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‘A new Iron Curtain and a new page in Europe's history’

The West’s sanctions will hit Russia hard, says Russian analyst Ivan Timofeev. But he does not see a return to the negotiating table anytime soon

Russia has launched a military offensive against Ukraine that drew strong condemnation from many countries. What are President Putin’s motives?

> The motives of the Russian leadership are stated by the leadership itself. As scholars, we have to gather the facts in order to analyse them. Unfortunately, of course, there are a lot of emotions in the air now. We have to keep a cool head and concentrate on our work – without emotions.

US intelligence agencies want to have predicted a pincer movement as Putin’s plan. This includes the capture of Kyiv and the installation of a puppet government. How is this different from a mere ‘special operation to protect Donbass’ as stated by the Russian leadership?

> I described the current war scenario back in November. Of all the scenarios we scholars discussed, the military one seemed the least likely – because of the high costs for everyone, including Russia itself. And yet it has now come to pass. We are now threatened with the harshest sanctions from the EU, the US, and other states. They pose a serious threat to our economy.
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> Moreover, there will be a political confrontation in Europe. The dialogue is over. NATO will inevitably amass military forces in Eastern Europe against Russia. The window for diplomacy is now closing as long as this conflict lasts. The West will no longer negotiate in this situation.

In fact, many experts did not expect a war – because it would not be in Russia’s interest given the devastating consequences. Why has the Russian leadership now taken the decision to attack anyway?

First of all: I cannot speak for the Russian leadership, I am not a government representative. The costs for Russia will be severe, especially for the economy. History is made when economic rationality is absorbed by political motives.

The current situation in Ukraine has been caused not only by a chain of decisions in Moscow, but also in Kyiv and in the West. Of course, Putin's decision has now set tectonic movements in motion. But even before that, there was a series of successive movements on all sides. I don't want to condemn or accuse anyone. Serious changes are currently taking place that we will have to live with for a long time.

An Austrian expert on Russia, Gerhard Mangott, recently told us that moderate experts around the Kremlin have been ousted by warmongers.

We are at a point where the views of the hardliners are prevailing. But besides the experts, there are also civil servants in the ministries – it is a complex decision-making system. That's why I wouldn't say across the board that experts have been replaced. Sometimes certain opinions weigh more heavily, sometimes others.

Putin thinks he has the support of the majority of Russians on his side in recognising the 'Donbass republics'. Unlike in 2014 with Crimea, however, there is no question of public applause for the military offensive at the moment. There are even individual protests. How do you assess the attitude of the Russians to this military step?

The fact that there are no mass protests says nothing about people's attitude. If someone doesn't take to the streets, that says nothing about their convictions. As a sociologist, I can tell you: even if some would put a 'yes' behind this or that step, behind the answer there are usually numerous details that reveal that the person thinks quite differently from the decision-makers.

The last poll conducted by the state institute WZIOM asked about the acceptance of refugees from the Donbass and the recognition of the Donbass. The vast majority of respondents were indeed in favour. But neither of mentioned a military action.

Exactly. There are many nuances. For me as a scholar, it would be interesting to analyse more precise data from focus groups. But I haven't seen such data yet.

In Putin's speech, he spoke a lot about NATO expansion: it would be unacceptable to station their infrastructure in Ukraine, as well as the creation of an 'anti-Russia' in areas that historically belonged to

Russia. Is the current conflict for him between Russia and NATO and not with Ukraine?

That is a matter of interpretation.

Is the Russian military at war with the Ukrainian population?

In his justification, Putin speaks of a war against the regime, not against the people. But that is standard. The crucial question, of course, is how the war will affect the population. How long will it last? Let us hope that there will not be many deaths – whether military or civilian. But the West's harsh reaction is certain. It means a new Iron Curtain and a new page in Europe's history.

The EU has announced a harsh package of sanctions against Russia, especially against the financial sector. Will the sanctions bring Putin back to the negotiating table?

I don't think there will be negotiations in the near future. Sanctions are usually designed to significantly increase the price for the target country for a certain policy. They are now imposed as a deterrent because of the damage done.

Indeed, several meetings of top leaders have been cancelled. The West's sanctions could also be aimed at creating discontent among the Russian population so that they take action against their leadership?

This idea is not new. People have already tried to apply it to Iran. It did not work there. With Russia, it is difficult to predict. The consequences of sanctions will be severe, both for Russian economic growth and for modernisation efforts. The people of Russia will suffer damage and a deterioration in the quality of life in the short and medium term, perhaps even in the long term. But to what extent will this generate political activity? That is not yet foreseeable. Nor does it necessarily have to occur.

How is China behaving? Could the country play a mediating role?

I don't think so. The joint statement by Putin and Xi Jinping says that China recognises Russia's claims against NATO as legitimate. If you look at the Chinese foreign minister's speech at the Munich Security Conference, he calls on both sides to implement the Minsk agreement. I am not aware of any Chinese assessment of the current military action so far. I don't see them as mediators yet. The current situation may even be advantageous for China. Despite the growing confrontation between the US and China, attention is shifting to Russia and Europe. China has a breather and can buy time.

The interview was conducted by Liudmila Kotlyarova and Roland Bathon.



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