

WHY VLADIMIR PUTIN HAS ALREADY LOST IN UKRAINE

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Vladimir Putin's ill-considered military adventure will have various consequences and its repercussions will be spread out over the years to come, profoundly modifying the European and therefore the world strategic landscape. But I am already certain of one thing: it will mean the end of Vladimir Putin.

Of course, it is possible ("certain", say many specialists...) that the master of the Kremlin will win militarily, but at a high price in human terms. But the political and economic consequences of this crisis - the most serious in Europe since the Second World War - will be devastating for Russia and will lead to the fall of the dictator.

Putin's only "chance" was indeed a quick and total victory: the capture of Kiev in less than 48 hours and the decapitation of the Ukrainian state would have installed a "fait accompli". The international community would not have been happy to accept it, but what could we have done when it was obvious to everyone that NATO would not commit troops on the ground? Afterwards, the installation of a puppet government, the possible organisation of a rigged referendum, a "Finlandisation" of Ukraine would have brought back a form of "normality" and realpolitik would have done the rest. But this is not the case.

1- Military scenarios

Before going any further, let us first examine the different possible military scenarios:

1- The "negotiations" between Kiev and Moscow succeed: Ukraine gives in to Russian demands (recognition of Crimea's belonging to Russia, demilitarisation, etc.) and all armed resistance ceases. As the positions of the two parties are irreconcilable, this scenario is highly unlikely (but not totally impossible, if Russian military pressure and civilian casualties become unbearable). Moreover, as weapons have been distributed to the population, the Russian troops would probably face a long guerrilla war.

2- Total and rapid Russian military "victory": Kiev falls, the Ukrainian government is overthrown (and its members eventually physically eliminated) and replaced by a puppet executive under Moscow's thumb. This scenario is unfortunately possible but increasingly unlikely. The hypothesis of the emergence of a Ukrainian guerrilla movement, in any case, would remain valid.

3- Moscow ensures its hold on part of the country (in the East, the North - including Kiev -, part of the South near Crimea) but the rest of Ukraine remains under the control of the Ukrainian army. The war is bogged down and clashes continue on the front line while guerrilla warfare takes hold in the Russian-occupied territories. A possible, even probable scenario.

4- Under international pressure and subject to sanctions that are crushing it and causing social unrest in Russia's major cities and the estrangement of Putin from a large part of the oligarchs who supported him until now, Russia backs down and unilaterally puts an end to military action in favour of a "political solution" that is currently difficult to envisage. A scenario that is now highly unlikely.

5- The Ukrainian army reverses the situation and, after having contained the Russian offensive, obtains a victory on the ground. This scenario is also highly unlikely given the disproportion of forces and I am therefore only quoting it for the record.

6- The situation gets out of hand and Vladimir Putin chooses to flee forward and carries out his threat to use nuclear weapons. But if this happens, we would be entering a totally unknown zone.

In short, unless there are surprises, we are headed for a war that, in one form or another - open conflict between two armies or guerrilla warfare - will probably be long. But time is against Vladimir Putin.

Whatever the scenario that eventually emerges, it is clear that nothing will be settled: in any case, Russia will have to face, at the very least, a long period of instability and guerrilla warfare on the ground.

2- The war is not popular

If the dead and wounded pile up, this war, which is already not very popular, will be increasingly rejected by the Russian population. And this is all the more true because the Russians are culturally, "ethnically" close to the Ukrainians: we are talking about two Slavic peoples whose history is intertwined; there is no counting the number of "mixed" marriages, of Russians who have parents, brothers, sisters or cousins "from the other side". In short, the war in Ukraine is not comparable to the war in Afghanistan or Chechnya: here, two Slavic peoples are fighting each other. This is certainly a difficult situation for the Russian soldiers and impossible for Russian society to accept.

Moreover, when the economic sanctions really start to take effect, the economic situation in Russia will become increasingly tense and will give rise to social unrest that the government will obviously be tempted to suppress by force, the only response it has known for years to any form of protest. It will thus become even more isolated internally. And to this anger coming from the base, will be added that of the new Russian "nomenklatura", this layer of oligarchs and high officials who, until now, have largely benefited from the regime in place but who, today, are hit hard by the sanctions. It is far from certain that Vladimir Putin and his close entourage will be able to resist this double internal pressure for long.

Beyond the military situation, these cultural and economic realities are the second reason why the Kremlin will lose this war.

3- War aims impossible to achieve

But Vladimir Putin is also losing because he cannot achieve his main war aims. What were they?

We can distinguish probably two main war aims and two secondary ones.

On the primary level: first, to deliver the “coup de grace” to NATO and, second, to absorb Ukraine, which is seen by the master of the Kremlin and Russian ultra-nationalists as an artificial state. On a secondary level: to ensure the "protection" (or even the integration into the Russian continuum) of the Donbass, to confirm Crimea's belonging to Russia and to create a territorial continuity between the Donbass, Crimea and perhaps even Transnistria, the autonomous Russian region of Moldova.

It is clear that the two main war aims will not be achieved. Not only has Nato not bowed down to the Russian imperial will, but it is safe to say that it has never been in better shape for thirty years, demonstrating its primary utility, which is to ensure the protection of Europe.

The European Union itself has rallied around solidarity with Kiev, among other things by deciding to invest hundreds of millions of euros in the supply of arms (unheard of!) to the legal regime in place in Ukraine.

Worse (from the Russian point of view): Switzerland (neutral, as we know) has decided to apply the EU sanctions in full, Sweden, which has not been neutral since 2009 but continues to refuse to deliver arms to a country at war, has broken with its doctrine and is participating in military deliveries. And Finland, which applied an identical doctrine, took the same historic decision. Thinking that he was dealing a fatal blow to the Atlantic Alliance, Vladimir Putin not only gave it a new lease on life and a new attractiveness, but also gave an appreciable boost to the construction of a European defence that he did not want to hear about.

As for the "non-existence" of a Ukrainian nation, the facts speak for themselves: the formidable spirit of resistance of the Ukrainian people provides a stinging denial of this contemptuous vision.

Finally, even if everything turned out for the best for Moscow, the international community will NEVER accept the fait accompli in Ukraine. Russia will have "won", of course, but it will be totally isolated politically (and physically) and economically crushed. This brings us back to the economic issues mentioned above.

4- Vladimir Putin believes his own propaganda

In fact, it is as if Vladimir Putin, after a near faultless record of nearly twenty years, despite all the abuses and crimes of his regime, had ended up, like many dictators, believing his own lies: NATO is weak, the democracies are cowardly, the Ukrainian people only dream of unification with the Russian big brother.

But as with his predecessors, the principle of reality puts things in their place.

It is for all these reasons that, whatever the evolution of the military situation on the ground (and I will come back to this point in the coming days, among other things to analyse the strengths and weaknesses of the Russian army), Vladimir Putin has already lost. It will take months or years, but history will one day say that the war in Ukraine led to the fall of Vladimir Putin.