



Research Article

## Political Analysis or Fortune-Telling by Crystal-Ball? Western Think Tanks' Challenges with Forecasting Putin's War

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**Abstract:** This article analyzes major western think tanks' forecasts, experts' opinions, and US and UK media content regarding the future of Ukraine-Russia relationships in the year preceding Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Though the Russian-Ukrainian war has been ongoing since the occupation of Crimea and quasi-republics ("Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics") were established in 2014, not many political analysts foresaw the coming of the bloodiest and most devastating war since WWII. At the same time, Big Data content analysis of US and UK media demonstrated the presence of markers of an approaching full-scale invasion. Correct-based estimation of the likelihood of a Russian invasion of Ukraine, as well as Ukraine's willingness and ability to protect its sovereignty, was crucial for shaping the appropriate response of the Collective West.

**Keywords:** war, conflict, full-scale invasion, escalation, Russia, Ukraine, political analysis, content analysis, big data.

### Introduction

The war in Ukraine revealed the ugly face of a Russia resembling a quasi-empire. This image was barely discussed in academia. The full-scale invasion resulted in mass murder, sexual violence, total destruction of civilian towns and villages,

“death lists” of volunteers, activists, decision-makers, Ukrainian service personnel, kidnapping, torture, forceful displacement to the Russian Federation, child trafficking, and displacement in occupied zones, in other words, many bigger and smaller Buchas.<sup>1</sup> Yet, according to one of the surveys anonymously conducted among political analysts<sup>2</sup> less than a year before the invasion, *only one* analyst predicted it.

Why did the world not notice the approach of the bloodiest conflict since 1945? What made a few see the future clearly, and what made the others ridicule such predictions? How come Polish politicians had been called “obsessed with Russia” for more than a decade for warning the West about a possible “resurrection” of the USSR with Russia’s ambition to be a superpower and inclinations toward aggression?<sup>3</sup> Timothy Snyder’s 2018 book *The Road to Unfreedom* was not followed by a serious academic and political discussion that might have led to taking effective preventive measures. The European Union came to the conclusion that “the vision of a common space from Lisbon to Vladivostok has not materialised”<sup>4</sup> only in the eighth year after the violation of the territorial integrity of Ukraine and several preceding military interventions in other countries.

Unfortunately, February 24, 2022, revealed that too many political analysts were no more useful than mediums with crystal balls. This demonstrates the power of oft-repeated narratives to blind those who tell them and who listen to them to other possibilities.

Bucha had a preamble. For years Russian political elites and their propaganda machines had been dehumanizing Ukrainians and fostering a spirit of Russian superiority that laid the groundwork for the atrocities there. Dmytro Kuleba, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, successfully summarized this trend: “Bucha was not enabled in one day. For many years, Russian political elites and propaganda have been inciting hatred, dehumanizing Ukrainians, nurturing Russian superiority, and laying the ground for these atrocities. I encourage scholars around the globe to research what led to Bucha.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A town in Kyiv oblast where the Russian army committed almost all possible war crimes, “‘They Killed People Systematically’: Bucha Residents Allege War Crimes by Expelled Russian Forces,” *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=HaCD0XlxYgA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HaCD0XlxYgA).

<sup>2</sup> Maksym Khylyko, “Ukraine–Russia: Is Conflict-Free Coexistence Possible? Results of the Expert Survey,” *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung*, December 2021, accessed July 13, 2022, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/ukraine/18808.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Noted by Krzysztof Gawkowski, Parliamentary leader of Lewica, at a meeting with European social democrats in March 2022.

<sup>4</sup> “Russia: Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the EP Debate on His Visit to Moscow,” *The Diplomatic Service of the European Union*, February 9, 2021, accessed July 13, 2022, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/russia-speech-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-ep-debate-his-visit-moscow\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/russia-speech-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-ep-debate-his-visit-moscow_en).

<sup>5</sup> Liliya Ragutska, “Kuleba: The Massacre Did Not Happen in One Day, for Many Years Russian Propaganda Incited Hatred,” *Obozrevatel*, July 10, 2022, accessed July 13,

It is worrisome that despite so much effort invested into understanding the roots and features of fascism, its rise in Eurasia was either overlooked or intentionally ignored. We do not intend to dive into narrative analysis in the framework of this article, as it should be a part of a more comprehensive, deeper, but necessary study. However, we do intend to scrutinize the political analysts (in the first section of this article) and the media content of the United States and the United Kingdom (in the second part).

## Assessments of Western Think Tanks and Political Analysts on the Eve of the Full-Scale Invasion

The actions of most Western governments shortly before and several weeks after the invasion demonstrated a great amount of disbelief in the ability of Ukraine to preserve its sovereignty due to the state of its armed forces<sup>6</sup> and a shock that one of the worst possible and least anticipated scenarios was realized. "The Ukrainian military may not be able to hold back even a limited Russian push across the line of contact."<sup>7</sup> The story of 5 000 helmets offered by Germany as assistance<sup>8</sup> is a bright example of the judgments dominating the discourse regarding policies to be implemented to support Ukraine back then. The appeals to reconsider the EU leading country's pacifistic policy as a preventive measure were not heard, although it could have had "the dual effect of reducing Ukrainian losses and increasing costs for the Russian military by forcing them to expend more munitions and lose more hardware."<sup>9</sup> The time wasted was not accounted for in hours or minutes, but human lives and hundreds of millions of losses in infrastructure.<sup>10</sup>

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2022, <https://war.obozrevatel.com/ukr/kuleba-bucha-trapilasya-ne-za-odin-den-protyagom-bagatoh-rokiv-rosijska-propaganda-rozpalyuvala-nenavist.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> Dan Peleschuk, "Ukraine's Military Poses a Tougher Challenge for Russia than in 2014," *Politico*, April 14, 2021, accessed July 13, 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraines-military-poses-a-tougher-challenge-for-russia-than-in-2014>.

<sup>7</sup> Eugene Rumer and Andrew S. Weiss, "Ukraine: Putin's Unfinished Business," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, November 12, 2021, accessed July 13, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/11/12/ukraine-putin-s-unfinished-business-pub-85771>.

<sup>8</sup> Daniel Boffey and Philip Oltermann, "Germany's Offer to Ukraine of 5,000 Helmets is 'Joke', Says Vitali Klitschko," *The Guardian*, January 26, 2022, accessed July 13, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/26/russia-ukraine-germany-under-pressure-to-back-eu-military-training-mission-in-ukraine>.

<sup>9</sup> Dumitru Minzarari and Susan Stewart, "The Logic of Defence Assistance to Ukraine: A Strategic Assessment," *German Institute for International and Security Affairs*, July 9, 2021, accessed July 13, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.18449/2021C42>.

<sup>10</sup> Dan Bilefsky and Nick Cumming-Bruce, "Ukraine's Prime Minister Says Rebuilding Will Cost \$750 Billion," *The New York Times*, July 5, 2022, accessed July 13, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/05/world/europe/ukraines-prime-minister-says-rebuilding-will-cost-750-billion.html>.

The West's response was shaped by previous estimations of (1) the likelihood of a Russian invasion of Ukraine, (2) the assessments of Ukraine's capabilities and fighting spirit, and (3) Russia's military capabilities and motivation to achieve its goals. Despite the efforts undertaken by Ukraine since 2014, which strengthened the army,<sup>11</sup> the doubts may be understandable. Not only were there many unresolved problems with infrastructure and organization,<sup>12</sup> but there was a significant gap in funding. In 2021 Ukraine spent \$ 5.9 billion on defense, while Russia spent \$ 65.9 billion. Predictions did not account for the almost unimaginable scope of corruption in the Russian army or the determination of Ukrainians to defend their homeland. These unaccounted-for factors have thus far proven crucial.

So, what were the predictions of the Western think tanks and political analysts a year before the invasion? For the purpose of this article, we will look into assessments presented by major think tanks (from countries with significant influence on the policies of the Collective West)<sup>13</sup> and views of political analysis provided to decision-making institutions.

First of all, it should be noted that the overall assessment of political, economic, social, military, historical, and even human factors was pretty well elaborated; however, only a few came to the conclusion that full-scale invasion was the most probable scenario. On the contrary, an in-depth understanding of the consequences and costs prevented the option from being seriously considered.

The expected "losses" of Russia from the invasion were obvious to all the analysts:

- Termination of the recently re-established direct dialogue with the USA (put on hold after the 2014 acts of aggression), which symbolized the recognition of the Russian Federation as a global superpower deciding the fate of the world;
- The impact of the sanctions following the full-scale invasion would be devastating for the Russian economy;
- Significant casualties might cause political issues at home;
- The interpretation of the war in Ukraine as civil and the presentation of Russia as a country not being part of the conflict will be dead as a narrative.

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<sup>11</sup> "Ukrainian Armed Forces," *Congressional Research Service*, January 26, 2022, accessed July 13, 2022, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11862>.

<sup>12</sup> Glen Grant, "Seven Years of Deadlock: Why Ukraine's Military Reforms Have Gone Nowhere, and How the US Should Respond," *The Jamestown Foundation*, July 16, 2021, accessed July 13, 2022, <https://jamestown.org/program/why-the-ukrainian-defense-system-fails-to-reform-why-us-support-is-less-than-optimal-and-what-can-we-do-better>.

<sup>13</sup> Countries have been chosen based on the level of assistance provided to Ukraine and their influence on the formation of policies of the Collective West.

The factors contributing to the likelihood of invasion were excessively discussed but eventually dismissed. Among them were:

- The self-confidence of the Kremlin and Putin due to a demonstrated lack of EU political will and efforts to decrease its dependence on Russian hydrocarbons and pursuit a green future; the EU's fear of inflation and recession of the European economy caused by the energy crisis if severe sanctions, including gas and oil embargo, are imposed; current high gas prices; the USA's focus on COVID-19 and China and, in the eyes of Kremlin, lack of a real European leader and no force that could challenge Russia;
- Russian leadership's belief that the world was evolving from a unipolar to a polycentric international system ("transitioning away from the West and towards the Non-West"<sup>14</sup>) and expected support from China;
- The Collective West's failure to react to a series of Russian geopolitical and military advances in the past two decades; modest sanctions were imposed on Russia after the annexation of Crimea, thus signaling the West's lack of commitment to sacrifice its economic interests to protect Ukraine; Ukraine's way to NATO was already blocked due to the ongoing so-called Donbas conflict, and this hinders Ukraine's alignment with the West;
- The assumption that NATO would not support Ukraine militarily due to a lack of Article 5 guarantees and the organization's inability to even "successfully defend the territory of its most exposed members" (as has become apparent in a series of war games);<sup>15</sup>
- Hundreds of years of shared history, widespread family and business ties among the populations of the two countries, and decades of russification of Ukraine;
- Putin's desire to leave a legacy as a "gatherer of Russian lands" (instead of the leader remembered for losing Ukraine) – the first ruler since the mid-Twentieth century to expand the country's territory and restore Russia's dominion over lands that were part of its historic empire. This goal was viewed not just as merely geopolitical but also as a generational, strategic, and personal aspiration;<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Samuel Charap et al., *Russian Grand Strategy: Rhetoric and Reality*, Research Report (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2021), [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR4200/RR4238/RAND\\_RR4238.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR4200/RR4238/RAND_RR4238.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> Doug Bandow, "Why on Earth Would Russia Attack the Baltics?" *CATO Institute*, February 7, 2016, accessed July 13, 2022, <https://www.cato.org/commentary/why-earth-would-russia-attack-baltics#>.

<sup>16</sup> Rumer and Weiss, "Ukraine: Putin's Unfinished Business."

- Well-financed information campaigns aiming to destabilize the EU by financing right-wing and populist parties of European countries, as well as think tanks, experts, and individual politicians.

**Table 1. Assessments of Western Think Tanks and Political Analysts on the Eve of the Full-Scale Invasion (2021).**

Institution / Expert	Assessment	Summary
<b>Belgium</b>		
<b>Martin Russell</b> (European Parliamentary Research Service)	“In spring 2021, many observers dismissed Russia’s threatening moves as mere ‘sabre-rattling,’ possibly as an attempt to force concessions in the stale-mated Donbas conflict. This time again, there are links to the Donbas situation ... On the other hand, further talks may simply give him more time to prepare an attack. According to some, the worst-case scenario could even see fighting spreading to other European countries.” <sup>17</sup>	Likely
<b>Michael Emerson</b> (Centre for European Policy Studies)	“Another reading of the Kremlin’s possible tactics is that they are essentially opportunistic ... At this point, one may assume that Kremlin strategists are waiting for the opportunities that their current threats may create, keeping all options open. For sure, they would prefer to achieve their objective of a compliant regime in Kyiv without military action. But nobody knows what opportunities may arise – not excluding further territorial gains for Russia, if achievable at low cost ... But while such operations are presumably among the options being prepared by Russian military planners, maybe the Kremlin is indeed just trying to use its threats to deliver other objectives, preferably without war.” <sup>18</sup>	Relatively likely

<sup>17</sup> Martin Russell, “Is Russia about to Start a New War in Ukraine?” *European Parliamentary Research Service*, December 16, 2021, accessed July 13, 2022, <https://epthinktank.eu/2021/12/16/is-russia-about-to-start-a-new-war-in-ukraine>.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Emerson, “With Russia Threatening Ukraine with War, What Should the EU Do?” *Centre for European Policy Studies*, April 21, 2021, accessed July 13, 2022, [www.ceps.eu/with-russia-threatening-ukraine-with-war-what-should-the-eu-do](http://www.ceps.eu/with-russia-threatening-ukraine-with-war-what-should-the-eu-do).

<b>Germany</b>		
<b>Dumitru Minzarari, Susan Stewart</b> (German Institute for International and Security Affairs)	“... the conflict is likely to linger for decades, leading to thousands of additional casualties and a higher risk of military escalation.” <sup>19</sup>	Possible in a long-term perspective
<b>Gustav Gressel</b> (European Council on Foreign Relations)	“There are good reasons to question Putin’s seriousness about preparing for an invasion, despite the ostentatious military measures he has taken to get ready for one ... Putin may be attempting a strategic misdirection that impales the West in a diplomatic process and military planning cycle that will keep it unprepared to meet his preferred, wily, and more subtle next move. Putin benefits greatly by focusing attention on the risk of war and prompting the current US scramble to defuse and de-escalate this crisis that he invented. If Putin is threatening military action to misdirect, then the West’s concessions will feed directly into his non-military efforts to achieve his objectives of changing the geopolitical orientation of Ukraine from West to East and weakening NATO. Putin’s ‘concession’ may be nothing more than not invading Ukraine. If he never intended to invade Ukraine, he will have received quite a lot while giving up almost nothing.” <sup>20</sup>	Unlikely from a short-term perspective
<b>Susan Stewart</b> (German Institute for International and Security Affairs)	Russia wants to destabilize the situation in eastern Ukraine. “If Russian leadership intended this as a test, then the Kremlin no doubt saw that it did indeed garner a response from the West.” <sup>21</sup>	Unlikely from a short-term perspective

<sup>19</sup> Minzarari and Stewart, “The Logic of Defence Assistance to Ukraine.”

<sup>20</sup> Frederick W. Kagan et al, “Forecast Series: Putin’s Likely Course of Action in Ukraine, Putin’s Military Options” (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War and the Critical Threats Project, December 2021), <https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Ukraine%20Invasion%20Forecast%20Series%20Part%202%20ISW%20CT%20December%202021.pdf>.

<sup>21</sup> Elena Barysheva and Alexander Savitsky, “Is Russia about to Launch an Attack in Eastern Ukraine?” *DW*, April 8, 2021, accessed July 13, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/is-russia-about-to-launch-a-fresh-offensive-in-eastern-ukraine/a-57127207>.

<b>The United Kingdom</b>		
<b>Keir Giles,</b> (Chatham House, The Royal Institute of International Affairs)	Based on past performance, it is reasonable for Moscow to hope that at least some of the treaty (new security treaties with the US and NATO) proposals will be accepted. And there are plenty of options for attacking Ukraine that are less costly, and more manageable, than another land invasion ... Western leaders have a track record of accepting Russia's demands through being terrified of the alternative. By constantly driving home warnings of nuclear escalation – repeated even in the texts of the treaties – Russia is trying to panic the West into rolling back its own security as a preferable alternative to open warfare ... Russia does not want its demands punted off into the long grass of lengthy negotiations – the last thing a conman wants is for his victim to have time to go away and think about it. But the urgency also reflects the limited time Russia can keep large numbers of troops on the Ukrainian border pretending to be about to invade. By presenting all its demands at once, Moscow could get traction with at least some of them ... It seems likely the troops opposite Ukraine – and others on the move across the country – are ready for a fight if necessary. But it is hard to see how rolling tanks across the border would serve Russia's aims when far cheaper and more controllable options exist for inflicting damage on Ukraine. <sup>22</sup>	Highly unlikely
<b>USA</b>		
<b>Eugene Rumer, Andrew Weiss</b> (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace)	“Kremlin could stage a rapid military onslaught to break the back of the Ukrainian military and force it to retreat behind the Dnieper River. This would position the Kremlin to control what is commonly referred to as ‘left-bank Ukraine,’ including the historical part of Kyiv. Presumably, the Kremlin might even try to install a puppet government in Kyiv and declare it ‘mission accomplished.’ But there is abundant reason to be skeptical about whether the Kremlin is eager to take on the long-term task of occupying and administering such a vast territory.	Possible, but unlikely

<sup>22</sup> Keir Giles, “Putin does not Need to Invade Ukraine to Get His Way,” *Chatham House*, The Royal Institute of International Affairs, December 21, 2021, accessed July 13, 2022, [www.chathamhouse.org/2021/12/putin-does-not-need-invade-ukraine-get-his-way](http://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/12/putin-does-not-need-invade-ukraine-get-his-way).



	Ukrainian forces and insurgent groups would almost certainly seek to make any mission along these lines as costly as possible. Even if presented with a fait accompli, the Biden administration would likely find great receptivity in Western Europe for steps to punish the Kremlin and reassure NATO allies worried about further Russian moves.” <sup>23</sup>	
<b>John E. Herbst</b> Senior Director (Eurasia Center), Former US Ambassador to Ukraine	“Russia’s failure in the East of Ukraine motivates it to intimidate Ukraine and test the West hoping to get concession from Ukraine and USA in negotiations on Donbass.” <sup>24</sup>	Unlikely from a short-term perspective
<b>Samuel Charap, Dara Massicot</b> (RAND Corporation)	It appears that Russia believes divisions would be needed in the case of a larger war with Ukraine. Russia views Ukraine as an ongoing source of instability for years to come. Russian expeditionary capabilities will remain limited through 2025 and beyond because Russia lacks key pillars for an expeditionary force, such as sufficient strategic lift or a foreign basing network. Russia might revise its military doctrine in the coming years to bring it into alignment with Moscow’s recent resource decisions. If recent military behaviors are accurate indicators, then such a revision would include a greater emphasis on large-scale interstate military clashes. <sup>25</sup>	Possible in a mid-term perspective

## Markers of Russia’s Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine in the Media in the USA and the United Kingdom

### Research Methodology

This study uses the Attack Index<sup>26</sup> information and analytical service for processing large volumes of information (Big Data) from open Internet sources. The service allows for determining the degree of information resonance on selected

<sup>23</sup> Rumer and Weiss, “Ukraine: Putin’s Unfinished Business.”

<sup>24</sup> “Will Russia Invade Ukraine Again?” *Atlantic Council*, December 2, 2021, accessed July 13, 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/event/will-russia-invade-ukraine-again>.

<sup>25</sup> Charap et al., *Russian Grand Strategy: Rhetoric and Reality*.

<sup>26</sup> “Attack Index,” <https://attackindex.com/uk/golovna>. The service was created by a Ukrainian team led by Ellina Shnurko-Tabakova.

topics. The service uses English-, Russian-, and Ukrainian-language monitoring databases collected over the past 25 years, in particular: social networks (Facebook, Instagram, LiveJournal, LiveInternet, Vkontakte, Odnoklassniki, Telegram, Twitter, Youtube, Reddit, Weibo, Rutube, Medium, ArXiv); more than 10,000 sites (media, blogs, forums); TV and radio content.

Attack Index is an integral indicator of the level of information danger, which takes into account many factors: the presence of information activity, the activity of possible opponents/ competitors, the deviation of the average information picture (background), the presence of information operations and the stages of their development, the retrospective and dynamics of the negative tone of publications, as well as the degree of chaotic processes. The service provides opportunities to search for messages on topics of interest in global networks; track information flows (stories), relevant topics, events, and processes; determine the dynamics of information flows; establish the dynamics of the tonality of publications; determine anomalous and critical components in the dynamics of thematic information flows; define the main events and objects of the thematic flow of information; visualize relations among monitored objects; forecast the development of the situation.

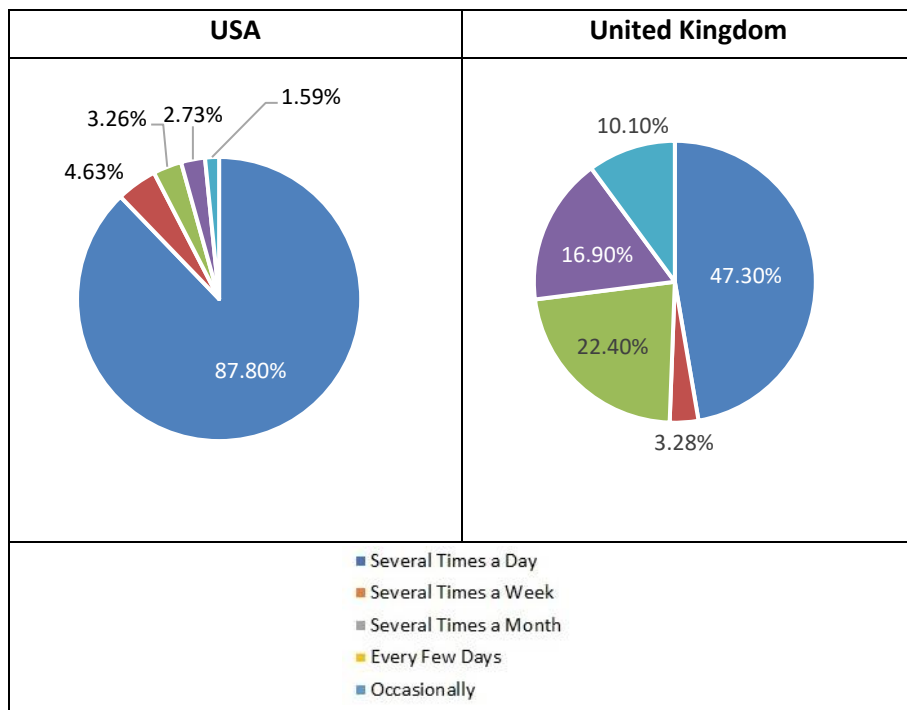
**Table 2. TOP 20 Publication Sources for the Whole Period of Query.**

USA		United Kingdom	
[1] Yahoo News	226	[1] Daily Express	80
[2] GlobalSecurity.org	43	[2] Daily Mail	61
[3] The Hill	42	[3] Independent.co.uk	55
[4] ABC news.com	36	[4] International Business Times	37
[5] WTOP	31	[5] The Guardian	23
[6] Stars and Stripes	29	[6] Daily Mirror	18
[7] New York Times	28	[7] The Sun	17
[8] Newsweek	26	[8] Telegraph	16
[9] Voice of America	24	[9] BBC	10
[10] Seattle Times	24	[10] Sky News	7
[11] Associated Press News	23	[11] The Times	7
[12] Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty	23	[12] Byline Times	6
[13] FOX News	20	[13] openDemocracy	6
[14] SFGate.com	20	[14] Economist.com	6
[15] WIVB-TV	17	[15] Scotsman.com News	5
[16] Washington Times	17	[16] EU Today	3
[17] The Wall Street Journal	14	[17] MiddleEastEye.net	2
[18] FOX 11	14	[18] Chatham House	2
[19] Los Angeles Times	12	[19] Bellingcat	2
[20] MarketWatch	12	[20] RUSI	1

**Decoding Narratives and Messages in the Media**

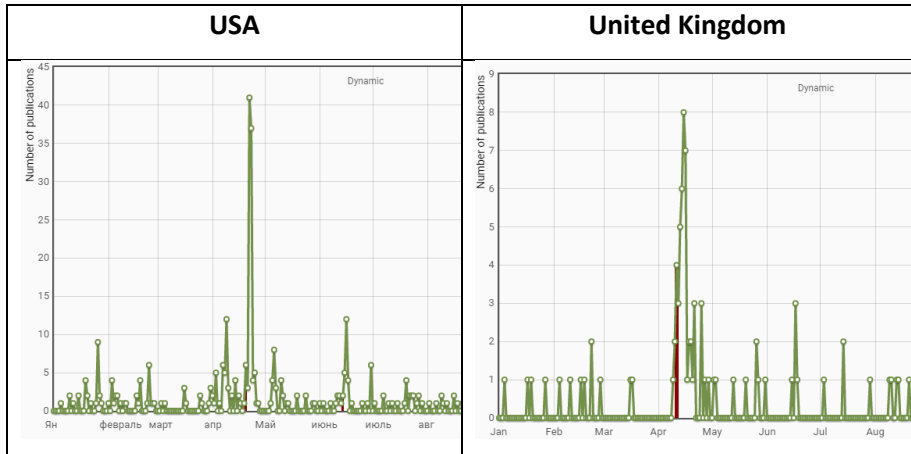
In order to determine if there were markers of a possible Russian invasion of Ukraine in the media of the United States and the United Kingdom, the keywords “war, Russian Federation / Russia, Ukraine” were chosen for analysis. Content analysis proved the relevance of the topic “War of Russia in Ukraine” in the media space of the United States and the United Kingdom in 2021: the level of threat awareness was 6 points in the United States and 8 – in the United Kingdom, which indicates the importance of signals about the potential aggression of the Russian Federation. The number of publications on the topic was 662 units in the US media and 164 in the United Kingdom. The probable coverage of the audience was 732 167 and 159 777 people, respectively. Unique content was formed mainly by official media and accounted for 9.19 % in the USA and 12.6 % in the United Kingdom, which is also an indicator of the urgency of the topic (see Table 2).

Information about a possible invasion of the Russian Federation into Ukraine appeared regularly in the media of the USA and the United Kingdom. Monitored media published such information several times a day in 87.8 % and 47.3 % of the cases, respectively (Figure 1).



**Figure 1: Frequency of Publications by the Keywords “War of the Russian Federation in Ukraine” in the Mediaspace of the USA and United Kingdom in 2021.**

The topic was most actively discussed in the timeslots of 04/02/2021 – 04/26/2021, 06/14/2021 – 06/17/2021, and 11/24/2021 – 02/24/2022 (Figure 2). In these periods, media presented key narratives regarding a possible invasion of the Russian Federation into Ukraine.



**Figure 2: Number of Publications by Dates within the Period of Study.**

From April 2 to April 26, 2021, the *National Interest* (USA) introduced the question, “Is war possible in Europe as a result of the escalation of the situation in Ukraine by Putin’s Russia?”<sup>27</sup> The publication analyzed the situation near the borders of Ukraine and in Crimea, pointing to “the highest military deployment of Russian army in Ukrainian borders ever” and assessed it as “yet another unprovoked escalation in Moscow’s ongoing campaign to undermine and destabilize Ukraine.”

The narrative, recorded in the form of a question, testifies to the presence of two contradictory opinions – fears about the possibility of thawing the conflict and denial of Russia’s preparations for a full-scale invasion of Ukraine:

The buildup has come amid a spike in hostilities in eastern Ukraine, where Russian-backed separatists have been locked in a simmering war with Ukraine’s US and European-backed military since 2014. The increase in the violence in eastern Ukraine has raised fears internationally of a possible flare up in the so-called frozen conflict. While US military officials haven’t seen an-

<sup>27</sup> Andreas Umland, “A War in Europe? Why Putin’s Russia Is Escalating in Ukraine,” *The National Interest*, April 20, 2021, accessed July 13, 2022, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/war-europe-why-putin%E2%80%99s-russia-escalating-ukraine-183200>.

anything yet to suggest Russia is gearing up for an imminent cross-border incursion into Ukraine, the United States, the UK and European states have criticized Moscow for the military buildup."<sup>28</sup>

The British *Daily Express* more categorically declares the possibility of a Russian attack on Ukraine in "Russia 'on Doorstep of War' with Ukraine after Largest Movement of Troops in 50 Years,"<sup>29</sup> although the phrase "on the doorstep of war," enclosed in quotation marks, indicates some doubt about a full-scale conflict.

The narrative "Is war possible in Europe as a result of the escalation of the situation in Ukraine by Putin's Russia?" is broadcast with two messages.

Message 1: "*The open build-up of the Russian military force – a show of strength or preparation for something more sinister?*" also shows doubts about a full-scale invasion of the Russian Federation into Ukraine. "In Washington, the CIA director told Congress that it remains unclear whether the build-up is a show of force or preparation for something more ominous;"<sup>30</sup> "The high visibility has cost Russia any element of surprise, leading analysts to minimize but not rule out the possibility of an actual attack;"<sup>31</sup> "Dr. McGlynn insists the build-up of troops and arms in eastern Ukraine is Putin 'showing off' and doubts the Russian strongman would risk a full-scale conflict. She said: 'Putin would rather manipulate and fool around than go into full-on war.' 'War is a big risk,' 'Putin flexes muscles amid Ukraine war threat';"<sup>32</sup> "The Russian ambassador to the UK has warned of a 'bloodbath' in Ukraine – and vowed to respond if Kyiv moves troops to the Donbas region."<sup>33</sup>

The presentation of the narrative and messages as questions indicates the uncertainty of the analysts' position regarding the Russian Federation's possible

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<sup>28</sup> Alexandra Odynova, "Photos Show Russia's Military Buildup near Ukraine as Putin Claims Dominion over More of the Region's Sea and Air," *CBS News*, April 21, 2021, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/russia-ukraine-military-buildup-crimea-putin-black-sea-airspace/>.

<sup>29</sup> Dylan Donnelly, "Russia 'on Doorstep of War' with Ukraine after Largest Movement of Troops in 50 Years," *Daily Express*, April 15, 2021, accessed July 13, 2022, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1423298/russia-news-Ukraine-doorstep-of-war-usa-Vladimir-Putin-Crimea-troops-ont>.

<sup>30</sup> Odynova, "Photos Show Russia's Military Buildup near Ukraine."

<sup>31</sup> Andrew E. Kramer, "In Russia, a Military Buildup That Can't Be Missed," *The New York Times*, April 16, 2021, accessed July 13, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/16/world/europe/russia-ukraine-troops.html>.

<sup>32</sup> Mark Hodge, "Empire State of Mind. Putin Is Threatening to Invade Ukraine 'to Humiliate' Biden as He Looks to Reassert Russia's 'Superpower' Status," *The Sun*, April 15, 2021, accessed July 13, 2022, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/14659341/putin-ukraine-humiliate-biden>.

<sup>33</sup> Tariq Tahir, "Ready to Strike. Chilling Satellite Pics Show 'Biggest-Ever' Build-Up of Russian Forces on Ukraine Border with Thousands Ready to Invade," *The Sun*, April 19, 2021, accessed July 13, 2022, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/14693649/satellite-pics-biggest-build-up-russian-forces-ukraine>.

aggression. The demonstration of force was evaluated as a signal to the West to hear and consider the demands of the Russian Federation.

The high visibility has cost Russia any element of surprise, leading analysts to minimize but not rule out the possibility of an actual attack. More likely, they say, the buildup is intended as a warning to the West not to take Russia for granted.<sup>34</sup>

Message 2: “*Putin wants to conclude an agreement with the West regarding the recognition of the sphere of interests of the Russian Federation*” also sounds vague since it is not specified which “sphere of interest” is meant. This message arose after Putin’s annual speech at the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation on April 22, 2021. In this speech, Putin demonstrated to the world the strategy for the future war<sup>35</sup> – disrespect for Ukraine and the countries of the West and disregard for the laws of warfare in order to satisfy one’s own ambitions. In his annual address, Putin compared the United States to the lame but arrogant Bengal tiger Shere Khan, from Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Book*. He described US allies as a gang of yelping Tabaqui-cowardly and despised golden jackals who attack Russia with “fake” accusations and impose sanctions while doing Shere Khan’s bidding. Later Putin “once again” “called on the West to begin discussing strategic weapons and global stability without confrontation. Indeed, taking into account non-strategic (tactical) nuclear weapons, which no one has ever verifiably counted, Russia may have more (maybe twice as many overall) than all the other official or unofficial nuclear powers taken together.”<sup>36</sup>

But the demands put forward by the Russian Federation to the West remain unclear. Putin warns of metaphorical uncertain “red lines” – “President Putin has warned western allies that they will pay a heavy price if they cross a ‘red line’ with Russia as tensions mount over its military build-up on the Ukraine border.” But the concept of “red lines” is very vague and can be expanded as the Russian Federation wishes.<sup>37</sup>

The same strategy is used by Putin in Ukraine today – after Bucha, Irpen, and Mariupol, Russia accuses Ukraine of Nazism and the West – of trying to bring Russia down. Therefore, the sphere of interest of the Russian Federation is an undefined concept, the boundaries of which can expand infinitely.

From June 14 – June 17, 2022, in the context of the Biden-Putin summit in Geneva initiated by the US president, the narrative “*The relationship between*

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<sup>34</sup> Andrew E. Kramer, “Putin Warns of a Russian ‘Red Line’ the West Will Regret Crossing,” *The New York Times*, April 21, 2021, accessed July 13, 2022, [www.nytimes.com/2021/04/21/world/europe/russia-putin-ukraine-navalny.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/21/world/europe/russia-putin-ukraine-navalny.html).

<sup>35</sup> “Mondi in Progress 29-04-2021,” *The Science of Where Magazine*, April 29, 2021, accessed July 13, 2022, <https://www.thescienceofwheremagazine.it/2021/04/29/mondi-in-progress-29-04-2021>.

<sup>36</sup> “Mondi in Progress 29-04-2021.”

<sup>37</sup> Kramer, “Putin Warns of a Russian ‘Red Line’ the West Will Regret Crossing.”

the Russian Federation and Western countries will depend on the Russian Federation's compliance with international norms" was formed. The US media of this period recorded the "battle of messages" of all interested parties<sup>38</sup>: "In 2008, NATO promised that Ukraine and Georgia would eventually be welcome to join the alliance despite protests from Russia" (NATO, 2008) – "The Kremlin has signaled that Ukraine's NATO bid is fraught with a new, hot conflict in Europe" (Russia) – "Washington definitely doesn't want war" (USA) – "Russia bolstered its forces near Ukraine and warned Kyiv that it could intervene militarily if Ukrainian authorities try to retake the rebel-controlled east" (Russia).

Russia's messages like "The Kremlin has signaled that Ukraine's NATO bid is fraught with a new, hot conflict in Europe" and "Russia bolstered its forces near Ukraine and warned Kyiv that it could intervene militarily if Ukrainian authorities try to retake the rebel-controlled east" initially created dissonance in the communication of the Summit, as they contained manipulative components – irrelevant situations as a reason for conflicts (Ukraine's NATO bid, Ukrainian authorities try to retake the rebel-controlled east). Therefore, the messages of the Russian Federation were received by the Western community with a shift in emphasis, which gave hope for peace. Russian messages should have been decoded as follows: "The Kremlin has signaled about new, hot conflict in Europe," "Russia bolstered its forces near Ukraine and warned Kyiv that it could intervene militarily." Therefore, the narrative "The relationship between the Russian Federation and the United States will depend on the observance of international norms by the Russian Federation" could not be accepted by Russia since the decision to invade Ukraine had already been made. Manipulative pretexts were used for it, which worked well for the domestic audience of the Russian Federation, if not for the international community.

On November 12, 2021, a narrative that lost relevance only with the start of the war on February 24, 2022, was verbalized – "The Russian attack on Ukraine will be a fatal mistake," "US warns allies that Russia could invade Ukraine as tensions in the region soar,"<sup>39</sup> "White House has warned European allies to prepare for a Russian INVASION of Ukraine with further border military build-up and tensions over gas supplies,"<sup>40</sup> "Why Russia could INVADE Ukraine: US warns tens of

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<sup>38</sup> Vladimir Isachenkov and Yuras Karmanau, "Some US Allies Near Russia Are Wary of Biden-Putin Summit," *The Seattle Times*, June 13, 2021, accessed July 13, 2022, <https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/nation/some-us-allies-near-russia-are-wary-of-biden-putin-summit>.

<sup>39</sup> William Walker, "US Warns Allies that Russia Could Invade Ukraine as Tensions in the Region Soar," *Daily Mirror*, November 12, 2021, accessed July 13, 2022, <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/us-news/warns-allies-russia-could-invade-25440116>.

<sup>40</sup> Chris Pleasance and Elizabeth Elkind, "REVEALED: White House Has Warned European Allies to Prepare for a Russian INVASION of Ukraine with Further Border Military Build-up and Tensions over Gas Supplies," *Daily Mail*, November 11, 2021, accessed July 13, 2022, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10192833/White-House-warns-Europe-prepare-Russian-INVASION-Ukraine-border-military-build-up.html>.

thousands of troops at border.”<sup>41</sup> On November 24, 2021, the “war of messages” of the Russian Federation (“The use of nuclear weapons is possible,” “Russia will not attack Ukraine”) and the West (“NATO countries are concerned about a possible Russian attack on Ukraine”) was gaining strength:

Russia’s defense minister on Tuesday accused US bombers of rehearsing a nuclear strike on Russia from two different directions earlier this month and complained that the planes had come within 20 km (12.4 miles) of the Russian border. But the Pentagon said its drills were announced publicly at the time and adhered to international protocols. Moscow’s accusation comes at a time of high tension with Washington over Ukraine, with US officials voicing concerns about a possible Russian attack on its southern neighbor – a suggestion the Kremlin has dismissed as false. Moscow has in turn accused the United States, NATO and Ukraine of provocative and irresponsible behavior, pointing to US arms supplies to Ukraine, Ukraine’s use of Turkish strike drones against Russian-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine, and NATO military exercises close to its borders.<sup>42</sup>

So, markers of the future full-scale invasion of the Russian Federation into Ukraine were present in the media of the USA and the United Kingdom in 2021. The transformation of the modality of narratives from interrogative (“Is war in Europe possible as a result of the escalation of the situation in Ukraine by Putin’s Russia?”) to affirmative-prognostic (“The attack of the Russian Federation on Ukraine will be a fatal mistake”) should have led analysts to think that Europe is approaching war and needs to take more efficient preventive measures.

### **Instead of Conclusions. Pricy Possible Miscalculations and Recommendations for the Future**

Currently, political scientists are trying to understand why the biggest tragedy of the first quarter of the XXI century was not obvious when military officials and intelligence were pretty outspoken regarding Kremlin’s intentions.

The analysis offering a low probability of Russia conducting a full-scale military invasion was not wrong. It was based on observable conditions and implications that held true, at least in appearance, until February. Instead, an alternative view is that something drastic occurred in Kremlin circles between

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<sup>41</sup> Aliss Higham, “Why Russia Could INVADE Ukraine: US Warns Tens of Thousands of Troops at Border,” *Daily Express*, November 12, 2021, accessed July 13, 2022, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1520420/russia-invade-ukraine-troops-border-evg>.

<sup>42</sup> Andrew Osborn and Phil Stewart, “Moscow Says U.S. Rehearsed Nuclear Strike against Russia This Month,” *Reuters*, November 24, 2021, accessed July 13, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-notes-significant-increase-us-bomber-activity-east-minister-2021-11-23>



January and February 2022, which led to a change in Putin's approach to Ukraine.<sup>43</sup>

We cannot exclude such a possibility, though we believe it is unlikely. If the invasion had been estimated as highly possible, the whole discourse around support for Ukraine and preventive measures might have changed or mitigated the recent course of events. For a long time, it has been obvious that Russia's strategic objective was to subordinate Ukraine. And when the soft power tools, in combination with heavy sponsorship of pro-Russian parties in the Ukrainian Parliament, did not deliver on the goal, Ukraine continued drifting westward even under the pressure of the ongoing war in the East. Then, unable to change Ukraine's foreign policy course, Russia chose the most obvious next step. "If I can't have you, no one can!"<sup>44</sup>

It has never been about NATO but the ability of an ex-Soviet republic to turn into a democratic state with the rule of law and fair elections. These are the two main threats to the Kremlin regime that, for over a decade, has been concentrating enormous resources in the hands of few. At some point, giving up the power becomes suicidal, considering the ways both the power and the riches have been obtained and preserved, including through the revival of the fascist ideas of Ivan Ilyin and encouraging the use of the "best practice" of Soviet totalitarianism.

It would have been beneficial to Russia to have a struggling corrupt semi-democratic Ukraine longing to be taken in the European family with no success as proof of a "mistaken pro-western course." Instead, Russia chose to demonstrate to other smaller countries that it considers its satellites what would be the fate of those unwilling to surrender and subordinate.

The key mistake of western political analysts was to consider the situation following the logic of democratically elected leaders who have to consider a variety of interests and aspirations of the elites and the people, which is not the case in Russia. Those who have been trying to understand the roots of internal processes in this country paid close attention to the policy culture, which by the end of the day outweighed cold calculation (or miscalculation) of one's potency, as well as potential gains and losses.

Violence and dominance as cornerstones of Russian leaders' power may be traced centuries back. The XX century, and especially the 1990s, determined the development of modern Russia, while the neighboring European countries have leaned towards putting human rights and democratic freedoms at the center of their existence. Both the "birth" of the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation are marked with repressions and physical elimination of some groups – political

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<sup>43</sup> Dumitru Minzarari, "Failing to Deter Russia's War Against Ukraine: The Role of Misperceptions," *German Institute for International and Security Affairs*, April 29, 2022, accessed July 13, 2022, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/failing-to-deter-russias-war-against-ukraine-the-role-of-misperceptions>.

<sup>44</sup> "Without a Dowry," a play by Alexander Ostrovsky.

rivals, national minorities, dissidents, and business competitors. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, criminal organizations have been fighting for resources to survive. Those who survived gradually turned into political and business elites. In a very poor economic environment, when people literally do not always have access to food, the most violent are best rewarded. That is when the approach “the might is right” has become a factor in the formation of the culture of violence that has demonstrated itself in the widespread war crimes against civilians in Ukraine.

The same approach has corrupted foreign policy. Like mobsters “negotiating” mainly in the presence of their armed gangs, Russia does not see the negotiation process as a means to reach a balance of interests. It only tests how powerful the other party is. It is true that “the Russian leadership views talks as the inability to impose one’s will since if one has the power, one does not need to talk but instead can act and impose the preferred outcome.”<sup>45</sup>

Tragically enough, the rule of President Putin coincided with the gradual healing of the Russian economy, mainly due to the rising prices of natural resources. Mistakenly, a large part of the Russian population saw a causal link between the concentration of power and the improvement in the economic situation. Thus, democracy has become seen by many as anarchy, a prerequisite of economic instability, uncertainty, and weakness. The latter cannot be tolerated. Thus, a significant part of the Russian population that demonstrates its full support or does not oppose the Kremlin’s actions is not a victim of propaganda (since many are able but unwilling to get information directly from their relatives or friends in Ukraine) but rather an embodiment of the authoritarian nature of Russian society.

With some exceptions, the expectations in the West that after the first misfortunes of the Russian army in Ukraine and the severe personnel losses, Russian society would react did not come true. The myth or feeling of belonging to something bigger than oneself (the Great Russian Federation, the World Force) turned out to mean more than personal happiness or family well-being for a great part of the population living in relative poverty. Unlike Ukrainians, who cherish the ability to be among the “authors” of the history of modern Ukraine, the majority of Russians remain passive and disengaged from activism and politics. Thus, the narrative of the enigmatic Russian soul should be reconsidered and focused on the question: “How come over 140 million people living at a ‘gas station masquerading as a country’<sup>46</sup> do so little to make it a comfortable home?”

The answer to this question will explain a lot about the logic of the current political decisions of the Russian Federation. Though seen by some western observers as a declining power, the regime, whose ultimate agenda is self-preservation, may adapt to new realities shaped by Western sanctions, as it is not being

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<sup>45</sup> Minzarari, “Failing to Deter Russia’s War Against Ukraine.”

<sup>46</sup> Senator John McCain.

challenged enough by the population, not to mention the weak, fragmented civil society.

Western political analysts should not have indulged in wishful thinking or projected western mentality onto a foreign one. When it comes to Russia, a totalitarian state in a world in need of hydrocarbons, it should be remembered that force is the first and foremost argument.

And the last and an obvious but a neglected fact of life: while most observers considered Putin a rational actor who would be unwilling to take risks when stakes are that high, they should have taken into account that “power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”<sup>47</sup>

To prevent future mistakes in assessing potential military threats, political scientists and analysts need to:

1. Not base conclusions on their wishful thinking or project one country's mentality and political culture onto another. This is the first step to a fatal error.
2. Take into account the peculiarities of national culture – the historical tendency of its carriers to replace constructive solutions with aggression.
3. Investigate markers of impending conflict in the media. Changing narratives, messages, and lexical signals are unmistakable evidence of the real situation.
4. Hear alternative voices. A marginal position can be credible.
5. Study the situation systematically – different approaches and methodologies will provide a reliable result.

## **Disclaimer**

The views expressed are solely those of the authors and do not represent official views of the PFP Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes, participating organizations, or the Consortium's editors.

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<sup>47</sup> Lord Acton (1834–1902) in a letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton.

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