

RESEARCH ASSESSMENT

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"What Are Vladimir Putin's Military Intentions in Ukraine?" *The Economist, The Economist Newspaper*, 29 Jan. 2022, <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2022/01/29/what-are-vladimir-putins-military-intentions-in-ukraine>.

Assessment:

This article is an extremely recent analysis of the situation in Ukraine. According to this article, Vladimir Putin has a number of options. I have read the article and combined it with my prior knowledge of Russia, current affairs news, and the book *Prisoners of Geography*, and this combination has resulted in my commentary on this article. This will be extremely valuable to my final project, because it will demonstrate the constant need for a global understanding in the world today.

As is now common knowledge, Putin is amassing a huge number of forces around Ukraine, preparing fully operational battle groups. The remarkable thing about these groups is not the sheer quantity (as much as 70, fully prepared for combat with 800 fighting troops per group) but that they are accompanied by the forces necessary to sustain an invasion. That is incredibly important, because that is a traditional immediate precursor to an invasion.

However, in Russian culture, it may not actually be a precursor to the invasion. Putin often negotiates with force first, and that is a Russian cultural norm. You mass the threat, present as though you are prepared to fight, but it is acceptable to back down if necessary. That is one thought regarding the posturing of Russia. Perhaps the end objective is actually not an invasion, which will likely be a costly battle and an even more costly insurgency. Instead, maybe the objective is to negotiate. Force the West to make concessions, shut NATO's door to Ukraine, and withdraw troops.

However, there is another interpretation. Putin does not have a good reputation in the Western world. He has been negatively described by President Biden, insulted often by the media, and is remarked on as murderous, a killer, and threatening by many politicians. These could easily be interpreted as an insult at best, a threat at worst. Perhaps Putin is actually acting in self-defense. Russia has an incredibly weak western border, facing a totally open European plain. As a result, it must expand outwards before the West expands towards it. Putin may be feeling the pressure from NATO and the United States, so may be looking to pre-emptively invade Ukraine to prevent it joining the West.

Yet another interpretation could be that this isn't about the West at all. Putin is an authoritarian ruler, so must present himself as the sole defender of Russia. He fights to keep his power by presenting the West as the enemy and all Russians under his protection. This includes the people of Ukraine. Putin's propaganda constantly paints the West as threatening the Russian people of Ukraine, so perhaps he poses as he does to convince his own subjects that he does care about them. The catch here is that Russians actually care too much about Ukraine and don't want to see death, but perhaps Putin is willing to risk that temporary bad PR.

A fourth interpretation, slightly more outlandish, actually argues that Putin may be playing the long game. Perhaps he won't invade, but his troops in Belarus will just stay. Indefinitely. This occupation could not be refused because of how dependent Belarus is on Russia, and Belarus is not close enough with the West for sanctions to be enacted. This would give Russia access to the European corridor, and continual threat over Ukraine to continue their modern warfare campaign of cyberattacks, bomb threats, and other destabilization efforts. Russia is already beginning the campaign, with threats made to Ukraine on an alarmingly often basis, forcing instability. An occupation of Belarus would accomplish many of Putin's goals with few repercussions. However, is a hit this soft worth taking?

For now, there are few answers. The only certainty for my project is that without an understanding of global dynamics, history, politics, and foreign culture, this level of understanding is impossible. This vindicates my project and will contribute to my final presentation.