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## Five reasons why Putin's objectives in Ukraine have backfired and failed

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*By Taras Kuzio of the University of Alberta*

Vladimir Putin's strategy of creating a "New Russia" from eight Russian-speaking regions in Ukraine has failed. Russia's president has covertly and overtly supported violent separatism in Donetsk and Luhansk (known collectively as the Donbas), where over 10,000 combatants

and civilians have died, with the aim of controlling eight Ukrainian regions. Yet Putin currently controls only a third of the Donbas that was never part of historic, Tsarist "New Russia".

Putin faced – and continues to face – five obstacles to his initial goals.

The first was, to his surprise, a determined and successful fight back by Ukrainian armed forces and volunteer National Guard, who were set to defeat the separatists subsequently saved by Russia's August invasion.

The second was international sanctions at a time of low oil prices that will increasingly damage Russia's economy and finances over the next 1-2 years. Further sanctions would speed up Russia's decline.

The third was public opinion in Russia, which although supporting giving aid to the separatists does not support an outright invasion of Ukraine. Evidence of this was last month's 50,000-strong peace march in Moscow.

The fourth factor is the poor state of Russia's armed forces, which mirrors that of Ukraine's. Although Russia – unlike Ukraine – has invested in military modernization, this has only created an elite corps of "green men" and airborne units who probably account for no more than 10 per cent of total troops. This, plus inevitable strong Ukrainian resistance, rules out a full-scale invasion of Ukraine which is geographically large and would be impossible to hold down.

The final factor shows to what degree the world view created by Putin's state controlled media has never corresponded to reality. Putin always mixed up "Russian speakers" with "Russians" in Ukraine, believing they were one and the same. So he was always unable to fathom the fact that a large proportion of Ukrainian armed forces and National Guard are Russian speakers. Russian speakers also dominate the huge civil society in neighbouring Kharkiv and Dnipropetrovsk who have collected and distribute donations to Ukrainian security forces.

Ukraine's eight Russian-speaking regions are divided into three groups.

The most pro-Russian and Soviet in their identity are, not surprisingly, the Crimea and Donbas, the former annexed by Russia and the latter the scene of bloody conflict. These were also the home bases of Ukraine's Party of Regions, Communists and Russian nationalists.

Kharkiv and Odessa, which I visited this month, were the swing regions that could have gone either way in the spring. Both had Russian nationalist groups – Oplot in Kharkiv and Rodina in Odessa – whose extremists sought to incite civil war. Failing this, their members joined the separatists. The most tragic result came on May 2, when 40 Russian nationalists died inside the Trade Union building in Odessa when it was burnt down following the shooting of 10 Ukrainian patriots by Rodina.

Kharkiv and Odessa are large student cities, with many foreign students in the former. They are predominantly middle class, with a large small and medium business sector and without the dominant rapacious clans and oligarchs found in the Donbas. Ukrainian patriots, including Kharkiv Metalist “ultra” football fans who coined the hugely popular song *Putin Khuylo* (“Putin is a Dickhead”), far outnumbered Russian nationalists on the streets in the spring.

The least pro-Russian and Soviet are Dnipropetrovsk, led by Jewish-Ukrainian Governor Ihor Kolomoysky who is the sponsor of the Ukraine Today English-language television channel, and Zaporizhzhya. The former was the home of Soviet Ukrainian elites and the latter has historic links to the Zaporozhzhian Cossacks who – unlike Russian Cossack supporters of the empire – are grounded in freedom loving and anti-imperial discourse. Kherson, bordering occupied Crimea, and Mykolayiv, with the exception of the port, are also not pro-Russian.

Putin not only failed to achieve his strategic goals in Ukraine but his strategy has thoroughly backfired in three ways.

A large majority of previously ambivalent Russian-speaking Ukrainians became Ukrainian patriots; in a time of conflict, individuals have to choose sides. This important lesson was missed by Donetsk oligarch Rinat Akhmetov who continued to waver and today is regarded with suspicion by Ukrainian patriots and Donbas separatists.

The foreign leader with the most negative image in Ukraine is Putin; 75 per cent of Ukrainians have a negative view of him. The Soviet indoctrination of Ukrainians and Russians as “brothers” has been irrevocably shattered.

Support for Nato membership has soared to 50 per cent; the highest it had ever been was in the late 1990s when it stood at 30 per cent. Coupled with this is a similar proportion of Ukrainians who support Ukraine returning to being a nuclear-armed state. Although this, like support for Nato membership, is a product of insecurity, it also reflects angst at betrayal by the US, the UK and Russia, who promised to support Ukraine's security in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum.

Ukraine's pre-term election on October 26 will crown Putin's defeat.

The Party of Regions, with miserable support, is not standing, while the Communists will for the first time not enter parliament. That the new parliament will be its most pro-European is a product of Putin's failed strategy, which removed the two most pro-Russian regions, failed to create a “New Russia” and solidified Ukrainian patriotism in Russian-speaking Ukraine.

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