

# What's on Putin's Mind?

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## The Ukraine Crisis and the Russian-Atlantic relationship

**At the moment this article is being written Ukrainian troops are fighting a fierce battle for the fourth day running to protect their capital Kyiv against Russian troops. Developments in the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian armed conflict are moving fast. The world was shocked when, after proclaiming the independence of Ukraine's breakaway 'republics' of Donetsk and Luhansk earlier that week, President Putin announced a 'special military operation' on 24 February. What followed the announcement was a full-scale attack on Ukraine by Russian forces. The question quickly arose: what is going on in Putin's mind?**

Since the end of the Cold War, relations between NATO and the Russian Federation, formerly the Soviet Union, have never been at lower ebb than they are today. The massive troop build-up of more than 150-170,000 soldiers on the Russo-Ukrainian border has been a topic of nervous discussion in the Western world for weeks now. What was the significance of this build-up? President Putin demanded that under no circumstances was Ukraine to become a member of NATO, and NATO had to withdraw its troops from former Warsaw Pact countries in Central Europe. And if Putin's demands were not met, 'military-technical' measures would follow. Putin wanted to reverse history and return to the security situation of 1997 when NATO consisted of only 16 member states. Since then, 14 Eastern European countries have joined the Alliance. Putin's demands did not go down well with Western leaders. States are independent entities and should be able to decide their own destiny; that is not up to the Russian Federation was the collective opinion within NATO. Urgent consultations followed, but these negotiations produced no tangible results for NATO other than that the parties continued to talk with each other.

Yet, this Russian troop build-up does not come as a complete surprise. Already at the end of January 2021, Margarita Simonian, RT's chief editor<sup>1</sup>, yelled during a conference in the

self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic: "Mother Russia, bring the Donbas home!" Far from being a spontaneous emotional outburst this all seems part of a larger plan. Shortly afterwards, Putin announced in a television interview that the Russian Federation would never abandon the Donbas region, an area located in the south-east of Ukraine. Subsequently, the rhetoric of war rapidly grew louder both in Ukraine and in the Russian Federation, resulting in a resurgence of skirmishes in the Donbas region which, according to the United Nations, have already left more than 13 thousand dead since its outbreak in 2014. In early March 2021, the Russian troops held large military exercises on the Ukrainian border and in Crimea; the troops involved were not withdrawn afterwards. On the contrary, the Russian armed forces were steadily building up a large-scale troop contingent in the region. In NATO circles this development was being watched with concern. Did Putin want to test the new American President, Joe Biden? Or was this Russian show of force a reaction to the change of policy of Ukraine's President Zelensky, who was increasingly losing patience when the peace talks with the Russian authorities failed to produce results?<sup>2</sup>

The first summit between US President Biden and Russian President Putin was scheduled on 16 June 2021 in Geneva to clear the air between the two leaders. There was no sign



In early March 2021, the Russian troops held large military exercises on the Ukrainian border and in Crimea. Was this Russian show of force a reaction to the change of policy of Ukraine's President Zelensky, who was increasingly losing patience when the peace talks with the Russian authorities failed to produce results? Pictured (in the center) is President Zelensky in January 2022 (photo: Sarakhan Vadym / Shutterstock.com)

of hostility yet, both leaders said. In the following autumn tensions began to rise due to the gradual increase of Russian forces on Ukraine's long border. A video teleconference between Biden and Putin in early December 2021 did nothing to relieve the tension. In the meantime NATO leaders were not waiting for the Ukraine crisis to escalate further; additional consultation was necessary. When the discussions failed in the first months of 2022, Western nations no longer believed in a peaceful and negotiated outcome and decided to move their embassy staff to safer locations outside the capital Kyiv.

So, what exactly are President Putin's intentions with Ukraine? The answer to this question is twofold. One part concerns the strained Russian-Atlantic relations ever since the end of the Cold War, while the second part describes Putin's convictions.

**Noteworthy events in the Russian-Atlantic relationship**  
Since the end of the Cold War, relations between the United States and NATO vis-à-vis the Russia Federation have been mixed but generally sensitive. It is easy to blame the Russian Federation for its provocative stance each and every time, but has NATO always been true to its word? And were most events of the last three decades not open to more than one interpretation? Take, for example, the long-lasting debate about German unification. Russian diplomats regularly claim that during the negotiations on German unification, officials of the United States gave assurances that as part of the deal NATO would

not expand further eastward. Recently released diplomatic documents from US archives show that the United States pressured Germany in February 1990 into allowing reunification, but there is no written promise made to the Russians that NATO would not expand any further.

However, James Baker, then US Secretary of State, indeed hinted in talks with Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, that the Bush Administration was willing not to move NATO's jurisdiction further to the east in exchange for German unification. A few days earlier, as German archives show, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, then Germany's Foreign Minister, had suggested that NATO should issue an open statement indicating that it did not intend to expand its territory eastward. His British colleague, Douglas Hurd, agreed openly to such a discussion within NATO. The whole issue remains ambiguous to this day, but contrary to Russian statements, Gorbachev never received an official written guarantee from NATO that the alliance would not extend its borders further east. Even the advisers to President George Bush Sr were initially divided over the question, but the Bush Administration offered Gorbachev, who was facing increasing domestic problems at the time, financial support for allowing German unification, with a unified Germany becoming part of NATO.<sup>3</sup>

Jack Matlock, as US Ambassador to Moscow closely involved in the negotiations, indicated that during those first

few months of 1990, many proposals and ideas for negotiations may well have led to all kinds of expectations but not to any firm promises. Matlock indicated that all negotiations were focused on the status of East German territory, while the Warsaw Pact was formally still in place. There was reference neither to NATO nor to the situation of the Eastern European countries at the time. It was a confusing period for both sides, and Matlock added that the language used during the negotiations was not always helpful in specifying and clarifying certain proposals. Eventually, during the so-called 'two plus four negotiations'<sup>4</sup>, agreement was reached that East Germany would become part of NATO territory on the condition that no foreign (non-German) troops would be stationed there. However, when Gorbachev was deposed and the USSR disintegrated, the agreements became invalid, so decided Western countries. Even formal treaty agreements were subjected to the *rebus sic stantibus* principle<sup>5</sup> because of the sweeping geopolitical changes since 1990.<sup>6</sup>

In 1994, former Warsaw Pact member states Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary indicated their wish to join NATO as permanent members after the Alliance initially had set up a Partnership for Peace programme for the armed forces of these countries allowing them to participate in joint exercises with NATO troops. US President Bill Clinton and his Secretary of State, Warren Christopher, reacted cautiously to the request of the three countries and held back at first, but less reluctant forces in the US administration saw NATO expansion as a confirmation of democratic developments in Central Europe. As a result, Clinton and Christopher shifted their stances slightly but were still in favour of a 'go-slow approach' concerning expanding NATO membership so as not to fuel Moscow's fears of encirclement. Eventually, in 1997, Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary started negotiations with NATO about their membership, and officially joined the Alliance two years later. Over time 11 other former Eastern Bloc countries followed suit.

In addition, NATO's intervention in Kosovo in 1999 and its attack on targets in Serbia, a close Russian ally with many cultural similarities, caused a great deal of resentment among the Russian authorities, who felt outmanoeuvred and not taken seriously. NATO's activities met with fierce opposition, as voiced by the then Russian President Boris Yeltsin: "Russia is deeply upset by NATO's military action against sovereign Yugoslavia, which is nothing less than open aggression."<sup>7</sup> There was also something else going on in Russia at the time. Yeltsin's Minister for Foreign Affairs, Yevgeny Primakov, initiated a change in Russian foreign policy which had previously mainly been focused on the West and which Primakov radically distanced himself from. Thus arose the so-called Primakov doctrine, which assumed a multipolar world with several major powers, such as Russia, China and India, alongside the United States. Other important elements of the Primakov doctrine

were the emphasis on Russia's primacy in the territory of the former Soviet Union and the pursuit of closer integration between the former Soviet republics, with Russia in the lead. Opposition to the expansion of NATO and, more generally, Russia's persistent attempts to undermine transatlantic institutions were also part of the doctrine. Primakov clearly adhered to this line, as was evident in March 1999 when, halfway to Washington, he decided to cut his visit short and ordered his pilot to make an about turn and fly back to Moscow as a protest against NATO's imminent bombing of Serbia.<sup>8</sup>

NATO's enlargement and its Kosovo campaign turned out to be a persistently sensitive issue for the Russian authorities, although Russian-Atlantic relations improved considerably at the beginning of the millennium. After the United States had been hit hard during the 9/11 attacks, it was President Putin who was one of the first heads of state to send a message of encouragement to US President George W. Bush. Two days earlier, the two leaders had had a telephone conversation during which Putin informed his US counterpart that Ahmad Shah Massoud, the leader of the anti-Taliban and Moscow-backed Northern Alliance, had been killed in Afghanistan by two suicide bombers. Putin had warned Bush of a harbinger that something was afoot, something that had long been in preparation. That warning soon became reality and, as announced, al-Qaida flew a number of civilian airliners into buildings in New York, Washington DC and crashed another one into a field near Shanksville, PA. In the period that followed the Russian-Atlantic relationship was at its height. President Bush proclaimed the Global War on Terrorism, mainly directed against Islamic fundamentalism, which was right up President Putin's alley.<sup>9</sup> He saw an opportunity to include his fight against rebel forces in the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, which is a predominantly Sunni Islamic part of the Russian Federation. Relations between NATO and the Russian Federation flourished and in 2002 it was decided to set up a NATO-Russia Council (NRC) to deal with issues such as counter-terrorism, military cooperation, cooperation concerning Afghanistan and the non-proliferation of weapons. However, after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, NATO decided to suspend all cooperation with the Russian Federation, albeit that the NRC remained intact at a very low level.

Another issue that has left deep scars on the Russian-Atlantic relationship is the Budapest Memorandum of 1994. After its independence in 1991, Ukraine still had 1,900 Soviet-made strategic nuclear warheads and between 2,650 and 4,200 tactical nuclear weapons stationed on its territory. Maintaining these weapons was a costly affair, something Ukraine could ill afford.<sup>10</sup> Ukraine wanted to become a non-aligned and non-nuclear state, a decision also motivated by the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in 1986 and the desire to break with Moscow and former Soviet traditions. Early January 1994 representatives of the United States, Ukraine and the Russian Federa-

tion began negotiations in Washington, DC. Two weeks later, on 14 January 1994, Russian President Boris Yeltsin, Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma and US President Bill Clinton signed a Trilateral Declaration in Moscow. In December 1994, Ukraine joined the Non-Proliferation Treaty and received security guarantees from the United States, the Russian Federation and the United Kingdom, laid down in the Budapest Memorandum. The Memorandum stipulated that Ukraine should hand over its strategic nuclear weapons to the Russian Federation under the proviso that Russia would guarantee Ukraine's territorial integrity.<sup>11</sup> Ever since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, NATO officials have argued that the Russian authorities have seriously violated these international agreements.

### PUTIN'S CONVICTIONS

The relationship between NATO and Russia, as it appears, has been one of tension, occasional relaxation and mistrust but what is it then that Putin strongly believes in? Soon after taking office in 2000, Putin became more and more convinced of the need to establish a strong Russian identity. His predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, had already taken the first steps in that direction. During his time in office an attractive diaspora programme called *Russkiy Mir* (Russian World), had been set up which encompassed not only Russians living in the mother country but also in former Soviet republics outside Russia. At that time *Russkiy Mir* was not a familiar term used in Russian history; it had only occurred once in a historical letter by the Grand Duke of Kyiv, Iziaslav Iaroslavich, to the Roman Catholic Pope Clement.

The rise and development of the Russian Orthodox Church is a key element in the concept of the *Russkiy Mir*. On 1 August 988, the Grand Duke of Kyiv, Volodymyr the Great, converted to Byzantine Christianity with the intention to consolidate his power. The following year, in 989, Volodymyr besieged *Kher-sonese Tauric*, the largest city in the north-east of the Black Sea region, less than 20 kms from present-day Sevastopol in Crimea. On the basis of this historical evidence President Putin and other Russian authorities have promoted the idea that Crimea is the cradle of Russian Orthodoxy which should unite the Belarusian, Russian and Ukrainian states.<sup>12</sup>

Another important element in the concept of the *Russkiy Mir* is Russia's glorious past, including the Rurik dynasty, the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation. Besides factual records of Russian history a multitude of alternative jingoistic histories have since emerged. Although each variant presents its own characteristics of the Russian identity, above all they share the idea that Russia is an 'empire of nature and predestination'. Russian history goes back to the *Kyivan Rus*, a mixture of Eastern Slavic, Baltic and Nordic peoples, once melted together and ruled from the 9th century by the Rurik dynasty. Today's Belarus, Russia and Ukraine all claim *Kyivan Rus* as their ancestor whereas Russian author-



Another important element in the concept of the *Russkiy Mir* is Russia's glorious past, including the Rurik dynasty, the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation. Pictured is Rurik on the Monument 'Millennium of Russia' in Veliky Novgorod (photo: Wikimedia Commons / CC BY-SA 3.0)

ities have always denied Ukraine's claim to *Kyivan Rus*. In fact, Russian authorities have never considered Ukraine as an independent, fully-fledged nation, much to the dismay of the Ukrainian people. In Russian eyes, Ukraine is just another variant of the Russian Federation that has no legitimate reason to exist, let alone independently.<sup>13</sup>

Putin has firmly come to believe in the *Russkiy Mir* concept and developed an increasingly delusional view of how Russia should be seen. The more he felt that Western leaders seemed to ignore him, the more he believed in *Russkiy Mir* and the more he wanted to establish the Russian Federation as a strong state. Renowned British strategist Sir Lawrence Freedman noted that Putin's sense of superiority has led to hubris, forcing him to shut himself off from criticism and advice. In recent weeks Putin has consistently stated that Ukraine is not a state, but an artificial object ruled by an illegitimate government. Putin became more and more convinced that the Ukrainians would not offer strong resistance in the event of Russian aggression. His ambassador to the UN hinted that the Russian troops entering Ukraine would be hailed as liberators.<sup>14</sup> Putin and his followers may have ended up in a world of their own perception, especially because they tend to confuse their own narratives about how they view the world with reality.



The Budapest Memorandum (1994) stipulated that Ukraine should hand over its strategic nuclear weapons to the Russian Federation under the proviso that Russia would guarantee Ukraine's territorial integrity. Ever since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, NATO officials have argued that the Russian authorities have seriously violated these international agreements. This picture from March 2014 shows people in Saint Petersburg supporting Russia's annexation of Crimea (photo: PeterSVETphoto / Shutterstock.com)

#### A FINAL OBSERVATION

All in all, it must be concluded that both in the sensitive NATO-Russian relationship and in his own convictions that have led to serious over-estimation of his own and Russia's potential, Putin may have seen a geopolitical window of opportunity to launch a massive attack on Ukraine. Besides, NATO is still licking its wounds after the hasty and chaotic evacuation from Afghanistan and not very keen to get involved in a conflict with Russia. What is more, US President Biden has not been very successful in the past year and, with US mid-term elections pending, cannot afford to put a foot wrong. As for Europe's dominant powers, in Germany a newly formed coalition government has just taken office and in France, currently chairing the EU, President Macron, treading cautiously with French elections looming, has so far hardly been successful in his diplomatic efforts to make Putin see sense. So, indeed, there is a lot to occupy Putin's mind. Among other things, he persistently believes that an armed attack is the only possible solution to keep Ukraine, especially its government, in check and, at the same time, NATO and the EU at bay. The world must therefore be unanimous in strongly condemning Putin's attack on Ukraine. As a conflict like this only has losers the only way out is the willingness on both sides to commence negotiations at very short notice. NATO and the EU have indeed come under severe pressure, so their member states must cooperate and be on their guard against being played off by Putin and, above all, show grit and determination.

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**Would you like to react?**

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3. Mary Elise Sarotte, 'A Broken Promise? What the West Really Told Moscow About NATO Expansion', *Foreign Affairs*, 93 (5), (2014), 90-97.
4. The term 'two plus four negotiations' refers to the negotiations for the unification of the two Germanies (East and West) by the four occupying powers, United States, United Kingdom, France and the Soviet Union.
5. The principle of *rebus sic stantibus* stipulates that, where there has been a fundamental change of circumstances, a party may withdraw from or terminate the treaty in question.
6. Jack Matlock, 'NATO Expansion: Was There a Promise?' JackMatlock.com Website, 3 April 2014. <https://jackmatlock.com/2014/04/nato-expansion-was-there-a-promise/>, 24 January 2014.
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13. Eliot Borenstein, *Plots Against Russia: Conspiracy and Fantasy after Socialism*, (Ithaca, NY (USA): Cornell University Press, 2019), 212.
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