



Putin's Plan: To Outlast Kyiv and the West

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Nearly two years into its war against Ukraine, the Kremlin gives no signs it is prepared to give up on its campaign of conquest. On the contrary, Vladimir Putin and his government are giving every indication of redoubling their efforts to conquer and subjugate Kyiv.

On Dec. 1, Russia's president issued a new presidential decree expanding the size of the country's military by some 170,000 soldiers. Doing so would swell the ranks of the Russian armed forces to 1.32 million and provide fresh blood for its Ukraine fight.

The decision is very much the product of necessity. To date, the Ukraine war has proven to be enormously costly to Russia in terms of manpower and material. According to Ukrainian military estimates, Russia has lost upward of 337,000 men since the start of the war in February of 2022, with another million wounded. It has also lost more than 10,000 armored combat vehicles, some 5,600 tanks and nearly 700 planes and helicopters.

Russia's military, moreover, is continuing to hemorrhage forces at an alarming rate. According to recent British estimates, Russia is now losing close to 1,000 soldiers a day to prosecute its campaign of aggression. As a result, it desperately needs significant new manpower to sustain its war effort.

This has compounded Moscow's other military problems. They include critical shortages of weaponry — which have forced Russia to rely on rogues like Iran and North Korea for battlefield equipment — and widening Western sanctions — which, while not totally effective, have helped to complicate Russia's access to critical technologies at least somewhat. But a shortage of men under arms is arguably Russia's biggest potential vulnerability, and the Kremlin is banking that more manpower will be the key variable in surmounting its current obstacles.

Here, Russia's size (with a population roughly four times that of Ukraine) represents a distinct advantage. For, while Ukraine has lost fewer men under arms than has Moscow — as of this summer, U.S. officials were estimating roughly 70,000 Ukrainian casualties and 100,000-120,000 wounded in combat — its losses are larger, both as a percentage of its total armed forces (numbering 500,000) and of the country's population as a whole (37.2 million).

Politically, too, Russia's decision reflects a cruel calculus. The country is on track to hold presidential elections in the Spring of 2024, and to the surprise of no one, Putin just announced he intends to stand for a fifth term in office. To be sure, the outcome of that contest is already a foregone conclusion; Russia's president is sure to win reelection in a contest that will be both unfree and heavily rigged. Even so, wartime stumbles have chipped away at Putin's mystique, and generated significant domestic complications — including, most recently, a growing anti-war movement by Russian women demanding the return of their husbands and sons from the front lines. All of which has added urgency to Putin's desire for conquest.

Relevant to Russia's calculations as well is that Western support for Kyiv is flagging. Skepticism over continued aid to Ukraine is surging in U.S. Republican circles, thanks in no small measure to the Biden administration's Ukraine policy — an approach which, while rhetorically strong, is significantly weaker than it should be in substance. Fearful of uncontrolled escalation in the conflict, the Biden White House has been slow to provide Kyiv with the game-changing equipment it desperately needs to alter the battlefield equation vis-à-vis Russia. This state of affairs has bred despair in Kyiv, fatigue in Washington, and something resembling a stalemate on the battlefield.

In light of all that, the Kremlin is clearly calculating that, if it simply throws more men into the grinding Ukraine war, it will be able to preserve its strategic position until Ukraine runs out of fighters, or Western resolve wanes — or both. That it has come to this conclusion reflects just how little Moscow cares about the well-being of its own citizens, and just how much it is committed to winning no matter the human cost.

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