

Opinion **War in Ukraine**

Putin is looking for a bigger war, not an off-ramp, in Ukraine

New mobilisation law is part of a wider effort to maximise Russia's firepower and blunt western support for Kyiv

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“These amendments are written for a big war and general mobilisation. And the smell of this big war can already be scented,” Andrei Kartapolov, the head of the Duma’s defence committee, said this week as the Russian parliament rushed to adopt a new law. The legislation enabling the Kremlin to send hundreds of thousands more men into combat reveals a sad truth: that far from seeking an off-ramp from his disastrous war in Ukraine, Vladimir Putin is preparing for an even bigger war.

It is understandable that many in Ukraine and the west want to believe that Russia’s president is cornered. The Ukrainian army is gradually reconquering lands occupied by the Russians and has shown itself capable of [striking deep into enemy territory](#) — even into the Kremlin itself. The sanctions pressure on Russia is mounting.

For now, the west remains united in support of Kyiv, and streams of modern weaponry and money sustain the Ukrainian war effort. Finally, the mutiny staged by the Wagner mercenary boss [Yevgeny Prigozhin](#) and visible conflicts among senior Russian military commanders add to hopes that the Kremlin’s war machine will break

down.

Things likely look very different to the Kremlin, which believes that it can afford a long war. The Russian economy is forecast to record modest growth this year, mostly thanks to military factories working around the clock. Critical components such as microchips needed for the defence industry are arriving from China and other sources.

Despite sanctions, the Kremlin's war chest is still overflowing with cash, thanks to windfall energy profits last year and also to the adaptability of Russian commodities exporters, who have found new customers and who settle payments mostly in yuan. If budgetary pressures were to become more acute, Russia's central bank could further devalue the rouble, making it easier to pay soldiers, defence industry workers and the internal security forces who keep the Russian elite and public repressed and largely in line with Putin's disastrous course.

When it comes to the war itself, the Kremlin still seems unperturbed by the Ukrainian counteroffensive. Even if Kyiv makes more advances, the Kremlin may brush them off as temporary. Putin is banking on the fact that the Russian manpower that can potentially be mobilised is three to four times bigger than Ukraine's, and the only pressing task is to be able to tap into that resource at will: to mobilise many more men, arm them, train them and send them to fight. This is precisely [the purpose of the new law](#), which should help the Kremlin to avoid another official mobilisation.

From now on, the government can quietly send draft notices to as many men as it deems necessary. The upper age limit for performing mandatory service will be increased from 27 to 30, and could be raised again in future. Once an electronic draft notice is issued, Russia's borders will be immediately closed to its recipient in order to prevent a massive exodus of military-age men like the one Russia witnessed last autumn. The punishments for refusing to serve have also been ramped up. These moves, combined with massive state investment in expanding arms production, should help Putin to build a bigger and better equipped army.

A parallel tactic is the strangulation of Ukraine's economy. Knowing that [the Ukrainian budget is on life support](#) provided by its western allies, the Kremlin wants to deny Kyiv all sources of revenue. Moscow has therefore not only pulled out of the grain deal that had enabled Ukrainian agricultural exports via the Black Sea, it has also launched [massive air strikes against Ukrainian ports](#) to destroy any possibility of reviving the agreement. The same logic underpins Russia's air strikes against civilian infrastructure: they are aimed at making Ukrainian cities uninhabitable and

preventing reconstruction efforts.

The Kremlin hopes that the rapid rebuilding of the Russian army and gradual decimation of the Ukrainian economy and armed forces will result in growing western frustration and a decline in material support for Kyiv. To speed up this process and break the west's will, Moscow is using threats of escalation, including expansion of the conflict towards Nato territory via [Belarus](#) with the help of Wagner mercenaries based there.

Putin has made plenty of fatal mistakes. But as long as he is in charge, Moscow will dedicate its still vast resources to achieving his obsession with destroying and subordinating Ukraine. As western leaders think about policies to support Ukraine into the third year of this ugly war, any long-term strategy must take this reality into account.

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