



Putin's War Plans Are Far From Popular

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Just how solid is Russian President Vladimir Putin's domestic support? Amid deepening tensions between Moscow and the West, and the growing likelihood of some sort of military conflagration over Ukraine, it's a question worth asking.

Over the past several weeks, Russia's military buildup opposite Ukraine has ignited heated debate in Washington and other capitals regarding the proper way to head off a new war in Europe. Yet, to date, all of the relevant arguments—both those in favor of supporting Ukraine and NATO, and the ones against them—have shared a common denominator. They have presupposed that the Kremlin's war plans are a popular national undertaking supported by a broad swath of the Russian people, and that, as a result, Putin has a domestic mandate to move forward militarily.

There's growing evidence, however, that might not be the case.

In late January, more than 2,000 Russian intellectuals issued a public statement urging the Kremlin to avoid launching a war of choice against its neighbor. The pronouncement, by the Congress of Russian Intellectuals, argued that "Russia does not need a war with Ukraine and the West. Nobody is threatening us, nobody is attacking us. The policy based on promoting the idea of such a war is immoral, irresponsible, and criminal, and cannot be implemented on behalf of Russia's peoples."

Just days later, another group of luminaries, including prominent national figures like political scientist Andrey Piontkovsky, sociologist Lev Gudkov and politician Grigory Yavlinsky, made the same case in the pages of *The New York Review of Books*. The central point of their open letter, which was signed by nearly 90 intellectuals, is damning: that war is being prosecuted by the Kremlin without the consent of the Russian people.

"There is no public debate. State television presents only a single viewpoint—that of the warmongers," they wrote. "Direct military threats, aggression and hatred are aimed at Ukraine, the US, and the West. But the most dangerous thing is that the war is being depicted not only as permissible, but as inevitable. This is an attempt to deceive the population, to impose upon them the idea of waging a crusade against the West, rather than investing in the country's development and improving living standards. The cost of the conflict is never discussed, but the price—the huge, bloody price—will be paid by the common Russian people."

Russia's intelligentsia are not alone in these sentiments. Fears of potentially dire consequences stemming from a new military offensive against Ukraine are now being echoed within Russia's military ranks.

General Leonid Ivashov, the influential head of the All Russian Officers Assembly, a civic group for retired Russian flag officers, issued a public appeal in late January against the prospective conflict. In it, Ivashov noted that Russia (and before that the USSR), waged just wars "when there was no other way out" and "when the vital interests of the state and society were threatened." Today, by contrast, external threats are "not critical," "strategic stability with NATO is maintained" and Russia's main problems "are internal."

According to Ivashov, an attack on Ukraine "will be a challenge to the existence of Russia itself as a state" and "forever make Russians and Ukrainians deadly enemies." The consequences for Russia, he likewise warned, are potentially dire: with the international community coming together to brand Russia as a threat to international peace and security and roll back its sovereignty. Ivashov also noted that local politics and plummeting popularity are driving Russian President Vladimir Putin's decision-making to instigate a conflict and argued that the Russian people should "refuse [the] criminal policy of provocation of war."

Even Russian decision-makers are beginning to have cold feet. U.S. intelligence agencies have reportedly intercepted communications among Kremlin officials fretting that a large-scale invasion of Ukraine could turn out to be more difficult to accomplish—and carry more adverse economic and political consequences than commonly understood.

Of course, none of this opposition may be enough to derail Russia's current trajectory. A quarter of a year ago, Putin began his military buildup opposite Ukraine as a way of expanding leverage over a disunited West and reconfiguring European security in his favor. However, ongoing diplomatic deadlock with NATO, and the growing economic costs of this extended deployment, may make him decide to take more drastic action in the weeks ahead.

Nevertheless, Putin relies on the approval of key Russian elites to maintain his hold on power. And the souring domestic attitudes now visible across the country's political spectrum suggest that at least some of the Russian president's supporters have come to believe the costs of his planned adventurism would outweigh any possible benefits. That, more than any Western threat, may be instrumental in making Putin blink.