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# Ukraine: behind the Kremlin's ill will lies the risk of eternal war

Following the failure of negotiations on Ukraine, the Kremlin's attitude should be viewed through the prism of its fears and obsessions. *'I consider Russians and Ukrainians to be one people. In this sense, all of Ukraine is ours,'* Vladimir Putin declared on 20 June at the St Petersburg Economic Forum. This statement marked the end of a period that began with Donald Trump's taking office in the White House. That moment had represented a long-awaited prospect of peace for Ukrainians, Europeans and even for part of the Russian population.

Much hope was expressed by the people, and grand words were spoken in the media: *'truce'*, *'lasting peace'*, *'ceasefire'* and *'negotiations'*. All of this only to see expectations dashed by the disinterest of an impatient Donald Trump, the intensification of Russian bombing in Ukraine, the diversion of attention to the Middle East and, above all, Moscow's evident ill will.

Firstly, it should be remembered that the US president did not actually create this sequence of events but merely followed a trend that had emerged in the summer of 2024. At the time, with the various offensives failing to yield any progress on either side, diplomats and intelligence services revived the idea of resuming talks. Russia was convinced that it had the upper hand, but it was struggling to hide the difficulties it faced. It then became increasingly open to discussion, out of opportunism, until Donald Trump arrived on the scene. Through his words and actions, Trump convinced the Kremlin to make the talks public

after months of private communications. This would have happened with or without Donald Trump, although the outcome might not have been the same with Democrats in power in Washington.

It should also be remembered that, in the Kremlin's view, Europe is merely an American 'pawn' and that the Ukrainians are being *'held hostage by a government manipulated by Washington to weaken Russia'*. This view of the situation was underscored – in the Kremlin's eyes – following the failure to implement the [Minsk Agreements 2](#). Also worthy of note is that, contrary to popular belief, Russia did not implement these agreements any more than Ukraine did, which did not prevent it from concluding that the key to Ukraine's capitulation lay in Washington and not in Berlin or Paris.

To understand what happened this spring, a mixture of Russia's professed good faith and calculated bad faith, we must look at the Kremlin's real objectives with regard to the organisation and management of political and geopolitical events, desired or imposed, from outside by the Russian president.

## DECLARED, BUT FLUCTUATING OBJECTIVES

The declaration made on 20 June is an excellent reminder that, despite all of the attempts to resume negotiations, the Russian president – who refuses to make any concessions – is committed to a course of action that can

only push him to further worsen the terms of the Ukrainian surrender that he is demanding. The main objective is part of a rationale that is deeply rooted in the history of this country: it involves regaining control over its Ukrainian neighbour with a view to stabilising its 'near abroad', a prerequisite for those in power in Moscow to protect themselves from their own people. The response to the Maidan revolution of 2014, the destabilisation of the Donbass in the months that followed, and then the support given to the Belarusian authorities in their repression of the 2020-2021 protests, was to punish the Ukrainians and Belarusians on the one hand and to inoculate the Russians against any inclination to rebel on the other. The strategy seems to have worked: while reporting in Russia (pre- 2022), I often met opponents who said they wanted to bring down Vladimir Putin through politics rather than street protests, for fear of a '*civil war that would inevitably be bloody*', in their words.

With the lesson learned, the Kremlin has continued its headlong rush, using nostalgia for the USSR to build an ultra-nationalism whose radical conservatism is based on values that were considered important in the Soviet era. This mixture of two radical ideologies means that the Kremlin can transform the notion of nationalism – a notion reserved for Ukrainian enemies – into virtuous patriotism. Russians are a people with ultra-nationalist values, but they are unaware of this. The aim is to convince the population that they are '*on the right side of history*'. The Russian government's goal of self-protection has therefore evolved to continue using Ukraine and the ongoing conflict, presenting the country as a Trojan horse for '*decadent values*' from the West, from which Slavs must protect themselves. According to regular reports on Russian television, the country's army is now fighting in Ukraine against feminists and the LGBT community, who are portrayed as representatives of these decadent values. These ideas are very popular in Russia. This war, which has now become ideological, also facilitates Vladimir Putin's tightening grip over the population. The question of a fifth column, an enemy within, has never been so prevalent in Russia since the USSR, leading to increasing acts of denunciation.

This is therefore a never-ending battle, which is difficult to wage with bombs, and which seems to be effectively ruling out any prospect of a truce. This battle is also being waged through disinformation and interference, with Russian attacks in Europe explained by a combination of war-related issues – to limit support for Ukraine – and a wish to impose a nationalist, conservative worldview on the West.

### THE OBSESSION WITH LEGACY

The war in Ukraine now has a 'historic' end goal. This is another of the Russian President's obsessions, common to many leaders, who is no longer so much interested in winning a war as in making a definitive mark on his country's history. He wants to join a line of '*great men*' as he attempts to ensure that it will be impossible to rewrite or rectify his history after his death. The rehabilitation of Joseph Stalin sought by the head of the Kremlin can also be explained in this way. There can be no bad characters in the Russian national narrative if you want to be part of it by way of heightened patriotism and national pride. Hence the Kremlin is erasing the imperfections of history by rewriting books intended for schools, by founding speeches full of inconsistencies and historical fantasies and is preparing the future by rewriting history live through propaganda. The war crimes perpetrated in Ukraine are systematically presented to the Russians in mirror image. This instantaneous rewriting of the facts is designed to comfort the population with a fantastical and distorted vision of reality, so that it is imprinted forever on this 'time-T', thus making it difficult for the public to question this 'truth'.

This is how an initial military goal was introduced in 2014: the "[Novorossiia](#)". This political project inherited from the Russian empire was certainly unknown to the majority of the inhabitants of the Donbass at the time. Few Ukrainians adhered to it, but this project was designed especially for the Russians. It provided them with an ideological framework based on nostalgia for a fantasised empire and enabled the rapid mobilisation of thousands of mercenaries and volunteers when it

came to destabilising the regions of Donetsk and Lugansk and attempting the same actions in the regions of Zaporijjia, Kherson and Odessa, the historic territories of the 'Russian Empire'.

From 2014, faced with the reality of the frontline, Vladimir Putin quickly, but temporarily, confined his military ambitions to the Donbass, the regions of Donetsk and Lugansk, still the main objectives of the Russian army. It is interesting to note that this term has reappeared in Russia over the last few weeks following the failure of talks with Donald Trump. In a recent interview with the French magazine *L'Express*, Vladislav Surkov, the Kremlin's main strategist, reiterated his vision of things: Ukraine is 'a quasi-artificial state' and 'must be divided into fragments'. A reference to Western Ukraine, considered by Moscow to be Polish, and 'Novorossiia', considered to be Russian. It is anecdotal, but the Russian authorities are working on the creation of a railway line that will reach Crimea via the occupied territories, already named 'Novorossiia Railways'.

This ideological project takes us to the juncture between the Russian President's 'historic' objectives and his short- and medium-term objectives, which are constantly fluctuating according to opportunities and difficulties. "Novorossiia" is a case in point. It cannot be reconstituted without taking control of the city of Odessa. The port city is talked of by Russian officials, and there has been a lot of bombing, but for the moment it is beyond the Kremlin's reach.

### SHAPING THE POPULATION AND RESISTING EXTERNAL PRESSURE

Contrary to popular belief, Vladimir Putin is not a chess player. He is guided by broad objectives but acts opportunistically on a day-to-day basis. He has the advantage of time, as the question of his mandate is no longer an issue, and he also enjoys total control over the population. However, numerous social, economic, military and geopolitical factors continually hinder his objectives.

As Russia does not really have a 'living' public opinion, the population must be constantly stirred up by artificial political events created by Kremlin technocrats. The risk is that a communication vacuum could lead the population to start asking questions which could be fatal to the regime. Every single day, propaganda has to convince Russians in Vladivostok that those in Kaliningrad support President Putin and his uncompromising war. And vice versa.

To do this, the Kremlin constantly creates short-term political episodes as a way to shape its population, limit the social risks sometimes involved in events imposed from outside and, ultimately, move towards the 'historic objectives' described above. The nuances of tone and risks lie in these political events, which are sometimes imposed. The latest example is striking: on 10 May, Vladimir Putin was forced to act in response to external pressure on the part of the Americans, Ukrainians and [Europeans](#) who publicly denounced Russia's unwillingness to seek a truce in Ukraine. In habitual response, the Kremlin leader made it a point of honour to resist anything he considers to be pressure: the press, the population, foreign leaders. But this time, he was reduced to making a surprise announcement in the middle of the night to announce talks – once again devoid of goodwill – in Turkey. He spoke under the pretext of reviewing his day's work at a fake press conference, so as not to give his people the impression of a serious official intervention. He needed to prove that he was seeking peace more than anyone else.

Without free media or independent politicians, Russia is not (or rarely) animated by public debate. The population often seems apathetic, anaesthetised or, on the contrary, radically supportive of its president. From the outside, it is difficult to read the nuances. However, when we compare the Kremlin's political tactics with what we hear on the ground, we realise that these often come in response, almost as in a democracy, to the frustrations and anger of the population.

While publicly expressing dissatisfaction is often not only illegal but also socially unacceptable, in certain, generally hyperlocal contexts, Russians are masters at directing criticism by using the right words and never targeting those in power. The Russian media outlet Novaya Gazeta has counted the equivalent of thirty protests per day in Russia, which rarely concern the war or federal politics. More general criticism is often highly visible on social media and is more easily expressed in private or on night trains (which have replaced the legendary kitchen discussions of the Soviet era).

And even if the Kremlin no longer has a large number of dissidents at large in society due to their *en masse* repression, the FSB still seems able to detect certain trends, whether they come from the urban population, the countryside, or the political and economic elite, which has influential levers at its disposal to get its messages across.

Most of the time, none of this prevents the Kremlin from sticking to its line or even from hardening it, motivated by a paranoia peculiar to authoritarian leaders. But it is always important to observe how these reports from the ground are factored into the design of these narratives, and how they influence those engineering the propaganda for the better, but more often for the worse. In March 2024, Vladimir Putin had put together a complex political plan designed to secure acceptance of his re-election for the first time since the Constitution was rewritten. It also aimed to ensure acceptance of the absence of any opponents in the election. This was even more difficult to manage given that the death of imprisoned opposition leader Alexei Navalny had roused the last remaining opponents in Moscow just a few days before the election.

The strategy was not only intended to act as counterfire, it also aimed to shape public opinion. It became clear as soon as he announced his candidacy in December 2023 that his presidential '*campaign*' would aim to shake the population out of its apathy and make it almost illegal to '*bury one's head in the sand*' while waiting for the hostilities

to end. In short, the fraudulent but official, almost unanimous, re-election of the Russian president intended to rally his people around him, convince them to continue the war against Ukraine and the West, and, in passing, project abroad the (false) image of a Russian president backed by his people.

But an authoritarian regime can never completely escape the unexpected: four days after Vladimir Putin's re-election, an attack on a concert hall in Moscow left 145 people dead. The presidential round was coming to an end; another crisis, in response, was beginning. It seemed risky because the Americans had warned President Putin of the imminent Islamist terrorist attack and the Kremlin leader had refused to act, declaring that it was an attempt to destabilise the country. It took 48 hours of anarchy, during which the terrorists fled the capital before being captured and tortured almost publicly by the Russian neo-Nazi militia '*Russisch*'. During this time, the state media reported only the facts, before the Kremlin constructed and disseminated its narrative. By accusing the Ukrainians of being behind the attack in one way or another, the Russian president subtly created a fog of terror, which ultimately served his previous agenda. Few Russians understood the reasons behind the attack, but they were gripped by fear of an internal enemy and the fear of a besieged citadel — enough to push them into the arms of the Russian president and make an irrational link with the war in Ukraine.

## GENERAL FATIGUE

The way Donald Trump conducted his attempts at talks on resolving the conflict in Ukraine forced the Russian president to adapt his domestic political strategy. The balance was unstable, with an American president representing the eternal common enemy but with all the assets to appeal to the Russians. The Kremlin wanted to drag out the talks so as not to lose its new link with Washington without risking an end to the war. Above all, it wanted to position itself as the victim of Ukrainian bad faith by accusing it of not working for peace by refusing to submit. Continuing its destructive

invasion of Ukraine, Russia contented itself with announcing every evening that it had captured new villages, unknown to the population, in the Donbass region, while stirring up as much as possible the threat of common enemies (the United States, NATO, Nazis, Western values, etc.).

A new and unexpected sequence of events has now unfolded. It seems to have been driven by the population, who are demanding peace and an end to the conflict. While the most radical elements have called for the offensive to continue, the Russian people have expressed their weariness with the horrors of war, the return of bodies to the villages, inflation and the lack of prospects. This was unexpected, given that Russians, who are calling for an end to the war in everyday discussions, can only conceive of it as a clear victory. The Kremlin has supported this plea by going so far as to call on certain foreign companies to return to Russia. It was clearly stated that the United States would be invited to invest in the country again. Rumours have emerged in certain circles, highlighted by the Russian press in exile, of a normalisation plan that is said to be on the Kremlin's agenda.

Vladimir Putin let it show that he was fatigued, realising that a significant period was approaching: 9 May and the 80th anniversary of the end of the 'Great Patriotic War'. For ten days, the Russian president completely disengaged from Donald Trump's 'negotiations' to devote himself to the annual reminder of patriotism and national pride. This sequence, more subtle than it appeared, drew on the sincere emotion of this period for Russians, to explain to them that negotiations would not take place and that the war would continue. In short, it was necessary to skilfully dash the hopes expressed during the previous period of time. The Russian army announced the liberation of the Kursk region, partially occupied by Ukraine, to give the impression of strength. Vladimir Putin appeared in a rare documentary showing him at home, stating that he was considering a successor so as not to dash people's hopes for the future. He then appeared surrounded by supporters in Red Square to prove to

Russians that the country was not isolated but, on the contrary, that it was at the forefront of a new world order. Nor should we overlook the thousands of local patriotic initiatives that were successful in terms of their impact on a large part of the population. The objective was clear: to convince Russians that peace is not coming anytime soon and that the war must continue, even if it means sacrifices for the motherland.

### ETERNAL WAR

Vladimir Putin recently justified the continuation and even intensification of fighting by citing an 'existential threat.' These remarks are not new, but they have resurfaced in response to an external event. The fact that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu justified his attack on Iran, outside international law, as a necessary fight against an 'existential risk' could inspire the Kremlin leader in his future efforts to influence the situation.

Russia has always been a master at confronting the West with its contradictions, but the combined actions of Israel and the United States offer it new opportunities to bolster its rhetoric of a 'just war' in Ukraine. The Kremlin now has interlocutors and populations around the world who can understand the Russian argument for a 'preventive war' against NATO and Western values.

We must therefore never forget that the war in Ukraine is factually existential only for Ukraine and the Russian government, but not for Russia and its population. This justification serves only to guide the government's long-term objectives — objectives that are far from being achieved in advance. Governing a country by educating younger generations about war, constantly stoking national pride, spreading fear, and keeping people in poverty is not without its risks. The echoes coming from the Kremlin show that even the economy — temporarily fuelled by the military-industrial complex — is taking a back seat to the war in the president's priorities. Inflation is high, the key interest rate is high, and the Russian economy seems to be surviving thanks

to the expertise of Elvira Nabiullina, head of the Russian Central Bank. But the Kremlin lacks men to send to the front and could be tempted to lower the standard of living of the population to push men from the countryside to enlist on their own, motivated by money. The strategy has worked so far, but the reserves of willing men are running

out. By linking his fate to this conflict, playing with the social risk posed by the fear of empty fridges and putting himself in a position where he has to mobilise men in an increasingly open manner, Vladimir Putin could gradually embark on a reckless endeavour that could prove fatal for his regime.

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