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Nothing Stood in the Way of Putin Invading Ukraine

By Sergei Shelin

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Ukrainian city of Sumy after Russian attack. **State Emergency Service of Ukraine**

The three-year anniversary of Russia's attack on Ukraine brings us back to the paradoxical atmosphere of the last days before the war. In mid-February 2022, the proximity of war was obvious to everyone. But that war would break out was perceived as unthinkable.

It seemed unnecessary and incomprehensible to the Russian masses, contradicting the interests of the upper classes, the regime, and even President Vladimir Putin himself. China did not need it at all and the invasion provoked the West into a crushing response. The prior conditions and driving forces behind the war seemed a mystery.

The aggressor is responsible for the aggression. But let us start not with Putin, but with the surrounding world.

Only two or three external powers were capable of preventing the invasion: the Chinese, the

Americans and — at a stretch — the Europeans.

In early February 2022, Putin went to Beijing for permission to fight and got it. Nothing was surprising about that. The opposite would have been a surprise.

The PRC has never once stopped its friends and trade vassals from even their most exotic adventures. Iran's military campaigns and the DPRK's nuclear missile improvisations are examples. China is again confining itself to the role of the beneficiary of others' aggression.

As for America, Putin recently echoed President Donald Trump's assertion that there would have been no war under him: "I cannot but agree with him that if he had been president, if the victory had not been stolen from him in 2020, then maybe there would not have been the crisis in Ukraine that occurred in 2022.

We cannot dismiss this as mere conjecture. There is a grain of truth here.

Judging by the fact that Trump is proving unable to intimidate Putin today, he would hardly have been able to intimidate him before 2022 either. But there has always been a purely human affection between them. Justified or not, Putin has always seen Joe Biden as his implacable enemy, while he sees Trump as someone like himself with whom he could bargain.

However, according to Putin, the only thing that could be bargained for in 2022 was the procedure of turning Ukraine into a Russian protectorate. He simply would not agree to anything less without a war.

And Trump would probably offer him a smaller piece - for example, to recognize the annexation of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics as they were in February 2022. But Putin in 2022, unlike in 2025, was not looking for "compromises". He imagined that the Ukrainian army was weak and Ukraine was ready to collapse.

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In Putin's eyes, no matter who would be president in 2022, the United States looked insecure and divided, having just disgracefully fled Afghanistan (that would have happened under Trump too) — and therefore helpless. If the Democrats were Republicans in 2022, the concessions they could realistically make in those circumstances would seem to Putin an act of disrespect. He would not have refused to invade.

He promised to solve the Ukrainian question himself and was sure that the West would bow down before him. The bewilderment of Europe's leaders, who went to beg and dissuade him, convinced him that they reflected their peoples' lack of will and would endure anything.

Both China and the West knew about the invasion in advance. The West was afraid of it. The Chinese did not care. But no one was going to get involved in a war with Russia. All the regimes decided so for themselves, regardless of the differing characters and beliefs of their leaders.

There were no external forces and mechanisms that would have prevented Russia from going

to war. They simply did not exist in the world of 2022. The real mystery was not this, but the lack of resistance Russian society showed to their country's aggression.

Putin had been designing and preparing for the war for about a year and a half. However, most of the regime was kept in the dark for two to three days before it began. At the historic Security Council meeting on Feb. 21, 2022, when the ruler demanded that the highest dignitaries to support the upcoming "special operation," some of them clearly believed that it was not a question of seizing all of Ukraine, but only of annexing its separatist-controlled regions.

At the same time, on Feb. 21-22, neither Putin's press secretary Dmitri Peskov, nor the puppet administrations in Ukraine's east, nor the relevant parliamentary officials in charge of ratifying the agreements on Russia's recognition of these so-called republics, could answer the question of within what boundaries they were formalizing their recognition and subsequent annexation. Would they include just the territories under separatist control at the time or the entire Donbas?

The first option left a chance that a big war could be avoided. The second meant that one would definitely start. But what Putin was pursuing was still kept secret from almost the entire officialdom.

Russia's financial and economic chiefs were warned about 24 hours before the invasion began. Even then, it was only in general terms. Putin did not discuss his conquest plans with them. This is also why the disconnection from SWIFT and the freezing of Russia's international reserves came as such a surprise.

But the very fact that war was approaching was far from a secret to the upper classes. It is likely that even in Putin's inner circle, many — if not most — wanted to avoid it and hoped that the concentration of forces around Ukraine would turn out to be a bluff. They would have been so afraid of the leader that they simply did not dare to broach the subject.

The lack of will officials showed came as a surprise. Only one person at the above-mentioned meeting of the Council of Security Councils, Dmitry Kozak, tried to take anything like an independent position. The rest of the elites in the room only wailed cowardly and tried to guess what their ruler wanted from them.

Another surprise was the timid silence of tens of thousands of pompous bureaucrats and magnates — famous for acting like aristocracy and supposedly ruling the country. For decades, it was believed that the scope of the Putin regime, for all its authoritarianism, was limited to the interests of this nomenklatura. Most of these elites have families, assets, extensive business interests and personal attachments in the West.

The severity of the blow that an invasion of Ukraine would inflict on all of this was obvious. Putin's adventure called into question everything the upper classes, from billionaires to middle-class officials, were accustomed to. But Russia's privileged classes accepted their fate and did not even verbally try to defend their habits and comforts.

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As for the common people, they surrendered to the course of events with as much resignation as the nomenklatura. But even fewer of them thought about what was to come.

Two months before the war, only 6% of those polled by the Public Opinion Foundation named the long-simmering conflict with Ukraine and the threat of all-out war as an important current event. In early February, that number rose to 16%. Only on Feb. 20, did it become noticeable, rising to 39%. However, even then, most people did not recognize any important events going on around them.

Putin did not drag his country into the war because its lower or upper classes asked him to do so. All strata of society were silent.

The attack on Ukraine was Putin's personal endeavor and the product of his personal obsessions. He did not express any class interests, warn anyone, nor consult with any circles in any form. But it turned out that it was not necessary. The ruler of the Russian Federation is uniquely free to do what he wants because there were no mechanisms that would have prevented Russia from launching its aggression.

Putin did not need to try to make all parts of the regime freeze in anticipation of his combat orders or for his subjects to obey them. Everything happened by itself. That is the bitterest surprise of the days before the war.

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