

Putin's Occupation Options for Ukraine: Keep or Trade?

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In his speech declaring the launch of the so-called “limited military operation,” President Vladimir Putin stated that Russia had no plans to occupy Ukraine: “We are not planning to impose anything on anyone through the use of force.” In the following three weeks, however, Russian troops did exactly the opposite. They seized Ukrainian towns, bombed civilian infrastructure, captured nuclear power stations, engaged in indiscriminate shelling of residential areas, sieged cities, and abducted local elected officials. On March 15, the Russian military declared that it had the entire Kherson oblast under its control – the largest administrative unit occupied by Russian forces since the capture of Crimea in 2014.

The popular response that Russian invaders face in Ukraine now, however, is starkly different from what they encountered in Donbas eight years ago. There has been a mounting non-violent resistance in most towns captured by the Russian forces, while local officials refuse to recognize the authority of the Russian military and pledge their loyalty to Ukraine. This widespread defiance of the Russian presence across Ukraine indicates that the Crimean or Donbas scenarios of long-term occupation will be untenable for Russia. Instead, as this memo argues, Russia is now more likely to use newly seized territories as collateral to press Ukrainian leaders to recognize their earlier territorial losses and add a neutrality pledge to Ukraine's Constitution.

2022 is No 2014

The swift takeover of cities in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts by local separatists and undercover Russian agents in spring 2014 occurred mostly without significant local resistance. In those rare instances where separatists received pushback from within, they either decided to withdraw, like in Svatove and Dobropillia, or engaged in violent retaliation, like in Mariupol. The success of quick separatist takeovers of most towns in

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Donbas was possible for three main reasons: 1) the receptivity of a sizeable share of local residents to separatist demands; 2) the defection or passivity of law-enforcement; 3) the cooperative response of the local authorities. Separatists and Russian agents also relied on pre-existing civil society and political structures, such as Afghan war veteran organizations and the Communist Party of Ukraine, which provided organizational resources and technical expertise to stage separatist referendums and mobilize the public behind their goals.

From the first days of the Russian multi-front assault on Ukraine in 2022, the response of local authorities and the public to the Russian military presence was markedly different. In Henichesk, a sea port town on the Azov Sea and one of the first towns captured by Russian troops, local authorities continued operating under Ukrainian state symbols. On March 6, thousands of Henichesk residents marched under Ukrainian flags in defiance of the Russian occupation. Similar repeated mass protests happened in almost all occupied towns in different regions, including oblast center Kherson. They were accompanied by the singing of the Ukrainian anthem and defiant chants in the face of the Russian military: "Go home!" City administrators often encouraged these protest rallies through their public expressions of loyalty to Ukraine and calls on local residents to defy the Russian presence. Importantly, there have been no counter-rallies in support of the Russian troops or of a union with Russia, which were widely held across Donbas in spring of 2014.

The Russian approach to administering the seized towns also differed from the approach used in 2014. First, Russians, initially, avoided removing state symbols from municipal buildings and tolerated public expressions of disagreement by city officials. This stood in contrast to the way Ukrainian symbols were publicly desecrated in Donbas, while local authorities were asked to pledge loyalty to the separatists or resign. For the most part, there were also no attempts to elevate local figures as replacements for incumbent administrators. Rather, Russian occupying forces established military commandant offices, which started functioning as parallel governance structures. Apart from overseeing the public order, they issued orders to restrict public gatherings and introduced curfews. The appeal of the Russian military commandant of Nova Kakhovka, for example, contained an "order" to stop any exchange or sale of arms or explosives, and to cease any "unauthorized" marches or pickets, the gathering of any military-related information, and any "illegal" actions against public property. Some towns, like Kherson and Kakhovka, also witnessed the deployment of Russian National Guard units, which started performing policing functions.

The local city governments recognized the need to co-exist with the Russian military but insisted that by remaining in their positions they helped to preserve Ukraine's claim on the territory. As Kherson mayor Ihor Kolyhaev [explained](#) ten days after Russian troops seized the city, "Kherson is de jure part of Ukraine, but de facto it is occupied." He stressed that the municipal authorities were still working in the city council under the Ukrainian flag and called on all local businesses to continue their operations and pay taxes into the

Ukrainian budget to sustain the national economy. He even initiated the formation of the “municipal guard,” which was aimed at maintaining public order in the absence of a fully functioning Ukrainian police force. In response to the rumors of plans to create the Kherson People’s Republic, city and oblast council deputies issued joint appeals affirming their commitment to Ukraine.

Similarly, when Halyna Danylchenko, a city council deputy of Melitopol, [proclaimed](#) herself an acting mayor willing to work under the Russian command, city council deputies [voted](#) to condemn her actions and open a criminal case against her. Even members of traditionally pro-Russian parties sided with their former political rivals in rejecting the Russian role. The mayor of Kryvyi Rih Oleksandr Vilkul, once a prominent leader of the pro-Russian Opposition Bloc, called his former colleague Oleg Tsariov a traitor for his appeal to start collaborating with the Russian army. The faction of another pro-Russian party Opposition Bloc – For Life! in the Kherson city council [voted](#) for its dissolution, while its leader declared that “the time for such parties has passed.” The experience of 2014, when many city council deputies across Donbas voted to hold separatist referenda in their towns, can no longer be replicated in the rest of Ukraine.

The dual governance of occupied territories, however, is likely to be temporary. The first abductions of city mayors known for their pro-Ukrainian stance, such as the mayor of Melitopol Ivan Fedorov and the mayor of Skadovs’k Oleksandr Yakovlev, already indicate that the Russian military recognizes their vital role in mobilizing anti-Russian dissent. After his release, Fedorov [confirmed](#) that the Russians asked him to ban anti-Russian rallies in the town and pledge loyalty to them. The use of threats and coercion, however, may only force some municipal leaders to resign or flee and is unlikely to trigger widespread collaboration. The examples of voluntary collaboration by local officials, like Danylchenko, so far remain rare. Unless there is more defection within the local administrative structures, Russian forces would have to choose between imposing order on restive local communities and ensuring the relatively smooth functioning of the basic city services. The prolonged occupation of these regions without internal acquiescence, however, is not a feasible strategy.

Obstacles for Sustained Occupation

Various studies of foreign occupation suggest that it regularly imposes significant costs on the occupying force due to the [rise](#) in terrorist attacks and the outbreak of insurgencies and [nonviolent](#) resistance campaigns. One [study](#) of successful occupations differentiated between security occupations, meant to prevent the occupied territory from becoming a threat, and comprehensive occupations, that add attempts to shape the political and economic system of the occupied area. While the extent of Russia’s occupation goals in Ukraine remains unclear, President Putin’s stated intention to “demilitarize” Ukraine suggests that he will, at minimum, seek to impose his security preferences on the occupied

territories. Hence, a successful occupation should ultimately allow Russia to advance its security interests in the region over the longer term.

Based on a review of the historical record of foreign occupations, the study points to three conditions that could allow an occupying power to achieve its goals: 1) a recognition that occupation is necessary and potentially beneficial (to rebuild the political or economic system of the country); 2) a perception that an occupier can provide protection from a third-party threat; 3) a credible deadline for ending the occupation set by an occupying power. All of these conditions presume a degree of acceptance of the foreign occupation by the local communities and a belief in its beneficial effects. By contrast, as Edelstein [observes](#), the greatest impediment to successful occupation is “the nationalism of the occupied population.”

Surveys conducted in the weeks preceding the Russian invasion already [indicated](#) a rising willingness to repel Russian “military intervention” across almost all regions of Ukraine. Between December 2021 and February 2022, the share of Ukrainians willing to participate in armed resistance to Russia grew from 33.3% to 37.3%.² Strikingly, in all regions more people expressed a commitment to an armed response than to participation in a non-violent resistance. Overall, in early February 2022 more than half of respondents across Ukraine (57%) suggested that they would be contributing to some type of resistance against Russia. This resolve strengthened even further after the first week of the Russian invasion. In a March 1 survey, 59% of Ukrainians said they were certain to take up arms to defend Ukraine and another 21% said they were likely to do so. In southern Ukraine, which came under direct Russian attack early on, a majority (53%) said they were fully ready to fight back militarily.

This readiness for armed resistance among Ukrainians in the southern and eastern regions now is far greater than it was in spring of 2014. In an April 2014 [survey](#), the highest share of respondents ready to fight a Russian military invasion was in Khersons’ka oblast (36.9%). In two oblasts in Donbas, which had already witnessed its first violent clashes, only 11.9% (Donets’ka) and 10.7% (Luhans’ka) indicated a willingness to fight Russian aggression through the use of force, while slightly more respondents in each said they would welcome the appearance of Russian troops.

One of the reasons for a starkly different reaction to the possibility of a Russian invasion in 2014 and 2022 may be a different view of the motives attributed to Russian leadership. In 2014 almost half of respondents in Donets’ka (47%) and Luhans’ka (44%) oblasts and a third of respondents (32.6%) in all southeastern regions said that Russia was justly protecting the interests of Russian-speakers in Ukraine. By contrast, in a March 2022 [poll](#),

² In all regions except three Eastern Ukrainian oblasts (Kharkivs’ka, Donets’ka, Luhans’ka) the share of respondents willing to join armed resistance was above 30 percent based on the KIIS poll conducted in February 5 – 22, 2022.

only 6% of respondents in the east and 1% in all other regions interpreted the military invasion as an attempt to protect the Russian-speaking population. The majority of respondents in all regions of Ukraine view the goal of the Russian invasion in starkly existential terms as a “full destruction of the Ukrainian people.”³

The brutality of the Russian military campaign, the siege tactics of major cities that increase human suffering, and the indiscriminate killing of civilians in different parts of the country using cluster munitions and other powerful explosives are only likely to reinforce this view. Any attempts to occupy new areas of the country, then, will produce not only broader non-violent resistance and sabotage Russia-backed authorities, but also give rise to an [insurgency](#) campaign likely to be sustained through [external](#) backing. The failure to coopt local groups into governance structures and the need to administer towns using Russian personnel could further [strengthen](#) resistance activity. This will impose additional costs on the Russian state and undermine its capacity to effectively govern the territories it captured. It will also create a permanent instability on Russia’s western borders and raise the risks of violence spilling over into Russia and of a direct clash with NATO member-states. Hence, any initial plans to divide Ukraine along the German model or to replicate the DNR/LNR in other oblasts need to be adjusted to the new reality of widespread Ukrainian defiance of Russia’s rule.

Collateral Occupation as an Alternative

The only feasible alternative for Russia is now to use the newly seized territories as collateral in ongoing talks with Ukrainian leadership. Moscow could then offer to cede them back to Ukraine in return for Ukraine’s fulfillment of key terms. This approach allows Russia to avoid the costs of establishing its own governance structures and, instead, rely on local elected officials to ensure the continued provision of basic services. Without necessarily coopting local authorities, Russia could still dampen internal backlash by allowing municipal officials to continue working for their communities.

Russia could expect collateral occupation to incentivize Ukrainian leaders to make costly concessions once they realize that Ukraine lacks capacity in the short-term to reclaim these territories militarily. In some ways, however, collateral occupation may also complicate the bargaining process. First, Putin already articulated his claim that the entire Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts should be part of the LNR/DNR. This would mean that the parties could not simply agree to return to pre-war borders as part of the settlement. Secondly, Russia’s capture of the southern parts of Ukraine fueled discussion of establishing a “land bridge” between Crimea and the rest of the Russian state. In the absence of other tangible territorial gains, this may strengthen those within the ruling elite who advocate against

³ According to Rating survey conducted in March 12 – 13, 2022 this view is shared by 65% of respondents in the West, 54% in the Center, 51% in the South and 54% in the East.

any settlement with Ukraine that would require Russia to give up its land connection to the peninsula. Thirdly, ongoing occupation has already been accompanied by coercion of local officials, journalists, and civic activists. The only oblast that Russia managed to occupy fully, Khersons'ka, also [displayed](#) the strongest will to fight Russian occupation and the [greatest](#) skepticism about the Novorossiia narrative as the basis for Russia's territorial claims compared to the rest of southeast Ukraine.

This suggests that a prolonged collateral occupation would require increasingly greater repressiveness on the Russian side. If such repressions would particularly entail widespread civilian abuse, as documented in Bucha, the prospects for a diplomatic settlement would dim further. Russia can then use collateral occupation for bargaining purposes only if the talks with Ukraine are finalized rapidly. If negotiations are stalled, Russia would have to shift its occupation strategy and face the uncertainty of rising costs from civil resistance and administrative hurdles to keep the territories it seized.

