



## AN ECONOMIC BURDEN TOO HEAVY: THE NEFARIOUS ATTRITION WARFARE

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### Abstract

*The economic impact of the attack on the Ukraine becomes more and more costly. The destruction of capital in a sizeable part of the Ukraine is immense. And the expenditures on war materials keep augmenting, not only for the belligerent parties but also for Western governments aiding Ukraine. The Russian president promises to keep fighting, mistakenly approaching the war as sunk costs. The attack was expected to be over in a few months. But it has become a war of attrition between Russia and NATO.*

*Keywords: military spending, casualties and human misery, war as sunk costs*

### INTRODUCTION

Opportunism is rampant in social life, also in warfare. A government planning to attack another state, is bound to underestimate the costs of warfare, especially in an attrition war. Russia has so far made incredible losses in people and tanks (the turrets are wrong). Yet, this leads Putin to mobilize more men and buy war materials abroad – sunk costs error. The ending ?

### PAULUS' TRUTH

In 1938 Hitler began planning the attack on Soviet. *Wehrmacht* asked general Paulus for an analysis whether Germany could win a *Blitzkrieg* against Stalin. His report was negative. Yet, he accepted to head the southern army in 1942 with Stalingrad as object. If Germany could not win *Blitzkrieg*, it certainly could not prevail in attrition war. Paulus gave true witness in Nuremberg and died a prisoner of DDR.

## HORRENDOUS ATTRITION COSTS

The war that Russia began against the Ukraine was and remains very threatening to the entire world. Besides the human casualties on both sides, there are the economic costs:

### 1) Direct costs:

The war has broken the economy of Ukraine and reduced economic growth in Russia. The destruction in the eastern Ukraine is complete and the losses of war materials of the Red Army immense. The reduction in Russian energy has fuelled inflation all over the world, reaching about 20 percent or more in electricity and food prices. Inflation in turn has led to interest rate increases and stock market turmoil. It remains to be seen how long the involved parties can afford this high tech war. They are not rich. Consider Figure 1.

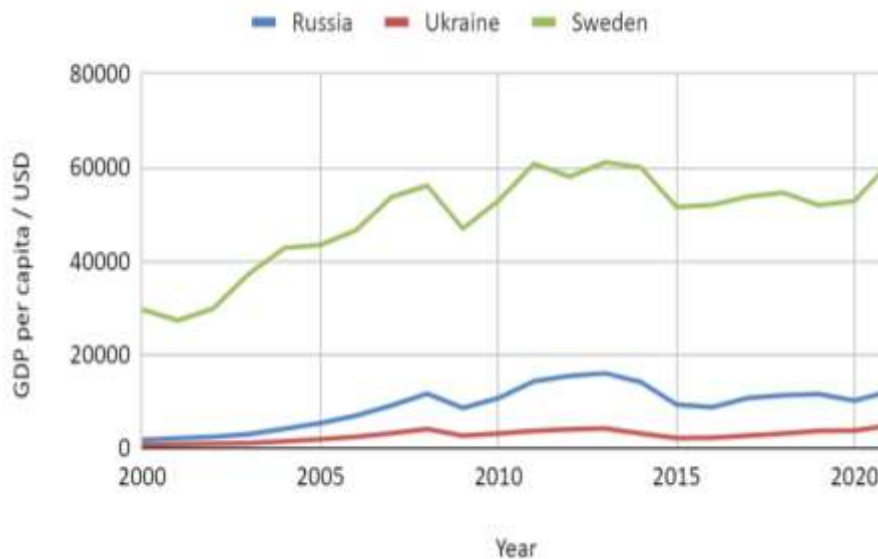


Figure 1. GDP per capita for Russia, Ukraine and Sweden.

### 2) Indirect costs:

As expected, the Ukraine war has unleashed a global frenzy of defence expenditures. The planned increase in spending on expensive war materials will drive out green policies. The much needed reduction in fossils seem to have been abandoned in several countries.

### 3) Future costs:

There is not only the immensely costly rebuild of Ukraine. Russia has to handle its many wounded soldiers. A lack of workers will hamper economic output, already restrained by brain drain. Economic wealth depends upon civilian output (Say).

## THE CONDUCT OF THE WAR

Russia now gambles on an *attrition* war, aiming at the destruction of physical capital. At first, Russia wanted *Blixtkrieg*, but failed. The underperformance of the Red army has not lowered the aspirations of Putin, whose discourse is more and more unrealistic (Belton 2020). Why, then, attack the Ukraine?

Official reason: According to the entourage of Putin, the developments in Ukraine threaten the survival of Russia. Thus, the turn to democracy in Kiev is said to be a Western *coup d'etat*, constituting an attack on Russia.

Unofficial reason: The regime in Moscow that Putin heads in an authoritarian fashion (Aslund, 2019), wants the same kind of state control in all ex-Soviet republics. Otherwise, democracy will spread also to Russia. The longer the war, the more the costs will be unsupportable, especially if Belarus and China enters somehow.

## JUST WAR?

There are two ways to explain the Russian attacks on Ukraine, using concepts from international law:

*Casus belli*: Russia reacts to the willingness of Ukraine to enter the EU and the NATO, arguing that the dissolution of the Soviet Union was based on a promise by Western powers not to invite the Ukraine.

*Unjust war*: this is basically Putin' war against democracy to protect his own regime. And the war is conducted in a manner that violates gravely just war *doctrine*.

In short, *just war theory* hands down a *casus belli* to Russia, but the conduct of the attacks makes Putin a war criminal. Why was the annexation of Crimea not enough? It is not easy to understand the policies of Russia towards the Ukraine, besides the NATO fear. It is maintained by Putin that the Ukraine somehow "belongs" to Russia, a position buttressed by history or culture. However, both the historical reference and the cultural commonality misses the fundamental political fact of the *undisputable* independence of the Ukraine since the dissolution of Soviet Union. When Putin speaks about Ukraine, he always omits the sovereignty of this state, according to international law. Why war?

## WAR AS A RATIONAL CHOICE

For a government to start an attack on another state, it must hold:

- 1) The probability of victory is larger than .5;
- 2) The victory must involve more gains than *status quo*.

Probabilities, gains and losses constitute the planning of an attack, and the expectations may be horribly wrong.

Warfare involves luck and misfortune, i.e. chance. Foolishness occurs when a government gambles too much on luck. War foolishness is a major cause of defeat, as with Hitler's hubris, starting attacks all over Europe and in Northern Africa. Putin's war is characterised by foolishness, as the Russian forces are ill equipped and hardly coordinated. Russian panzers are too weak. The danger of a *Pyrrhus's* victory hangs over every war project such as Napoleon's.

### **CLAUSEWITZ' INSIGHTS**

Clausewitz' definitions of war and its conduct are still valid, but Putin's war efforts appear to lack relevant knowledge of strategy, preferring instead to bomb everything, military or not.

Look at Clausewitz' principles:

P1. War and politics: "war is just the continuation of politics with other means". True, Putin first controlled Ukraine via the president, but then came Zelenskij along. Clausewitz looked upon the world as zero sum, but this excludes cooperation or coordination. Surely both countries would have gained from peace, striking a bargain instead of all casualties and destruction. They are both poor nations.

P2. "War has only one aim: to impose your will upon the other". This amounts to a mentalist approach: will against will. Clausewitz wrote about crushing the enemy's will. This worked in the 1920s for Stalin against Ukraine – not now.

P3. "Recourse to physical violence until the opponent does as he is told". Clausewitz drew his lessons much from the Napoleonic wars. They were not *total wars*, but Clausewitz is said to have endorsed the idea of total war – questionable.

P4. Enmity, hatred and primordial violence. Here we have an essential difference from Clausewitz. The Ukraine and Russia are or were not viewed as France and Germany or Prussia and Austria in the 19th century, locked in animosity.

Ukrainian history is replete with wars with neighbours, but it is not a matter of people hate between Russians and Ukrainians. These people adhere to the Slavic culture. Even by appeasing the present government in Kiev, Russia would have been better off than today's *pariah* predicament.

Clausewitz has of course a large number of ideas on strategy and tactics, but they are often old fashion, focusing on *die Schalcht* (decisive battle). He states as a conclusion that a golden opportunity to conquer must not be missed. Perhaps exactly this admonition misled the Russians? Clausewitz underlined uncertainty, devotion and genius. Now things are more brutal with rockets and grenades - endless bombing of whatever, even children.

## **RUSSIA AGAINST NATO**

We see only destruction, people fleeing and deaths. War is meaningless today, since it becomes *total* and often takes the form of attrition.

War is mental, governed by *ex ante* beliefs. *Ex post*, Putin is wrong. Outcomes are worse now than in the past. Thus far, the NATO countries have helped Ukraine in various ways, not least with state of the art weaponry. The group has been united as never before and Sweden and Finland are prepared to join. Russia cannot take on the US. Geopolitically, Germany has decided to arm forcefully -all three countries setting new courses compared with the experience of 1945.

It is clear that Putin planned this war poorly. He badly overestimated the forces of Russia and underestimated the help for Ukraine.

Now, global output is falling, hurting much needed social expenditure and green policy. Russian ruthlessness is a reminder of the danger of naked power (Lenin, 1917; Weber, 1978).

## **CONCLUSION**

A war of attrition will end when one of the parties faces exhaustion. This will be Russia. But will Putin stop before the costs have ruined Russia and the Ukraine? When you lose, cut losses! This rational maxim is difficult to accept by an attacker with hubris and no fear of nemesis.

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