

CAROL SAIVETZ: I'd like to welcome everybody to our Starr Forum focus on Russia seminar series about the Russian-Ukrainian crisis. We have an astonishing number of people logging in. Let me just say thank you to the people who are convening this. It's the MIT Center for International Studies, the Security Studies Program, and the MIT Russia program. There are five of us and each of us has promised to speak for about five or six minutes, and then we would like to open it up for Q&A. So please find the Q&A function on the bottom of the Zoom screen, and please put your questions in there. They will be moderated and called.

We have five speakers today. First speaker will be Elizabeth Wood, who is a professor of history in the MIT history program. Our second speaker is Serhii Plokhii, who is the director of the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute.

And I realized I forgot to identify myself. I am Carol Saivetz of the MIT Security Studies Program and also of Harvard's Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies, then Dmitry Gorenburg, who is a senior researcher at the Center for Naval Analyses and is also affiliated with the Harvard Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies. And finally, we have Olga Oliker who is the director for Europe and Central Asia at the International Crisis Group. And I have to add that she's an MIT alum and we're very pleased to have her join us today. So I think we should dive right in because we have such a short period of time here. So, Elizabeth, you're on first.

ELIZABETH WOOD: Welcome everybody, and thank you, Carol. Thank you Laura Kerwin and Michelle English for organizing this in the background. I'm going to speak very, very briefly about a few historical issues as one of the two historians on the panel. All through the Soviet period, Russians and Ukrainians of all classes and interests had one phrase they used as a drinking toast with each other, "Let there not be war." [SPEAKING RUSSIAN] As long as there's no war.

They remembered World War II as a time of terrible suffering and immense casualties. But that phrase, that fundamentally antiwar stance has faded. Soviet and now Putin-era propaganda has constantly beat the drums of war as a glorious, participatory, unifying, and redeeming value. And strangely-- and this is one of the things we'll be talking about since last spring, Putin has been advertising the build up of his forces on the eastern front of Ukraine, as well as more recently on the northern Belarusian and southern Crimean fronts.

This differs significantly from the playbill of other conflicts Russia has been engaged in the last 20 years. Those other incursions into neighboring spaces have typically taken place under the radar so they were not always fully noticed until Russian forces-- political and/or military-- were actually in place. The key examples, obviously, are Transnistria, Moldova since the early 1990s, Nagorno-Karabakh also since the early 1990s, in fact since the 1980s, South Ossetia and Abkhazia since the Georgian war of 2008, but also before Crimea, even before 2014, and the Donbas since 2013. These are what we call "frozen conflicts."

I want to say, though, that a common misunderstanding is that these occur after military conflict has come to an end. In the post-Soviet space, I would argue almost the opposite, that they occur instead of open military conflict. No war is declared, no end is found. Russian troops and political forces, including undercover provocateurs and local political parties, stir up trouble then keep the tension at a low simmer.

Why the massive buildup on three sides of Ukraine? We'll hear many perspectives today, but briefly, the sheer size of Ukraine is a good thing to remember at the beginning of our panel. Russia cannot intervene there without a major buildup. Ukraine is, after all, the second-largest country in Europe. Russia is the largest, but Ukraine is the second. Russia is making, obviously, a number of diplomatic claims to try to force NATO to back down and not accept any new nations, to pull out its military forces.

Russia is also making a number of symbolic claims, saber-rattling to show off Russian weaponry, especially new strategic weapons, but also obviously saber-rattling to show off Russia's status as a great power. This has been one of Putin's signature issues since he came to power in 1999. In effect, he's saying, we can threaten another country so we are a world power. They are not hiding that threat.

The great controversy which we'll take up today is that no one knows exactly what Russia's aims are. Do they just want the annexation of Donbas? Do they want all of Ukraine? Are they threatening war in order to get the International Security arrangements in Europe redesigned? Are they planning something entirely different and ready to surprise us all?

It's important to remember that Russian military leaders, and Putin in particular, have been trying to find a way to reestablish ties with, and dominance over, Ukraine for years with only limited success. Russian political activists intervened in 2004 to try to get Viktor Yanukovich elected as president, an election that international monitors declared to be fraudulent, and in which, in fact, Yushchenko was put in power.

In 2014 they instigated the military conflict in the Donbas region after annexing Crimea. But I think this is also important that in 2016-- and this is not as well known as it should be-- using Donald Trump's campaign manager Paul Manafort, they tried to get the Trump administration to accept a peace plan that would solve the Ukrainian crisis by proposing Yanukovich as head of an independent Donbas region. If you want more on that, it's in the Mueller report.

I've been thinking a bit about what might get the Russians to stop invading Ukraine, thinking about the past. First of all, if what the Russians really want is respect, [RUSSIAN], world status, then perhaps one of the sanctions that could have an effect would be for the UN to threaten to remove Russia from the Security Council. It might be hard to pull off, but the threat could be made.

Second, Russian leaders need to think about what I would call historical deterrence, and think about what the historical precedents of invasions and occupations have caused. On invasions, several-- the 1905 and the 1917, the Russo-Japanese War and World War I, brought down the Russian government. In 1905 they had a revolution for a year and a half. In 1917 it obviously ended up in the Bolshevik Revolution.

Occupations have also been extremely costly. The classic, of course, is the occupation of Poland which was divided in the 18th century and then in the 20th century, and which has led to die-hard anti-Russian sentiment both in Russia and in the United States. If we think about Brzezinski and Richard Pipes, they were both of Polish descent.

So it's clear that you create long-term enemies when you occupy, and it's also very costly to the Russian people who for all the years of [RUSSIAN], when the Soviet Union occupied the neighboring countries militarily-- we have to remember, it was military as well as political-- the Russians came to feel that they were second-class citizens. So this is not a good solution for anybody.

I would also add that based on past history, I do believe that diplomatic solutions are possible. I'm particularly interested, obviously, that the Biden administration, NATO, as well as French and German governments, are putting out diplomatic proposals. But the structure of NATO and Russia's exclusion from it have long created serious imbalances. Now would be an excellent time not to abolish NATO, but to rename it, perhaps, redefine its purpose, which since 1949 has been to deter Russia specifically. It's leaving one player out.

The NATO-Russia council, which was established in 2002, was suspended in 2014 after the Russian invasion and annexation of Crimea; a correct step, but it needs to be revived. They did have a single-day meeting on January 12th of this month, but that was just a single day. That's not enough.

So one topic I think has to be discussed is what could be the redesign of international security structures, perhaps a greater role for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, OSCE, and others. In short, I'll end with a prayer, let there not be war and turn it over to my colleagues for more discussion and elaboration. Carol, are you going next?

CAROL No, Serhii's going next.

SAIVETZ:

ELIZABETH Serhii, Serhii Plokhii.

WOOD:

SERHII Well, thank you Elizabeth and thank you Carol, thanks to the organizers of this event. It's a pleasure to be part of it. What I want to say is just to build on something that Elizabeth was saying. In December, we marked 30-year anniversary of the fall of the Soviet Union. And the role of Ukraine was extremely important in that process. One week after Ukrainians voted for independence of their country, the Soviet Union was dissolved. Russia was not interested in the continuation of the Soviet Union as it was, or even reformed union that Gorbachev offered at that time without Ukraine.

PLOKHII:

I would say that today's plans of Kremlin to re-establish control over the post-Soviet space are not successful and would not be successful without Ukraine being in one way or another part of the Russian sphere of influence. And speaking historically, this is what is at stake.

I also want to say about more recent history. The history of the last eight years-- it was in 2014, immediately after the end of the Olympics, the Winter Olympics that were hosted by Russia, that the Russian aggression against Ukraine started by annexation of the Crimea. Now we are a few days away from the start of another Winter Olympics of 2022, and the chances of a war, another invasion, another annexation, are extremely high.

What happened in Ukraine in the last eight years can be one of the explanations, or at least can provide some context for the current crisis and for the real threats of the war or the invasion coming today from Russia. One thing that happened in Ukraine as the result of the war was, of course, the loss of territory. Ukraine lost 3% of its territory with the annexation of Crimea and another up to 7% of its territory in the east as the result of the ongoing war and de facto occupation by Russia and Russian proxies of part of Donbas.

Ukraine got all together there up to 2 million IDPs, internally displaced persons. So that is another huge blow to Ukraine, to Ukrainian economy. 5% of the population-- only in the Crimea and it's difficult to put the exact number of how many people were lost in terms of the citizens of Ukrainian state as the result of the war. It was a major, major blow to Ukraine. And the reason-- at least the way how it was clear from the Russian propoganda at the time was maybe it was to stop Ukraine's movement westward, to partition the country, to cut it in half, create the so-called New Russia.

And those plans, at least to that extent, they failed. They failed as the result of the mobilization of the Ukrainian society that mobilized across ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and religious lines, linguistic in particular. The expectation in Moscow was that if you speak Russian, your loyalty would be with Russia and you would join the proxy forces, invading forces, whatever it is, dependent on Crimea or Donbas, and it didn't happen.

Ukraine, in fact, not just mobilized, it became much more homogeneous in terms of its voting practices, in terms of its political orientation overall. The last two presidential elections in Ukraine showed that unity when you look at the map. Both President Poroshenko in 2014, and then later President Zelensky, they won by a landslide. Before 2013, before 2014, what you see in Ukraine would be a country really cut in half, and this is not the case anymore.

There is a country that where, for the first time, the citizens are prepared not just to go and vote for the independence of their country like it happened in 1991, but are prepared to take up arms and risk their lives defending their country, which is, again, one of the indicators of the rise of a political nation of the sort that you can read in the textbooks and in the newspapers. But that's what is actually happening, or happened, in Ukraine in the last eight years.

There is a reorientation of the country toward the West, something that Russians certainly wanted to stop back in 2015. The exports to Russia fell from 26% to 12% within the first two years after the start of the conflict. The exports to the European Union grew from 28% to 40%. So what the war produced, much more unified, mobilized, and much more West-oriented Ukraine than it was back in 2013, 2015. So this is absolutely opposite to what the ideas, what the goals were, the expectations of Russia was in 2013 or 2015, and that is probably, at least in my opinion, one of the reasons why we see this escalation and why we see this threat by force and potential invasion today.

Elizabeth talked about what can be a possible solution or what can be some form of remedy. And I-- answering that question, of course, we all ask it again and again. I can answer it with one word, and this is unity. And this is the question, unity for Ukraine and Ukrainian citizens in the Ukraine, and this is the unity of the west of Ukrainian, of allies, and friends of Ukraine, and anyone who doesn't want war in the center of Europe, anyone who wants the legal borders to stay and the international order to be preserved. What is needed is unity.

And one thing that I can say is that there is certainly more unity in Ukraine today than there was before, but not enough. And there is not enough unity among the allies, especially when you talk about Europe. Thank you very much for your attention.

**CAROL
SAIVETZ:**

Thank you, Serhii. It's my turn, and then I'll turn it over to my colleagues who haven't spoken yet. I wanted to use my turn, my time today to talk about what I see as the drivers of Putin's foreign policy towards Ukraine. The first thing that's talked about all over the place is NATO expansion. I've never bought into the realist narrative that says it's all our fault because we expanded NATO, and that if only if we had an expanded NATO things would have been playing out differently.

To be clear, I think that Putin's obsession with NATO expansion is one of many but not the only driver. Yes, we can agree that the Bucharest Summit happened in 2008 where George W. Bush pushed for a promise to include Georgia and Ukraine at some point down the road. This is the same summit at which Putin allegedly told Bush that Ukraine wasn't a real country.

The Georgian war of that summer, though, basically took the issue off the table. I think what Ukraine was looking for in 2014, and we can hear more from Serhii particularly, was access to the EU, not NATO membership, but access to the EU through an association agreement. And, yes, I agree with some of my colleagues who argue that the association agreement does have some military clauses in it. But it was not about joining NATO.

But my understanding is that public opinion polling at the time really indicated that the Ukrainian public was not interested in NATO membership. And as Serhii has just mentioned, now Ukrainians are much more interested in joining NATO and in joining the West much more formally than even the 2014 agreement would have added. The other thing that I keep getting sort of stuck on in my head is that this whole idea is that if Russia annexed Crimea, for example, in order to prevent some kind of NATO expansion in 2014, then why wasn't just the annexation of Crimea and protecting Sevastopol from becoming some kind of a NATO base that was talked about at the time by the Russians, why wasn't that enough? That doesn't explain the instigation of the fighting in the Donbas, and I'll come back to this.

I think another driver is really a fear of democratization, and what I've called in my own writing, "people power." We've seen evidence of Ukrainians taking to the street, that people power, both in 2004 in order to thwart Yanukovich's alleged election then, and then again in 2014 to force Yanukovich from power. And I think that Putin deep down feels vulnerable. Now I'm not a psychiatrist and I don't know the man, but it does seem to me that there's real fear there.

I mean, there were demonstrations in Moscow in 2011. There were more recent demonstrations. I mean, why go to the lengths that they've gone through to poison, arrest Navalny and to break up that whole organization if Putin was secure in his power?

And we might even expand that conversation to include the recent events in Kazakhstan, which is the first time that Russian and CSTO troops were used. Putin was quoted a couple of years ago in the *Financial Times* that the era of liberalism is over and that it's basically useless. I think he would clearly prefer what we might call the League of Authoritarians or something, because that also facilitates the corruption that the Russians have been known to export.

And I would add to my list another driver of economic issues. As Serhii and Elizabeth both said, Ukraine is the second-largest former Republic of the Soviet Union. It has a huge economy compared to the others. Remember, in 2012, Putin ran on as a platform this idea of creating the Eurasian Economic Union. It's basically nothing without Ukraine, so I think there was another reason to try to prevent Ukraine from drifting West. And I think, again, there's a link with my second driver, which is sort of the attractiveness of the West.

And finally, I think that Putin, in his own mind, somehow conflates the EU and NATO. They're all European institutions of which Russia is not a part. And finally, something that Elizabeth alluded to, in this whole idea that Russia is pursuing its global status, its superpower status. Some of you will remember Andrei Gromyko. I know I'm dating myself here. Andrei Gromyko famous quote that, no issue anywhere in the world should be resolved without Russian then Soviet input.

And much more recently, Dmitri Trenin, the noted Russian commentator, argued that Russia wanted to be a rule setter, not a rule taker. So again, the idea of status, who has the seat at the table? So this obviously links back to the idea of NATO expansion and the international order, specifically in Europe since the end of the Cold War.

So here, I do think that Putin wants to be calling the shots, and I think that's part of what this whole buildup on Ukraine's borders is actually about. But he also wants to be the rule setter outside of what we might call the liberal international order, because that doesn't serve his purposes. Since the Georgian War-- and Dmitri will talk about this-- Russia has revamped its military, strengthened its position vis-a-vis its neighbors in the West, and since 2014 it has attempted to sanction-proof its economy.

It has a large sovereign wealth fund that's estimated to be 12% of GDP. Oil prices are currently very high. The central bank was forced last week to intervene to prop up the ruble, but just a couple of days ago, Russian markets staged a huge comeback.

So to sum up, I really do think that what's happening now goes way beyond Putin's feelings about Ukraine per se. And while the Ukrainians are the immediate target, I would argue this has much more to do about Russia's relations with Europe and with the United States. Putin is seeking to redress the perceived wrongs of the whole post-Cold War era by establishing itself as a leading power in some kind of revised international order.

Angela Stent has written, and I want to quote here, that Putin is seeking to get quote, "the West to treat Russia as if it were the Soviet Union with special rights in its neighborhood and a voice in every serious international matter." It sounds a lot like Gromyko to me. This means, in effect, reversing the Soviet collapse.

Now I'm not arguing that Putin wants to recreate the Soviet Union, but I do think he wants to hold sway, or wants Russia to hold sway over the whole post-Soviet space. It also means that we will continue to see Russia exploiting divisions-- and this goes again to what Serhii just said, exploiting the divisions within the transatlantic alliance, trying to create problems between the United States and its European allies. And I think he also would like to change the rules of the game that have been governing the international system since the end of the Cold War. And I will pass the baton to Dmitry.

OLGA OLIKER: All right, I'm not Dmitry, but I think technical difficulties have slowed Dima down. So I'll go in his place and hopefully it will not upset the order of things too much. I'm Olga Oliker.

So Serhii was talking about unity, and I want to ask, what does one do with that unity, of sort of where do we go from here from this point of crisis? And just kind of to recap very quickly, because I think we're all assuming a lot of knowledge about what's going on, we have these two nested crises. We have the Ukraine-- the war in Ukraine's been going on since 2014. And we also have the European security crisis that, according to Russia, has been going on since the end of the Cold War, which has something to do-- a lot to do with what Carol was talking about, the loss of status. But it also has to do with the perception of security that's linked to that loss of status, and the desire to rebuild that and to get that back, which includes controlling most of the post-Soviet space but also includes a lot of things about just what kind of sway Russia has in Europe as a whole.

So effectively what Russia is doing now is it's got all of these troops near Ukraine. It's not openly threatening Ukraine it just happens to have a vast quantity of troops all around it. But what it's negotiating with Western states about is the European security order. And it's made a series of demands about what it wants, which is promises of no NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia, which is limits on certain deployments, some of which are probably OK with the Western states, some of which not so much. And it means a rollback of basically the military posture to the way it looked before NATO enlarged the first time around, so back to the posture of-- they like 1997 as their target date.

So what do you do, what do we do, if we assume we're all Westerners under these conditions? And I would say especially what you want to do is avert war, if you are hoping there will be no war. So I would say that there are two options on the table that would stand a really strong chance of averting war, which nobody is going to take. And then I'll talk through some of the other options on the table and the way forward.

So here's one way to avert the war. You can give Russia what it wants. Ukraine implements the Minsk Agreements that ended the end of the worst of the fighting in 2014, and then again in 2015, with more worst of the fighting, and implements them the way Russia wants them implemented, which in Russia's view, is going to prevent Ukraine from any kind of Western alignment.

You can also, from the Western standpoint, promise no Western alignment for Ukraine, no NATO enlargement. You can pull all the forces back to countries that were NATO members in 1997. And that would conceivably, if you do this, probably keep Russia from going to war. It would also potentially destroy NATO. New NATO members would see this as very dangerous, and really an abdication of NATO's job to defend them. And it would certainly set the stage for the next crisis when Russia decides that this isn't quite enough and/or very nervous new NATO member states take action to try to improve their security, and so forth and so on. So that's an option that could prevent the war, but would not end well.

Here's another option that could potentially prevent the war, which is the NATO states could say, you know what, we may or may not ever let Ukraine into NATO, but we will fight for it. We will send forces. We won't just send weapons. We will risk World War III.

The problem with the scenario, of course, is that it risks World War III. So it might very well deter Russia-- the reason Russia does not want Ukraine and all these other states and NATO is because it does not want them to have NATO's security guarantees. It's not acceptable to many of the other members of the alliance, because they don't want to take that risk. So this also could break the alliance. And basically it could work. But if it doesn't work, the results are disastrous, and not just for Europe, but for the whole world.

Hence the path that Western states have chosen, which is a combination of threatening Russia that if it does take additional military action in Ukraine they will face severe sanctions, and also that very military buildup that they keep complaining about is going to get worse, not better, not roll back to 1997, but massive roll forward along its borders. But on the other hand, if it's willing to talk recognition that the current security order in Europe does not meet anybody's needs adequately or it wouldn't be in this mess, so let's talk about a new one.

Let's talk about deployment limits. Let's talk about exercise limits. Let's talk about activity limits. Let's talk about a Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty 2.0, a Helsinki pact 2.0. Let's talk about it.

There are a couple of other things that get placed on the table periodically, but don't really stay there. One of them is something that I've occasionally referred to as sort of a conscious Munich, where you give up Ukraine. Ukraine is pressured to surrender, but NATO instead of talking to Russia about a new security order builds up to prepare for the next war. This is kind of a worst of all possible options because Ukraine loses its sovereignty and there's also no hope of a more stable international order that comes out of it. In fact, things just get less stable.

Another option that gets a good bit of attention is this idea that Ukraine will declare neutrality, that Ukraine will pledge never to join NATO, will be a neutral state forever. There are four reasons that's not going to work. One, it's been tried before and it hasn't stuck. The previous Ukrainian Constitution had committed the country to non-bloc status. The current Ukrainian Constitution commits the country to seek NATO and EU membership. You can change your Constitution, who knew?

And the foreign promises of security that were made by the Budapest memorandum, they were assurances. They weren't guarantees. They weren't binding, et cetera, et cetera. But I think they also leave a bad taste in a lot of mouths about how this would go forward.

Second reason this won't work is Russia isn't looking for a neutral Ukraine. It's not what it's asking for. Russia doesn't want Ukraine to be neutral. Russia wants Ukraine to be friendly. Arguably, Russia wants Ukraine to behave the way Poland did during the Cold War when it was occupied militarily and politically.

Third, having been invaded, Ukrainian ambivalence about alignment that was really a pretty defining feature has faded significantly. Fewer and fewer Ukrainians like the idea of neutrality. Now I think they increasingly recognize that they're not going to get NATO membership, what they've settled for is a sort of aspirational alignment where they have no security guarantees but they have some deterrent threat of the sort we're seeing now where NATO member states offer help and threaten Russia with things short of military force. And it is telling that they feel much safer with that, even if not entirely safe, than they think they would feel with Russian promises of guaranteeing their security.

And then the fourth reason neutrality doesn't work is that Western states don't actually care that much about Ukraine honestly, but they also don't very much want to give up and back away. And if they, at this point in time, pressure Ukraine to neutrality and have to offer it whatever promises they have to offer it to do it, they are simultaneously giving up to Russia and promising a way-- whatever it is, they must promise a way to Ukraine. It's just not a position they want to be in.

So we're back to this current approach, and I do think the current approach is the right way forward. It is a diplomatic way forward. It is looking to use the tools of diplomacy backed by, to some extent, some threats of force, at least of weapons supply, certainly by economic power to do the job. If it does work, it still leaves open the need to have good negotiations on Ukraine itself, deals on what exactly does happen, what constraints, if any, are going to be put on NATO's enlargement on actions and activities in the Black and Baltic Sea regions et cetera.

All of which is going to take a while, so you're not going to get one clean deal in the next couple of weeks that makes this all go away. But if you get a little bit of de-escalation and the Russian forces pull back, that would actually be a tremendous step forward for European security. It doesn't solve everything forever. There could still be another crisis. It could derail all of these talks, but it would actually be a net plus.

I also want to talk very quickly-- I know I don't have much time-- about what happens if there is a war, and maybe Dmitry will also go into that. Some of that depends on how long the war lasts, whether Ukraine surrenders. If Ukraine does surrender, Western states are left with either kind of going back to this conscious Munich idea and building up, or negotiating with Russia despite this. And that might be what Russia is hoping for. But it's hard for me to imagine that's actually going to be how things / I think there will be a lot of anger and a lot of intent to punish Russia.

Russia might be stuck occupying Ukraine, which I don't think it expects to do. But if it really wants a change in government-- which there's some reason to think is what it's going for-- might be what is required. That will be costly and nasty, as Elizabeth Wood already noted, and it will be paired with a Western buildup that will make things even costlier and nastier. It might try to pull out and get us back to some version of the current status quo except with more sanctions and more buildup, but that just seems very odd and almost foolish.

And then I would also say that if there is a war, of course, Ukraine will suffer the most. It is possible that the Zelensky government may indeed collapse. But unless the Russians are in fact occupying Ukraine, hard to see how it will be replaced by a government friendly to Russia. It's also possible that, short of war, the Zelensky government won't surrender but may try to offer concessions on Minsk in order to avert war. They don't seem to be making any steps in that direction right now, but it could be possible, and then fall to domestic political pressure as a result.

So there are a lot of fun things to be watching in this space. This is a very dangerous moment and I do think that the path that Western states are on right now is the best possible one. If it works we'll be in a better place at the end of it. If it doesn't, we will be in a far worse one.

**DMITRY
GORENBURG:**

All right, well, my task is to talk about the Russian military aspects of the situation. And to be honest, I think the situation is not pretty. So Russian forces near Ukraine are currently at about 70 battalion tactical groups, along with additional support elements. So what does that mean? Battalion tactical group is an organized combined armed formation which averages about 800 personnel in size. So that's a combat unit.

So this translates to about 56,000 combat troops, more or less. And then you add all those various supporting units and that sort of thing, so the total number of Russian troops near Ukraine is likely to be approaching about 100,000. And then, aside from those regular Russian troops, there's also separatist forces in the Donbas region. It's hard to get a good count on that probably around 15,000 or so troops there.

So what this means is that approximately 40% of Russia's total available combat potential-- in terms of conventional combat potential, obviously, is currently near the Ukrainian border. Plus there's additional airspace and naval units I'll talk a little bit later. So those are kind of forces that are deployed, let's say, within 125 to 200 miles of the Ukrainian border.

And in those fall into two categories broadly speaking. There's divisions in the brigades that are permanently stationed in the area, and that's about half the number of that force and most of the supporting ground troops that are there right now. And then there's a second set of forces that are units that have been temporarily deployed near Ukrainian borders from units that are normally stationed elsewhere in Russia, and that includes armies that are based in the North Caucasus, units in the central Russian territory around Moscow, St. Petersburg, and even most recently we see troops being moved in from the Far East. So kind of all over Russia.

So the addition of these-- the second group of forces has more than doubled Russia's offensive potential near Ukraine in the last few months. So for example-- and this is not just in the fall. It started back last spring. So for example, last April, Russia's 41st combined arms army has been in the region. And that's about 1,800 miles from where it's normally based. And then most recently, about 15 to 20 of these PTGs from the Russian Far East have moved into the region primarily into Belarus, although some may be near in Russian territory as well. And that's 50% of the total Eastern military district's combat potential that has now moved from Siberia, from the Far East, into the neighborhood of Ukraine.

So that's the ground forces, and Russia also has a significant naval presence in the Black Sea that could potentially be used in an invasion. So there's a good portion of the Black Sea fleet that's in the process of going out on exercises in the Black Sea right now, live fire exercises. And so that shows that they're ready for action. There's also six additional amphibious landing ships that are on their way to the Black Sea from the Northern and Baltic fleets, and these ships could be used together with the Black Sea forces to potentially undertake an amphibious operation either near Mariupol in the Azov sea or near Odessa in the Black Sea itself.

So that's kind of like a basic lay down to the forces. Then there's the question, what can the Russian military do with these forces? So we know where the forces are, but the way that Russia has positioned the forces gives it a variety of options in terms of what kind of operation it can undertake. So one possibility that I think is fairly unlikely but nonetheless should be mentioned is it could just be a limited operation in Eastern Ukraine, sort of Donbas 3.0 or whatever number we're up to now. So that's one possibility. I don't think that's likely because I don't think it achieves Russian goals, political goals.

So second option is a much larger operation in the east where Russian troops deploy pretty rapidly to occupy the eastern half of the country, perhaps going as far as the Dnieper river. There's also now, especially with the troop's position in Belarus, there's a possibility that Russia could move in from the north to kind of encircle Kiev-- probably not take Kiev, that's hard. And urban combat is not necessarily where their strengths lie, but they could threaten Kiev. And then meanwhile, there's a third direction, which is forces based in Crimea, together with the Black Sea naval forces that I mentioned, could launch an operation to occupy the south, and that could potentially cut Ukraine off from the sea, which has a lot of economic implications in addition to the political ones.

So that leads to the question, how can the Ukrainian military respond? Now the Ukrainian military is much stronger now than it was in 2015. It spent a lot of that time developing. Its command and control is much better than it was in that fairly chaotic period after the Euromaidan. But the thing is the Russian military is much stronger now than it was then also. So the gap may be just as large now as it was then.

Ukraine's biggest problem is that its air defenses and its air force are quite weak. And so Russia-- all analysts agree that Russia could very quickly achieve air superiority in the event of an invasion, and this would make it very difficult for Ukrainian forces to resist a large-scale invasion. So then there's some analysts say that it might be better off, at that point, if this is a situation that Ukrainian forces are in and there is a large scale invasion, maybe better off to just undertake an organized retreat back rather than lose the forces, and kind of set up resistance units to cause pain to potential Russian occupation.

But-- and I think we're largely-- Olga-- I think we're all largely in agreement that Russia's primary goal is unlikely to be occupation. The goal is to achieve to use a military victory to achieve political aims, so force NATO out of Ukraine, but most likely install a government in Kiev that is less hostile to Russia-- again, I'm in agreement with Olga here-- maybe even friendly to Russia. So the ideal is to get those concessions and then withdraw.

Now how you assure that those concessions actually are carried out, well that's maybe the government replacement aspect. And so if they can't get the concession, then maybe they would consider partition and partial occupation. But I think they fully recognize that that could be a pretty painful scenario.

So just one final word, there's the question of timing. A lot of the forces right now are still just pre-positioned equipment, the temporarily relocated forces, and the troops are still back at their bases. It's much cheaper to keep those troops there until a decision is made to actually launch something and then fly them in, then it can be done pretty quickly. So they're also still waiting on some additional units that are still on their way. So I would guess that Russia would be ready in like two or three weeks or so, which also conveniently puts it after the Olympics, so that's another consideration. I don't think they want to spoil China's party.

Anyway, so it's a pretty bleak picture, to be honest. And I hope that some of these diplomatic measures that Olga laid out work, but I'm at the same time pretty pessimistic. So that's the situation. I'm happy to move on to questions.

**ELIZABETH
WOOD:**

OK, let me step in now. So we have a lot of excellent questions. I want to remind everybody that if you want to put more questions in, that you can use the Q&A function. Let me start with a good question to the panelists. How can viewers keep up with what's going on as this unfolds? Do you have favorite websites, favorite analysts for the military, for the diplomatic, for the Ukrainian side of things? I propose we take the panelists in order they spoke. First Carol, then Serhii, then Olga, then Dmitry. If you could say one thing about how would you recommend American viewers, who maybe don't speak Russian or Ukrainian, how can they keep up what's going on inside Ukraine? Are there any particularly good sources for you, Serhii?

**SERHII
PLOKHII:**

Well, for general information I am checking BBC all the time. So that's where I go first. But beyond that, I look at the Ukrainian websites, and *Ukrayinska Pravda* is still a good source. Quite recently they published analysis by the Ukrainian military experts. It seems to me that was the only outfit, online or not, in Ukraine that did that.

The problem is my advice is that I don't remember anymore in which language I read those things, Ukrainian, Russian, or English. But that's in terms of what I do. I start with BBC and then go into the Ukrainian websites starting with *Ukrayinska Pravda*. [UKRAINIAN] is another one, again, the language might be an issue, though.

**CAROL
SAIVETZ:** In terms of English-language sources Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty has stories every day. The Carnegie Endowment Moscow Center has interesting pieces about the Russian perspective on what's happening, like Serhii, the BBC, *The Financial Times*, sort of the usual culprits, if you will, who all of whom have reporters on the ground and are trying really hard to keep up with events. *The New Yorker* correspondent, Josh Yaffa, who's going to be one of our next speakers, has a great piece that's coming out in I think it's next week's *New Yorker*, talking about the origins of the Russian-Ukrainian crisis and everything. So even keep an eye on what they've been writing as well.

OLGA OLIKER: So the original-- the beginning of the Ukraine crisis in 2014 was what got me on Twitter, because one thing I realized then was that reporters tweet before they file. So I second what everybody else has said about reading the news and just tracking it. If you would like to be obsessed and track it moment by moment, Twitter, or Telegram if you speak Russian or Ukrainian, may be your best bet.

I also would like to put in a plug for our own work at Crisis Group. We do offer-- we have a piece that came out in December that analyzes the situation which is remarkably still quite relevant, though we are preparing another one for next week. And we also have some podcasts that address the situation for those of you who prefer to listen to your analysis. And we do try to make our work accessible and also concise, and I'm told we often succeed, so hopefully on this as well.

**DMITRY
GORENBURG:** Just a couple of additional sources that haven't already been mentioned, *War on the Rocks* is a great source for military and security-oriented English-language analysis of this topic. And *The Monkey Cage*, I think there was a link that was sent around to something I co-wrote that was on *The Monkey Cage*, but there's a lot of good analysis that covers both domestic situation and an international situation.

And then as long as we're putting in little plugs, the CNA Russia team has been putting out a product called *Russian Media Analysis Newsletter* that tracks-- it's biweekly and we cover what the Russian media is saying about Western military activity, NATO, and so forth. And so if you don't read Russian but want to know what the Russian media is talking about, it's available on the CNA website and maybe we can get a link in there as we go along here. So that's another good source.

**ELIZABETH
WOOD:** OK, so let me-- we've had we have 37 questions. If anybody wants to add more, the Q&A feature is up and running and we have very little time. But a couple of questions raised the question of the Russian domestic involvement in all of this. Carol had raised the issue of Putin's possible vulnerability. Is he going to war for domestic audiences? How might people-- do any of you have thoughts on how Russians might respond to this war? What do you think about other possible political, social objectives that are broader than just Ukraine?

**CAROL
SAIVETZ:** I'll jump in just to kick it off. I think it's a great question and a really important question. In 2014, all the commentary was that the annexation of Crimea was dramatically popular in Russia and it bolstered Putin's popularity rating. Now they're not doing well with the COVID crisis, only 30%-some odd of the population is vaccinated and the case numbers are just staggering. One day last week, or this past week, it was 88,000 new cases in that given day. So I think that there's that issue.

I think that the average Russian is more concerned about feeding his family, and keeping a roof over his head, and everything else, than he is about Ukraine. And I keep thinking that if there is an invasion and/or occupation, which would be even more costly, how are the addition of dead soldiers, and how would their families react on top of just dealing with the decline in the Russian economy and COVID? I think Putin is actually very vulnerable at the moment, and I'm not sure this is a great idea. If he thinks he's going to get a win like Crimea, 2014, I'm not sure it's going to play out that way.

ELIZABETH WOOD:

Let me throw this question to Dmitry and Olga because a related question came up about-- and then I have a question for Serhii. Somebody asked, what are the stakeholders pulling Putin toward and away from war? Somebody asked specifically of the role of General Gerasimov, who is often putting out military doctrine. And I know, Dmitry, you've written about that. Are you getting a sense on that? And then, Serhii, I want to ask you about the Ukrainian leaders and how are they coping with the pressure, messaging their country and so on. But, Dmitry and then Olga, what do you think about the stakeholders and how are they pulling and pushing Putin?

DMITRY GORENBURG:

Well, first of all, Gerasimov is an implementer not an influencer. And so his job is-- if Putin says, OK, we're going to invade Ukraine, his job is to figure out how to do that. I think that the people that are pushing Putin towards a more confrontational stance are the hardliner, security-oriented types who have been writing a very hard line things for a while, like Nikolai Patrushev for example. He's been very kind of conspiratorially-minded in his writings for many years and very anti-NATO and anti-West. So I think that's where it's coming from.

And part of the problem, potentially, is that with the COVID pandemic, Putin has been self-isolating much more. So he is not interacting as much with, let's say, the more economically-oriented Russian political elites, people like Kudrin and Siluanov, people who might in the past have highlighted the costs of confrontation and restrained him a bit. And I think that this is part of the problem and why we've been seeing a much more confrontational situation.

OLGA OLIKER:

So I agree with all of that. I think it's interesting to watch kind of the logic of people in the presidential administration, and the folks whom they might be reading, where they do believe fundamentally that the Ukrainians all secretly love Russia, and so that they will be greeted with candy and flowers. And I think there is a certain amount of that that's still very prevalent in the narrative and in the discourse, which I would think would be why they would think that they can go in, overthrow Zelensky, and get a friendly government. I'll also throw in there that I'm pretty sure the MFA would love to just have a nice, long series of negotiations with Western countries about how to make a better, more secure European order and not a war which will absolutely cut off their opportunity to do that for a very long time.

SERHII PLOKHII:

Well, in terms of Ukrainian leadership and response to the current crisis, I would say that until maybe the last two weeks, there was not much of concern really shown in Ukrainian media, or even social media, or any concern signaled by the presidential administration. So there was the belief that, again, the whole crisis is a diplomatic tool, that the invasion probably would not come. And that changed in the last two weeks, and certainly in the last few days quite dramatically.

The timing for the war is never good for the country that is attacked, but for Ukraine, it's especially bad given that the issue of unity is a big question. The approval ratings of President Zelensky started to fall in the summer. His ability to get the vote out of the Rada, out of the parliament, is probably the lowest in comparison to all his tenure in office. He has his party that he created out of nothing, the Servant of the People, that has the majority, but it looks like there are cracks within that-- not coalition, but within the faction, within the party itself.

And he's, at the same time, at war, or was at least at war until very recently with the richest oligarch in Ukraine, Mr. Akhmetov. He was going until recently, again, and still goes probably after his predecessor Mr. Poroshenko. So from that point of view, there is little unity that has been demonstrated in the last months and weeks. A little bit better now in the next few days, but again, this is not the situation in which the country has to be, and in terms of the support for the president, not the situation we want to see at this point.

ELIZABETH WOOD: So we're really very close to end of time, and such great questions from everybody. I want to take one of the last questions which is, Olga, you had dismissed the idea of neutrality for Ukraine. One of our last questioners asked, could there be a plebiscite of the Ukrainian people, and what about the option that Finland, Sweden, Austria, and Switzerland have all had neutrality even at the height of the Cold War? Maybe Olga, do you want to comment more on that? What would it take, I guess, to try to find a way to make Ukraine neutral, or is that such an impossible idea for Russia that it's not going to go anywhere?

OLGA OLIKER: So my argument is that neutrality is not a solution to this current crisis. Whether or not Ukraine at some future point of its existence chooses to be neutral-- it was certainly a preference for a lot of Ukrainians prior to the 2014 war. I don't know if that's something that could come back. For all of the reasons that I went through, it's not plausible for Ukraine to say, wow, this is a great idea for us now. It also won't solve this problem because it's not what Russia wants. So it's the wrong answer to the question.

ELIZABETH WOOD: Does anybody else want to comment on that real quick, or leave it? OK, so I guess another interesting question is, what happens to the gas pipelines? Somebody asked, effectively, if Ukraine is invaded, would they break the pipelines? Someone else asked, what happens to the pipelines if Russia intervenes? Anybody want to take up that one?

CAROL SAIVETZ: Russia-- it's really interesting, because I think Gazprom Russia has been sending less gas to Europe, I think in the hopes of splitting the Europeans, or peeling them off from supporting us as we're supporting Ukrainian sovereignty and independence. Nord Stream 2 is not operational yet. It has not been given the go-ahead by the German government. So in effect, Russia still needs to rely on the pipelines that run through Ukraine.

Apparently the Russians are worried. There were reports the other day that there was an LNG tanker off the coast of Kaliningrad just in case somehow Kaliningrad got cut off from either by what the Europeans were doing or by the effect of war. I mean, the Russians have established this dominant position in the gas markets, and yet they haven't really been able to leverage it to the extent I think that they hoped. They would love to punish Ukraine by closing those pipelines, but they can't do it completely until Nord Stream 2 is operational.

And apparently, President Biden the other day got a promise from the German coalition and from the German Chancellor that if there is an invasion-- now, I guess we can say, what does an invasion mean, and if it's an incursion does it count, and everything else-- that they would not authorize Nord Stream 2, that Nord Stream 2 would be cut off. So I think Russia needs to be careful, especially since so much of Russia's income is dependent on oil and natural gas exports.

OLGA OLIKER: Can I jump in on this just very quickly? So Russia is meeting its contractual obligations to the Europeans. There was some talk that because there is a bit of a gas crisis here in Europe-- I'm sitting here with my thermostat turned very, very low because my gas prices have gone up astronomically high-- that the Russians might provide a little more, but it's not clear the Russians could even if they wanted to because of other demands on their gas. So this debate of whether they were intentionally throttling generally comes out with, no, that doesn't look like that's what they were doing.

Most of Russian gas, certainly to Germany and to an awful lot of Europe, is not transiting Ukraine anymore. They found they found a lot of other ways to do this. Nord Stream, however, is still a big-- Nord Stream 2-- is a big part of Russia's strategy for providing gas to Europe, and so is Ukraine, actually. Because Russia wants to maintain that dependence of Ukraine on Russia, so you still have to move some gas through Ukraine to do that.

And it will be really interesting in the worst possible way if there is an escalation, and if part of the sanctions package has a significant energy component, because as I said, prices here already really high. It's going to be a cold winter. It's going to be really hard for Europe. It's going to be also really, really hard for Russia, because it is very dependent on these exports. So I mean, this is actually one of the interesting things about the sanctions package is, it's very likely to be one where European states, especially, bear at least some of the brunt

ELIZABETH WOOD: Anybody else want to comment on that? I realized we're over time, but I think-- Olga, I'm particularly concerned, I don't know if you can stay. You had a hard stop, possibly. Maybe we take 10 more minutes. I think this is such an interesting discussion. Any other comments on the gas pipelines? If not, I'll take another question from the audience. Yes, Serhii, please.

SERHII PLOKHII: I have a very short comment in the sense but I absolutely agree with Olga in terms of the neutrality of Ukraine. It's one issue that Ukrainians are not interested at this point, and another is that for Russia this is not a solution. So I just want to say that this is also the way how I look at the situation.

And I have, if I am allowed to ask questions of Dmitry and Olga, because I really wanted to know. One of the things that I read recently was that there is movement around the unrecognized separatist republics. The Communist Party proposed a bill about the possible recognition of their independence, and there are apparently initiatives coming from the ruling party in Russia about supplying arms to those republics. And it looks like that may be the way also to shield Russia, per se, and Putin as well from possible sanctions if it's those public at war. And my question is whether one should pay much attention to those initiatives that are now happening in the Russian Duma, in your opinion?

DMITRY GORENBURG: I think it's definitely worth paying attention and continuing to pay attention. One thing that the problem is that these kind of-- if it's just another, like I said, Donbas 3.0, this doesn't really achieve Russian political goals. It's no one's going to give the big concessions that they seem to be looking for if there's a reactivation of fighting in the east, if it's just limited to that.

So those things are-- I mean, maybe one way to think about them is that they're potential off-ramps. If in the Kremlin there is a calculation made that it's not worth it, that the cost is going to be too high, Nord Stream is going to be canceled, whatever it is, they figured out that the people lining the streets with flowers in Ukraine are not actually going to be there for them, whatever it is, then there could be some smaller thing that's somehow connected to some subsequent diplomatic initiatives, maybe, and we kind of all, step back with this limited invasion-- or not invasion, but incursion, or whatever terms you want to use.

So that's a possibility. Again, I don't think it's likely, because I don't think it gets the Russian leadership what it wants. And the only way to we get there is if there is some-- Putin has some change of mind and decides the costs aren't worth it.

OLGA OLIKER: I mean, the other thing if you lose these-- I think Dmitry's absolutely right. I think the point of these republics is that you force them back into Ukraine, and then you force Ukraine to behave itself the way you want it to if you're Moscow. Yeah, I mean, I think recognition and all of that is giving up. As for Ukraine would be giving up on them and trying to separate them off would be the same, it would be a form of giving up.

DMITRY One thing I just might want to add, I've heard from people on the ground in Ukraine who've traveled recently to
GORENBURG: the eastern regions, that the leadership there is much more optimistic than they have been in recent years. So they sort of think something good is coming, for what it's worth.

ELIZABETH That's worrisome. Somebody asked, what is the pain threshold for the Russian populace? At what point are
WOOD: Russians likely to resist this war, or is there not such a point? If there were 1,000 dead, horrific battles, do we think that would stop Russians? Would they stop their government? I don't know.

DMITRY I guess I can start if no one else wants to. So the striking thing to me, paying attention to what is going on in
GORENBURG: Russia, is that Russians-- and also Ukrainians-- are much more skeptical about the possibility of war than Western media, leaderships, and people. That's, I think, because there's still a psychology of, this is crazy. We're really going to fight Ukraine?

But I think that-- I forget who was earlier in the discussion said that this is not something that's going to lead to that same burst of patriotism that we saw in 2014. And I think that's right. At the same time, the Russian population has been, I think-- and here maybe I disagree a little bit with something Carol said earlier when she said that Putin is-- I forget the exact words, but he's in trouble, and he's trying to repress in order to stay in power. I think that he's actually done quite well in turn in terms of neutralizing the population. Now this is not a permanent state necessarily, but I think that overall the population is kind of demobilized, and I'm not sure what they could do.

CAROL Can I just jump in. I did not mean to imply, and if I did I apologize, that Putin was on his last legs and on his way
SAIVETZ: out because of this or anything else. But I think that the population is really very atomized, and sort of de-politicized at the moment. And what I kept thinking about was if you remember back in 2014, especially after Donbas happened, there were the group of mothers from Pskov and some of these other areas who were really agitating to find out where their kids were buried. And I think that depending on what the casualty rate was, that this could work against any kind of thing.

But given Russian history, and given how authoritarian Russia has become, I don't foresee any major demonstrations. I don't foresee Putin being overthrown by massive demonstrations any time, too. It doesn't mean that he doesn't have the sense of vulnerability. I just don't think it's a real one.

DMITRY Yeah, I think so.

GOENBURG:

ELIZABETH Serhii, do you want to have a last word as we wrap up? What's the most important takeaway?

WOOD:

SERHII Well, again, I agree with what has been said about Russia. What I feel is happening in Ukraine, certainly, a sense of real concern, deep concern. And there is a lot of talk and discussion about the resistance and partisan warfare. So that's the theme that really dominates the social media right now. So army, yes, it's all important, but it's basically defending your cities, defending your villages. From every window there will be people shooting, so whether that will be happening or not, but that's the mood that is now in Ukraine, at least among significant part of Ukrainians.

ELIZABETH Well, I want to thank our panelists enormously. Thank you Serhii for bringing the Ukrainian perspective. It's hugely important to keep Ukraine at the center of this, that this is a real place with real people. Thank you Carol for talking about Putin and the domestic. Dmitry for the military, we need to understand these things. And Olga, who had to just leave, but she brought in all the diplomatic and crisis management.

And thank you to our audience, great questions. If you have a chance, on February 3, the next Starr Forum is going to be Autocracies: Assault on Press Freedom with experts and journalists from Russia, Hungary, and Poland. So please join us, and thank you so much for coming today. Thank you to Michelle English and Laura Kerwin who organized this in the behind scenes. And thank you each and every one of you for following this issue. Let's all keep, as I say, [RUSSIAN]. Let's hope that there's no war. So we'll see what happens. Thanks, everybody. Bye for now.