

RUSSIA ENTERS THIRD YEAR OF WAR DIMINISHED, DEGRADED, AND JOYLESS

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On the night of December 29, 2023, Russia conducted a series of massive missile strikes on Ukrainian cities. This operation was meant to add weight to President Vladimir Putin's confident and unwavering words in a series of public events that concluded the year.

It produced another failure, however, as most missiles were intercepted by Ukraine's air defenses (Meduza.io, December 29). As many as 35 innocent civilians were killed, though the missiles hit nothing of military significance. In contrast, the earlier Ukrainian missile strike on Feodosia on December 26 resulted in a spectacular explosion of the large Russian landing ship *Novocherkassk* (Svoboda.org, December 29, see video above).

Despite putting on a strong front, Putin increasingly struggles to shield the failure to achieve any progress in Russia's most recent offensive from the domestic population and will likely be unable to avoid the prospect of even more failures in 2024.

Putin insists on justifying his "special military operation" in the maximalist terms of regime change in Ukraine and the reduction of North Atlantic Treaty Organization enlargement (Republic.ru, December 29). Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu admitted, perhaps unwittingly, that Moscow's overall goal for 2023 had been much more modest: maintaining defensive lines against the Ukrainian counteroffensive (Interfax, December 26).

Following political orders to demonstrate the capacity for regaining the initiative on the battlefield, Russian troops continue to try advancing on Ukraine's defenses, focusing particularly on devastated Avdiivka and throwing away hundreds of soldiers in senseless "human wave" assaults (Novayagazeta.eu, December 27).

Ukraine's military leaders learned bitter lessons from the scant territorial gains from their counteroffensive and seek to adjust their strategy for a long war of attrition.

The repercussions of the war have put a greater strain on the Russian economy than official reporting shows (The Insider, December 30). Resilient economic strength looks to be the decisive factor for victory in this war.

While implementing a huge increase in defense and security funding, the Russian military-industrial complex is operating at maximum capacity. The over-exploitation of its basic assets combined with growing labor shortages has led to setbacks in production and technical breakdowns, often manifested in explosions at defense production facilities (Moscow times, December 23).

The Russian Ministry of Finance plans for a new high in war expenditures, though its estimates for incoming revenue are overly optimistic (RBC.ru, December 30). Putin continues to promote the message that money is not a problem.

Still, even the most privileged business empires are forced to pay extra taxes and make "donations," especially

at a time of war. Meanwhile, a further decline in real incomes for ordinary Russians looms on the horizon (Novayagazeta.eu, December 28).

A severe shortage of investments is disrupting Russia's high-value oil and gas sector, which struggles to find new loopholes in the constantly tightening Western sanctions regime (Forbes.ru, December 21). The erratic behavior of Russian energy corporations on global oil markets complicates Moscow's relations with other producers in the OPEC+ key partners, including Russia.

Putin tried to explain away these tensions during his unexpected visit to the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia in early December 2023 (Forbes.ru, December 7). The secretive trip, however, demonstrated the sharp decline in Russia's ability to wield significant influence in international affairs.

Veteran Russian pundits, such as Sergei Karaganov and Dmitry Trenin, seek to reconfigure Russia's acute ambitions for securing the status of a great power into the claim for leadership of the presumably anti-Western "global majority" (Kommersant, December 28).

In reality, for most politically diverse and self-centric states in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East, the experiences of interacting with Russia serve as a warning about the risks of aggressive autocracy to global development (Nezavisimaya gazeta, December 24).

Russia has little to offer to countries seeking to accelerate modernization. These countries are perfectly aware that Moscow is compelled to provide every natural resource and economic niche available to China. Beijing's claims of being an answer to aspirations in the Global South are far from convincing.

Even so, countries in the Global South have every reason to take for granted Russia's readiness to follow the course set by Beijing and responsiveness to reservations expressed by Chinese Communist Party General Secretary Xi Jinping (Riddle, December 26).

Russian political elites categorically deny the apparent reduction in Russia's international status to that of a troublemaker, which inevitably narrows many of their perspectives and agendas (Moscow times, December 28).

By some accounts, the preference of Russian public opinion for ending the war rather than striving to achieve victory seems to be growing steadily (Re-Eussia.net, December 12). Habitual hopes for a better year ahead are mixed with sour expectations of more of the same, leaving the season of festivities lacking joy (Republic.ru, December 28).

Pretenses of normalcy cannot camouflage the grim reality of an unwinnable war. As official discourse on traditional values departs further from the reality of social demoralization, it still determines the boundaries of acceptable behavior for the Kremlin (Novayagazeta.ru, December 30).

The apt symbol of Russia's current circumstances for the past year is the crash of the much-trumpeted Russian mission to the Moon, leading to a purge at state corporation Roscosmos (Izvestiya, December 14). This contrasts the successes of space programs in many other countries, from ambitious India to improbable North Korea.

There was one "success" that defined the hidden disarray in Russia's domestic affairs: the suppression of the Wagner Group mutiny on June 23 and 24. Putin will avoid mentioning this victory by reciting fake triumphs, as

the liquidation of Yevgeny Prigozhin cannot erase the Kremlin leader's personal responsibility for empowering the criminal entrepreneur (Meduza.io, December 30).

After the shocks of 2022, many Russians may find comfort in the perception of the gradual stabilization and normalization of the past 12 months, which they hope will continue in 2024. The reality is that stabilization will likely mean steady economic degradation and a mutation of Putin's autocracy into dictatorship.

Normalization amounts to acceptance of the continued decay of the demoralized society, though the Russian population prefers not to openly acknowledge it.

The war in Ukraine continues to scar and traumatize Russia. Millions of its citizens who either opted to escape or are compelled to wait it out in internal migration find it increasingly difficult to understand their country. Russia's leaders, who inhabit the bubble of servile loyalty and self-deceiving propaganda, have an even more distorted understanding.

One proposition that the Kremlin continues to mention now and again, but cannot possibly contemplate acting upon, is the call for a ceasefire and subsequent peace treaty. Ukraine will never agree to such a prospect so long as Russia occupies its sovereign territory.

As a result, Ukrainian forces will have to endure more tragic losses and painful sacrifices in the new year before they break the Russian pattern of war-making and open the road to a renewed, stable peace in Europe.

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