



# Ukraine Essential

**Brief Two**

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Moscow, in its third day of hostilities against Ukraine, sought to (1) encircle Kyiv to force President Zelensky to accept [Putin's ultimatums](#) and (2) secure a land bridge encompassing Crimea, Transnistria, Donetsk, and Luhansk. As affirmed by the ultimatum, Putin is seeking to [achieve what he failed to accomplish in 2014-2015](#), namely political control over Ukrainian policy. The stakes now, however, are considerably greater – any potential new agreement, Minsk-3 style, would target the entire country with [a range of measures](#) (from Russia's complete control to partition).

Though the war was viewed as unfathomable by (nearly) everyone only a few days ago, Moscow is now seeking to rapidly seize Kyiv and force a political surrender. Russia's strategy, undoubtedly, is aimed at minimizing its costs and losses, resembling the 2014 Crimea campaign that achieved its objectives with (almost) no violence. The Kremlin, that said, severely underestimated the Ukrainian resistance. Russia's stalled momentum perhaps explain the earlier discrepancy between Ukrainian and US risk assessments regarding a possible conflict (i.e. Ukraine had concluded that Russian troop levels were not enough for an effective and efficient full-scale invasion).

The formidable and determined Ukrainian resistance further portends a considerably more brutal and destructive course of war here on forward. Ukrainian President Zelensky's [rejection of the "Minsk-3" ultimatums](#) was indeed met with renewed attacks on military targets around Kyiv, and a start of a greater offensive across the frontline. Fierce fighting expected in Mariupol, meanwhile, with Russian troops seeking to advance from Crimea eastward (to complete the land bridge). Russia's war strategy appears to also be targeted towards gaining control over the eastern banks of the Dnieper River and encircling Ukrainian troops in the eastern parts of the country. A major battle is on the way in Odessa too. Western Ukraine has not been spared either from Russian Air Force even though these are largely demonstrative for the purpose of demoralization. The overall campaign, which began with cruise missiles strikes on military targets in most large Ukrainian cities early Wednesday morning, appears directed towards psychological warfare tactics intended to frighten Ukraine into submission.

While Ukraine's southern and northern defenses (to Kyiv) have proven to be vulnerable - many expected an assault to come from the east – the country's air defence and air force are still operational despite the air strikes. Russia's superior capacities in electronic warfare and cyber tools have also not managed, as of yet, [to disrupt Ukrainian command](#), control, and communications. Only a smaller number of assembled Russian forces have been deployed in the military campaign up to this point though. The approach towards Kyiv and "progress" on the land bridge, consequently, could be considered relatively successful. Russia has seemingly continued to avoid indiscriminate shelling of cities and [civilian targets](#) that would lead to egregious levels of [casualties and make it](#) even more difficult for Moscow to achieve its political goals.

This approach, however, is a strategically calculated trade-off - greater Russian fatalities will ensue and more pressure on the home front. According to [information](#) from Ukrainian military officials, Russian losses since the start of the offensive (up to February 26th at 6:00) include 102 tanks, 536 armoured vehicles, 14 airplanes, 8 helicopters, and an astonishing 3500 military personnel. Though the true number of casualties may be lower, some of the Russian tactics - wide reliance on highways/roads similar to the 2014-2015 campaign; early advances without support units; the launch of airborne troops before control over airports is secured - [have led military experts to scratch](#) their heads. The more casualties, the less is the window for a successful Russian military campaign.

Not only the Ukrainian army is putting up a fierce fight, it is becoming increasingly clear also for Russian soldiers that they are not met with applause and not seen as liberators anywhere. The reaction from the Ukrainian population is even more overwhelming than after the annexation of Crimea. Russia can still win the military side of the war given its military superiority, but it has lost any support it had among the Ukrainian population. Additionally, the war has already started a myriad of problems for Putin at home.

Russia's steps taken to amplify propaganda at home, block social media networks including Facebook and Twitter (though not Instagram), and expel Western journalists from Moscow are clear further signs that opposition to the war is growing within Russia. The use of the word "war" has been outlawed, with organizations and pages deploying it anyway being shut down. Roskomnadzor, Russia's media-monitoring agency, also banned media sources from using any information or sources apart from official government communication. This rule, in effect, means that war reporting describing the situation and developments in Ukraine can only include statements released by Moscow.

It is crucial that Ukraine not be left to fend for itself in the war. As Putin calculates that the West will continue buying Russian oil (US) and gas (Europe), the West needs to prudently decide on the range of sanctions it will apply, spanning from Russia's exclusion from SWIFT to those directed at the Russian Central Bank to [the prohibition of technology](#) exports. Given the overall societal fatigue, apathy, and precarious economic state facing Western economies, sanctions should be oriented primarily towards targeting Russian interests. The severance of ties with Russia will be inevitable though. While weapon supplies will now even come from Germany, [financial support](#) for the Ukrainian state is even more important.

The longer the war grinds on, the worse it will get. Zelensky has no good choices: either negotiate on Russia's terms and be humiliated (among other consequences) or choose to fight and risk significant casualties in the capital and across the country. In seeking to pragmatically navigate between these two options, it will likely prove difficult to mitigate further loss of territory.

The war is also a regional one. Russia has already engaged Belarus – whose battered leader Lukashenko has lost his capacity to balance since the 2020 elections and the introduction Western sanctions. Putin might also aim to go all the way to Transnistria, which is very alarming for Moldova.

The tragic loss of life and the shared cost of unprecedented sanctions is sending shivers down the spines of a generation that is witnessing its first European war at this scale. An even larger war hinges on the thin balance.