

**Nataliya Bugayova**[@nataliabugayova](#)Jun 24 • 8 tweets • 4 min read • [Read on X](#)

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1/ Putin didn't invade Ukraine in 2022 because he feared NATO. He invaded because he believed that NATO was weak, that his efforts to regain control of Ukraine by other means had failed, and that installing a pro-Russian government in Kyiv would be safe and easy. The primary goal of the Kremlin's anti-NATO rhetoric has been to justify Putin's foreign policies that often had little to do with NATO, as my @TheStudyofWar colleagues @KatStepanenko and Dr. Fred Kagan, and I have written: .

**Institute for the Study of War**<https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/weakness-lethal-why-putin-invaded-ukraine-and-how-war-must-end>

2/ Putin has long sought to break NATO and Western unity, but not because the Kremlin felt militarily threatened by NATO. Russia's military posture during Putin's reign has demonstrated that Putin has never been primarily concerned with the risk of a NATO attack on Russia. Russian military reforms since 2000 have not prioritized creating large mechanized forces on the Russian borders with NATO to defend against invasion. Russia deployed the principal units designed to protect Russia from NATO to Ukraine, which posed no military threat to Russia, in 2021 and 2022. In 2023 - at the height of Russia's anti-NATO rhetoric - Russia continued to withdraw forces and military equipment from its actual land borders with NATO to support the war in Ukraine.

3/ Putin has always been more concerned about the loss of control over Russia's perceived sphere of influence than about a NATO threat to Russia. Putin's actual issue with NATO and the West has been that they offered an alternative path to countries that Putin thought fell in Russia's self-declared sphere of influence. The "color revolutions" that so alarmed Putin were, after all, the manifestations of those countries daring to choose the West, or, rather the way of life, governance and values the West represented, over Moscow.

4/ NATO and the West threatened Russia by simply existing and being the preferred partner to many former Soviet states – which, in Putin's view, undermined Russia's influence over these states. Putin saw the ability to control former Soviet states as an essential prerequisite to reestablishing Russia as a great power. In simple terms, the West – and those in the former Soviet states who preferred to partner with the West even without fully breaking with Russia - stood between Putin and what he believed to be Russia's rightful role in the world.

5/ The prospect of Ukrainian NATO membership did not drive Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The first NATO commitment to admitting Ukraine to the alliance came in the 2008 Bucharest Declaration, which promised Ukraine and Georgia paths to membership but took no concrete steps toward opening such paths. Successive NATO summits generated no further progress toward membership for either country. Putin intensified the narrative that NATO was a threat to Russia over the years, alleging by 2021 that Russia feared NATO's imminent expansion in Eastern Europe. NATO had taken no meaningful actions to enlarge at the time, however. Accession of new members to the alliance requires that they complete a formal Membership Action Plan (MAP). NATO produced no MAP for Ukraine or Georgia, meaning that the formal process for their accession had not even begun. NATO had taken no new formal steps toward Ukrainian membership by the time of the 2022 Russian re-invasion beyond restating the 2008 Bucharest Declaration promising Ukraine a path to NATO membership in a 2021 June communique that followed a massive Russian military buildup on Ukraine's borders. Ukraine enshrined the commitment to joining NATO in its constitution in 2019, and NATO recognized Ukraine as an Enhanced Opportunity Partner in 2020. Neither of these events constituted formal steps toward NATO membership. The Enhanced Opportunity Partnership announcement explicitly said that Ukraine's new status "does not prejudice any decisions on NATO membership."

6/ The blocks on Ukraine's accession to the alliance that Putin had helped establish remained firmly in place. Russia had succeeded by 2022 in freezing any move to bring Ukraine into NATO in accord with the 2008 declaration, and there was no

plausible argument to make that any further enlargement of the alliance was imminent. Hungary’s relatively pro-Russian position and NATO’s unwillingness to absorb a new member state with an unresolved military conflict with Russia meant not only had there been no meaningful progress toward Ukrainian NATO membership by 2022 but also that no progress was on the horizon. Putin had effectively blocked Ukrainian accession to the alliance by the time he launched his full-scale invasion— clear evidence that Russian fears of imminent Ukrainian NATO membership did not drive the invasion.

7/ The prospect of Ukrainian NATO membership had most certainly not driven Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2014. Ukraine pursued a non-alignment policy, the NATO Bucharest Declaration notwithstanding, from 2010 through 2014. Ukraine renounced its non-alignment status in December of 2014 as a direct result of Russia invading Ukraine and illegally occupying three of its regions in 2014. This point is essential to keep in mind for those who argue that Putin’s goal is Ukraine’s neutrality.

8/ Russian fictional rhetoric notwithstanding, nothing about the NATO threat was more urgent in 2022 than it had been for years, and Putin could offer no plausible reason for thinking that it would become more urgent any time soon. We must look elsewhere for the explanation for the 2022 invasion, and therefore for Putin’s actual war aims. Read more in our 2023 @TheStudyofWar assessment "Weakness is Lethal: Why Putin Invaded Ukraine and How the War Must End." 



Institute for the Study of War

<https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/weakness-lethal-why-putin-invaded-ukraine-and-how-war-must-end>

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Mar 28

The Kremlin is flooding Western discourse with false and irrelevant narratives, forcing us to expend decision bandwidth on irrelevancies rather than solutions. More in my latest @TheStudyofWar essay' "Denying Russia's Only Strategy for Success.' 1/2 [understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/d...](#)

2/ It is not an accident that the Western debate often becomes impaled on arguing about basic well-established facts about this war. This is not merely a function of Western knowledge gaps or short memory. It is also a result of the Kremlin's effort to saturate the Western debate with its assertions.

3/ A key example is a myth about Russia protecting Russian speakers in Ukraine. Russia has obliterated predominantly Russian-speaking cities in Ukraine, killing, torturing, forcefully deporting, and forcing to flee many Russian-speaking Ukrainians. Russia

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Sep 25, 2023

My latest with @TheStudyofWar. Ukrainian forces have adapted. Now is not the time for Western doubt but for the West to embrace Ukraine's way of war and commit to sustaining Ukraine on the battlefield. 1/

The US is used to partners that require us to lead — from proxy forces we trained to our allies who rely on us for security. In Ukraine, however, the US has a partner that is leading on the battlefield and knows its operational environment, its enemy, and its own capabilities.2/

Ukraine’s way of war has yielded repeated successes against Russian forces -in Kyiv, in Kharkiv, in Kharkiv Oblast, in Kherson, and now, to a growing extent, in Ukraine’s south. 3/

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Jul 24, 2023

My latest with @TheStudyofWar. The West risks handing the Kremlin another opportunity to prolong its war in Ukraine if it fails to resource Ukraine’s sustained counteroffensive. 1/

Momentum is the key dimension of capability in this war. Maintaining the Ukrainian initiative will likely result in compounding damage to Russia’s ability to sustain the war. Any breather for Russia is an opportunity for the Kremlin to reconstitute for future attacks. 2/

Ukraine, with Western support, has achieved substantial military results over the past 17 months. Ukraine defeated the Kremlin’s initial objectives in this war, liberated about 75,000 square km of its territory, and prevented Russia from establishing control even over Donbas. 3/

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May 5, 2023

Russia is a not just any belligerent — it is a belligerent that has repeatedly and purposefully hijacked the notion of peace as a lifeline for its aggression. 1/

The US thus should not preemptively handicap its policy options by setting the expectation of peace talks that the Kremlin has expressed zero desire to enter in good faith. 2/

This war cannot be resolved through typical negotiations. Putin has resorted to a full-scale invasion when other means to control Ukraine failed. The Kremlin is engaged in a genocidal effort, aimed to eradicate Ukrainian statehood through a large-scale mechanized invasion. 3/

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Apr 28, 2023

My latest with @TheStudyofWar. The debate about the US facing a “long war” in Ukraine is misframed. The catchall phrase “long war” is skewed by legacy US thinking about wars, Kremlin information operations, and the inherent difficulties in parsing battlefield realities. 1/

2/ Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is not a long war for the US, because the US is not fighting this war. The US is not fighting a proxy war. Ukraine’s choice to defend itself against Russia’s genocidal efforts is exogenous to the West’s decision-making.

3/The West and Ukraine are not protracting or spreading this war; Russia is. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is entirely a war of choice. The Kremlin is choosing to protract this war and can choose to end it at any point.

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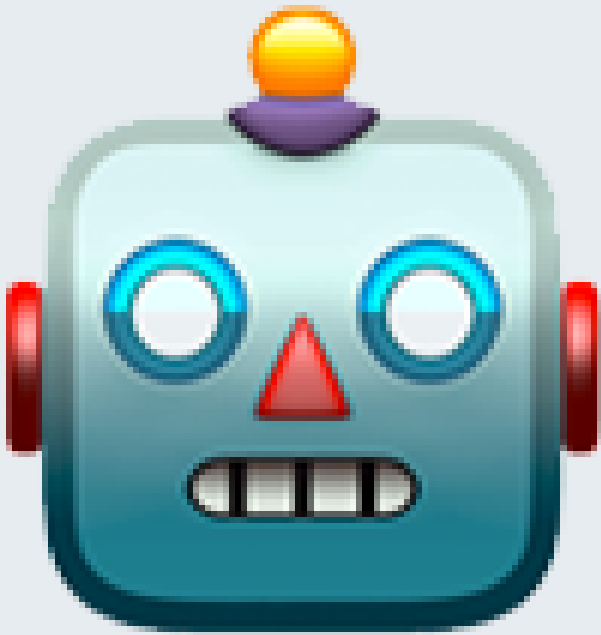
Feb 22, 2023

I had the pleasure of joining @OnPointRadio to discuss Russia’s war on Ukraine & to challenge the false assumption shaping some policy discussions related to its solution: that Putin’s intent regarding Ukraine will change. 📌 Key points starting at min 13: [wbur.org/onpoint/2023/0...](#)

2/ Putin has in deed and in word made clear that his maximalist intent regarding Ukraine is inflexible. That policy is that Ukraine should not exist as a state.

3/ Policies built around the false premise that Putin will somehow change his intent for Ukraine – such as allowing Russia to keep some of its territorial gains to stave off future attacks – are policies based on hope, not facts. If anything, Putin has doubled down.

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