



## SAGE International Policy Brief



## PUTIN & RUSSIA ON BORROWED TIME

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## KEY FINDINGS

- The only nuclear option that remains credible for Vladimir Putin is a nuclear weapons test over an uninhabited part of Ukraine, Snake Island or elsewhere in the Black Sea. The role of such a test would signal an intent to escalate, not to damage Ukrainian cities or elements of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Such a demonstration would show Putin's threats to use nuclear weapons cannot be dismissed, and the likelihood of actual uncontrolled global nuclear war is possible.
- Putin's weaponization of oil and gas supplies to Europe will fail as Europe creates new oil and gas infrastructure and finds reliable, alternative oil and gas suppliers.
- Putin's partial military mobilization will fail to provide the necessary manpower reserves he needs to continue his war effort.
- The Putin regime and the Russian Federation are in a problematic state. As Putin is so closely identified with modern Russia, the end of Putin may also be the end of Post-Soviet Russia (as we currently understand it).

Historians will see the 24<sup>th</sup> February, 2022, [invasion of Ukraine](#) as a turning point for the Russian Federation and international relations in the early 21st Century.

For the first time since the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis at the height of the Cold War<sup>1</sup>, nuclear weapons are being utilised in great power [brinkmanship](#). Should Russian President Vladimir Putin and his inner circle make good on these threats, it will be the first time nuclear weapons have been used by a country other than the United States since 1945.

The likelihood of a Russian nuclear attack against Ukraine is palpable since the Russian conventional military has performed so [poorly](#) against the much smaller, though Western-armed, Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU). The fact that the Ukrainian government of Volodymyr Zelensky put up such heroic resistance to the Russian invasion subverted expectations that the onslaught of Russian military might would rapidly crush Ukraine.

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<sup>1</sup> 1947-1991.

Political and social reforms in Ukraine since the Maidan Revolution in February 2014<sup>2</sup> saw the majority of the country orientate itself toward the West. This was as much a generational change as it was political among Ukrainians as a new leadership elite in Kyiv saw Ukraine's future as a sovereign Western country as opposed to a satrapy<sup>3</sup> of Russia. [Western military training and support](#) of the AFU after Russia's annexation of Crimea (18/03/2014) gave the AFU the practical means to resist further Russian military encroachments.

Nevertheless, it must be remembered that while reports of Russian soldiers abandoning their positions and equipment during the seven months of this war thus far give some hope that Ukraine might end up defeating Russia, the AFU is still [smaller](#) than the Russian military. Ukrainian resistance also comes at an enormous human and economic [cost](#) for this relatively new post-Soviet nation.<sup>4</sup> It also comes at an economic cost of [trillions](#) of dollars when calculating its direct global impact.

### Putin's Nuclear Option

While it appears that the Russian military, according to most Western metrics, seems to be losing the war it started against its Slavic neighbour, it still seems unlikely that low-yield battlefield nuclear weapons will be used. Why?



Figure 1. Image Credit Shutterstock

Because of the way the AFU have been deploying their forces against the Russians. The AFU appear to be spread out in [small units](#). Once a specific target or objective is identified, AFU units come together rapidly to form a 'mass' to conduct close-quarter combat against the Russians. Upon achieving their objectives, AFU units [disperse](#) until their next target or objective is identified. This fighting style means that no massed military formations on the Ukrainian side of the battlespace are sitting out in the open, presenting an inviting target for battlefield nuclear weapons.<sup>5</sup> These sorts of weapons were primarily designed in the early

Cold War period (the 1950s-60s) and based on World War II experience where opposing armies did clash en masse. Punching a hole in a [massed enemy formation](#) would enable a counter-offensive through that hole. Such was the theory. However, when forces are dispersed and only form mass upon engagement with the enemy, fighting forces are too close together to use battlefield nuclear weapons. Using them during conventional combat would incinerate and irradiate enemy and friendly forces alike. Therefore, no rational commander would welcome their use, even under dire circumstances.

<sup>2</sup> Also known as Euromaidan.

<sup>3</sup> A province governed by an imperial power.

<sup>4</sup> Ukraine became independent from the Russian-led USSR in 1991.

<sup>5</sup> This fighting style is confirming in real time the prioritisation of American training in small unit tactics and long-range precision strikes which the AFU is implementing in their fight against Russian forces.

However, where the deliberate release of a battlefield nuclear weapon might be helpful is as a symbol of intent to escalate.

Some seasoned commentators have speculated that President Putin might give an order to release a low-yield<sup>6</sup> nuclear weapon on an uninhabited part of Ukraine, perhaps somewhere in the Black Sea or somewhere of tactical value where his forces were forced to withdraw, such as [Snake Island](#).<sup>7</sup> So long as there were minuscule casualties from such a 'demonstration', this would place the Zelensky government in an awkward position. Western countries supporting Ukraine and Zelensky might say that the world has entered a vastly more dangerous phase where all-out nuclear war with Russia becomes no idle threat. Under this scenario, EU states could panic and open negotiations with Putin's regime to end the war - to the detriment of Ukraine.

While this has to be considered a real possibility, for Putin's inner circle to allow him the use of nuclear weapons, even calculating that it will only be a demonstration, might be the thin edge of the wedge. As far as we know, the Russian chain-of-command regarding the use of nuclear weapons are as follows. Putin carries with him a small briefcase or [Cheget](#). This is the equivalent of America's so-called 'nuclear football' (actually, also a briefcase). Through the Cheget, Putin can transmit orders to Central Military Command to use nuclear weapons. Once authorisation is cleared, the order is then supported by the Russian [General Staff](#). Only upon verification of these codes can a nuclear strike be carried out.

It is hard to predict how the West would react to the detonation of a nuclear weapon aimed at cowering Zelensky and European governments into accepting Russia's Ukrainian [annexation](#). Furthermore, there is no way of telling whether the Biden administration would let this action stand since it would form a precedent for similar actions by other autocratic nuclear-armed states such as the People's Republic of China or North Korea.

What is clear from the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine is that had nuclear weapons been used early, perhaps in a strike against the western Ukrainian city of [Lviv](#), a critical [supply](#) route into Ukraine for Western weapons; not only would this have terrorised the people of Ukraine, damaged a key city and logistics hub, and spread radiation into neighbouring Poland, it might have collapsed the Zelensky government and brought about a total collapse of Western resolve to stand by Kyiv. However, the domestic and international support for Zelensky and Ukraine increased over time as Western weapons flooded into AFU units, giving them better tactical capabilities to resist Russian forces. Had a low-yield nuclear strike occurred early, closing off organised international support for Ukraine, we still might not be aware of the glaring problems faced by Russian military equipment, tactics, and organisation. The mythology of an assertive Russia would have persisted until tested elsewhere.

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<sup>6</sup> A specific type of short range nuclear weapon of between 1 to 100 kilotons. Strategic nuclear weapons are long-range weapons (intercontinental distances) generally between >100 kilotons to 1 megaton.

<sup>7</sup> Snake Island is a sparsely inhabited small island in the Black Sea. It is 35km from the mouth of the Danube River. It was one of the first Ukrainian territories seized by Russian forces upon the commencement of Putin's 'special military operation'. It was returned to Ukraine on 30 June after the AFU drove the Russian presence off the island. Russia claims its withdrawal was a 'goodwill gesture'.

## Non-nuclear Options

Vladimir Putin is concurrently working on asymmetrical<sup>8</sup> non-nuclear options, but it is doubtful that they will work to Russia's strategic advantage.

## Fossil Fuel Denial

The northern winter of 2022 is likely to be one of the coldest and most expensive for many European natural gas [consumers](#). With the Nord Stream pipelines from Russia now effectively [closed](#) to Western

markets, and many European countries using gas for heating during the winter months as well as for industrial output, there is the possibility that European citizens might openly revolt against their elected governments as they freeze, unable to pay for ever-increasing gas prices. This situation will be tough on the elderly as Europe has one of the highest [elderly-to-youth](#) ratios and the poor. Furthermore, we expect many to die from cold,<sup>9</sup> indirect casualties of Russia's 'special military operation' against Ukraine. This is a genuine threat. A threat likely to cause social turmoil across the Continent, though by how much is the question.



Figure 2. Image Credit, Wikimedia Commons

European governments have not been sitting on their hands, content to watch social discontent grow. Indeed, [billions](#) of Euros have already been spent on [improving](#) Europe's energy infrastructure and alternative sources of supply in order to survive the coming winter of 2022. Germany, the most vulnerable country in Europe, is leading the charge. A new pipeline to Spain is under construction to render the Nord stream pipelines redundant, at least while Putin remains in power. Germany is also leaning heavily on the international gas market, [buying](#) whatever it can to ensure its strategic reserves survive winter. As a result, there will be [gas rationing](#) across Europe, with night-time electricity supplies reduced or cut to public monuments and buildings while the restructuring of European energy infrastructure and supplies continues. By 2024, it is expected that Russia's hold over European energy will be broken, with gas prices [dropping](#) to pre-war levels.

Moreover, this will not be good news for Putin or any successor that follows in his line.

<sup>8</sup> As the [Encyclopaedia Britannica](#) explains: "asymmetrical warfare, unconventional strategies and tactics adopted by a force when the military capabilities of belligerent powers are not simply unequal but are so significantly different that they cannot make the same sorts of attacks on each other".

<sup>9</sup> A good piece on the health effects of cold can be found here: Marmot Review Team, *The Health Impacts of Cold Homes and Fuel Poverty*, Friends of the Earth & the Marmot Review Team, London, 2011.

Before the war, European but primarily German dependence on Russian oil and gas was seen as a critical vulnerability. So Putin decided to [weaponise](#) these commodities that were his country's biggest earners in the hope that desperation for cheap Russian oil and gas would stop European countries from supporting Ukraine. This strategy might score some unrest in Europe while it restructures toward alternative energy suppliers and exacts a grim toll on the elderly and poor due to cold, capturing headlines and social media alike. However, it is unlikely that Putin will get what he wants from this asymmetric strategy, a Europe desperate to abandon Zelensky & Ukraine to go back to '[business as usual](#)'. Putin [cannot be trusted](#) as the custodian of Europe's primary oil and gas supplies. This was a card he could have only used once. Now that Putin has used it, Europe will not return to Russia for any significant commodity, preferring to pay a premium on its fossil fuel and other raw materials from anywhere other than Russia. As for [Asia](#), some commentators have claimed that Putin will turn to China and India as new markets, replacing those he lost in Europe. However, Russia has neither the economic resources nor the [infrastructure](#) necessary to sell oil and gas to China and India in the exact quantities it did to Europe. Furthermore, China and India will likely extract much [lower](#) prices from Russia and not pay the Russians what European countries once did.

### Partial Military Mobilisation



Figure 3. Russians escaping Putin's mobilisation order. Image credit, Vano Shlamov/AFP - AL JAZEERA

Putin saw [partial military mobilisation](#) (21/09/2022) as a way of throwing some of Russia's significant manpower resources at Ukraine. Russian history at war has always been about utilising and exploiting its [excess human capital](#). By dipping into the well of the veteran community in the reserves, it was hoped that leveraging off people with former and limited contemporary military experience would be a cheap and cheerful way of adding numbers to Russian formations in Ukraine. The problem

with this is that Russia, now under the most extensive economic [sanctions](#) regime in modern times, faces several glaring problems. It is cut off from cash and from legally acquiring spare parts and technologies needed to keep its military equipment operating at peak efficiency. Having suffered staggering military losses from Western-supplied weapons at the hands of Ukrainian defenders, the question that has to be asked is, what will Putin train his excess human capital with? What will they be armed with when deployed to Ukraine?

Old Cold War stocks of [armour](#) are now being refurbished, but these vehicles are no match for the modern weapons the Ukrainians have been using.

Sophisticated aircraft of the Russian Aerospace Forces (VKS) depend on foreign suppliers for [high-tech](#) items that Russia can no longer access and integrate into its platforms. This is one of the reasons why Russian warplanes have been largely [absent](#) from this conflict—engaging the Ukrainian Air Force (UkrAF) or ground-based surface-to-air missiles risks higher losses that they can ill-afford to sustain. Similarly, Russian ballistic missiles are not solely produced from Russian-only sources. Once they have been used, they cannot be replaced.

China, Russia's '[no limits](#)' friend is unwilling to covertly provide Putin with what he needs to prosecute his war in Ukraine such as weapons and military technology. The two countries that have suggested that they are happy to sell weapons to Russia, [North Korea](#) and [Iran](#), are not technological or industrial giants. Furthermore, these countries have active strategic policies to support, so how much spare equipment or industrial capacity they are willing to sacrifice for Putin's war in Ukraine will be the crucial determinant of how critical they will be as Russian allies.

Also, we need to talk about demographics.

Earlier, we mentioned that Western Europe has a burgeoning elderly-to-youth ratio; this is also true of the [Russian Federation](#). Putin's call for partial mobilisation has seen tens of thousands of Russians of military age [flee](#) the country to Finland, Georgia and even Mongolia. As this tide of able-bodied Russians leaves the mother country unwilling to support a war started by Putin based on many [false assumptions](#), this will have a deleterious effect on Putin's ability to govern, let alone prosecute his war against Ukraine. Moreover, the average Russian family no longer has five members or more. Parents of modern Russian children are no longer willing to blindly sacrifice them at the whim of their political leaders, no matter how the propaganda is spun.

## Conclusion

The Russian special military operation is going badly for Vladimir Putin. Before this war, political acolytes, not wanting to contradict the 'great man' chose self-preservation and told Putin what he wanted to hear rather than tell him that his country was in no condition to fight a major conventional war. When wars go badly for autocrats, this usually sets off a chain of events that will consume the leadership that starts them. This has been the case throughout history, and it will be the same for Russia now. Putin is on borrowed time. We need not have to await the arrival of a new messianic nationalist figure to arise from the ashes of Putin's Russia. The damage to the Russian Federation's reputation is so corrosive it will take generations to undo, the embarrassment of its military performance so thorough that it is likely that the political centre in Moscow may not survive the end of Putin. In this case, the geopolitical shock of seeing the Russian Federation's end may only dawn on observers now. Was Russia too big to fail? Or did its size and peculiar demography doom the country to collapse?

Putin, during his political heyday, believed in a vision of Russia being something separate from the rest of the world. It straddled both the European and Asian continents, so for a

while at least, Putin proclaimed Russia a [Eurasian power](#). However, the reality is that Russia has always been a European state, with the vast bulk of its population residing east of the Ural Mountains. West of the Urals is the Russian Steppes and the vast Siberian wilderness. This area is sparsely populated. The strength of a country's stewardship over its territory is its ability to defend all access points to its interior and resources. During the height of its power, the former USSR could defend Soviet territory in a way the Russian Federation cannot defend Mother Russia today.

Furthermore, all the organisational [problems](#) of holding onto old Soviet notions of warfighting have gravely affected Russian military efficiency and effectiveness. Corruption at the political and defence industry levels has seen Russia start a war it had no hope of seeing through once the West committed to the defence of Ukraine. At the beginning of Putin's war, we at SAGE said that this was the beginning of [the last Soviet War](#). The end of this war might not just be the end of the Putin regime but of Russia itself.

## Recommendations

Assuming that the end of Putin and possibly that of contemporary Russia are preferred outcomes of this war - continuing the current Ukrainian defence will eventually create the conditions within the Kremlin that could see Putin eliminated as leader, possibly setting off a chain reaction of events that will destabilise or completely destroy the Russian state.

Prior to this outcome, it is possible that Putin might seek to demonstrate his resolve by using a low-yield tactical nuclear weapon over an uninhabited or sparsely inhabited part of the Ukrainian mainland, Snake Island or somewhere in the Black Sea. The following recommendations are to disincentivise Putin, and/or the Russian General Staff from carrying out such an 'intent to escalate' scenario.

- Ensure that back-channels and public sources (mainstream and social media), communicate that any such 'intent to escalate' will not be tolerated.
- Communicate through private and public channels that such a demonstration of Russian nuclear power will be met by harsher economic sanctions than those currently imposed on Russia.
- That the release of Russian nuclear weapons will be met by the immediate approval of Ukraine's entry into NATO.
- That upon the Russian use of nuclear weapons on or near Ukraine, NATO reserves the right to conduct kinetic operations against Russian military forces.

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## About the author

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