

**Is Russia facing defeat in Ukraine?**

Sir Roderic Lyne

*Headline in The Times (London), 8 October: "Collapsing Russian lines spark hope of early end to war."*

**Russia's war with Ukraine has entered a new phase. Russia is losing, running short of men and munitions, internally divided, faction-ridden and under economic pressure; but it would be wildly over-optimistic to think that peace is around the corner. The conflict has not reached an end-game. Russia has effectively moved onto a war footing and is escalating. The situation is fraught with risks – for Russia, Ukraine and the West. Russia is heading for instability.**

**Putin has had a disastrous autumn.** His forces have lost significant ground, although still advancing in parts of Donetsk. He and the army leadership have faced rising criticism from retired officers (presumed to be reflecting views within the serving military) either that the war was a mistake or that it should be conducted with greater ferocity. On 21 September, in a sign of desperation, Putin announced the mobilisation of new forces for what he still refuses to call a war. On 5 October, two days before Putin's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday and following widely-derided sham referendums, he signed laws claiming to annex four regions of Ukraine which Russia does not fully occupy and the boundaries of which the Kremlin was unable to define.

**Mobilisation has shattered the previous veneer of normality across most of Russia.** Putin had for months been holding off pressure to conscript more troops, for fear of a strong popular reaction. Across the country people now know that they are at war. A second exodus has been triggered, with an estimated 300,000 men having fled across different borders.

**Predictably, Putin is doubling down.** His paranoia about the United States and Western plans to dismember Russia hit the top of the Richter scale in his 30 September speech. He has reiterated warnings that he is not bluffing about a possible resort to nuclear devices. He is now aligning with the most hawkish elements. Putin has placed the notoriously thuggish (but effective) General Surovikin in charge of the operation; and is pressing President Lukashenka to bring Belarus more directly into the war. It is not clear whether the explosion on 8 October on the Kerch Strait bridge connecting Crimea to Russia was an audacious act by Ukrainian special forces (as at first appeared) or a ploy by factions in Russia. Either way it provided a convenient trigger for the launching on 10 October of over a hundred missiles and drones at eleven Ukrainian cities – a move probably prepared before the bridge explosion. If the war continues to go badly for Russia, Putin and Surovikin will use maximum aggression – and Putin could consider the option of martial law and a formal war footing.

**President Biden has joined the ranks of those looking for an "off-ramp" for Putin,** but there is no apparent off-ramp. Rationally, after a series of defeats, losing most of his invasion force, and the fiasco of his mobilisation announcement, Putin should be looking for a way out. There are elements within the upper echelons who would favour the cessation of active hostilities and a resumption of the negotiations which broke down in April. Putin is not listening to any such advice. He has been driven by emotion and an obsession with controlling Ukraine or wreaking destruction there. For him withdrawal appears inconceivable and possibly fatal, especially after the "annexations"; and the Ukrainians would not now offer the sort of concessions under discussion in March.

**Could Putin be forced out?** The Russian business and political elites can see the dire costs of the war but are obeying orders for fear of the consequences. Putin is surrounded by layers of protection commanded by arch-loyalists. He is a master at playing competing factions off against each other. His position has weakened and either military defeat or a breakdown of

order in Russia could eventually force him out; but in the near term he will be very hard to shift.

### **So where does it go from here?**

**One scenario is that the Ukrainians will continue to push the Russians back gradually towards the borders - with the Russians digging into defensive positions**, holding onto part of the four regions where they are camped through the winter while continuing to bombard Ukraine (with diminishing stocks of missiles) and disrupt the West (possibly including acts of sabotage). Russian forces still hold over 80% of the territory in the South and East which they have taken since 24 February. Putin and his generals would hope to turn the tide with additional troops next year, but thousands of reluctant and poorly trained conscripts will be a dubious asset for Russia. There has been no weakening of the will of the Ukrainians to regain their territory and their military are getting stronger. The West, thus far, is standing firm and the latest bombardments have consolidated support for Ukraine (with the G7 Heads meeting in response and Germany now agreeing to provide air defence systems). The prospect would therefore be for a **prolonged conflict, slowly moving in Ukraine's favour**.

**A second scenario would posit a collapse in the will to continue the conflict of the Russian government and the Russian military** – with supplies running short, troops demoralised, the economy in deepening trouble, popular support falling (and China urging an end to the war). This could happen over time but Russia is a long way from breaking point. Support for the war varies by age, location and level of education. A crude estimate would be that there is still strong but diminishing support from a third to a half of the population (in a traditionally patriotic country), with the most committed opponents having left, been locked up, or keeping their heads down. In the first instance any change of leadership would most likely take Russia in a tougher and more primitive direction.

**Might Russia go nuclear?** The Russians are using the nuclear threat to try to deter Ukraine and NATO – a credible threat because the war is an existential issue for Putin and we cannot assume rationality on his part. It is conceivable that he would order use of a low-yield battlefield device if he thought that would stave off defeat – especially if he risked losing Crimea, which almost all Russians consider to be their territory. Nuclear experts think this unlikely: it would not stop the Ukrainians, and it would trigger a very strong reaction from NATO and more widely (including from China and India). US and UK intelligence agencies have said in the past week that they have detected no preparations for use of nuclear weapons.

**And peace?** Whatever happens over the short-to medium term – whether, for example, some form of stalemate develops into a de facto ceasefire or truce – **there cannot be a peace settlement until Russia irrevocably accepts Ukraine's independence and sovereignty**. That will not happen under a Putinist regime. Meanwhile the damage done not just to Ukraine but to Russia will be huge. The war has destabilised the Russian elite, bringing the most brutish elements to the top, putting Putin's leadership in question, and triggering an exodus of talent. In the words of one Russian commentator, the country is now in a condition of **"unstable stability"**.



**Sir Roderic Lyne**

Sir Roderic Lyne was the UK's Ambassador to Russia during President Putin's first term, since when he has consulted, written, lectured and broadcast extensively on Russia.