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## (DIS)ENGAGEMENT IN THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR

*The policy commentary aims to determine how the engagement of Russia and Ukraine in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict fluctuated from the beginning of the war to the annexation of part of Ukrainian lands. Drawing on Randall Collins's analytical framework of conflict, the analysis uncovers the tendency to increase or stabilize a high level of engagement on the Ukrainian side and a decrease on the Russian side. In such a case, one might suppose that it is possible to end the war with Ukraine's victory. Russia does not have adequate material and logistical resources. Its group solidarity, ideological polarization, emotional mobilization, and the allies' support are insufficient to tip the tide of war in its favor. The partial mobilization of Russians and sending 300,000 soldiers to war will not change this situation because it is only one and not the essential feature of engagement.*

*Unlike Russia, Ukraine has no weapons of mass destruction. Simultaneously, Russia is treating nuclear weapons as a last resort. Ukraine will be significantly destroyed if Russia launches several dozen tactical nuclear missiles. It inevitably will be followed by NATO's decision to use a parallel, though not necessarily nuclear, response, leading to the destruction of the Russian key military potential. In this case, the land forces and the Black Sea Fleet are usually mentioned as targets. The desire for retaliation and the inability to acknowledge defeat may be the main reasons for Putin's next step and the mobilization of strategic nuclear forces. It will force the US to respond immediately with MAD doctrine, resulting in the complete annihilation of at least the Northern Hemisphere. This scenario is only possible if Putin's decisions remain irrational and implemented.*

**Keywords:** *Russo-Ukraine war; Russian aggression; engagement in conflict; Ukrainian national solidarity; contentious politics; Putin*

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### Introduction

Russia's decision to initiate a full-scale war on February 24, 2022 was completely irrational (Bäcker & Rak, 2022). The September 21, 2022 provisions on the partial mobilization and incorporation of the conquered Ukrainian lands into Russia, and including them under the nuclear umbrella, are more than risky (Vajriyati et al., 2022). The latter also means a significant increase in the threat to the whole world's existence.

This policy commentary aims to account for how the Russian and Ukrainian engagement in the conflict fluctuated from the beginning of the war to the annexation of part of Ukrainian lands. It draws upon Randall Collins's (2012) five-plane analytical framework of conflict. Its major assumption is that a decrease in engagement results from a failure of group solidarity formation. According to Collins, conflict produces conditions for concentrated interaction rituals, and internal solidarity triggers external conflict. First, a decline in engagement occurs along with a failure of group solidarity formation due to avoidance, isolation, and attacks that one-sidedly damage a group's organizational and material capacity. Second, ideological polarization between opponents increases as a result of perceived atrocities. Simultaneously, confrontational tension or fear makes violence incompetent and translates into real atrocities. Third, emotional burnout

unfolds through the sudden increase, plateau, and dissipation of enthusiasm. Fourth, disengagement occurs when material resources are scant and cannot be mobilized because they have depleted, and logistics have failed to supply them. Fifth, a decrease in engagement occurs when allies fail, and the neutrals make a third-party settlement. When opponents remain stalemated, initial enthusiasm and external polarization yield new internal factions, i.e., victory and peace groups, establishing novel conflict identities. Ideals triggering, maintaining, and legitimizing the conflict, promoted at the outset, become obstacles to resolution over time when the end is close (Collins, 2012). This framework offers theoretical lenses to understand the dimensions and dynamics of Russia's and Ukraine's (dis)engagement in the conflict and formulate early predictions of its development.

### **Dimensions of Russia's and Ukraine's (dis)engagement**

Russia's aggression against Ukraine has drastically strengthened the Ukrainian national identity (Barrington, 2022). Russia has become an enemy seeking to take control of Ukraine and destroy its people. The latter objective involves identity and physical destruction. At an awareness level, the war became a breakthrough existential and biographical experience for Ukrainians. While Ukrainian group solidarity gained significant and intense new national dimensions, Russian group solidarity began to wane and disintegrate.

The decision to start the war was imposed in advance and treated as not affecting Russians' everyday life. Therefore, a "special military operation" was commonly accepted mainly because of the belief in an imminent victory and a confirmation of Russia's imperial status. The new symbols, the letters "Z" and "V", were to unite the Russians behind the idea of victory (Panchenkov, 2022). With territorial progress slowing down, the war was conformistically accepted. After losing a large part of Kharkiv Oblast, the war was accepted only externally, and for a significant part of society, mainly young men, it became unacceptable. Mobilizing 300,000 reservists caused men's mass emigration (Faulconbridge & Liffey, 2022). The massively used strategy of escaping mobilization to survive is an external expression of negative feelings prevailing in Russia, i.e., fear – 43 per cent, shock – 23 per cent, and anger – 13 per cent (Levada, 2022). Simultaneously, it signifies an unspoken distrust and aversion to the rulers. The Russians have stopped identifying themselves with the imperial state. Independent organizational structures have been severely damaged. There is no sense of ties between the state and the nation. The massiveness of survival strategies proves the lack of supra-group ties (Alyukov, 2022). The only exceptions are regional structures of ethnic minorities with strong family ties, such as in Dagestan.

The ideological polarization among Ukrainians increased by leaps and bounds after the critical junctures, including the Russian aggression, the famous response of the Serpent Island defenders and the myth about their heroic death, and then after the disclosure of mass murders, first in Bucza and in September 2022, in Iziur. Russian occupiers are considered murderers and mindless robbers. In turn, the Russian state media, at the beginning of the war, spread myths about crimes committed by Ukrainians in the Donbas and dangerous American biological laboratories in Ukraine. They referred to Ukrainians as neo-Nazis and nationalists. The extremely negative image of Ukrainians as a passive tool in the West hands, which is striving to destroy Russia, reappeared in Vladimir Putin's address on September 21, 2022 (Putin, 2022). In September 2022, ideological polarization in state propaganda increased.

The Ukrainian nation experienced rapid ascents several times – from the beginning of the war, the effective defense of Kyiv, the withdrawal of Russian troops from the north, and the victorious offensive in the Kharkiv region. The plateau phases were relatively short and turned into the phase of ascent. In the Russian population, after the first phase of managed enthusiasm based on the glorification of new symbols, the letters "Z" and "V" (Panchenkov, 2022), a long plateau phase followed. It turned into a slow dissipation after the defeat at Kharkiv. An emotional burnout happened.

Ukrainian material resources were hardly sufficient in the first period of the war. However, Ukrainian logistics was incomparably more efficient than Russian. The weapons and military equipment supply from NATO enabled Ukrainians to stop Russian attacks. In turn, Ukrainian soldiers' equipment and training allowed offensives near Kharkiv and Kherson. Mobilization of the Armed Forces of Ukraine at the beginning of the war and the return of several hundred thousand men from economic emigration with the will to fight the invaders meant that Ukraine had no problems with human resources. The Ukrainians' will to fight against the aggressors is unyielding. The Ukrainian army's desire to take revenge for its defeats and powerlessness in 2014 is particularly strong. Before the war, Ukrainian military resources were considered much smaller than Russia's. Ukraine has had an unfavorable strategic position due to its exposure to attacks from the north, east, and south. After a few days of the war, it turned out that the logistical advantage, real-time orientation

on the battlefield, the will to win, and command skills became the decisive factors of Ukrainian advantage. From the summer of 2020, a technological advantage was also visible.

190,000 soldiers were sent to the war against Ukraine in February 2022, which is slightly more than 20 per cent of the Russian army (Cancian, 2022). The troops of the Russian Guard, Wagner's group, Chechen troops, and those from the areas conquered in the Donbas in 2014 joined the Russian army. Military units were poorly commanded, e.g., combat reconnaissance causing many casualties are common. Moreover, the soldiers' will to fight is not high. Due to the efficiently working Ukrainian defense systems, Russian ships cannot get closer to Ukrainian territories, and the planes can only operate from a distance in very risky conditions of the frontline. Logistics has failed from the beginning of the war. The exception was the relatively well-organized delivery of ammunition, especially in the early summer. However, after Ukrainians introduced high-precision artillery, i.e., the Himarsians, the direct combat supplies to the Russian troops decreased significantly (Kalin & Michaels, 2022). The Russian army has been unable to carry out offensive operations since the beginning of September 2022. The only weapon of war that has not been used so far is nuclear weapons (Palavenis, 2022). While Ukrainians' engagement increases, Russians disengage from the conflict.

The fifth dimension is resources in the form of alliances. Ukraine receives enormous material, humanitarian, and political aid and unprecedented support for war emigration from European societies and states, including Turkey and North America. Without financial aid from Western states and institutions, the Ukrainian state could not function. Providing intelligence, combat equipment, and military training reveal a high level of the allies' engagement.

The Kremlin can count on Belarus to a limited extent. Armenia has been taking the US course since September 2022. Central Asian states, especially Kazakhstan, are distancing themselves from Russia. Since the beginning of the war, China has supported the Kremlin only on the diplomatic level, despite earlier declarations of strategic cooperation. However, on September 21, 2022, China called for peace talks based on the principle of territorial integrity. It means an apparent distancing from Putin's decision to annex the occupied Ukrainian territory. Finally, India tried to remain neutral until September 21, 2022, and after that date, it began distancing itself from Russia. For Russia, the only significant allies and, at the same time, arms suppliers are Iran and North Korea (Hunter, 2022). Russia is gradually becoming alone in the international arena. The allies' engagement is significantly decreasing.

### Conclusions

The policy commentary has delved analytically into five dimensions of the increase and decrease of both sides' engagement in the Russian-Ukrainian war. It has uncovered the tendency to escalate or stabilize a high level of engagement on the Ukrainian side and depletion on the Russian side. In such a case, one might suppose that it is possible to end the war with Ukraine's victory. Russia does not have adequate materials and logistic resources. Its group solidarity, ideological polarization, emotional mobilization, and the allies' support are insufficient to tip the tide of war in its favor. It can be assumed that the partial mobilization and sending of 300,000 soldiers to the war will not change this situation because it is only one and not the essential feature of engagement (Klain, 2022).

Unlike Russia, Ukraine has no weapons of mass destruction. Simultaneously, Russia is treating nuclear weapons as a last resort. Ukraine will be significantly destroyed if Russia launches several dozen tactical nuclear missiles. It inevitably will be followed by NATO's decision to use a parallel, though not necessarily nuclear, response, leading to the destruction of the Russian key military potential. In this case, the land forces and the Black Sea Fleet are usually mentioned as targets. The desire for retaliation and the inability to acknowledge defeat may be the main reasons for Putin's next step and the mobilization of strategic nuclear forces. It will force the US to respond immediately with MAD doctrine, resulting in the complete annihilation of at least the Northern Hemisphere. This scenario is only possible if Putin's decisions remain irrational and implemented.

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**Бейкер Р., Рак Дж. (Не)залученість у російсько-українській війні**

Ця стаття має на меті визначити, як коливався ступінь залученості Росії та України в російсько-українському конфлікті від початку війни до анексії частини українських земель. Спираючись на аналітичну структуру конфлікту Рендалла Коллінза, аналіз виявляє тенденцію до збільшення або стабілізації високого рівня залученості з українського боку та зниження з російського боку. У такому випадку можна було б припустити, що війну можна буде закінчити перемогою України. Росія не має відповідних матеріальних і матеріально-технічних ресурсів. Її групової солідарності, ідеологічної поляризації, емоційної мобілізації та підтримки союзників недостатньо, щоб схилити хід війни на її користь. Часткова мобілізація росіян і відправка 300 000 солдатів на війну не змінить цю ситуацію, тому що це лише один, але не суттєвий елемент бойових дій.

На відміну від Росії, Україна не має зброї масового ураження. Водночас Росія розглядає ядерну зброю як крайній засіб. Україна буде значно зруйнована, якщо Росія запустить кілька десятків тактичних ядерних ракет. За цим неминуче прийде рішення НАТО застосувати паралельну, хоча і не обов'язково ядерну відповідь, що призведе до знищення ключового військового потенціалу Росії. У цьому випадку як цілі зазвичай називають сухопутні війська та Чорноморський флот. Бажання відплати та нездатність визнати поразку можуть стати головними причинами наступного кроку Путіна та мобілізації стратегічних ядерних сил. Це змусить США негайно відповісти доктриною MAD, що призведе до повного знищення принаймні Північної півкулі. Такий сценарій можливий лише в тому випадку, якщо рішення Путіна залишатимуться нераціональними та неухильно виконуватимуться військовими.

**Ключові слова:** російсько-українська війна; російська агресія; участь у конфлікті; українська національна солідарність; конфліктна політика; Путін