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From Stalemate to Escalation: Why Putin Needs More War

by Nona Mikhelidze

- Russia's drone incursion into Poland signals deliberate escalation: Moscow is testing NATO's resolve, reframing stalemate in Ukraine as a global clash with the West.
- Moscow's strategic goals in Ukraine – demilitarisation, regime change, stopping integration into the West – have collapsed due to Ukraine's military resilience, European alignment and Zelensky's leadership.
- The Kremlin's repeated attempts to capture the whole Donbas have stalled, laying bare Moscow's inability to achieve strategic objectives.

On 10 September, **Russia launched around twenty drones against Poland**, a NATO member state. This was not a mere spillover from attacks on Ukraine, but a deliberate and carefully prepared hostile act, matured in the Kremlin over the preceding months. It came against the backdrop of a shifting international context marked by Donald Trump's arrival in the White House: his rhetoric, the hostile measures against transatlantic allies – from trade tariffs to cuts to funds for strengthening security in Eastern Europe – and the absence of concrete action against Russia, masked by red-carpet diplomacy, all reinforced Moscow's perception that the time had come to widen the conflict.

Two objectives in particular seem to drive this escalation. The first is to test NATO's resolve: Russia's elites increasingly believe

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that an attack on an Eastern European country would not trigger direct US intervention. The second, which may appear paradoxical but is increasingly plausible, stems from the perception of a strategic defeat in Ukraine. Margarita Simonyan, one of the loudest voices in Russian propaganda, **expressed it bluntly**: "When we ask ourselves in our kitchen chats 'Oh, why haven't we taken Kyiv? Why are we not in Lviv?' I'd like us to remember one thing. We are not fighting Ukraine, but the entire 'civilized world'." The strike on Poland fits neatly into this narrative: reframing the image of a grinding, inconclusive war in Ukraine as part of a broader geopolitical confrontation with the West as a whole.

What victory, whose defeat?

Since the very start of the invasion in February 2022, the debate has centred on what "victory" or "defeat" might mean – for both the aggressor and the victim. For Ukraine, which had no choice but self-defence, the minimum victory has been the preservation of sovereignty and independence – achieved so far, albeit at immense cost. The maximum victory would be the restoration of the 1991 borders as recognised by international law. To understand why Moscow shows no intention of stopping a war that has already cost it more than a million casualties between dead and wounded, however, it is necessary to ask why the Kremlin regards ending hostilities at this point as a defeat.

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From the beginning, the Kremlin has repeatedly spelled out Russia's strategic aims: the demilitarisation of Ukraine, meaning the destruction of its military capacity; the so-called "denazification", in practice a regime change in Kyiv to install a pro-Kremlin government –turning Ukraine into a new Belarus; the imposition of neutrality to block Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration; territorial expansion through the annexation of parts of the south and east; and, finally, the reassertion of Russia's status as a great power, capable of dictating security arrangements not only in its immediate neighbourhood but across Europe.

Three and a half years into the war, these goals remain essentially unchanged. What has shifted, instead, are the deadlines for achieving them consistently postponed in the face of Kyiv's extraordinary resistance. The question, then, is simple: after all this time, what has Russia actually achieved?

Stated objectives meet realities on the ground

Where Moscow sought to demilitarise Ukraine, it now faces one of the strongest armies in Europe. After the full-scale invasion of February 2022, Ukraine's military underwent a radical transformation. Once weakened by years of underfunding and structural inefficiencies, the armed forces rapidly professionalised, investing in training, modern tactics and coordination. Despite heavy losses, they gained vast battlefield experience and developed resilience. Western support was decisive. Massive transfers of advanced weapons, intelligence sharing and joint training programs boosted Ukraine's firepower, precision strike capabilities, air defences and electronic warfare. At the same time, **Kyiv innovated**: integrating drones, counter-battery systems and territorial defence networks to offset Russia's numerical superiority. The result is an army that combines professionalism, adaptability and high morale capable of complex operations against a larger foe.

With regard to regime-change in Kyiv, the Kremlin's plans collapsed almost immediately. Russian forces were repelled at the gates of the capital as early as April 2022, suffering heavy

losses in both men and equipment. Instead of weakening Volodymyr Zelensky, the invasion strengthened his leadership and political legitimacy. Ukraine's resilience and its military successes in 2022 fuelled national morale and consolidated popular backing around the President, bolstering his international influence and prestige. In short, the attempted regime-change not only failed but produced the opposite effect: it transformed Zelensky into a symbol of resistance and unity, the very embodiment of the state Russia sought to dismantle.

Finally, Moscow's attempt to block Ukraine's integration with Western institutions, above all NATO and the EU, also led to the opposite outcome. Far from isolating Ukraine, the war has accelerated its European integration. In June 2022, the EU granted Ukraine candidate status, which before the invasion was but a remote possibility. Since then, the accession process has driven wide-ranging reforms in governance, law and the economy. Much remains to be done, but civil society has flourished, promoting transparency, accountability and participation. NATO's trajectory has been similar. True, even today, there is no unanimity among allies around a clear membership perspective. But perceptions have changed. Once regarded as a liability plagued by internal weaknesses, **Ukraine is now perceived as one of Europe's most capable militaries**, turning it into a potential strategic asset for NATO.

The Kremlin lost in Donbas

From the outset, one of Putin's declared priorities was the full occupation of the Donbas. While Russian forces have taken almost all of Luhansk and large parts of Donetsk, they have never achieved full control over the whole region. Major urban and industrial centres such as Kramatorsk, Sloviansk and Kostyantynivka remain in Ukrainian hands, forming the backbone of a heavily fortified defensive line that blocks Russia from advancing further. The partial occupation has also created practical headaches for the Kremlin. Key infrastructure near Sloviansk remains out of reach, leaving Moscow struggling to secure stable access to potable and industrial water in the areas it occupies.

The Donbas also offers a telling case study of repeated promises and failures. Already in spring 2022, Russian forces were ordered to complete the occupation by the end of June. In the following months, Putin again and again set new deadlines to capture all of Donetsk oblast, which all passed unmet. Most recently, in August 2025, Putin declared that Ukraine would have to "cede Donetsk", predicting that Russia would conquer the region by October this year. As President Zelensky reported, Putin even told US envoy Steve Witkoff that he intended to take the entire Donbas by the end of 2025. Each deadline, however, has dissolved on contact with reality.

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The most tangible gain Russia has made since February 2022 is the conquest of large areas in southern Ukraine, including Mariupol and Melitopol, creating territorial continuity with Crimea. Yet compared to the costs incurred, this achievement rings hollow. Moscow has lost over a million troops killed or wounded and poured immense resources into holding devastated territories and the ruins of cities like Bakhmut and Avdiivka – places most Russians had scarcely heard of before the war. Moreover, Russia has not captured a single major regional centre: even Kherson, briefly occupied, was liberated by Ukrainian forces in November 2022.

Putin's desperate need for war

As mentioned, through the invasion, Russia wanted to reaffirm its status as a great power, dictating security arrangements not only in the post-Soviet space but across Europe. Here, too, the outcome has been the opposite. Instead of bending the West to its will, Moscow's aggression revitalised NATO, expanded its borders with the accession of Finland and Sweden, and spurred European states to drastically increase defence spending and cooperation. The decline is visible even closer to home. In the South Caucasus, Moscow's influence has waned dramatically. Armenia has drifted away after Russia failed to guarantee its security against Azerbaijan; relations with Baku have deteriorated; and Turkey has assumed a greater role in mediation and cooperation, displacing Russia's traditional dominance. Far from projecting strength, Moscow has been exposed as a power struggling to hold on to what it already controlled.

If Russia were to end the war now, what could Putin present to his citizens as a victory? He would face the impossible task of dressing up limited, costly territorial gains, purchased at the price of more than a million casualties, devastating sanctions and deepening international isolation, as a historic triumph. Compounding the dilemma is the war economy itself, which has locked Russia into a vicious cycle: ending the conflict would expose the fragility of its economic system and the emptiness of wartime mobilisation; while prolonging it risks further exhaustion and stagnation.

In this context, the Kremlin appears increasingly inclined to export instability into Europe through hybrid operations, threats and direct military pressure, rather than remain bogged down only in a costly stalemate in Ukraine. Escalation can be sold at home as proof of strength, especially if the West responds with little more than its habitual expressions of "deep concern", which Russian propaganda eagerly recasts as weakness. For Putin, war has now become the sole instrument for holding on to power: stopping it is not part of his plan. The real question, then, is not whether Russia will stop, but whether the West will allow Putin to push the war to new heights.

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