

## EXPLAINER

# 6 Questions About Russia's War in Ukraine, Answered

Your guide to Foreign Policy's coverage of the war so far.

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As Russian President Vladimir Putin's war on Ukraine enters its fourth week, the conflict has taken an increasingly gruesome turn. Russian forces have bombed schools, hospitals, and theaters, with civilians paying the price. According to [United Nations estimates](#), Russia's invasion has killed around 700 civilians and injured over 1,000 more, though the actual toll is likely significantly greater.

## Russia Invades Ukraine

A major land war looms over Europe.

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"Russia has turned the Ukrainian sky into a source of death," Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky told the U.S. Congress in a virtual speech on Wednesday. "This is a terror that Europe has not seen, has not seen for 80 years."

*Foreign Policy* has been covering the lead-up to and onset of the war closely for months through both reporting and expert analysis, and we will continue to do so as the war continues and the fighting intensifies.

From explaining the debate over a no-fly zone to unpacking Putin's nuclear threat, *Foreign Policy's* reporters and contributors have answered the most pressing questions about Russia's war. Here's a quick guide to our coverage so far.

## 1. Okay, let's start from the beginning: Why did Putin decide to invade Ukraine?

Putin sees the world through a peculiar historical lens, the author and journalist Paul Berman writes. The Russian leader has long believed that his country faces dangers that are external and ideological—such as Western liberalism—instead of ones that are internal and structural. To prevent the Russian state from collapsing, he believes he must halt the eastward spread of these dangerous, subversive ideas—by crushing them in Ukraine.

“Every one of [Russia’s] invasions in the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries was intended to preserve the Russian state by preventing a purely philosophical breeze of liberal thoughts and social experiments from wafting across the border,” Berman writes. “The same reasoning has led to the most ferocious invasion of all, which is the one going on right now.”

Putin’s brutal invasion has also raised questions about his mental state, as FP’s Amy Mackinnon reports. Although it’s impossible to gauge the true state of his mind, Mackinnon writes, officials and Russia experts have been stunned by the dark, even bizarre, nature of his recent statements.

“The more repressive your regime becomes, the more paranoid a leader grows because you have less sense of what is happening in society,” Andrea Kendall-Taylor, a senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security, told Mackinnon.

With Putin, Kendall-Taylor added: “It seems like we’re at a whole new level of paranoia.”

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## 2. Ukraine has repeatedly called for a no-fly zone. What is that, and why has Biden rejected the idea?

In his impassioned appeal to Congress on Wednesday, Zelensky urged Washington to implement a no-fly zone to ban Russian aircraft from flying over Ukraine, thereby preventing aerial attacks and enabling civilians to evacuate the country more safely. But it would also require military enforcement, namely from NATO forces.

Washington and its NATO allies have repeatedly refused, contending that it would put their air forces in direct confrontation with Russia's and only intensify the conflict. Enacting a no-fly zone "would require, essentially, the U.S. military shooting down Russian planes and ... prompting a potential direct war with Russia," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said.

International relations scholars overwhelmingly agree that establishing a no-fly zone would "risk uncontrollable escalation," as new research in *Foreign Policy* reveals. According to the College of William & Mary's Global Research Institute, which surveyed 866 respondents, experts widely believe that establishing a no-fly zone could push Putin to engage in more escalatory military tactics, including deploying chemical, biological, and even nuclear weapons.

For the United States, most experts say, it's far too dangerous to risk provoking such an outcome. "If we take that next step of direct military engagement by our pilots or our capabilities against Russian forces, which a no-fly zone does, then we are the ones who are escalating that conflict," Ivo Daalder, a former U.S. ambassador to NATO, told FP's Ravi Agrawal.

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### **3. So if a no-fly zone is out, are there other things the United States or NATO can do to help Ukraine?**

Kyiv has also pleaded for NATO-owned fighter jets, although Western countries have struggled to determine how to deliver them, as FP's Amy Mackinnon and Jack Detsch report. In early March, Poland proposed sending 28 Polish MiG-29 fighter jets to Ukraine, although the deal later collapsed.

But delivering aging fighter jets to bolster Ukraine's defenses was a terrible idea to begin with, defense policy specialist Blake Herzinger argues in *Foreign Policy*. Polish MiGs are decades old and require substantial maintenance that Ukraine may not be able to provide. If NATO really wants to help, Herzinger writes, there are better ways of doing so.

Some alternative routes could include training Ukrainian volunteers to operate the country's man-portable missile systems, coordinating civilian cyber-activities, and preemptively preparing for a continuity of governance should Kyiv fall, the defense experts David A. Deptula, Marc R. DeVore, Emma

Salisbury, and Michael Hunzeker write. All of these options, they argue, are far less escalatory than establishing a no-fly zone—and more practical.

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#### 4. What is Putin's nuclear threat?

In the days following the invasion, Putin sparked global alarm when he put Russia's nuclear forces on high alert. These concerns only intensified as Russian forces bombarded three nuclear plants in Ukraine.

“The prospect of nuclear conflict, once unthinkable, is now back within the realm of possibility,” U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres said on Monday.

Although the worst-case doomsday situation remains unlikely, Putin's nuclear saber-rattling could transform the way in which the world treats nuclear arms control, the Center for Nonproliferation Studies' Sarah Bidgood writes. Historical lessons from the Cuban missile crisis suggest that the war in Ukraine may have a chilling effect on arms control—even as it simultaneously underscores the importance of mitigating nuclear threats.

As tensions continue to escalate over Putin's nuclear threat, Washington now faces a serious dilemma. Should the White House attempt to call Moscow out for its threats—or adopt a more restrained response? FP's Emma Ashford and Matthew Kroenig debate in our series *It's Debatable*.

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#### 5. What is the humanitarian situation?

In besieged cities such as Mariupol, a strategic coastal Ukrainian city, the situation is becoming increasingly dire. Residents have been facing a humanitarian catastrophe as food, water, and medicine run low, Jack Losh reports for *Foreign Policy*.

On Tuesday, 20,000 people fled the city; a day later, Russia shelled a theater that was reportedly shielding hundreds of people, including women and children. “Satellite imagery showed that the word ‘children’ was written in Russian on the ground outside the building in an attempt to dissuade Russian warplanes from targeting it,” Losh writes.

“My happiest memories were in Mariupol,” Viktoria Popova, a Ukrainian artist who now lives in Germany, told Losh. “Now seeing it being completely broken down ... it’s a nightmare.” Her parents were finally able to escape the city on Tuesday.

In Mykolaiv, another key city, residents’ homes have been regularly bombed, while hospital patients say they have been the targets of prohibited weapons, Stefanie Glinski reports for *Foreign Policy*. In Dnipro, relentless shelling has destroyed apartment blocks and memorials.

So far, around 3 million Ukrainian refugees have entered Europe, the vast majority of them women and children, FP’s Anchal Vohra reports. “Russians are bombing our homes and killing civilians,” Kirova, a Ukrainian woman who fled Mariupol, told *Foreign Policy*. (She only shared her first name.) “I did not want to leave my partner, but I had to first think of my son.”

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## 6. What is Putin’s endgame?

Putin believes that Ukraine is not—and can never be—a separate country, FP’s Michael Hirsh writes. This belief has been echoed in his speeches and writings: In an essay from July 2021, he argued that “Russians and Ukrainians were one people—a single whole.”

This mindset can help reveal Putin’s ultimate endgame—and also suggests a more worrying future ahead.

Putin’s ultimate goal is “to bring Ukrainians and Belarusians all into the fold of Russia,” Alexander Motyl, a Russia expert at Rutgers University, told FP’s Mary Yang. “Which means, of course, that he needs to eliminate all individuals who have a separate Ukrainian identity.”

Russia’s history—and Putin’s propensity for risk—suggest that he may double down on his demands in Ukraine to cement his power and ensure his political goals are met, experts Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Erica Frantz write.

“If Putin is ousted, similar leaders’ track records suggest Putin stands a high likelihood of being jailed, exiled, or killed,” Kendall-Taylor and Frantz write. “In Ukraine, Putin will dig in to avoid any perception of loss and compel Ukrainians to bend to his will.”

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