

What to Expect in Russia's Winter Offensive in Ukraine

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Wading through the [18,000-word transcript](#) of an hours-long meeting that President Vladimir Putin took with the "soldiers' mothers" last Friday in Moscow, one gets the impression that the fighting in Ukraine may continue well into 2023 — and even beyond.

In a most revealing remark, Putin acknowledged that Moscow blundered in 2014 by leaving Donbass an unfinished business — unlike Crimea — by allowing itself to be lured into the ceasefire brokered by Germany and France and the Minsk agreements.

Moscow took some time to realise that Germany and France [connived with then leadership in Kiev](#) to scuttle the implementation of Minsk accord. Then Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko admitted in a series of interviews with western news outlets in recent months, including on Germany's Deutsche Welle television and Radio Free Europe's Ukrainian unit, that the 2015 ceasefire was a distraction intended to buy time for Kiev to rebuild its military.

In his words,

"We had achieved everything we wanted, our goal was to, first, stop the [Russian] threat, or at least to delay the war -- to secure eight years to restore economic growth and create powerful armed forces."

The so-called Steinmeier Formula (proposed by German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier back in 2016 when he was foreign minister) on the sequencing of the Minsk agreement, had called for elections to be held in the separatist-held Donbass territories under Ukrainian legislation and the supervision of the OSCE; and, if the OSCE judged the balloting to be free and fair, then a special self-governing status for the Donbass territories would be initiated and Ukraine's control of its easternmost border with Russia restored.

Putin admitted that Russia accepted the Minsk agreements ignoring the wishes of the

Russian population in Donbass. To quote him,

“We sincerely went to this. But we didn’t fully feel the mood of the people, it was impossible to fully understand what was going on there. But now it has probably become obvious that this reunion [of Donbass] should have happened earlier. Maybe there wouldn’t have been so many losses among civilians, there wouldn’t have been so many dead children under shelling...”

For the first time, perhaps, an incumbent Kremlin leader admitted making mistakes. The above poignant passage, therefore, becomes a touchstone for Putin’s future decisions, as the Russian mobilisation approaches the final stage and by end-December, an estimated 4 lakh additional Russian troops will have been deployed in forward positions.

The bottom line is that Putin slammed the door shut on another Minsk-like hodgepodge of modern furniture and antiques. How does this translate as political reality?

First and foremost, much as Moscow is open for dialogue without preconditions, Russian negotiators will be bound by the recent amendments to the country’s Constitution, which incorporated Donetsk, Lugansk, Kherson, and Zaporozhye regions as part of the Russian Federation.

Second, Friday’s meeting has been, by any reckoning, an audacious initiative by Putin — risky, politically speaking. His interlocutors included mothers drawn from far-flung regions, whose sons are either actively fighting on the warfront, or have experienced the tragedy of sons having been killed in the fighting, or seriously wounded and need prolonged rehabilitation.

They were strong-willed women, for sure, and yet, as one of them from the small town of Kirovsk in Luhansk told Putin while recalling the death of her son Konstantin Pshenichkin on the frontline,

“My heart bleeds, my soul freezes, gloomy memories cloud my mind, tears, tears, and suddenly my son asks me: “Mom, don’t be sad, I’ll see you – you just have to wait. You will go through this life for me, and in that life, we will be together again.”

Putin claimed openly — highly unusual for a Kremlin leader — that he went prepared for the meeting. But he still had surprises in store. Such meetings are impossible to be choreographed as pent-up emotions are in play in front of TV cameras.

Thus, Marina Bakhilina from Sakha Republic, mother of three sons (one of whom is a highly decorated soldier from the elite Airborne Forces, 83rd Brigade and recipient of the Order of Courage) complained that there’s no hot food on the frontline. She told Putin:

“Do you understand what’s going on? If our people can’t provide our soldiers with hot meals, I, as a master of sports and a shooting CMC, would love to go there, to the front line to cook.”

Putin replied gently,

“It would seem that the issues have already been mostly resolved... it means that not everything is normal...”

What stands out in such frank exchanges is Putin's massive political capital, derived out of the great consolidation he has mustered in getting the nation to rally behind him. The overall mood at the meeting was one of commitment to Russia's cause and the confidence in ultimate victory. Of course, this strengthens Putin's hands.

This is where the analogy of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis comes unstuck. Public opinion wasn't a key factor 60 years ago. In a nutshell, common sense prevailed in 1962 as realisation dawned that any failure to take into account the rival power's security interests could have an apocalyptic outcome.

The difference today is that while President Joe Biden has insulated himself and is not accountable for his dogged pursuit of a Russian defeat on the battlefield in Ukraine and an ensuing "regime change" in Moscow, Putin insists on holding himself accountable to his people. Will any western "liberal" politician in power dare emulate Putin's extraordinary meeting with the "soldiers' mothers"?

If economic hardships lead to social unrest and political turmoil in western Europe, the politicians in power will be at a disadvantage. Putin is fighting a "People's War," while western politicians cannot even admit that they are fighting Russia. But how long can it be hidden from the public view in Poland or France that their nationals are getting killed in Ukraine's steppe? Can the western politicians pledge that their "volunteers" didn't die in vain? What happens if a refugee flow out of Ukraine into western Europe begins as winter advances?

In military terms, Russia enjoys escalation dominance — a markedly superior position over its NATO rival, across a range of rungs as the conflict progresses. The accelerating Russian operation in Bakhmut is a case in point. The deployment of regular troops in the recent days shows that Russia is on the escalation ladder to wrap up the 4-month old "grind" in Bakhmut city in Donetsk, which military analysts often describe as a lynchpin of Kiev's defence in the eastern Donbass region.

A [New York Times report on Sunday](#) highlighted the enormous scale of losses Ukrainian forces suffered in recent weeks. Evidently, the Wagner Group of Russian military contractors who were doing the fighting pinned down the Ukrainian forces in defensive position, estimated in the region of 30000 troops including crack units "that have been worn down by nonstop Russian assaults."

The Times report admits, citing a US defence official, that the Russian intention could have been to make Bakhmut city "a resource-intensive black hole for Kyiv." This paradigm will repeat elsewhere, too, except that the Russian forces will be much stronger, far superior in numbers and vastly better equipped and will be fighting from heavily fortified positions.

Putin made it clear at Friday's meeting that vanquishing the neo-Nazi Banderites will remain a firm objective. Although regime change in Kiev is not a stated purpose, Putin will not settle for a repetition of the ceasefire and peace as in 2015, which left an anti-Russian, proxy regime of the US in power.

That said, Putin underscored that "despite all the issues related to the special military operation, we do not change our plans for the development of the state, for the development of the country, for the development of the economy, its social sphere, for national projects. We have huge, big plans..."

Taken together, all these elements define Russia's so-called winter offensive. Putin's hand-picked theatre commander in Ukraine General Sergei Surovikin is not in the mould of Patton or MacArthur. Basically, he holds the compass of the special military operations, while incorporating the experience accruing through the past 8 months of NATO involvement in the fighting. But never once did Putin use the expression "war" to characterise the conflict.

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