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Bringing the war back to Russia

The Ukrainian offensive in Kursk marks a historic moment. What implications does it hold for the country's future and the overall course of the war?

Kursk, the name has a special ring to it in Russia. Exactly 24 years ago, one of the first major disasters of Putin's reign occurred — the nuclear submarine 'Kursk' sank in the Barents Sea, killing all crew members. Today, it is the namesake, the regional capital Kursk, that has dominated the news for a whole week. For the first time since the Second World War, the regular army of a hostile state is on Russian soil, with tanks and not far from the sites of the colossal Red Army tank battle against the Nazi *Wehrmacht* in 1943.

With its Kursk-Belgorod operation, Ukraine has already successfully pulled off a powerful surprise, also in terms of communication. The penetration of a substantial Ukrainian troop unit into Russian territory is accompanied by an effective disinformation campaign. For example, a deepfake video of the Kursk governor was circulating on the Russian internet for some time, appearing to call on his citizens to gather in defence of their country and form militias. There are also staged and acted recordings, for example the selfie video of a 'local resident' who reports on conversations with Ukrainian occupying soldiers and preparations for a 'referendum on joining Ukraine'.

Officially, little to nothing is communicated by Kiev, which reinforces the desired effect. Ukraine has closely observed the reaction to the Prigozhin revolt and knows that a lack of preparation on the part of Russian officials, general confusion on the ground and radio silence from above are its best allies.

The population of the border districts on the Russian side should feel more than ever: the war is coming home; the Kremlin

As expected, the Russian government was caught off guard. The border guards and the supporting army units were generally aware of the possibility of Ukrainian border crossings, but only to the extent of last year's actions by the 'Russian Volunteer Corps', a formation under the patronage of Ukrainian military

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intelligence. These were mainly high-profile pinpricks documented on social media, carried out by a few dozen soldiers and with no further military relevance. This time, Ukrainian soldiers and material in division strength are involved — a failure of Russian reconnaissance and proof that the drone-saturated 'glass battlefield' on the direct Russian-Ukrainian contact line is no guarantee against such coups.

The situation is still unclear: Moscow remained silent for a long time, issuing premature all-clears. President Vladimir Putin finally declared the defence campaign to be an 'anti-terrorist operation' and mandated the FSB domestic intelligence service with a kind of police martial law. On Tuesday, Russian forces then struck back at Ukrainian troops with missiles, drones and airstrikes. The motto is: don't make the enemy's success any bigger. Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of Russian border residents are on the run or evacuated; they report on the inactivity of the local authorities; television programmes broadcast reassuring lies right up to the last minute ('It's only a small Ukrainian reconnaissance force') instead of information that is vital for survival (addresses of emergency shelters in the country, information on evacuation routes, packing lists).

The blame game was also immediately underway: the Kadyrov fighters stationed on the border blamed the Ministry of Defence, local officials pointed to the silence in the federal headquarters, the remnants of Wagner's troops called in from Mali and asked to be reinstated quickly on the Ukrainian border. In the same week of all weeks, the Russian digital censorship authority begins the long-planned large-scale shutdown of YouTube — still the most important source of information for millions of people. Russia is sinking into a fog of war and information.

Effects of the operation

But even the most successful surprises only work for a short time — such is their nature. After a week, we still don't know exactly what goals the Ukrainians are pursuing, but we can already assess the various effects of the operation. Firstly, there are the communicative goals of the endeavour: in addition to the certainly very necessary self-assurance of the Ukrainian armed forces and society – that they are not completely caught up in the agonising battle against fatigue – the operation also sends several signals to Russia. The population of the border districts on the Russian side should feel more than ever: the war is coming home; the Kremlin cannot keep its security promises. This is indeed an effective message, as the shelling of Belgorod and other places close to the border

in the past has certainly put the local population in a crisis mood.

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However, as with earlier drone attacks on Moscow, this has by no means resulted in an anti-Kremlin and anti-war stance. In spring, Moscow responded by launching the Kharkiv offensive in an attempt to suppress Ukrainian artillery and thus move Russian villages and towns out of its reach. Nevertheless, this development is very localised. Russians in other parts of the country remain distant and indifferent to the suffering of their compatriots on the Ukrainian border — the censorship in the Russian media is too strong and the degree of dissociation and social coldness deliberately cultivated by Putin's regime is too high. Only those who have relatives and friends in the border districts and who talk to them know first-hand: the war has long since arrived in the heartland of Russia, and not just a week ago.

The situation is different, however, with the current shift in human losses on the Russian side towards conscripts, who are primarily deployed to secure the border. Here, the Ukrainian operation could have a manifest effect on the mood in Russia. There are already known deaths among the average 20-year-old members of the Russian regiments stationed near the border. Over the last two and a half years, the Kremlin has taken great care to avoid the deployment of conscripts on the front line or to explain it as a mistake. The absolute majority of recruits are older people (around 40 years of age), prisoners, veterans, newly naturalised citizens, police officers and siloviki from other sectors, as well as mercenaries.

The social contract – according to which the Russian army conscripts many young people, but keeps them out of foreign and war missions and returns them to their families largely unharmed at the end of their service – even goes beyond any legal provisions. There are currently not even any conscripts in the annexed territories of Ukraine. Though, according to Russian legal opinion, these territories are domestic and therefore suitable for the deployment of conscripts. If many more of them were to die in the course of the Ukrainian operation, this would electrify the soldiers' mothers' movements as well as social media — something that cannot be effectively kept secret even in today's Russia.

Ukraine can be credited

Ultimately, the question remains as to whether the whole thing should also send a signal to

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Vladimir Putin or even herald preparations for diplomatic efforts to end the war. Could the whole thing end in a territorial exchange offer from Kiev? That seems doubtful at present. For an actual occupation, the rapid advance of the Ukrainian armed forces would have to be followed by a massive deployment of Ukrainian soldiers and material. The Russian military has been pulling together various reserves in the Kursk region for days, which are still significantly larger than on the Ukrainian side. Moreover, the Russian units fighting on the front line in the Donbass have only had to surrender marginal capacities and resources; their forward movement has by no means come to a standstill.

Given his leadership style, it is also doubtful that Vladimir Putin would now be more willing to negotiate than before. The Kremlin leader may first want to restore his position of strength before honouring the surprise success of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Commander-in-Chief Oleksandr Syrsky through negotiations. In his government consultation this week, he was militant: there can be no talks with a state that 'attacks Russian civilians and nuclear power plants'.

The situation is still dynamic and it is therefore impossible to draw any conclusions. The Ukrainian offensive marks a new chapter in the war, but at the same time does not yet look like a game changer. Nevertheless, Ukraine can be credited with reminding Russia and the world that you can't have it both ways — war in a neighbouring country and peace at home.



Alexey Yusupov

Alexey Yusupov heads the Friedrich Ebert Foundation's Russia programme. He was previously the FES' office director in Myanmar,

Afghanistan and Kazakhstan. He also supports political actors as an adviser and moderator.