

# Russian Annexation of Occupied Ukraine Is Putin’s Unacceptable “Off-Ramp”

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**Key Takeaway:** Russian President Vladimir Putin likely intends to annex occupied southern and eastern Ukraine directly into the Russian Federation in the coming months. He will likely then state, directly or obliquely, that Russian doctrine permitting the use of nuclear weapons to defend Russian territory applies to those newly annexed territories. Such actions would threaten Ukraine and its partners with nuclear attack if Ukrainian counteroffensives to liberate Russian-occupied territory continue. Putin may believe that the threat or use of nuclear weapons would restore Russian deterrence after his disastrous invasion shattered Russia's conventional deterrent capabilities.

Putin’s timeline for annexation is likely contingent on the extent to which he understands the degraded state of the Russian military in Ukraine. The Russian military has not yet achieved Putin’s stated territorial objectives of securing all of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts and is unlikely to do so. If Putin understands his military weakness, he will likely rush annexation and introduce the nuclear deterrent quickly in an attempt to retain control of the Ukrainian territory that Russia currently occupies. If Putin believes that Russian forces are capable of additional advances, he will likely delay the annexation in hopes of covering more territory with it. In that case, his poor leadership and Ukrainian counteroffensives could drive the Russian military toward a state of collapse. Putin could also attempt to maintain Russian attacks while mobilizing additional forces. He might delay announcing annexation for far longer in this case, waiting until reinforcements could arrive to gain more territory to annex.

Ukraine and its Western partners likely have a narrow window of opportunity to support a Ukrainian counteroffensive into occupied Ukrainian territory before the Kremlin annexes that territory. Ukraine and the West must also develop a coherent plan for responding to any annexation and to the threat of nuclear attack that might follow it. The political and ethical consequences of a longstanding Russian occupation of southeastern Ukraine would be devastating to the long-term viability of the Ukrainian state. Vital Ukrainian and Western national interests require urgent Western support for an immediate Ukrainian counteroffensive.

## **Kremlin Plans to Annex Southern Ukraine:**

**Russian President Vladimir Putin likely intends to annex occupied southern and eastern Ukraine directly into the Russian Federation in the coming months to consolidate his control over these territories and possibly deter Ukrainian counterattacks.** The Kremlin likely plans to annex much of the Ukrainian territory currently occupied by Russian forces—portions of Kherson and Zaporizhia oblasts in the south and the areas of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts in the east that Russian forces and their proxies control. Moscow may also annex other Kremlin proxy statelets like South Ossetia (in Georgia) and Transnistria (in Moldova). ISW has previously detailed the ongoing Kremlin conditions-setting to annex or recognize occupied Kherson, Zaporizhia, Donetsk, and Luhansk.<sup>1</sup> That conditions-setting includes replacing local media with Kremlin-run media outlets, installing Russian internet and communications networks, forcibly transitioning local economies to the Russian ruble, kidnapping, executing, and replacing local Ukrainian officials with Russian collaborators, and likely hunting and eliminating anti-occupation activists and partisans. Widespread

Russian atrocities against Ukrainian civilians are part of the established Kremlin playbook to gain control over occupied areas.<sup>2</sup>

**The Kremlin no longer conceals its intentions to annex areas of occupied Ukraine.** The secretary of United Russia, Putin’s political party, visited Kherson on May 6 and announced that “Russia is here forever.”<sup>3</sup> The Russian-appointed deputy head of the Kherson Civil-Military Administration, Kirill Stremousov, announced on May 11 that Kherson would develop a legislative framework for joining Russia by the end of 2022 and would entirely forgo a public referendum after reports that Russian occupation authorities were preparing for a fraudulent Kherson independence referendum.<sup>4</sup> He said that the international community did not recognize Russia’s (rigged) referendum on annexing the Crimean Peninsula after Russian forces invaded and captured that Ukrainian territory in 2014, and that a Kherson referendum was therefore unimportant.

Stremousov said aloud what Russians have tried to obfuscate: Russia will annex Kherson despite widespread local opposition to annexation. Stremousov’s statement shows that the Kremlin likely realizes any attempt to conduct a “referendum” in Kherson would be met with widespread resistance even after months of Russian brutalization and intimidation of the local population. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov did not contradict Stremousov in a May 11 press conference, stating that the Russian annexation of Kherson “must have an absolutely clear legal background, justification, [and] be absolutely legitimate, as was the case with Crimea” but explicitly did not mention a referendum. Russian-appointed Kherson regional head Volodymyr Saldo said on May 9 that “if the Russian Federation is here, then the entire set of laws, the structure and construction of power will be precisely Russian.”<sup>5</sup> He said that he expected “some kind of [Russian] federal district will be created, which will include the Crimea, Kherson, and Zaporizhia regions,” though the Kremlin is not bound to administer an annexed Kherson Oblast in this manner and regularly contravenes the stated expectations of its other proxies.

The Kremlin has many models for the governance of annexed territories based on Russia’s complex and varied federal system. Occupied territories could be incorporated as oblasts (the administrative unit roughly analogous to American states that comprise most of Russia), republics (like the illegally annexed Crimean peninsula), federal cities (like Russia’s two main cities of Moscow and St Petersburg and the city and naval base of Sevastopol), or an entirely new organizational structure.<sup>6</sup> The Kremlin could also choose to first turn occupied territories into proxy “people’s republics” as an intermediate step, or offer a phased path to annexation. ISW cannot currently forecast which path to annexation the Kremlin will likely pursue, but the recent Russian official comments noted above suggest that outright annexation is currently the most likely.

**The Kremlin’s planned wave of annexations could also include proxy territories outside Ukraine.** The newly elected leader of South Ossetia, one of two Russian proxy regions in Georgia created and defended by the Russian military during and after the 2008 Russian invasion of Georgia, said on May 11 that he awaited a Russian “signal” to hold a referendum on joining Russia.<sup>7</sup> His predecessor said in his concession speech on May 9 that his government had already submitted paperwork to prepare and determine a date for the accession referendum.<sup>8</sup> Officials from Abkhazia, the other Russian proxy state in Georgia, said on March 31 that they support but do not share South Ossetia’s aspirations to join Russia, indicating that Abkhazia will likely not be included in a Russian annexation sweep.<sup>9</sup> Separately, US National Intelligence Director Avril Haines warned on May 10 that Putin seeks a land bridge to the Russian proxy Moldovan breakaway region of Transnistria, but does

not currently have the military capabilities to achieve that goal.<sup>10</sup> The Kremlin may approve Transnistrian annexation or recognize the independence of the self-declared Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic to set conditions for future operations in Moldova or southwestern Ukraine. Such Russian actions would likely follow the establishment of military control of occupied Ukraine and take account of the fact that Russia almost certainly lacks the military capability to seize the parts of Ukraine, including Odesa, that would be necessary for such a land bridge.

### **Costs and Benefits of Annexation for Russia:**

**The direct Russian annexation of any areas of occupied Ukraine would permanently change the pre-invasion legal frameworks codified in the Minsk II Accords and preclude returning to any sort of status quo antebellum. It would thereby cost Putin the opportunity he pursued doggedly from 2014 to 2022—attempting to insert Russian proxies (the DNR and LNR) into the Ukrainian political system as permanent levers of influence.** Outright annexation of Ukrainian territory would foreclose the resurrection of the legal frameworks outlined by the Minsk II accords, which depended on treating Russia’s proxy statelets as parts of Ukraine and requiring Kyiv to grant them both autonomy and the rights to participate in the Ukrainian political system. Putin’s recognition of the “independence” of those statelets immediately before the February invasion has already formally changed the situation, to be sure. But whereas one might theoretically imagine Putin trading that “independence” for a return to the Minsk II framework, it is almost impossible to imagine him accepting a retrocession of territory he has formally annexed to the Russian Federation.

If Putin annexes the occupied territories, therefore, he will have decided to give up the option of using proxies within the Ukrainian political system to resume the hybrid war approach he had taken toward Ukraine since 2014. He would likely make such a decision because he knows his latest invasion has already destroyed any possibility of returning to those Kremlin-favorable frameworks, because he fears a Russian military collapse, or because he seeks to restore credible Russian deterrence by introducing a nuclear threat—or all three. **Regardless of Putin’s reasoning, Russia cannot—and will not—accept a return to a pre-war status quo. If the Kremlin directly annexes Ukrainian territory, it will mark a fundamental departure in the Kremlin’s approach to Ukraine, from hybrid warfare and political manipulation to outright military coercion and, if possible, conquest.**

**Annexation of Ukrainian lands is likely the only “off-ramp” that Putin is interested in pursuing at this time. Even this face-saving option, which falls far short of the Kremlin’s initial war aims of complete regime change in Kyiv, would be a devastating blow to Ukraine and is likely the minimum outcome that the Kremlin is willing to accept.** If Putin can declare victory by annexing large swathes of Ukrainian territory, he can better sell the costs of the war to the Russian population and to any sympathetic global audiences. The Kremlin absurdly justified its unprovoked war of aggression against Ukraine as defending the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics from Ukrainian “Nazi” aggression and an alleged planned genocide against Russian speakers. The Kremlin likely assesses it must therefore consolidate and justify its gains by annexing at least the currently occupied portions of Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts if it seeks to maintain that narrative and claim that it achieved the war’s stated objectives.

**A Russian annexation would seek to present Kyiv with a *fait accompli* that precludes negotiations on territorial boundaries even for a ceasefire by asserting that Russia will not discuss the status of (illegally annexed through military conquest) Russian territory—the argument the Kremlin has used regarding Crimea since 2014.** The Kremlin did not seriously engage in its perfunctory negotiations with Ukraine in Istanbul in March and April. After annexing Ukrainian territory, the Kremlin will frame Ukrainian negotiators' demands for the return of Ukraine's sovereign territory as absurd requests for Russia to give up its own land and dismiss them.

**A Russian military collapse combined with further Ukrainian battlefield successes or the Kremlin's acceptance that a military collapse is imminent are likely the only other circumstances under which Putin would accept something less than his stated objectives for this phase of the war.** Collapse does not necessarily mean a mass surrender or rout of the Russian military. A Russian military collapse would more likely be roughly analogous to the state of the French army from April to June of 1917 during the First World War, when over half the divisions in the French army refused to go on the offensive due to shattered morale and poor leadership.<sup>11</sup> Russian forces in such a state would be extraordinarily vulnerable to concentrated Ukrainian counteroffensives, and the Ukrainian military would be able to pick the battles of its choosing if Russian forces were unwilling to attack. A Russian military collapse would likely involve an endemic level of desertions and “fragging” of officers, the practice of personnel killing their own officers, both of which have been observed throughout the war.<sup>12</sup> Such a collapse would render further offensives impossible in the current phase of the war in Ukraine and could lead to a disorderly withdrawal of Russian forces from the front lines, as was seen following the Russian loss in the Battle for Kyiv.<sup>13</sup> The Russian military will not be completely destroyed, nor would it have to leave Ukraine before reaching a state of collapse. However, a collapsed Russian military would lose its ability to function as a coherent fighting force. If that happened, Putin might well find himself obliged to accept far less than his current stated objectives.

### **Timing:**

The Kremlin has set partial conditions for annexation in areas like Kherson and Zaporizhia and has actually had to rein in some of its proxy officials from the DNR, LNR, and South Ossetia as they clamor for annexation. But the Kremlin has not yet formally announced annexation or the formation of new proxy republics in those areas. The Kremlin must set certain political and military conditions before it can annex occupied territories. Military realities could force a change in timeline or in pacing, however, and Ukrainian military gains in the east could drive a quicker annexation of specific areas.

**The Kremlin likely intends to annex all of the territories it wants to incorporate into Russia at once, rather than stagger the annexation process.** The Kremlin likely believes that mass annexation would minimize the longevity of international outrage. The international community eventually normalized relations with Russia following its 2008 invasion of Georgia and the stagnation of its 2014 invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea; Putin would likely seek to replicate that pattern.

**The Kremlin will need to establish relatively comprehensive security and administration structures within its occupied territories before it can announce effective annexation.** Unexpectedly stiff Ukrainian resistance in occupied Mariupol's Azovstal steel plant, as well as anti-occupation protests and partisan activities in Kherson and other occupied areas, have likely slowed the

Kremlin's intended timeline.<sup>14</sup> The Kremlin likely expects strong backlash in occupied Ukrainian territories when it declares formal annexation and therefore is seeking to break up partisan and opposition groups before going forward with annexation, likely through the population-control efforts of Rosgvardia forces.

**The Kremlin must also work to transform its military occupation of Ukrainian territories into a series of political administrations capable of governing newly minted Russian regions before it can formally annex those territories.** This process will take time as the Kremlin crushes opposition movements, arrests or kills off local Ukrainian officials, eradicates local governance structures, and replaces them with Russian administrators or Ukrainian collaborators. The longer that Russian forces have to control and subdue occupied Ukrainian territory, the more difficult it will be for Ukraine to rebuild local administrative and governance structures in those areas if they can regain control. **The political clock on Ukraine's ability to regain control of the southeast is ticking.**

The Russian head of the Kherson region said in a May 9 interview that the formation of a regional government was underway.<sup>15</sup> He claimed that there was no widespread or organized violence in Kherson, only "separate manifestations." These claims (likely exaggerated) may indicate that occupation forces, probably including Rosgvardia troops, have cracked down on Ukrainian resistance and partisan activities in the region, enabled by Russian control of communications infrastructure. The degree of success of those Russian crackdowns, or of ongoing Ukrainian partisan activities, is unclear.

The Kremlin also likely needs to address internal disagreements on administrative boundaries and organization before formally annexing Ukrainian territory. DNR head Denis Pushilin claimed on May 9 that Mariupol "is the territory of the Donetsk People's Republic forever. No one will take it away from us."<sup>16</sup> However, conflicting Russian and Ukrainian reports on May 3 suggest that other Russian decisionmakers may be planning to annex Mariupol directly into Russia's Rostov oblast, rather than into the DNR.<sup>17</sup>

### **Intended Effects of Annexation:**

**The Kremlin could threaten to use nuclear weapons against a Ukrainian counteroffensive into annexed territory to deter the ongoing Western military aid that would enable such a counteroffensive.** The Kremlin has already falsely claimed that Ukrainian strikes on Russian territory—during an unprovoked war of Russian aggression against Ukraine—are somehow escalatory rather than a legal Ukrainian response under the laws of war.<sup>18</sup> However, Russian nuclear doctrine clearly allows for nuclear weapons use in response to "aggression against the Russian Federation with the use of conventional weapons when the very existence of the state is in jeopardy."<sup>19</sup> The Kremlin could frame a Ukrainian counteroffensive into annexed Ukrainian territory as a threat to the existence of the Russian state—such an absurd claim would be no less plausible than many other claims Russia has already made. Making that claim, however, likely necessitates Russian annexation of occupied territories, rather than creating additional proxy statelets in places like Kherson and Zaporizhia.

The Kremlin could believe that a nuclear threat would deter ongoing Western military aid that would enable such a Ukrainian counteroffensive. Ukraine and the West should not let that happen. The Kremlin has likely calculated that NATO would rhetorically and materially support Ukrainian

counteroffensives into a hypothetical proxy statelet Kherson People’s Republic (or simply Russian-occupied Ukraine), but would not support Ukrainian attacks into the Kherson Oblast of Russia, for example.

The Kremlin may also believe that Kyiv would be unwilling to directly attack claimed Russian territory, particularly after Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said on March 27 that Ukraine would not try to recapture all Russian-held territory by force, arguing that it could lead to a third world war.<sup>20</sup> Zelensky has repeatedly called for the restoration of the de facto borders as of February 23, the day before Russia’s latest invasion.<sup>21</sup> The Kremlin could conceivably believe that annexation would prevent Ukrainian counteroffensives, even without an explicit nuclear threat.

### **Military Supporting Effort:**

**In order to enable the annexation of occupied Ukrainian territories, the Kremlin must accomplish the following military objectives:**

- **Hold and consolidate control of occupied territory.** This objective necessitates the disruption of partisan activities and the defense of held territories.
- **Stop Ukraine from retaking additional territory.** The Kremlin will likely order Russian forces to settle into defensive positions once Kremlin officials accept that the Russian campaign in Donbas has reached its culmination point—if they ever do.

**However, the Kremlin may not have acknowledged that its military campaign in Donbas has stalled.** The Kremlin may still believe that its forces can take the rest of Ukrainian-held Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. The Russian proxy head of the DNR claimed on May 9 that the DNR is “faced with the task of regaining control over its territories, and then the republic will decide on its future—almost certainly referring to accession into Russia”<sup>22</sup>

Russian forces are continuing ineffective offensive operations in eastern Ukraine despite the vanishingly small chance that they will make any substantial territorial gains. The Kremlin is likely operating under one of the following mindsets:

- It erroneously assesses that Russian forces can complete their stated objective—the complete capture of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts; or
- It has realized that Russian forces will be unable to completely capture Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts but is continuing to order attacks in order to maintain momentum and prevent the fragmentation of Russian forces; or
- It is planning a larger mobilization of lower-quality Russian reserves or the general population in order to accomplish its original territorial objectives, forcing a months-long delay for additional Russian forces to arrive and turn the tide (or so the Kremlin might believe).<sup>23</sup>

Ongoing Russian attacks, though ineffective, do achieve the military objective of pinning Ukrainian defenders in place by threatening further advances. Kyiv may be unwilling to risk pulling the forces it would need to conduct a counteroffensive against occupied southern Ukraine from areas that are currently under Russian attack. If Russian forces accept that they will gain no additional territory in Ukraine and settle into defensive positions themselves, Ukrainian forces will gain an opportunity to

seize the initiative and choose where to launch counter-offensives against the depleted Russian forces, which may collapse in the face of a determined counterattack.

### **Forecast:**

**We assess that the remainder of this phase of the war in Ukraine will likely follow one of three courses: either Russian forces will annex occupied Ukrainian territory into Russia, the Russian military will stall for time as it attempts to mobilize additional forces, or the Russian military will continue to pursue impossible military objectives with insufficient resources and ultimately collapse in the coming months. Mobilization does not preclude military collapse.** Many of the dangers outlined in this assessment hinge on a Russian recognition of its conventional military weakness and a proactive decision to secure Russian gains in Ukraine. Putin's mistaken decision to invade Ukraine despite Russia's poor preparation and conventional military capabilities suggests that the West should not rely on clear-eyed Russian assessments of their own military capabilities. Ukrainian forces may be able to force Russian forces out of occupied Donetsk and Luhansk, or at least back to the pre-February borders of the DNR and LNR, if Russian forces do not decide to end their offensives early. **If Russian forces make the deliberate choice to end their offensive before the Ukrainian military forces them to do so, that decision would be a strong indicator of imminent annexation. If Russian forces fail to recognize that their Donbas campaign has culminated, the Russian military in Ukraine may be headed for an outright collapse.**

Russian forces will likely either decide to end their offensives in Donetsk and Luhansk and annex the territory they currently hold or they will be militarily defeated by Ukrainian forces. If Russian forces stop shy of capturing the entirety of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, the Kremlin will owe the Russian population an explanation as to why it did not achieve its stated objectives. The false Kremlin narrative of an anti-Russian "genocide" in eastern Ukraine traps Russian decisionmakers if they care about narrative consistency: they must "rescue" sufficient territory to claim to have stopped the "genocide" in order to claim victory.<sup>24</sup> Alternatively, the Kremlin could calculate that domestic support for the end of the war is unimportant to its aims and simply claim a victory that is inconsistent with the Kremlin's running narratives.

### **Policy Implications:**

**Despite its conventional military failures, the only off-ramp the Kremlin appears to be considering is at least partial victory.** Putin likely understands that there will be no return to the Minsk II accords or any similar legal framework that allowed for Russian interference in Ukrainian politics. But Putin has not ceded his longer-term ambition of controlling Kyiv, even though his attempts to take the Ukrainian state by force have failed (for now). **If Putin annexes occupied territory and the conflict settles in along new front lines, the Kremlin could reconstitute its forces and renew Putin's invasion of Ukraine in the coming years, this time from a position of greater strength and territorial advantage.**

**The West must take seriously the real and likely threat that Russia will annex southeastern Ukraine and the expand Russian nuclear doctrine to cover that newly annexed territory.** Russia's annexation plans are not guaranteed to succeed. They depend on consolidating control of occupied territory, establishing administrative capabilities, and preventing a

Ukrainian counteroffensive. The West must do what it can to deter Putin’s expansionism while also preparing an answer that offers Ukraine more than capitulation.

**Ukraine and its Western partners likely have a narrow window of opportunity to support a Ukrainian counteroffensive into occupied Ukrainian territory before the Kremlin annexes that territory (or brings up additional forces).** This window of opportunity is not necessarily obvious. In a military sense, Ukrainian forces should begin their counteroffensive before Russian forces decide that their campaign has culminated and begin to dig into more orderly and possibly morale-boosting defensive positions. Poor morale and worse leadership have soundly degraded Russian forces; Ukraine should ideally counter-attack at the time of maximum Russian disorder before Russian forces have time to fully go over to the defensive and dig in.

**The political and ethical consequences of a longstanding Russian occupation of southeastern Ukraine would be devastating to the long-term viability of the Ukrainian state and necessitate Western support for a more immediate Ukrainian counteroffensive.** Every day that occupied Ukraine remains under Russian control is another day of horrific human rights abuses, targeted degradation of Ukrainian governance structures, and “filtration” of civilian populations. **If Ukrainian forces do not retake southeastern Ukraine before Moscow annexes that territory, Kyiv may find that the southeast has become irreparably mired in the same situation that Crimea has faced since 2014.**



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