

# Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: Lessons for the Effective Defence of Eastern Partnership Countries

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*Russia's military invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was first and foremost a signal that previous Western policies on Russia were defective, due to superficial responses and ill-fitting strategy. Ukraine's case provides lessons for the EU's engagement in Eastern Partnership countries not yet under Russian effective pressure. This requires a more significant involvement at a level that the US reached when helping Western Europe resist Soviet political subversion. Anything less is likely to fail, leading to these countries' creeping political annexation by Russia.*

Arguably, the most important error made by the collective West in Ukraine was the failure to sufficiently strengthen Kyiv militarily before the invasion. This would have allowed Ukraine to counter Russia's military revanchism in its infancy and discouraged its proliferation and escalation. While the US sold Ukraine a few dozen Javelin anti-tank launchers along with over 200 missiles in 2019, it demanded that these be kept outside of the conflict area in Donbas. Germany had been aggressively blocking military aid to Ukraine right up until the invasion. Both actions – while professing benign intentions – strengthened the Russian leadership's belief that the West was irresolute in opposing it and that Ukraine was a soft target.

One of the main explanations driving the half-hearted US policy was the conviction that Ukraine would not be able to hold out for long against Russia. On the first day of the Russian invasion, US officials assessed that Kyiv would fall "within days" and expected the country's resistance "to be effectively neutralized soon thereafter." Repeating such signals – as a senior US military official did recently – could critically undermine all the major efforts of Ukraine's Western partners to deter Russia. Given its growing perception that Ukraine's partners will soon give up and press Kyiv to negotiate from a weakened position, Russia's most likely response is to "gamble for resurrection" – a term that describes a situation in which Russia goes all out in continuing the war.

This would drastically increase the risk of Russia repeating its military aggression against other Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries such as Georgia or Moldova. In its recent history, in the 1920s and 1940s, Russia has conducted two largely unopposed waves of military annexation of its neighbours. Making this parallel is justified by Putin's public statements that – like Russian tsars – he is "winning back and consolidating... Russia's territory". What can the EU do to reduce the risk of Russian aggression against other EaP countries?

## **The Effects of Russian Aggression**

The Georgian and Moldovan governments have drawn some somewhat controversial conclusions from Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Both countries decided not to join with the EU's initial package of sanctions. Georgian officials claimed that doing so would damage the country and its population. The Moldovan leadership invoked the country's economic vulnerability to Russia.

Although the rhetoric of both condemned the aggression, they have been accused of actions that appear accommodationist towards Russia. For instance, the Georgian authorities faced accusations of assisting Russia to circumvent some of the Western sanctions. There are credible signals that Moldova obstructed the transit of military or dual-use goods to Ukraine, invoking neutrality in an interpretation biased towards Russia.

Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine led Moldova and Georgia to adopt a soft bandwagoning strategy towards Russia by indirectly yielding to some Russian demands and behaving largely in line with Russian expectations. This is consistent with the consequent defence and security postures of both states. Even though Georgia developed a total defence concept in 2017, its actions suggest that the concept is only on paper and that its government is unwilling to implement such a policy. In fact, the Georgian prime minister repeatedly voiced the opinion that Georgia "will never again fight Russia" and even accused the EU of wanting Georgia to fight Russia as a precondition for obtaining EU candidate status.

This view has gained some traction in public opinion – arguably shaped by the ruling party – as a slightly larger group now opts to maintain relations with Russia in some form, than to pursue a purely pro-Western stance (45% vs 43%). This is a crude but useful indicator of the general population's resolve to oppose Russia: between March and September 2022 the proportion of respondents who strongly oppose dialogue with Russia increased from 25% to 30%, implying it is a minority that maintains this resolve. And a key precondition for an effective total defence strategy is developing and strengthening the population's "will to resist".

Moldova displays significant similarities. While the Moldovan government is genuinely pro-European and makes credible efforts to fight corruption – unlike the one under oligarchic control in Georgia – the national defence posture it has developed is similar. Despite repeated indications that Russia is contemplating invading the country, the Moldovan authorities have refused to consolidate national defence, hoping to avoid irritating Russia.

## **The Pillars of an Effective Response**

While Moldova and Georgia might find it difficult to put up effective long-term military resistance if faced with the full power of Russia's military aggression, preparing for this scenario could significantly reduce the probability of a Russian attack. To illustrate this following its ongoing experience in Ukraine, Russia observed that contrary to its earlier expectations the costs of its aggression in terms of economic resources and manpower have been extremely debilitating. The longer potential resistance to a Russian invasion could last according to Kremlin perceptions, the less likely it would be for Russia to start another invasion.

Unlike Ukraine, however, Moldova and Georgia are small territories that lack strategic depth and the ability to trade space for time in combat. This puts pressure on both countries to plan their national defence differently. The key focus should be on (i) protecting their heavy firepower capabilities against Russia's long-range attacks in the first moments of an invasion, (ii) aggressively using massive firepower against invading Russian troops and (iii) effectively employing a large segment of the population in active armed resistance alongside its armed forces. This approach is more likely to slow Russia's gain of terrain while increasing its losses.

Even though Moldova and Georgia may look different in terms of national defence conditions, they have specific advantages that make a robust total defence posture feasible. Moldova is insulated from Russia by Ukrainian territory, which makes it difficult for Russia to sustain the logistics and manpower for an extensive military operation in Moldova. Even if Russia were to use its military contingent along with its military proxy in Transnistria, its ability to support combat operations would be limited unless it can take control of Ukraine's Odessa region (the caveat is that this would be the case only if Moldovan defence forces were optimally prepared). This gives Moldova more chance to defend its territory effectively. Georgia, on the other hand, has common borders with Russia, which enhances Russia's ability to support long-term operations. However, Georgia's mountainous terrain significantly improves the advantage of the defender, as political science research has revealed. Given that Russia will be constrained in the number of troops it can employ in an invasion, as Ukraine has shown, in the long-term Georgia's total defence strategy has a high probability of inflicting significant costs on a Russian invader by continuously degrading its troops and eventually forcing it to give up.

### **Russia's Design for the Eastern Partnership**

The main reason why the Moldovan and Georgian governments ignored effective strengthening of national defence postures and capabilities was probably their conviction that Russia was very unlikely to invade militarily or that cost-effective concessions to Russia could prevent an invasion. Russia's actions in Belarus and Ukraine, along with strong signals sent by Putin and influential power groups linked to him, would suggest that such hopes are unfounded. Putin has clearly indicated that Russia under his leadership intends to recover effective control over the territories of the former Soviet Union. His actions will vary depending on individual target country conditions, but the general model seems to be one of creeping political annexation. The Belarus case offers certain insights into Russia's strategy towards authoritarian regimes: (i) create an existential threat for the authoritarian; (ii) rescue the authoritarian in exchange for control over national elites and institutions; (iii) co-opt the elites, then gradually and informally integrate them; (iv) conduct several years of influence operations to reduce popular antagonism; and (v) compel the national parliament to vote for a confederation or "union" type of integration with Russia.

Ukraine constitutes a slight deviation from this model, albeit in implementation rather than logic – in its quest for political control Russia's predominant focus is on the population. It suggests that unless the civilian population is well organized and equipped, it will not put up effective military resistance in occupied territory. Events in Ukraine have also shown that Russia is ready to use politically costly methods to crush civilian resistance, including employing methods of forced displacement of the population that the Soviet Union used in the past in post-1945 Ukraine and elsewhere. This would remove one of the main obstacles to Russia recovering its control over the post-Soviet states: resistance of the population. Russia has shown that it is ready to accept related costs and even reduce its relationship with the West to Cold War levels. The only effective response is to persevere in eroding Russia's military capabilities and resolve using a strategy of denial and defence. Any territorial concession in Ukraine would result in Russia taking the time gained to recover and come back better prepared for a renewed military invasion. The over 100,000 Ukrainian children that Russia has allegedly moved to Russia are likely to be brainwashed and trained to fight in Russia's future operations against Ukraine. The Russian defence ministry has acquired rich experience of running such programmes during implementation of the nationwide Youth Army (*Yunarmia*) "patriotic project" it began in 2015.

## Policy Recommendations

- The EU should drastically review its cooperation and support framework with Georgia and Moldova; it should encourage and assist them to build functional total defence policies and produce effective early warning and early response military capabilities.
- Another EU focus should be on assisting these countries to consolidate national sovereignty over their informational space, reducing the ability of Russia to conduct influence operations on their territories, on the one hand, and helping incumbent governments to cultivate a “will to resist” among the majority of the population, on the other. This would also greatly contribute to the resilience of Georgia and Moldova against Russian aggressive measures below the threshold of war.
- As in the Cold War period, the logic of the EU’s economic and political reform assistance should be secondary to and support the logic of defence and security assistance.
- The governments of Georgia and Moldova – for various reasons – are timid in balancing against Russia. The EU should encourage them by providing political and material support to proactively strengthen their will and capabilities to resist Russian pressure on national governments.
- Given the practical impossibility of effectively implementing the above steps without a robust presence in these countries, the EU should engage with the US, the UK and Canada to develop large-scale and locally based assistance missions in the two countries to monitor progress on the ground. The intensity of this involvement should be comparable to the US involvement when helping Western Europe resist Soviet Union-era political warfare efforts.



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