenges and campaign pressures (Farrell et al., 2020). Military adaptation at the operational level is about making the necessary adjustments to objectives, methods and means with an understanding of the risks associated with the

current environment. There is a long tradition of assessing countries' adaptive capacity in war (Jarl & Frelin, 2024; Murray, 2011). However, there has been a preponderance in the literature where the internal conditions of military forces have been given more weight than the often underexposed environment they fight in (Farrell, 2022). Because, even with an ongoing war, the focus is on managing the specific environment of war to achieve the political objectives given to the military organisation. If the political objectives are not met, the military organisation fails. In the literature on why military organisations fail on the battlefield, three factors in particular can lead to failure. These are the ability to adapt, to predict and to learn (Cohen, 2012). These three factors are, of course, closely related, but what is special about adaptation is that it relates to both the future (the ability to predict) and the past (the ability to learn), but focuses on change and adaptation in the present.

The ability to be adaptive is particularly important in relation to two external factors – the Russian political regime and the Ukrainian military. These external pressures create internal dynamics that both favour and hinder effective warfare. It is up to military commanders to ensure that the internal dynamics match the demands and pressures from the outside world. This happens at the operational level, where the political and tactical levels are tied together. By looking at the Russian military's operational ability to adapt to the demands, conditions and opportunities arising from the war, we can say something about the Russian ability to make the necessary adjustments to military task performance and organisation in war. This has led to this chapter's question: How do the Russian armed forces manage to utilise their adaptive capability in Ukraine at the operational level, and can adaptation continue to be the key to ending the war?

In this chapter, we look at how the Russian military handles wartime conditions in three specific cases from the war. Each of the three cases looks at how the Russian armed forces deal with the pressures they face and how they utilise adaptation to overcome these challenges. These situations can tell us something about the Russians' ability to be adaptive in war and what inhibits/promotes this ability. This is crucial knowledge to have when trying to assess Russia's military capability and will.

Research overview

Methodologically, it is difficult to research an ongoing war. The Russian regime has shut down criticism of the war, and the information war creates an additional veil over what is true and false. This naturally affects the validity of the study, which is why it is important to openly present the background to the conclusions reached in the chapter. The chapter uses source material from many different types of open sources. To describe the Russian military's adaptive capacity in the war in Ukraine, the chapter is based on summarising reports, analyses and research articles (Engqvist et al., 2023; Watling & Reynolds, 2023a; Zabrodskiy et al., 2022). These sources help to analyse the different periods of the war. Their focus is limited in time and contributes to the knowledge in the three sections of the article. The knowledge that can be extracted here relates specifically to Russia's goals, methods, means and risk appetite.

Despite the fact that access to the Russian military is closed, the top military layer continues to communicate to the population and the outside world. This communication is particularly useful for understanding how the military officially relates to external actors, the war and the official objectives. The internal dynamics of the military can be explained through the testimonies of deserters, prisoners of war and frustrated soldiers communicating with video/audio recordings, but also through official policy and legislation (Blanc et al., 2023; Faulconbridge, 2023; Filachev, 2023; Gerashchenko, 2023; Sauer & Sullivan, 2023). This type of source provides insight into the inner workings of the Russian military. It is a mixture of official organisational narratives and individuals' descriptions of the effects of the war and the organisation.

To understand the Russian military's ability and historical approach to adaptation in war, Russian culture, doctrine, and thinking about war at the operational level are examined (Gjerstad & Poulsen, 2021; Jonsson, 2019; Kofman et al., 2021; Poulsen & Staun, 2021). These sources are characterised by drawing their knowledge base from historical sources, traditions and doctrines, all of which have a retrospective focus.

Methodological approaches

The chapter is based on three cases from the war, each of which in its own way illustrates the Russian ability to adapt. They each paint a picture of the adaptation strategy used by the Russian military. The first case is around the start of the war (February and March 2022), where adaptability was tested in the transition from peacetime to wartime. The second case is the Ukrainian offensive in autumn 2022, where the Russian armed forces were forced into a defensive or retreating role. The last case focuses on the start of the war of attrition in the summer of 2023, when the battle took the character of a clash between two evenly matched forces.

The impact points are analysed based on the operational logic formulated as ends, ways, means and risk (Yarger, 2006).

- The goal is about what is to be achieved,
- Methods are about how to achieve the goals and with what resources.
- Means is about what tangible (personnel, materials, finances, etc.) and intangible (will, courage, intellect, etc.) means are used and how,
- Risk explains the gap between what needs to be achieved and the concepts/resources available to achieve the goal. Since it is assumed that there are never enough resources, there is always a risk. The strategist seeks to minimise this risk through the balance of goals, methods and means.

Adaptability is thus analysed in relation to the balancing of goals, methods, means and risk management. The analysis will thus draw conclusions about what characterises the Russian military organisation's adaptive capacity during the war in Ukraine.

The theoretical landscape

The concept of adaptation is closely linked to Darwin's ideas from *On the Origin of Species*, where animals are dependent on continuous adaptation in order to survive in the competition for resources and living conditions (Darwin, 1859). The argument from Darwin can be applied to the way organisations relate to the outside world and themselves by highlighting these two loose couplings, firstly, when the individuals in an organisation

have different interests and secondly, when there is uncertainty about the means/ends relationship. Adaptation must secure these loose couplings through the design of goals, means, methods and risks, but also by strengthening the organisation and fighting together (Hannan & Freeman, 1984).

Much of the literature on military adaptation examines why some countries are more or less adaptive or what key factors influence a country's need for an adaptive approach (Barno & Bensahel, 2020; Farrell, 2022). The existing literature typically positions itself at one end or the other of the dynamic spectrum between internal conditions or external pressures (Abatecola, 2012). The internal focus examines how managers strategically manage their own organisation, learning, technology, methods and objectives (Barno & Bensahel, 2020; Hoffman, 2021). While the external focus is an examination of the conditions/nature of war, the impact of the adversary, political pressure, etc. (Doz, 2007; Gavetti & Levinthal, 2000). This chapter's contribution seeks to examine both focus areas in order to understand how the two loose couplings put pressure on the organisation. In response to these pressures, organisational adaptation theory has developed four approaches/schools that organisations use:

- Structural apathy (Hannan & Freeman, 1984). Apathy can manifest as slowness, weak learning ability or lack of responsiveness.
- Adjustment (Hambrick & Finkelstein, 1987; Singh et al., 1986; Snow & Hambrick, 1980). Relatively few changes in strategy to deal with environmental change
- Reorientation (March, 1981; Staw et al., 1981). Major changes in strategy in response to major changes in the environment.
- Strategic renewal (Burgelman, 1991). Major changes in strategy implemented through autonomous strategic processes.

Using these four approaches to adaptation, it can be assessed which adaptation strategies the Russian military uses.

The structure of the chapter is shown in Figure 16.1.

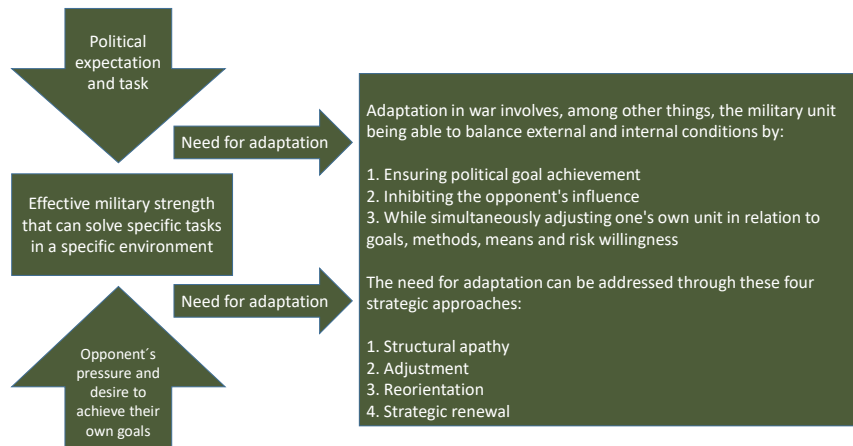


Figure 16.1: The military force's adaptation task at the operational level.

The basic idea of the chapter is to examine how the Russian military handles the loose couplings in the attempt to achieve goal fulfilment and which adaptation strategies are preferred.

Russian warfare at the operational level

Russia has a tradition of viewing war from a holistic perspective that encompasses military, economic, political and social aspects (Jonsson, 2019). General Valery Gerasimov, the Chief of the General Staff, said in a speech to the Russian Academy of Military Science in 2017 that the military should be seen more as the coordinating, and to some extent the executing, actor to integrate pressure on political, economic, information and other non-military measures (Gerasimov, 2017). This gives the military the overall coordination responsibility for the war/operation. There is a long historical tradition of assigning full responsibility to the military and utilising the operational level for this. At the end of World War I, the Red Army went through a wave of innovation that led three renowned military thinkers, Svechin, Tukhachevsky and Nikolayevich, to develop an operational concept to bridge the gap between the political-strategic level and the tactical level (Friedman, 2021; Jonsson, 2019). Their purpose was to develop a

military that could connect operations across large frontal sections to the strategic aim.

For Svechin, the operational level involved placing his units in the best possible tactical positions, taking into account available materiel, available time, deployable units and the nature of the operation itself (Svetjin, 1992). Here Svechin touches on the four key elements of operational thinking; objectives, methods, means and risk. Svechin's ideas assign responsibility to the military leadership so that the military can independently carry out the operation without undue interference from politicians (Jonsson, 2019). Contemporary Russian operational thinking is described by Kofman et. al. (2021) as follows:

"Operational art, on the one hand, is subject to strategy, and at the same time it occupies a leading position in relation to tactics, determines their goals and directions of development. There is also a feedback. The development of tactics, the emergence of new ways of waging combat has an impact on operational art, and operational art, in turn, affects the development of strategy."

It is this feedback mechanism described by Korabelnikov that in today's military becomes the catalyst for the adaptive capability of the military system. This mechanism goes two ways, with the strategic level providing and framing the task, while the tactical and operational levels communicate to the strategic level to contribute to development. In this way, the flow of communication between the levels determines whether adaptation ensures effective goal fulfilment.

Analysis

The analysis here has much in common with chapters 6, 7 and 8 on the army, navy and air force respectively, as the operational level looks at how the overall capabilities are utilised. Therefore, a greater depth of understanding can be gained by reading these chapters as well. The three cases in this chapter are based on the same analytical approach, where the operational level is examined through its handling of goals, means, methods and risks. This makes it possible to analyse which adaptation strategy the Russians used and whether it can be seen as effective. Effectiveness is assessed by how a given behaviour brings the armed forces closer to achieving their objectives. Each analytical section briefly sets the scene with a

description of the situation and the political task at hand and then describes the Russian armed forces' adaptation strategy.

Analysis section 1 – The beginning of the war and the ability to adapt

Russian military preparation for the war began in March 2021, when a large number of conventional forces deployed on the border with Ukraine. Before the war, General Gerasimov, as Chief of the General Staff, had stated; "I lead the second most powerful army in the world" (Zabrodskiy et al., 2022, 7). This perhaps says something about the self-image of the armed forces. The military units were formed into battalion combat groups (the common term is BTG or Battalion Tactical Groups). The operation had been highly secretive, with only the very top of the top leadership knowing about the plan. The Russian armed forces sought to achieve the political goal of controlling all of Ukraine by the summer of 2022 through a combined attack with the five military districts. The military strategic objective was, by attacking from the north, south and east, to weaken primarily the political will to resist and secondarily the will of Ukrainian society, including the military, to fight. But planning is one thing. Another is execution. Because after a week, the first units began to stall. And after about 30 days, the total Russian offensive reached its culmination point. It was no longer possible for the Russian forces to continue the attack.

The overall plan was to start with air strikes to take control of Ukraine's airspace simultaneously with deep strikes by special forces aimed at seizing strategic areas, and then finally follow up with the five military districts' attacks from the north, east and south. The operation also had a social purpose through a massive disinformation campaign aimed at weakening Ukrainians' will to defend themselves. The operation was directed from the top of the Kremlin with no overall military commander for the operation. Presumably, Putin may have been wary of appointing a military commander for the entire operation to avoid said commander being accredited with the victory, which could pose a threat to Putin in the future, a method also used by Stalin and Zhukov (Bailey & Stepanenko, 2023).

The Russians had prepared a bold, high-risk plan – which had to succeed on the first try because there was apparently no backup plan – a risky strategy that led to the initial defeat. In particular, an inability to adapt to the expectations of the domestic political environment was evident, and the Ukrainians' actual willingness/ability to fight was surprising (Stojar, 2023). The internal lines of the Russian military showed so many

weaknesses that the goal of quickly taking Ukraine could not succeed. After just one week, the operation called for adaptation, where the first units stalled and the Ukrainians' will to fight not only surprised – but grew. After that, the situation only worsened. The air force did not have effective assessments of the effect of the damage to the Ukrainian air force (Zabrodskyi et al., 2022). The army, which extensively used battalion combat groups formed for a rapid offensive war, proved extremely difficult in logistics, coordination and co-ordination. The units were poorly trained and did not have sufficient logistical support behind them. The lack of overall command of the operation contrasts with the Russian doctrine and thinking of Svechin (1992). The lack of holistic management inhibited the feedback mechanism, which could have contributed to timely adjustments and adaptation.

The beginning of the war gave the Russian organisation a sense of whether their forces could solve the problems that a modern military must be able to handle when facing a peer opponent. The challenges the Russians faced in the first weeks of the war centred on an inability to adapt quickly. The armed forces could not sufficiently adapt to the shift from peacetime/conflict to fighting a conventional war. The management of the operation was not delegated to the operational level but remained at the political-strategic level. The objective to focus on a massive attack on the political and social level (the will of society and the military) was a fallacy in relation to the military strength, will and numbers of the Ukrainians, something that became clearer and clearer with each passing week. In this way, the Russians' adaptation strategy seems to be characterised by structural apathy (Hannan & Freeman, 1984), where the necessary adjustments in goals, methods and means are not made and risk assessment is neglected.

Analysis section 2 – The Ukrainian offensive in autumn 2022

At a press conference in March, General Sergei Rudskoy from the General Staff explained the new focus of what he called the "special operation" (Lyster et al., 2023):

"In general, the main tasks of the first phase of the operation have been completed, the combat potential of the armed forces of Ukraine has been significantly reduced, which allows us, I emphasise again, to focus the main efforts on achieving the main goal – the liberation of Donbas."

The statement can be seen as a positive rewriting of reality, but despite this, it shows what the General Staff officially communicated at this specific time. The statement also shows a significant military shift in the war's focus, from trying to take the political centre of power in Ukraine to emphasizing the occupation of a specific region. This led to massive troop movements and the surrender of the territories won in northern Ukraine. General Aleksandr Dvornikov, commander of the Southern Military District, was given unified command of the operation.

In September, the partial mobilisation was launched, which meant an additional 300,000 soldiers were called up. Russian President Vladimir Putin declared the four regions of Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhya and Kherson annexed in a speech, shifting the focus of the war from primarily Donbas, which General Rudskoy had just announced, to all four regions. After moving forces from north to east, and despite the mobilisation, in September and October 2022, the Russians were subjected to Ukrainian attacks, causing Russian forces to relinquish large land holdings, particularly around Kharkiv and Kherson.

Overall, the Kharkiv area was lost in September, which was in stark contrast to Putin's objective. It was a defeat for the Russians, with large parts of their forces collapsing and a coordinated retreat turning into a rout. It was not only land that the Russians had to relinquish, but also a large number of captured soldiers and a considerable amount of equipment (Gady & Kofman, 2023). Internally, the Russians suffered from low morale during this period, which contributed to the armed forces' inability to fight effectively (Dalsjö et al., 2022; Heier, 2023; Zabrodskyi et al., 2022). The Russians had largely abandoned the idea of offensive operations with larger unit formations and had moved predominantly to a defensive war.

The Russians' revised plan, with a focus on the east, proved unsustainable just a few months later. The loss of Kharkiv and the Ukrainian pressure on Kherson may have contributed to the large turnover of military commanders in key positions (Bailey & Stepanenko, 2023). Even the head of the entire operation in Ukraine was replaced several times, but in October, General Gerasimov, the Chief of the General Staff, was appointed as Supreme Commander. Apparently, a new approach was needed from a political point of view. But despite the replacement of senior operational commanders, the Russians also lost large parts of Kherson. With the installation of Gerasimov, there was a shift in the use of military means. Massive drone and missile strikes were now used against civilian infrastructure in

Ukraine. The attacks had two main objectives: 1) To weaken the Ukrainian economy and 2) To influence the Ukrainian will to fight. While the military strategy in the first phase of the war was aimed at the political and societal level, the defeat of the Ukrainian military to take over Donbas became the main focus in autumn 2022.

With the mobilisation, one of the external factors that put pressure on the military was again seen. Despite intensive recruitment campaigns and salary increases, recruitment to the military lagged. The Russians changed the organisation, and after 10 years of battalion combat groups, the concept was abandoned (Ministry of Defence, 2022). Once again, units had to learn to fight together in new organisational structures (Heier, 2023).

In the face of the Ukrainian offensive, the Russians did not manage to stop the attack. The Russians were mostly forced into temporary defensive positions and were only able to conduct offensive operations to a very limited extent. The number and quality of Russian forces were not high enough. The massive support of the Ukrainians from countries all over the world contributed to the Ukrainian forces becoming stronger again and again. Realistic plans were not delivered at the operational level, and the nature of the plans again underestimated the Ukrainians and overestimated Russian capabilities.

The period was characterised by a meandering course. First, the official focus was on Donbas, then the focus was on the four regions, and then large parts of these areas were lost. The political signal of the annexation of the four regions also contrasted with the official statements of the military's top commander, who emphasised that the focus was on Donbas. This was not doctrine. Svechin emphasised that there should be minimal interference from the political-strategic level at the operational level (Jonsson, 2019). This period was characterised by the opposite, with changing commanders and the expansion of political objectives that could not immediately be met. Even though there was holistic leadership during the period, the change in leadership level was quite significant. This may indicate a lack of a feedback mechanism between the operational and political-strategic levels. The operational level failed to create coherence between goals, methods and means. The means and methods were not aligned, making the plan too risky.

While the first phase was characterised by structural apathy (Hannan & Freeman, 1984), the second phase of the war saw a new orientation (March, 1981). Through massive pressure, the Ukrainians managed to force the

Russians further back and on the defensive, where the focus was on holding the land they had won. At the same time, a structural apathy (Hannan & Freeman, 1984) in relation to the fulfilment of the politically proclaimed objectives was still evident. The adaptive strategy is seen in the reorientation regarding the internal conditions and in relation to the threat from the Ukrainians, while structural apathy was the predominant strategy in relation to the political-strategic level.

Analysis section 3 – War of attrition over the summer of 2023

The final section is based on the fighting over the summer of 2023. The war of attrition began in early winter 2022 and is characterised by minimal shifts on the frontline despite massive fighting. The Ukrainian offensive went from being called a spring offensive to a summer offensive. An offensive where the Ukrainians had to show how they could fight with the newly donated heavy weapon systems. In early June 2023, the Ukrainians began offensive operations. It was the start of approximately two months of trying to break through the Russian defences. As a result, the Russians became more defensive and lost a few hundred square kilometres (Miller et al., 2023). The Russian goal was to retain control of the four regions. There were certainly no statements in favour of an adjustment. No major attempts were made to gain control of all four regions, with the exception of the Wagner Group's battles to take the city of Bakhmut, which they were able to claim in early summer (Stepanenko, 2023).

During this period, the Russians' ability and willingness for offensive operations were very limited, which reduced the pressure on the Ukrainian military. Instead, the focus was on putting economic pressure on the Ukrainians by imposing a naval blockade and cancelling the Black Sea grain initiative. In this way, Russian means were used less riskily by focusing on the use of naval power. On land, the Russians changed tactics and built massive defences. This proved to be an effective tactic in stopping the Ukrainian attack. Even though the Ukrainians managed to make a small breach in the defensive line, the Russians were repeatedly and effectively able to close the gap.

On the inner lines, the Russian armed forces struggled with several bad cases of internal discord. An audio file of General Popov, the most decorated general and commander of the 58th Army, was published on social media, where he sharply criticised the strategic choices, leadership,

logistical capability, etc. Popov expressed sharp criticism of the leadership, as seen in this quote from the audio file (Lister et al., 2023):

"The Ukrainian army could not break through our ranks at the front, but our supreme commander hit us from behind by treacherously and viciously beheading the army at the most difficult and intense moment".

It cost him his job. The Wagner Group's mutiny similarly revealed a deep distrust of the operational and political-strategic level. Trust in the leadership is crucial for high morale in a military organisation, and this distrust, as well as the discussion about the purpose, is one of the reasons why morale remains low in the armed forces (Jeppesen & Elrond, 2021; Kurki, 2023). The internal unrest came during a period when the Russians actually managed to hold their ground – overall – but the criticism was probably more about uncertainty in relation to the objective.

The Russian armed forces generally managed to stop the Ukrainian attacks and, not least, to stop and defeat the Ukrainians' Western-donated armoured vehicles (Lockwood, 2023). However, the objective of holding all the territory of the annexed regions was not achieved with the chosen method. There do not seem to have been enough resources to carry out major offensive operations. However, the Russians managed to create an effective defensive plan that could resist the Ukrainian attack. In this way, there seems to have been adaptive learning at the tactical level (Ryan, 2024a).

No further proactive efforts are being made to fulfil the political task at hand. The Russians' operational handling of the task with goals, means, methods and risk management paints a picture of structural apathy (Hannan & Freeman, 1984). Defence does not bring the Russians closer to the proclaimed goal, but an adjustment (Hambrick & Finkelstein, 1987) is made to deal with Ukrainian pressure. Similarly, the naval blockade is seen as an adjustment strategy where the Ukrainians were pressured economically with relatively few means. Thus, it could appear that the Russians were working towards a status quo solution during this period, where land gained was not lost and pressure was applied wherever possible.

Conclusion and perspective

The challenges and pressure for the Russian armed forces deployed in Ukraine during the period analysed, from the start of the war to the summer of 2023, generally came from two sources: the outside world and their own organisation. The Russian armed forces failed to fulfil the expectations of the political system, while the Ukrainians managed to retake large areas of land and prevent the Russians from achieving success on the battlefield. On the domestic front, a picture emerged of a Russian military that lacked the training, morale, resilience, equipment and leadership to wage a successful war, and where internal strife and discord hampered co-operation.

As Jonsson (2019) described, Russia has a tradition of viewing war from a holistic perspective that includes military, economic, political and social aspects. Throughout the three stages of the war, the operational focus has shifted from putting political and societal pressure on Ukraine to focusing more on economic and military pressure. The many shifts in focus may of course suggest that the Russians have been adaptive, yet the problem, as this analysis has shown, is that the chosen adaptive strategy has not brought them closer to their goal. However, the adaptive approach has repeatedly sought to fulfil lowered objectives, which then turned out not to be met either. Essentially, a structural apathy (Hannan & Freeman, 1984) has crept into the Russian military. But at the same time, there have also been signs of readjustment and reorientation initiated by Ukrainian pressure. But what is the reason for this unwillingness to achieve the objectives?

Were the means sufficient?

When assessing Russian resources, it must be done according to two parameters: quantity and quality. Numerically, Russia has an advantage, while having a larger mass to draw from (Johnson, 2022). When looking at personnel resources, there is no getting around recruitment problems, high casualty rates and poorly trained soldiers, and the lack of a second mobilisation most likely meant that the resources were not enough to do more than eventually hold on to captured territories (Kjellén, 2023). The quality of training, leadership and coordination was not high enough. Furthermore, the nature of the equipment was also largely unsuitable for warfare, which put a strain on the logistical links. This led to a loss of confidence that has affected morale from the beginning of the war. The allocation of

resources, both in terms of quantity and quality, could not match the challenges they faced on the battlefield.

Are the methods right?

The holistic approach to the use of military assets has meant that sustained concentration has not been favoured. The shift in objectives meant that resources and focus were constantly changing at the expense of sustained pressure and concentration.

At the operational level, there was great confidence in the Russians' own capabilities and will. At the beginning of the war, this confidence led to unrealisable objectives based on offensive forms of combat, but over time the chosen methods became increasingly defensive, primarily due to the pressure the Ukrainians managed to put on the Russians.

The methods of pressuring and winning on the battlefield have changed during the war. Initially, the focus was on pressuring the political-strategic level and then abandoning this approach. Then the focus shifted to the attrition of the military and later again to the economic/societal level. The many shifts have taken their toll on the sustained pressure and resulted in funds being spent on areas that did not have the desired effect.

What's happening to risk appetite?

Risk-taking has been minimised as the war has developed. The war started with an audacious plan to take Kyiv within a short time. As the Ukrainians' pressure on the battlefield and the political pressure with numerous changes of key commanders in the armed forces mounted, the willingness to take risks has become less and less. Offensive methods have been replaced by defensive ones and thus the objectives of the war cannot be realised. As Yarger (2006) states, the strategist must seek to minimise this risk through strategy development. However, the problem is that the risk appetite during this period was so low that the armed forces did not get any closer to achieving the political objective – quite the opposite.

What does this say about operational management?

As described in the introduction, for Svechin, the operational level is about understanding the nature of the operation itself, in addition to objectives, means, methods and risks (Svetjin, 1992). The core of the operation in Ukraine is of course very much about the pressure the Ukrainians manage to put on the Russians, the support they receive from outside, and the

expectations the Russian political-strategic level has of what is to be achieved. The analysis in this chapter has shown that there is external pressure from the political level and from the Ukrainians, which means that there is a need for crucial adaptive adjustments in the war.

There seems to be something wrong with the internal feedback mechanism that Korabelnikov described as essential at the operational level to create an effective communication flow between the tactical and strategic levels. There are very few sources with in-depth insight that describe the reasons for the lack of feedback, but if Prigozhin and Popov's accusations of lack of responsiveness are true, a filter has been installed between the operational and political-strategic levels that inhibits feedback. This may be one of the reasons for the lack of rigour in goals, means, methods and risks. The feedback mechanism between the operational and tactical levels seems to be different, where many necessary adaptive measures have been incorporated throughout the war in order to survive (Ryan, 2024a; Watling & Reynolds, 2023b).

Whether the Russians' lack of or weak ability to adapt means that they will lose the war cannot be said. Farrell (2022) has studied how adaptation can develop when two military forces go to war with each other. He argues that as time passes, competing military forces will end up co-adapting so that they evolve simultaneously. In this way, the war at the time of writing (November 2024) can be seen as a situation where the two military forces have adapted to a defensive situation in which the Russians are very slowly, and at great cost, chewing into Ukrainian territory. At the same time, some of the same tendencies of a weak ability to predict Ukrainian actions can be seen, for example when the Ukrainians attacked into the Kursk region in August 2024. In this way, the adaptive approach still seems to bring something new to the war, because it is about creatively unfolding the military tools in the military opportunity space.

What can we learn going forward?

Before the war, there was great confidence that the Russian armed forces could lead, wage and manage a war against a "smaller country" like Ukraine. The Russians had demonstrated in major exercises that they could manage and coordinate large and complex operations. But the reality, we must now say, was that these were mostly well-orchestrated theatre performances (Pili & Minniti, 2022). Assessments of Russia's pre-war military capabilities have been overly focused on quantity and technology. It has

been easy – or easiest – to count the number of units, naval vessels, tanks, missiles, etc. and on that basis assess the Russian ability to wage war. What has been missing is the in-depth and critical examination of quality – looking at hard-to-measure factors such as leadership, morale, training, feedback mechanisms, ability to conduct operations, etc.

During the war, Russia's ability to be adaptive has evolved. The armed forces aim to learn from the mistakes made at the beginning of the war. This is most evident in the ability to adapt tactically (Brands, 2024; Ryan, 2024b). At the operational level, there has been a development, although it is not as significant. But what the Russians have managed to do is adapt and utilise the factors in the military option space (Jarl & Frelin, 2024).

The day peace or peace-like conditions arise in Ukraine, Russia will have a significant and trained military force that is in no way comparable to what it had before the war. This poses a threat to Denmark and NATO (Danish Defence Intelligence Agency, 2024), as they have shown both the will and ability to wage war. The gap between a battle-hardened nation and a peacetime nation can be crucial in war. Elliot (2012) writes that this gap can become extremely costly in war in terms of loss of life and resources before such a gap is minimised.

The adaptation gap can be minimised by continuously adjusting and adapting the factors in the military option space: doctrine, legal restrictions, resources, time, task/mission, terrain and enemy options (Jarl & Frelin, 2024). However, as this chapter also shows, not only are internal conditions important but so is an outlook towards potential enemies and effective communication between the military level and the strategic-political level. The Danish military must therefore carefully assess whether it has the capability to fight a modern war. This can be done by both learning from the war in Ukraine and continuously trying to predict how, where and with what means future wars will be fought in order to make the necessary adaptations.

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CHAPTER 17

Conclusion

By Niels Bo Poulsen & Jørgen Staun

Introduction

The war in Ukraine was still in full swing when the last sentence in this book was written. Despite enormous material and human losses, the Russian war machine grinds on. And the Ukrainians are still holding their ground. But where does the Russian military actually stand after three years of full-scale war? What can we say about the regime's future use of the Russian armed forces? And where does that leave Denmark and NATO?

In this book, we have discussed the increasingly centralised Russian form of government, which can best be described as a kind of medieval royal court with constant battles for the attention and favour of the president. We have followed the elite's increasingly radicalised worldview and found probable motives for invading Ukraine in Russian great power thinking, in the military sense of vulnerability and fear of NATO, but especially in the increasing Russian imperialism and ethnic nationalism. In addition, we have focused on the accelerating patriotism and militarism in Russian society, including the pervasive indoctrination of Russian youth, whose primary purpose is to mould young people to become good soldiers for the motherland and secure supporters for the regime. We have also discussed the Russians' ability to adapt militarily, which may not have been impressive, but seems to be increasing. In addition, we have sought to assess Russian military capability both by analysing the Russian armed forces and by examining other important components in the way Russia

applies military power, such as its special forces and the extensive use of influence operations.

In this chapter, the individual contributions will be synthesised and the perspectives for Danish security and defence will be outlined. This is done in three movements. First, we take stock of Russia's overall political and economic situation and the state of its alliance strategy after three years of war – an issue that is outside the scope of this book, but which is necessary to make a comprehensive assessment of where Russia and its ability and willingness to use military force are heading in the coming years. Next, we look at the country's military capability, service by service, and discuss the Russian ability to coordinate its means and generate and deploy combat power based on the knowledge that the chapters on the individual services and capabilities have created. Finally, we offer a perspective on the picture that emerges and the possible threat from Russia to Denmark and its NATO partners.

Russia after three years of war

The international framework conditions for Russia after three years of war in Ukraine have simultaneously developed both better and worse than the Kremlin probably imagined. The timing of the war probably reflected the fact that Putin and his advisors saw the West as weakened after several years of the Covid-19 pandemic and a chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan, and characterised by domestic political polarisation and distrust of established political forces in countries such as France, Germany and the US. It is debatable whether the Western response could or should have been faster, stronger and more aggressive than it turned out. All in all, however, it is fair to say that Russia has probably been met with greater consequences and a stronger willingness for confrontation than the Kremlin had originally anticipated.

Russia's timing was good in the sense that up until the outbreak of war in 2022, the Russian regime had managed to make the country and its elite relatively resistant to sanctions. This was helped by the continued high demand for Russian energy – especially oil and gas – in several European economies, not least Germany. As a result, the economic sanctions imposed on Russia after the invasion have neither brought Russia to the negotiating table nor dismantled its economy – despite some media speculation that it

was an "economic nuclear bomb" (Hamilton, 2024). The fact that the sanctions have not brought Russia to its knees is primarily due to the country's quite healthy state finances. But this does not mean that the sanctions have not had a significant effect (Hedlund, 2024). Also in Moscow's favour is the fact that Western sanctions have not received broad support in the Global South. On the contrary, several countries – including a number of European countries – have seen extensive sanctions circumvention, where microchips and semiconductors, which Russia desperately needs for its weapons industry, have been exported to Russia's southern neighbours and then re-exported onto the Russian market.

Russia has also been able to skilfully exploit its relations with countries such as Iran, China and North Korea. China has provided Russia with crucial diplomatic backing in the form of alleged neutrality in the conflict. China's position has also given smaller countries in the Global South far more elbow room than if China had distanced itself from Russia's aggression. In the specific negotiations on the purchase of Russian gas, for example, China seems to have taken advantage of Russia's vulnerable situation to secure highly favourable contracts for itself. On the other hand – and this is not insignificant – the Chinese have clearly rejected any Russian use of tactical nuclear weapons in Ukraine.

Elsewhere, the Putin regime's foreign policy strength and freedom of action have also been curtailed as a result of the war. In the Caucasus, Russia has watched as its client state Armenia's control of the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave was lost in an Azerbaijani lightning campaign in September 2023, a campaign strongly supported by one of Russia's geopolitical rivals in the Caucasus, Turkey (Yalçınkaya, 2021). At the time of writing, another Russian client state, Syria, was also feeling the consequences of the Kremlin's focus on Ukraine. When Islamist rebels went on the offensive again in the otherwise languishing civil war, the regime in Damascus only received modest support from Russia, which probably contributed significantly to the surprising fall of the Assad regime.

Iran and North Korea are often referred to somewhat derisively in the Western press. However, the two countries have provided Russia with valuable support in the form of drone and ammunition sales – for example, some reports indicate that North Korea has delivered between 1.6 and 6 million artillery shells to Russia, while the million promised to Ukraine by European countries has not yet arrived. The deployment of 10-12,000 North Korean soldiers in Kursk is not insignificant either; on the contrary,

it makes it easier for Putin to avoid a new wave of mobilisation. Furthermore, the increasingly close Russian-North Korean cooperation, which has also resulted in a so-called alliance treaty, creates new complicated dynamics on the Korean peninsula. What does North Korea get in return for the shells and troops it sends to Russia? Russian missile defence systems? Help to extend the range of North Korean missiles? We do not know. But what is certain is that South Korea and Japan, which will be more threatened by an enhanced North Korean missile programme, will have to consider what steps they need to take to secure themselves against a perceived increasing threat from North Korea. And how will China react to increased armament in South Korea or Japan?

As demonstrated in chapters 2 to 4, the Russian leadership has a number of reasons to continue the war. The war is seen as justified in terms of security, geostrategy and history. There is no indication that the – extreme – extent of Russian losses on the battlefields of Ukraine has led to a real crisis of legitimacy for the regime. At the same time, it should be noted that Russia's poorest regions have actually received a significant injection of capital through the, by Russian standards, staggering bonuses for joining the war and the even larger amounts that go to the families of fallen soldiers as compensation. Add to this a middle and upper class in the big cities who, at the time of writing, seem relatively untouched by the war – physically, financially and morally – although rising inflation, the fall of the rouble and the central bank lending rate of 21 per cent, high even by Russian standards, with the promise of an imminent increase, seem to be taxing the patience of both the elite and the population.

However, decisively opposing the regime would be foolhardy, as it is becoming increasingly repressive. It is in this context that the discussion in chapters 3 and 5 on whether Russia has evolved into a totalitarian or fascist country should be seen. In any case, what remains is that extremist voices are given plenty of space in the otherwise highly controlled media landscape. In an interview with a Russian media outlet at the turn of 2023-24, political scientist Sergei Karaganov, who as mentioned in chapters 4 and 11 of the book has repeatedly called on Putin to use nuclear weapons, said the following about the consequences of war for Russia:

"The military operation we are conducting in Ukraine is aimed, among other things, at preparing the country for life in the future very dangerous world. We are purifying our elite, kicking out corrupt, pro-Western elements. [...] The special military

operation helps our self-cleansing from Westerners and Westernism, helps us find our new place in history." (Karaganov, 2023)

Not only does the war provide increased space for such views. Putin's campaign also has the domestic political consequence of fuelling the power struggle between the established elite and groups that use their participation in the war as a form of social and political capital. The behaviour of Wagner Group leader Yevgeny Prigozhin in the months leading up to and during the march on Moscow on 23 June 2023 is a clear example of this. If this interpretation is correct, the risk of political instability seems to increase the longer Putin allows the war to last. British Russia expert Mark Galeotti argues that war has become the organising principle for power struggles in the Kremlin and is actually emerging as the main principle for the distribution of goods relevant to the elite/society in Russia.

Russia's domestic political stability – despite the high level of propaganda and repression – is not a given. The Prigozhin affair in June 2023 demonstrated an astonishing degree of paralysis among the relevant authorities. Several violent terrorist attacks – most notably the horrific attack on the Crocus music arena in Moscow in March 2024 – have cast doubt on the ability of police and security authorities to conduct surveillance of ordinary citizens, fight terrorism and be deployed as an occupying force in Ukraine – as is the case for a significant part of the domestic force Rosgvardiya. And Ukraine's surprise incursion into the Kursk region in August 2024 showed once again how difficult it is for the Putin regime to react to unforeseen events or intelligence of imminent attacks that do not fit the norm. Not only can an inability to protect the country's citizens from terror and war undermine the regime, but it is also still possible that high casualties on the front lines or the consequences of the huge economic reprioritisation caused by the war could do so. So far, the Russian regime looks stable. Just remember that an opaque authoritarian regime like Russia's looks stable until the day it falls apart.

The crux of the matter, in terms of whether the war must eventually be stopped because it risks undermining the legitimacy of the regime, is whether a sufficiently large part of the population perceives the war as a struggle for survival, that is, shares the narrative of Russia as being vulnerable and threatened, but also as a country that must and should be a great power, as described in Chapter 3.

The war can end for many reasons. It can end because the Ukrainians agree to Russia's demands, including the loss of Western support for Ukraine. And it could end because US President Trump puts so much pressure on one or both sides that peace is forced upon them. And it could end because the Russian forces can do no more. As the book's chapters on individual Russian services and capabilities have shown, there are no signs that Russia's offensive capabilities – despite the enormous losses of the war – are exhausted, but neither are they inexhaustible. Let us now turn to Russia's military forces and summarise the assessments made in the individual chapters.

The Russian military service by service – strengthened or weakened by the war?

The analysis in Chapter 6 on the Russian army is unequivocal. The Russian ground forces do not currently have the resources to fight a conventional war with NATO. One of the Russian army's main problems is that it is basically wasting resources – equipment, ammunition and the lives of its own soldiers. Therefore, forces need to be regenerated at too fast a pace and in too large a number for the units and soldiers to be adequately trained in Russian doctrine and tactics before they are sent into combat.

On an operational and tactical level, the Russian army has had some success in learning from experience on the battlefield. The army has proven itself capable of applying its lessons learnt in cover, concealment, suppression, depth and reserve. However, the army is severely challenged in terms of independent combat with small units and combined arms at the tactical level. Doctrinally, the basics seem to be in place, but the requirement for education, training and, not least, routine training of soldiers and units, especially when it comes to interoperability and synchronisation, requires time and resources.

While Russian lessons learnt may be just beginning, the Russian capability for force generation and production of armaments and ammunition, as we have seen in the war of attrition, clearly calls for reflection. Today, Russia has a significantly larger ground force deployed in Ukraine than the invasion army it started with in 2022. They have gone from a force of between 190,000 and 200,000 soldiers at the start of the war to an estimated

470,000 soldiers (Watling & Reynolds, 2024).¹ The US and UK authorities estimate the total number of Russian casualties to be 600,000 and 700,000 soldiers respectively: dead, wounded and missing (AFP, 2024; Schmitt, 2024). In less than three years, Russia has generated a total of almost one million soldiers.

We can see that, especially at the tactical level, the Russian army is gaining experience in modern warfare that no NATO forces have – in a war where the Russians even have to defend themselves against Western weapons. This will give them an advantage *over* NATO. And this means that if, following a peace agreement, the Russian army succeeds in translating the expensive experience gained on the battlefield in Ukraine into education and training, which is then spread throughout the organisation, we risk ending up with a regenerated, experienced Russian army. And if the Russian political leadership chooses to maintain the high level of production of military equipment and ammunition – and it is quite likely that they will – the Russian army could be rebuilt within a shorter or longer period. This could make the Russian army a difficult opponent in any future conflict with NATO.

For the Russian navy, there is no immediate cause for celebration – at least in terms of the Black Sea Fleet's involvement in the war in Ukraine. The Black Sea Fleet has been so challenged by long-range Ukrainian missiles and drones that it has lost its operational relevance in the current situation. Ukraine's *sea denial* capability – the ability to prevent the Russian navy from using the Black Sea effectively in its operations against Ukraine – has reduced the Black Sea Fleet's ability to fire long-range cruise missiles at land and move supplies between increasingly fewer safe harbours. The fleet cannot threaten Ukrainian shores with landing operations. Nor has it been able to maintain a maritime blockade of Ukrainian harbours. And it has not been able to protect Crimea from air and sea attacks. Russia's problem now is that it is quite difficult to reverse a negative trend in a naval war. Once a navy is in a downward spiral, the negative trend is often very difficult to stop. This is due to the long delivery time for new ships and the high demands on infrastructure in the form of an efficient shipbuilding industry. There is no indication that Russia will be able to rebuild the

1. According to the Ukrainian Defence Intelligence Service, the total number of Russian troops in Ukraine from the start of the invasion to 22 November 2024 increased from 360,000 to 580,000 (Interfax-Ukraine, 2024).

shipyards in the Black Sea region within a relevant timeframe, given the war in Ukraine. There is also no real indication that Russia will be able to find solutions to contain the drone threat, as the technological development of maritime drones currently outpaces the development of defence systems against them.

Of course, the Black Sea Fleet is only one of several Russian navies. But the overall long-term prospects for the Russian navy are not positive. By geography, tradition and identity, Russia is a land power. And the army has traditionally been at the front of the queue when it comes to equipment and materiel – after the Second World War in fierce competition with the strategic rocket forces and the nuclear triad. The navy comes far down the line in the competition for military resources. The reconstruction of the Black Sea Fleet therefore has a long way to go.

The Russian Space and Air Force (VKS) has also had major problems. The VKS has been unable to gain air supremacy over Ukraine. This is primarily due to the belief of the top leadership and military planners that the Russian forces would not have to fight their way out, but that Ukraine would fall, almost by itself, within a few days. Therefore, at the start of the war, they chose not to use the resources necessary to at least attempt to gain air supremacy. As pointed out in Chapter 8, in the initial phase, the VKS used only about 160 cruise missiles against airports, air defence units and aircraft scattered across Ukraine.² In comparison, the US fired 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles in 2017 when it attacked some of Syria's production facilities and delivery vehicles to carry out chemical weapons attacks (Zhirovkov, 2022, p. 17). And one U.S. Army unit alone used 102 ATACMS missiles on the first day of the war in Iraq in 2003 (Pitts, 2003).

In addition, the VKS has proven to lack the ability to plan and execute large, complex air operations – where there can be up to a hundred or more aircraft in the air at a time with different roles and targets – which is why Russia has not been able to gain control of Ukrainian airspace since. The problem of securing air supremacy is probably also due to the very large quantities of anti-aircraft missiles that the West supplied to Ukraine quite early in the conflict. The lack of air superiority has meant that Russian operations on land – and to a lesser extent in the Black Sea – have not received

2. And since the attack plan had been leaked, the Ukrainians even moved many of their aircraft and air defence units shortly before the attack, avoiding many casualties.

the air support from attack helicopters and fighter jets with laser or TV-guided missiles (close air support) that a modern army needs. The VKS has clearly not had the capacity to perform accurate and rapid intelligence gathering and target selection either.

However, the Russian air force has succeeded somewhat. The Russian fighter jets, especially the Su-30 and Su-35, have proved effective and superior to the Ukrainian aircraft. They have been able to suppress the Ukrainian air defence with jamming and missiles, but have not been able to knock out the Ukrainian air defence. Russian long-range missiles have also proved effective. The VKS has also shown adaptive capabilities and has learnt to get better at new types of missions, updating target designation technology and developing a (cheap) glide system that has transformed their traditional "dumb" bombs, of which they have many from the old Soviet stockpile, into more intelligent bombs with increased range. The Russian S-300V and -V4, Buk-M1, -M2 and -M3, and Tor air defence systems have proved relatively effective in keeping Ukraine from flying over the occupied territories. However, in the later part of the war, Ukraine has been successful with a large number of drone strikes and a few missile strikes against targets deep inside Russia. This suggests that the VKS may be prepared for defence against aircraft, cruise missiles and helicopters, but not against the slower flying drones.

For the Russian armed forces, Ukrainian drones have presented a steep learning curve, which has not been pretty. Drones have taken centre stage in the war in Ukraine and are likely to play a key role in future conflicts. The advent of cheap, highly effective surveillance and first-person view (FPV) attack drones has changed the dynamics on the battlefield, especially close to the front lines – and especially after the war became a war of position and exhaustion. Reports from Ukraine are that in a five-kilometre-wide belt on both sides of the front, all movement and often all communications are detected and targeted by the enemy. This has major consequences for all military traffic, whether it's bringing ammunition or food to units or getting wounded or dead soldiers out of the area. It is difficult to find an accurate figure for Russia's production and use of FPV drones. At the time of writing, open sources vary between 25,000 (Roblin, 2023) and 40,000 (Hambling, 2024) per month, with Russia itself reporting as many as 120,000 per month (Savage, 2024). In any case, these are huge numbers. One thing is that drones have made it difficult to hide from the enemy; another is that the protection provided by multi-million dollar armoured

vehicles is actually often insufficient against the relatively cheap drones, especially if there are enough of them and they are used in coordination. In addition, flying munitions and self-flying bombs, such as Shahed/Geran, have the potential to replace the aircraft that previously provided close air support to ground forces in combat or long-range missile strikes. This means that countries or organisations that have no air force can and will use flying munitions and self-flying bombs to carry out attacks previously reserved for great powers or rich countries with expensive precision weapons. What unites the many different types of drones is that they are not only highly accurate; they are also relatively cheap and already widely available on the global market.

One of the places where the high Russian casualties are causing problems for the military's desire to maintain a high level of training is among the Russian special forces. It is still possible to recruit soldiers with sufficient mental and physical characteristics to be accepted into the special forces. However, a significant proportion of the cadres needed to ensure a high level of professionalism among the new soldiers has been lost. And this is expensive, not least in terms of time. In round figures, it takes at least four years to train an effective spetsnaz soldier and as long or longer to train a spetsnaz officer at company commander level.

Russia, on the other hand, remains a leading nuclear power in the world – on par with the US. This is a position they have deliberately maintained and chosen to secure for many years to come through a long-standing, comprehensive modernisation programme that is now nearing completion. Russia has a stockpile of approximately 4,380 nuclear warheads intended for use, of which 1,710 are deployed on land-based missile systems (870), submarines (640) and bombers (200) (Kristensen et al., 2024). On 19 November 2024, Putin signed a new, official Russian doctrine on the use of nuclear weapons. In it, Russia reserves the right to use nuclear weapons against an aggressor state acting in coordination with a nuclear-armed ally. In the event of an attack by a non-nuclear weapon state co-operating with a nuclear-armed power, this type of aggression will be considered as a single attack, it states. However, the doctrine is not radically different from the previous one, and it seems that by adopting a new doctrine, Russia is trying to use the change itself as a form of intimidation of NATO.

Still, there are also other areas of concern. In 2023, Russia chose to terminate its participation in the last remaining arms control treaty governing US-Russian strategic nuclear weapons, the 2010 New START agreement,

which had been extended for a five-year period back in 2021. In the broader non-proliferation arena, Russia has also moved in an unfortunate direction. The country has gone from being an active international player working to maintain the non-proliferation regime to being a practical and strategic partner for both Iran and North Korea in weapons technology.

In the cyber domain, Russia has had neither the capabilities nor the resources to degrade Ukraine's cyber defences. On the other hand, the Russian government has shown itself willing to allow cybercriminals and activists to join forces to attack targets in Ukraine – and even in NATO countries. The war has strengthened the more moderate arguments in the debate on offensive cyber weapons and military cyber power, highlighting the limitations of cyber attacks at the tactical and operational levels, especially in situations where the battlefield is characterised by rapid developments. Thus, it is clear that offensive cyber attacks have the potential to undermine the cohesion of digitalised societies at the strategic level through attacks on, for example, communications and critical infrastructure – but not if the adversary maintains a high degree of resilience. Resilience, especially the ability to rebuild after an attack, is key. But this requires preparation. Therefore, Russia's lack of results in Ukraine should not lead to complacency in the Danish government, as it is a difficult, expensive, complex and politically thankless task to expand and implement existing cyber and information security strategies.

Russia's extensive use of private military companies (PMCs) and irregular militias has proven effective, but also risky. Above all, the use of PMCs has spared the Russian authorities from having to launch another mobilisation, which would likely have been unpopular with the Russian population. The common lesson of the Wagner Group's mutiny – Yevgeny Prigozhin's failed march on Moscow in June 2023 – seems to be that private actors should not be allowed to grow too big and strong. But this overlooks the fact that the Wagner Group could hardly have achieved its goals of a palace coup with just 4,000 soldiers. It also overlooks the fact that the group has never been truly private, but has always been a semi-state entity rooted in Russia's security apparatus. The military companies have brought experience from abroad, which has been adapted to the battlefield in Ukraine and then spread among Russian armed units. However, the groups have generally been no more sophisticated than using tactics that still entail high casualty rates and heavy use of ammunition.

One of the places where Russia has been successful is in the area of information and influence. For example, Chapter 14, Russia's war in the information space, assesses that the Kremlin's nuclear threat rhetoric and the regime's influence and information efforts have had an impact on the West's willingness to donate money and weapons. In particular, Russia's influence operations have supported the long-standing ban in the West on Ukraine using the donated weapons against targets inside Russia itself. Russia's information efforts, on the other hand, have not been able to influence Ukraine's will to fight. Over time, it must also be considered that the West has become far more resistant to Russian intimidation attempts.

An important lesson from the war in Ukraine is that while the physical battlefield is geographically limited, the cognitive battlefield is now global in scope. Russia has demonstrated an ability to mobilise support and partners on a global scale to an extent that initially seemed to take the Western bloc by surprise. And while the West expected unified opposition to Russia's illegitimate invasion of Ukraine, through anti-colonialist rhetoric, anti-Americanism and accusations of Western double standards, Russia was able to assemble a counter-bloc that has been and continues to be expressed in UN votes. This development is in itself highly significant. It is not an expression of widespread support for Russia's aggression, but – and this in itself is also very worrying from a Western perspective – a perception of the conflict as being of secondary relevance and/or as an opportunity to advance their own interests, for example in the form of access to cheap Russian oil. Interpreted in this way, the global reaction to the war indicates a trend towards a less rules-based world characterised by great power competition and opportunism. A world where Europe, and even the US, will be less important and where there will be less stability – at least from a European perspective. In this world, the use of military means to pursue interests will be more widespread and lead to global rearmament – which is already an observable trend, see for example, The Security Policy Analysis Group (2022).

Can Russia learn from its mistakes?

Although we believe that the Russian armed forces, especially the Russian army, do not currently pose a real conventional threat to an entrenched and effective NATO, it would be problematic to underestimate Russia's ability

to recover. Russia – and its predecessor state, the Soviet Union – has repeatedly demonstrated a formidable ability to regenerate its military forces, even when things looked bleak. Historically, there are also numerous examples of how defeats on the battlefield incentivise sweeping military reforms that enable the country to take revenge in a short number of years. In addition, a weak and dysfunctional NATO is not an entirely unrealistic future possibility. This would in itself increase Russia's relative military strength.

The key question is firstly whether the Russian military is able to learn from its mistakes and adapt to the changes required by the modern battlefield. And secondly, whether the Russian economy and armaments industry will be able to supply sufficient equipment and ammunition, also in the longer term. In terms of adaptability – or the ability to adapt and change – there seems to be something wrong with the internal feedback mechanism that Russian doctrine otherwise describes as essential at the operational level. Because without it, the doctrine states, there can be no effective communication flow between the tactical and strategic levels. There are only a few open sources with in-depth insights that deal with the problems of the missing feedback loop. But if Wagner Group leader Yevgeny Prigozhin and the now imprisoned General Ivan Popov can be used as truth witnesses – and this should probably only be done with some caution – then there is a "filter" between the military operational level and the political strategic level that inhibits the flow of information and reduces the responsiveness of the regime, and thus inhibits Russia's ability to adapt to changes on the battlefield in a fast and effective way. This is certainly not a new problem, but rather represents an almost chronic state of affairs in Russia, where over-reporting success and suppression of inconvenient information has been the norm rather than the exception.

In terms of Russia's ability to adapt at a strategic level, things are looking better from the Russian perspective – although here too there are problems. Until 2026, Russia is not expected to be challenged in terms of recruitment or defence industrial production. In terms of personnel, the current mix of conscripts, partially mobilised and volunteers, seems to ensure a fairly stable supply of soldiers. So even though former defence minister Sergei Shoigu's goal of 1.5 million soldiers under arms by 2026 is unlikely to be met, the study in Chapter 15 concludes that it is not unlikely that the future Russian military will consist of a force in the region of 1.1 to 1.3 million personnel, excluding mobilised personnel – perhaps from 2030 onwards.

This corresponds to an expansion of between 30 and 40 per cent compared to the estimated strength from 2021 of just over 900,000. And that's a big task, especially while at war. A crucial prerequisite for success is that the Russian economy is able to accommodate a continuation of the expansive fiscal policy that the infusion of resources for the war represents. And with the signs of overheating in the Russian economy at the time of writing, we may well have our doubts. But the political will seems to be there.

In relation to the question of whether the Russian economy and armaments industry can continue to deliver, the answer here is less substantiated, as this is not a question we have examined in a separate chapter. However, Russia is likely to be able to continue on its current course for some time to come. Yet, this is far from being a course without costs. All things being equal, it will gradually make Russia poorer, less influential, more polarised in domestic politics and more dependent on China. Thus, the defence industry's ability to supply the quantities of equipment that are essential to the success of the current military strategy will also be more dependent on the continued ability and willingness of foreign partners – especially China, Iran and North Korea – to supply the necessary components, rare materials and advanced technology, including sanctioned dual-use components. And this will further distort the Russian economy. It will be moved (even further) away from a model with room for genuinely private companies with innovation potential and be locked into dependence on a few, primarily commodity or energy-extracting sectors.

The evolution of the war from an intended blitzkrieg to a war of attrition characterised by less movement and outmanoeuvring with more focus on fire and attrition is, from a historical perspective, a relatively frequent occurrence. At first glance, this change in warfare is most worrying for Ukraine. Partly because the war is taking place on Ukrainian territory. Partly because the country's human and financial resources are significantly smaller than those of Russia. In June, Russia's Ministry of Defence counted 33 million men fit for military service, according to a government database accessed by the news media Meduza. By comparison, there were six million potential soldiers living in Ukraine before Russia's invasion in 2022, just over half of whom have since been registered in the country's military service database (Kurmanaev, 2024).

This is partly compensated for by Ukraine's – as far as can be estimated – relatively lower manpower losses and its ability to attract support from its allies. But it is also entirely dependent on outside help in order to fight.

This goodwill has fluctuated over time and is at risk of crumbling depending on the future policies of the Trump administration – which is likely to be an important part of the Russian strategy. The longer Russia manages to retain control over Ukrainian territory, the greater the risk that the occupied territories will become the starting point for a ceasefire line and thus be retained by Russia during (fruitless or protracted) peace negotiations. It is in this light that Ukraine's attempt in late summer 2024 to take the war into Russian territory and capture border areas in the Kursk region north-east of Kharkiv should be seen.

Finally, let's turn from Russia and its war in Ukraine to Denmark, its neighbourhood and NATO.

The implications for Denmark and NATO

The most important lesson of the war in Ukraine is that Russia has shown a recklessness and purposefulness that appear out of proportion to the gains it seems able to achieve. The observed behaviour has been difficult for Western analysts to interpret, nor has Russia been compelled to change its behaviour through sanctions and support for Ukraine. Whatever form the war in Ukraine takes, it seems highly unrealistic to expect the West (or Russia for that matter) to return to pre-invasion *business as usual*. Therefore, it is more likely that we will live in a Europe characterised by deterrence and intense security competition, where the biggest and most immediate threat will come from Russia. But it will also be an international system where a more competitive and less rules-based world order can create other, partially military threats from major and middle powers that feel emboldened by the West's declining relative strength and use the new situation to challenge individual countries with which they have a specific dispute, in the form of influence operations or coercive diplomacy or other.

A continued high level of conflict with Russia will require a strong NATO. But it will also require significant intelligence capabilities and effective dialogue within countries and the alliance on how to most effectively deter the Kremlin regime, including responding to provocations and hybrid attacks. If the alliance remains united and under a US nuclear umbrella – and despite all the hype, this is the most likely scenario – the greatest risks will come from Russian subversion in the form of sabotage, disinformation and other hybrid forms of attack.

There have been many crises in NATO's history, and there have also been long periods when NATO was conventionally inferior to the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc. However, this did not lead to a Soviet attack due to the strong American presence in the alliance. The danger in the coming years will probably centre on a possible American disengagement initiated by President Trump, who has repeatedly, implicitly or explicitly, threatened such a move. Such a US "withdrawal" from Europe could create increased opportunities for Russia to initiate actions for which it need not fear a response because the alliance is too fragmented and lacks the ability and will to carry out a conventional war, or alternatively threaten nuclear deterrence. It is therefore necessary for European NATO countries to be re-armed both in terms of training and deployment of significantly larger forces than today, but also in terms of the necessary material procurement and the building of large stocks and underlying industrial capacity.

With Finland and Sweden joining NATO, the security geography of the Baltic Sea region has changed significantly. The Baltic Sea will become a kind of NATO inlet where it will be difficult, perhaps impossible, for the Russian Baltic Fleet to conduct offensive operations against NATO countries, including Denmark. An airborne landing of Russian forces on Danish soil will not be an easy task either. Bombing raids by bombers and fighters will also be difficult as numerous NATO fighters and ground-based air defence systems will make it difficult for them to operate. The conventional threat to Denmark will therefore primarily come from long-range missiles and drones. Here, however, the Ukraine war has clearly shown that Russia does not hesitate to hit civilian targets if it is deemed profitable. This means that air defence in the Danish context will not only have to defend military installations, but also vulnerable civilian critical infrastructure. Another observation from the war in Ukraine is that it is not possible to guarantee that no missiles or drones will penetrate even a very robust air defence system. Therefore, it is important to consider the role of passive air defence as a complement to active air defence. The principles of passive air defence – such as concealment, dispersion, deception and robust facilities – can be applied in both military and civilian contexts. In addition, the ability to repair damage quickly and efficiently should be a priority, and the possibility of air strikes – including on civilian targets – must be incorporated into civilian preparedness.

The small and affordable surveillance (ISR) drones and *first-person view* (FPV) attack drones have changed the dynamics of the battlefield and

made it even more difficult to hide from the opponent, turning armoured vehicles costing millions of dollars into easy prey for converted *off-the-shelf* drones costing a few thousand dollars. It's a change on the battlefield that will also affect the Danish Defence and NATO in a conflict. On the one hand, Danish army units deployed to the Baltic countries will be threatened by ISR and FPV drones or by attacks from loitering munitions (kamikaze drones). However, given their affordability, many potential adversaries other than the Russians could also use drones in large numbers. This new threat will require all three services to protect their weapons platforms, facilities and personnel, both in Denmark and during operations elsewhere in the world.

Above, we described the Baltic Sea as a kind of NATO lake – in the sense that Russia will find it difficult to operate militarily and the NATO countries will have some degree of control over it. However, the question for Denmark and NATO is whether the Russian navy's current problems in the Black Sea risk becoming NATO forces' future problems in the Baltic Sea. Because here it is NATO that needs to ensure *sea control*. Russia, on the other hand, can utilise the Baltic Sea's many bottlenecks, short distances and vulnerable critical infrastructure to disrupt NATO's ability to operate with long-range, land-based missile systems in combination with unmanned drones above, below and on the water. At the same time, it will probably be a combination of the Northern Fleet and the Baltic Sea Fleet that the Danish navy will have to deal with on both sides of the Danish straits. Because even if Denmark closes the strait, Russia will be able to sail corvette-sized ships between the Baltic Sea and the White Sea through its system of man-made canals, locks and rivers, the so-called inland waterways. In addition, missiles from the Northern Fleet's surface vessels and submarines will be able to reach targets in most of the Baltic Sea (depending on type). Russia's military planners seem to have taken this into account with the creation of the new Leningrad Military District, stretching from the Barents Sea in the north to Kaliningrad in the south. This makes the Barents Sea and the Baltic Sea a military "theatre" in Russian military thinking.

In Denmark, the Navy's strategic logic has for many years dictated a focus on large and flexible frigates that can perform many types of tasks. As a result, the Navy today consists of very few, but relatively valuable ships. In many ways, this approach has made sense so far. But the strategy is riskier if you want to fight a coastal war against a peer opponent. The

loss of a single frigate would represent a very large percentage of the fleet's total combat power. If you want to create a resilient fleet that can fight on despite losses, you should aim to spread your combat power across more and smaller platforms. The Black Sea naval war has also clearly demonstrated the vulnerability of surface vessels to missiles and drones. The only Russian vessels that have been able to operate despite the Ukrainian AD/A2 bubble are the country's submarines, which in turn have proved vulnerable in port. The question is whether Denmark's and NATO's surface vessels in a war scenario would not face at least some of the same problems in the Baltic Sea.

Denmark and the rest of the Danish Realm are also vulnerable on the seabed to actions carried out by Russian submarines and special forces against critical infrastructure. Therefore, there is a major task in creating a civil defence capability that is strong enough to counter the effects of these and other types of attacks on infrastructure. There is also a need to create a better capacity for maritime and airspace surveillance – an issue that is particularly precarious in relation to Greenland and which – as it is also linked to the US perception of its own territorial security – can have very far-reaching consequences if not handled correctly, possibly in the form of firm US demands or pressure on Greenland.

Ultimately, it will be a political choice how the possible Danish rearmament will be organised and financed. This is not just about the overall framework for the Danish armed forces, but also about difficult choices between the various services, including how best to size the future armed forces in relation to the widely different security geographies and threat scenarios that characterise the three parts of the Danish Realm. And this is very much a question of speed. The threats from Russia (and potentially other powers) outlined in this book are not decades away, but may already emerge in the very near future. It will therefore also be a major political task to build up the Danish Defence rapidly while ensuring adequate resource management – as well as occasionally facing the misinvestments, commissioning problems and other challenges that have historically almost always been the faithful companion of rearmament processes. How the impending, quite massive build-up of the Danish Defence will be managed could, in itself be the subject of an entire book. And since this will not only be a task for the Danish military but also forms part of the curriculum at the Royal Danish Defence College's Master in Military Studies, you, dear reader, may well find a textbook on the subject in your bookstore

a few years from now. If not, whether you are an ordinary taxpayer and voter, civilian official, officer or politician, you will at the very least be faced with many difficult questions in the coming years in the eternal dilemma between "guns and butter".

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