

## Russian ‘special military operation’ as a failed coup de main. An intelligence analysis perspective

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### Abstract

The authors analyse the invasions and accompanying intelligence activities as *coup de main* operations, understood not as strict execution of the art of war, but rather as a *coup d'état* carried out by external forces on the territory of the attacked state. *Coup de main* as an effective surprise attack requires the use of offensive counterintelligence infiltration and the pacification of the opponent with police-type forces. In the article, these mechanisms are analysed using the example of Soviet actions in countries perceived by Moscow as its sphere of influence, the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in 2014 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 historical experience from the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 which the authors compare to the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact troops in 1968. Understanding this model of aggression requires presenting instruments for analysing how the authoritarian state operates.

### Keywords

*coup de main*, *coup d'état*, Ukraine, infiltration, intelligence analysis, situational logic



## Introduction

The subject of the research described in this article is a specific type of actions directed against state authorities and their coercive apparatus, defined by the term *coup de main* (English: blow with a hand). This concept, taken from English-language literature, primarily from the thought of Edward Luttwak, will be described in more detail later in the text.

The aim of this article is to analyse the Russian Federation's (RF) actions in its two acts of aggression against Ukraine: in 2014 and 2022, as *coup de main* operations according to the operational definition adopted. The realisation of the research objective can contribute both to the awareness of the threat of this type of actions and increase resilience to them.

The authors made the following research assumptions: total institutions<sup>1</sup>, which can include both the armed forces and the administrative apparatus in authoritarian states, have a hidden agenda, referred to in sociology as the second life of the total institution<sup>2</sup>. Applying this concept to the operational practice of authoritarian states, one can see significant discrepancies between the formal doctrine of the use of armed forces and their actual use. This is discernible in the activities of the Soviet Army, including interventions in countries that were formal allies of the USSR, counter-guerrilla and expeditionary activities<sup>3</sup>. The Russian Federation has taken over this legacy, and its military actions (in Chechnya in 1994–1996 and 1999–2000, in Georgia in 2008, in Syria in 2015–2024<sup>4</sup> and in Ukraine since 2014) have been far from the assumptions of war between state actors similar in capability. From this follows the second assumption made by the authors – the experience of the use of military force in post-World War II operations that influenced the functioning of the Russian Armed Forces in peacetime (time 'P') and their *modus operandi* during the invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Erving Goffmann: "A 'total institution' is a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life". Quoted after: *The Characteristics of Total Institutions*, in: *A Sociological Reader on Complex Organizations*, A. Etzioni (sci. ed.), New York 1961, p. xiii.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 312–338.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. В. Триандафиллов, *Характер операций современных армий*, Москва 1929 (V. Triandafillov, *Kharakter operatsiy soveremennykh armiy*, Moskva 1929); H. Hermann, *Operacyjny wymiar walki zbrojnej* (Eng. Operational dimension of armed struggle), Toruń 2004, pp. 129–131; M. Depczyński, L. Elak, *Rosyjska sztuka operacyjna w zarysie* (Eng. Russian operational art in outline), Warszawa 2020, pp. 233–244, 282–294.

<sup>4</sup> The Russian intervention in Syria continued even after the full-scale war with Ukraine had begun.



The research limitation adopted is the narrowing of the research base to a case study of two Russian operations against Ukraine – the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and a full-scale invasion in early 2022, as well as the juxtaposition of the latter with the assumptions of the Warsaw Pact military intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968 analysed on the basis of documentation of the operation “Danube”.

An extensive study of the 1968 intervention in Czechoslovakia, both in terms of the use of force itself and the impact on other countries, primarily the so-called Eastern Bloc, was carried out by: Kent DeBenedictis, Jacques Rupnik, Alexander Stykalin, Slavomír Michálek, Ljubodrag Dimić, Miklós Mitrovits, Mirosław Szumiło, Mihail Gruev, Michal Štefanský and Jakub Drábik as well as Kieran Williams. Important contributions to the examined issues were made by Alex Hughes, Marek Świerczek and Edward Luttwak<sup>5</sup>.

The authors of the article used qualitative, heuristic and theoretical research, which they supplemented with structured analytical techniques according to classification of Randolph H. Pherson and Richards J. Heuer.

## Coup de main – operational definition

The term *coup de main* is used to describe the use of armed force by an aggressor<sup>6</sup> who, wishing to effect a change of political power<sup>7</sup> in an attacked state<sup>8</sup>, enters its territory

<sup>5</sup> See in detail: K. DeBenedictis, *Russian “Hybrid Warfare” and the Annexation of Crimea. The Modern Application of Soviet Political Warfare*, London 2022; *Operation Danube Reconsidered. The International Aspects of the Czechoslovak 1968 Crisis*, J. Drábik (ed.), Stuttgart 2021 (the authors of the chapters: J. Rupnik, A. Stykalin, S. Michálek, L. Dimić, M. Mitrovits, M. Szumiło, M. Gruev, M. Štefanský, J. Drábik); K. Williams, *The Prague Spring and its aftermath: Czechoslovak Politics, 1968–1970*, Cambridge 1997, pp. 112–143; A. Hughes, *Plan Z. Reassessing Security-Based Accounts of Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine*, “Journal of Advanced Military Studies” 2023, vol. 14, no. 2, pp. 174–208. <https://doi.org/10.21140/mcuj.20231402009>; M. Świerczek, *Yezhov’s infiltration model and the Russian Federation’s seizure of Crimea*, “Przegląd Bezpieczeństwa Wewnętrznego” 2024, no. 30, pp. 385–411. <https://doi.org/10.4467/20801335PBW.24.016.19618>; M. Świerczek, *2014 takeover of the SBU headquarters in Lugansk as an example of the operation of the Russian special services*, “Przegląd Bezpieczeństwa Wewnętrznego” 2023, no. 28, pp. 278–312. <https://doi.org/10.4467/20801335PBW.23.012.17662>; E.N. Luttwak, *Zamach stanu. Podręcznik* (Eng. Coup d’état. A practical handbook), Warszawa 2017.

<sup>6</sup> The aggressor can be both a state and a non-state actor.

<sup>7</sup> This change can be carried out while maintaining the formal independence of the attacked state, e.g. by staffing the puppet government controlled by the aggressor.

<sup>8</sup> In all the cases studied by the authors, the *coup de main* was carried out against state authorities, which, however, does not constitute *per se* evidence that it can only be referred to state actors. The authors want to emphasise this because of the popular argumentation between 2001 and 2022 regarding the “uniqueness” (non-state actors were supposed to be an exception to the rules of strategy) of state



with his forces (troops), usually in a marching formation. He assumes that, thanks to the shock effect induced, he will not encounter effective resistance. The preferred form of overpowering the opponent is the psychological impact – as a result of this, the victim of aggression will not put up (armed) fight and thus will not become a defender<sup>9</sup>. Firebombing is used tactically when the victim of the aggression resists (becoming a defender) or to enhance the shock effect on a non-resisting victim (e.g. bombing of non-resisting military installations or terrorist bombing of civilians). The logic of the use of force in such actions differs from that used in open armed conflict, where the potentials of the parties are similar (near-peer conflict).

Four detailed hypotheses were formulated for the study described in this article:

1. The actions defined by the operational definition of *coup de main* have a strategy of their own, different from the classical logic of armed conflict and similar to the logic of *coup d'état*. Theoretical methods were adopted as a means of verifying this hypothesis, including the development of an operational definition of *coup de main* and its application to selected cases included in the research base.
2. The decision to carry out a “special military operation” as a *coup de main* should not be explained solely as a mistake by a rational actor or a psychological portrait of a leader, but rather as a modelling of the organisation’s behaviour projecting into the planning process.

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actors and the inapplicability of the knowledge concerning them (especially the oeuvre of the strategy classics) to non-state actors. Cf. the words of Christopher Bassford: “[...] in a dazzling display of historical forgetfulness [...] our national security community appears to be stunned to discover that warfare can be waged by groups other than Weberian states. [...] Prompted by what evidently appears to many writers to be the utterly new kind of warfare waged by organizations like, say, Al Qaeda, they spin out bold new buzzwords designed, shaman-style, to capture the spirit of this earthshakingly new innovation by giving it a name. Some popular examples are “non-state war” and “Fourth- (or Fifth-) Generation War” [...] or [...] “the New Warfare” [...] Possibly the most misleading (to the few who are equipped to assign any meaning whatsoever to the phrase) is “non-trinitarian war” a term coined by [...] Martin van Creveld to encapsulate a new, allegedly “non-Clausewitzian” approach to theorizing about war”. See: Ch. Bassford, *Na palcach wokół trójcy Clausewitz* (Eng. On a tiptoe around Clausewitz’s Trinity), “Kwartalnik Bellona” 2017, vol. 688, no. 1, p. 73.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. the words of Clausewitz: “War actually takes place more for the defensive than for the conqueror, for invasion only calls forth resistance, and it is not until there is resistance that there is war. A conqueror is always a lover of peace (as Buonaparte always asserted of himself); he would like to make his entry into our state unopposed; in order to prevent this, we must choose war, and therefore also make preparations, that is in other words, it is just the weak, or that side which must defend itself, which should be always armed in order not to be taken by surprise”. See: C. von Clausewitz, *On war* (The quotation was excerpted from the original available on the website: <https://ebook-mecca.com/online/On%20War%20-%20Carl%20von%20Clausewitz.pdf>).



- Structured analytical techniques were used to verify this hypothesis (Table 1). The results of each method are presented in Tables 3 and 4.
3. The seizure of Crimea and the first phase of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in the Kyiv, Kharkiv and Kherson directions were *coup de main* operations, similar in their objectives to the 1968 intervention in Czechoslovakia. Historical analogies, inference and abstracting were used to verify it, the results of which are included in Table 5.
  4. A prerequisite for a successful *coup de main* operation is intelligence infiltration. Its scale determined the success of the operation in 2014 and its failure in 2022. The same methods were used to verify it as for the third hypothesis.

Coup de main as a practice of the Russian Federation

The analysis of the circumstances, objectives and consequences of *coup de main* operations requires an appropriate methodology. Research based on the two models considered: political-military decision-making and the functioning of an authoritarian state such as the RF, uses cause and effect relationships analysis<sup>10</sup>. The article takes as its starting point the structured analytical techniques according to Pherson and Heuer’s classification, described in Table 1, together with their application.

**Table 1.** Structured analytical techniques determining cause and effect relationships and application of these techniques in the article.

Name of analytical technique	Description	Application in the article
Situation logic <i>Red Hat</i>	The expert opinion to adopt the reasoning of the entity under investigation	Elements of the <i>Red Hat</i> methodology underpin the analysis. For the purposes of the article, the opinions of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Hieronim Grala and Witold Jurasz<sup>11</sup>,</li></ul>

<sup>10</sup> R.H. Pherson, R.J. Heuer, *Structured Analytic Techniques for Intelligence Analysis*, [n.p.] 2020, pp. 361–387.

<sup>11</sup> Hieronim Grala and Witold Jurasz were selected for *Red Hat* analysis as Polish, expert sources with practical experience in diplomacy on Russian territory. The following interviews were analysed: *Czy Jurij Andropow był twórcą pierestrojki?* (Eng. Was Yuri Andropov the founder of perestroika?) – *Obliczka historii series*, YouTube, 14 V 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vbbcUNYaxkU> [accessed: 30 VI 2024]; *ROSYJSKI KRĄG WŁADZY* (Eng. Russian power circle) – *Kulisy historii series Episode. 120*, YouTube, 1 VII 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=szr-pwtXV0U> [accessed: 30 VI 2024]; *Rosja Putina – obsesja neoimperialnej potęgi* (Eng. Putin’s Russia – obsession of neo-imperial power) |



Name of analytical technique	Description	Application in the article
Situation logic <i>Red Hat</i>	The expert opinion to adopt the reasoning of the entity under investigation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Andriy Kharuk and Mikhail Zhirokhov<sup>12</sup>,</li><li>• Kamil Galeev<sup>13</sup>,</li><li>• William Spaniel<sup>14</sup> and Mark Galeotti<sup>15</sup></li></ul>

*Czwartki w DeBeKa #1*, YouTube, 29 II 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rUAGEnRAllw> [accessed: 30 VI 2024]; *Nie będzie końca wojny bez końca Putina: prof. Hieronim Grala* (Eng. There will be no end to war without an end to Putin: prof. Hieronim Grala) – didaskalia, YouTube, 16 IV 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uTlrecy9m80> [accessed: 30 VI 2024]; *Debata “Co dalej z Rosją?” – Hieronim Grala, Witold Jurasz, Janusz Onyszkiewicz, J.M. Nowakowski* (Eng. The debate “What next for Russia?” – Hieronim Grala, Witold Jurasz, Janusz Onyszkiewicz, J.M. Nowakowski), YouTube, 4 XII 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gk45gw7ECHY> [accessed: 30 VI 2024]; *Elity Zachodu tęsknią za przewidywalną Rosją* (Eng. Western elites yearn for a predictable Russia) | Prof. Hieronim Grala, YouTube, 10 VI 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KaU41GKpNmY> [accessed: 30 VI 2024].

<sup>12</sup> Andriy Kharuk and Mikhail Zhirokhov were chosen for *Red Hat*’s analysis as Ukrainian, expert sources with access to a considerable amount of information from soldiers involved in the fighting relatively recently. Sources used for the *Red Hat* analysis: A. Харук, М. Жирохов, *Бойова хроніка 2022 року*, Київ 2024 (A. Kharuk, M. Zhirokhov, *Boyova khronika 2022 roku*, Kiiv 2024), pp. 49–203; М. Жирохов, *Невідбутий блицкриг: оборона аеродромів Гостомелю та Василькова, лютий 2022 року*, Чернігів 2022 (M. Zhirokhov, *Nevidbutiy blitskrig: oborona ayerodromiv Gostomelyu ta Vasil’kova, lyutyiy 2022 roku*, Chernigiv 2022), pp. 4–69; idem, *Війна танків. Україна, лютий-серпень 2022*, Чернігів 2023 (M. Zhirokhov, *Viyna tankiv. Ukraïna, lyutyiy-serpen’ 2022*, Chernigiv 2023), pp. 4–88.

<sup>13</sup> Kamil Galeev was identified for *Red Hat* analysis as an anti-government (opposition) Russian source whose credibility is difficult to assess, but is often corroborated by other sources analysed. Galeev should be characterised more as a writer of OSINT reports than as a scientist, but his observations are a valuable addition to attempts to understand the situational logic in the case at hand. See: K. Galeev (@kamilkazani), entry on the portal X, 28 II 2022, <https://x.com/kamilkazani/status/1498377757536968711?lang=en> [accessed: 30 IX 2024]. Other oppositional Russian sources, such as Maxim Katz and Mikhail Zygar, were not adopted to develop situational logic theses within *Red Hat* technique.

<sup>14</sup> William Spaniel was chosen as an English-speaking expert for the *Red Hat* analysis. He is Associate Professor of the University of Pittsburgh specialising in game theory and its application to strategy and policy analysis. Sources used for the *Red Hat* analysis: W. Spaniel, *What Caused the Russia-Ukraine War (And How Will It End?)*, e-book; idem, *How Ukraine Survived: Inside the Strategy to Stop Russia’s Invasion*, e-book; idem, *Why Russia Miscalculated Ukraine: A Self-Inflicted Disaster in Three Acts*, YouTube, 24 I 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8YkGrKQXZxE> [accessed: 25 I 2023]; idem, *The Hidden Battle that Saved Ukraine*, YouTube, 3 I 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hh9xT9d6SJU> [accessed: 25 I 2023]; idem, *The “Battle” of Crimea: Inside Russia’s Playbook to Capture the Peninsula*, YouTube, 15 III 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ijmoz2VfjrQ> [accessed: 25 IX 2024].

<sup>15</sup> Mark Galeotti was selected for *Red Hat*’s analysis as a second English-speaking expert. He works as a senior researcher and a coordinator in the Centre for European Security, Institute



Name of analytical technique	Description	Application in the article
Situation logic <i>Red Hat</i>	The expert opinion to adopt the reasoning of the subject under investigation	are synthesised. The experts were selected on the basis of the methodology defined by Józef Kozłowski <sup>16</sup>
Application of theory	Application of theory and models to clarify the circumstances and conditions under which certain phenomena occur	The article draws on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Edward Luttwak's model of <i>coups d'état</i> concerning the discrepancy between the nominal<sup>17</sup> and actual chain of command, psychological knowledge of the fight-or-flight mechanism or the absence of active resistance,</li> <li>• Graham T. Allison's models of state decision-making<sup>18</sup></li> </ul>
Historical analogies	Attempting to understand the processes taking place through comparison with historical counterparts	The analysis points to similarities with other operations of this type: the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact troops in 1968, the capture of Crimea in 2014 as a <i>coup de main</i> operation and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022

of International Relations Prague. Sources used for the *Red Hat* analysis: M. Galeotti, *Putin takes Crimea 2014. Grey-zone warfare opens the Russia-Ukraine conflict*, [n.p.] 2023; idem, *Putin's wars. From Chechnya to Ukraine*, Oxford 2022; idem, *The Personal Politics of Putin's Security Council Meeting*, The Moscow Times, 22 II 2022, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/02/22/the-personal-politics-of-putins-security-council-meeting-a76522> [accessed: 1 IX 2024].

<sup>16</sup> J. Kozłowski, *Practical dimension of issues related to assessing the reliability of sources and the trustworthiness of data and information*, "Przegląd Bezpieczeństwa Wewnętrznego" 2023, no. 29, pp. 323–358. <https://doi.org/10.4467/20801335PBW.23.032.18774>.

<sup>17</sup> E.N. Luttwak, *Zamach stanu. Podręcznik...*, p. 59.

<sup>18</sup> G. Allison, P. Zelikow, *Essence of Decision. Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers Inc., 1999, pp. 18–25. Other techniques, which will be omitted in the article, can also be used for this type of analysis. They do, however, provide useful instrumentation for more elaborate studies devoted to, for example, the concept of the intelligence dyad or the degrees of military involvement in state policy according to Samuel Edward Finer.



Name of analytical technique	Description	Application in the article
Historical analogies	Attempting to understand the processes taking place through comparison with historical counterparts	In the event of a shortage of information on the Soviets, the authors of this article will reason per analogiam with the structures of the People's Republic of Poland (PRL) or other socialist states during the Cold War period

Source: own elaboration based on: R.H. Pherson, R.J. Heuer, *Structured Analytic Techniques for Intelligence Analysis*, [n.p.] 2020, pp. 361–387.

Within the *Red Hat* method, described in Table 1, three situational logic theses based on expert opinions were formulated.

1. Instead of analysing Russia as a rational actor and psychological analyses of Vladimir Putin as the sole leader, the “collective Putin” should be analysed – organisational and palace models of power structures.
2. Although Russia exposes its armed forces and presents itself primarily as a military power, the army's role in politics is minor. The factor that influences the state (among other things, the thinking of the leaders) is the Federal Security Service (FSB) and it is the most important power ministry.
3. The Russian military acts in practice as a pacification force. Official doctrine does not have much impact in the armed conflicts of the last few decades. The year 2022 was the first time since the end of the World War II that Russian troops had to face a regular army of a well-armed enemy on the battlefield.

The decision-making models described by Graham Allison were then applied to the RF: the state as a rational actor, organisational behaviour and government policy (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Decision-making models according to Graham Allison in relation to Russian Federation.

Model	Description in the context of Russian Federation
State as Rational Actor Model – in which the behaviour of the state in the international space is compared to the actions of a conscious individual (person)	To this model can be attributed Russia's actions in strict terms of international politics as an entity seeking, among other things: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• to subjugate Ukraine as a satellite state, annexing part or all of its territory depending on the outcome of the invasion,</li> </ul>



Model	Description in the context of Russian Federation
State as Rational Actor Model – in which the behaviour of the state in the international space is compared to the actions of a conscious individual (person)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to strengthen its position vis-à-vis the US and NATO by demonstrating its capacity in Eastern Europe, thus increasing the chances of accepting ultimatums towards the Alliance's eastern flank</li> </ul>
Organisational Behaviour Model – state actions as a result of structures, procedures and established ways of operating services and institutions	<p>Organisational Behaviour Model may point to several organisational entities inside Russia that influenced the planning and conduct of the war, including: FSB, Main Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the RF (GRU), Main Operational Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the RF, Special Operations Forces Command.</p> <p>In the context of the 2014 annexation of Crimea, a key planning role was played by the Main Operational Directorate, whose head is customarily the first deputy Chief of the General Staff. The authority probably had some of the plans prepared back in the 1990s. Despite occasional disagreements with the Ministry of Defence, the Main Operational Directorate of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation was tasked with planning the details of the annexation of Crimea, which was successful thanks in part to planning work starting as early as January, even before political decisions were made at the highest level. The FSB and the GRU also played a significant part in the final preparations.</p> <p>In 2011, the Special Operations Forces Command was established to direct special military operations. Its role has grown steadily since the successful annexation of Crimea and intervention in Syria, although its prestige translating into an increased role in the context of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine could be seen as a mistake in the approach to using special forces as selective frontline attack units<sup>19</sup>.</p> <p>As a result of the links to the Governmental Politics Model, the key influence on the decisions taken by the RF considered in the article is primarily the special services with the FSB as the factor with the greatest influence on power, with the role of the armed forces as an effector with limited influence on central decisions. It should be noted that in the Russian intelligence organisation, the FSB is responsible for the post-Soviet area, which shows that the so-called near abroad states are not treated as a "full-fledged foreign country"</p>

<sup>19</sup> A. Liffyandchick, D. Jones, S. Fabian, *The Fall from Grace of Russian SOF: The Danger of Forgetting Lessons Learned*, Irregular Warfare Center: Insights, vol. 1, no. 8, September 2023.



Model	Description in the context of Russian Federation
Governmental Politics Model – palace model, analysing dependencies arising from personality traits and mutual connections, leaders' immediate environment, etc.	According to thesis 1 of situational logic, the decisions of the collective with the greatest influence on state policy should be analysed

Source: own elaboration based on: M. Galeotti, *Putin takes Crimea 2014. Grey-zone warfare opens the Russia-Ukraine conflict*, [n.p.] 2023, pp. 22–23.

## The seizure of Crimea in 2014 as a successful coup de main

The prelude to the invasion of 24 February 2022 was the decision eight years earlier to launch the annexation of Crimea<sup>20</sup> by the Security Council of the Russian Federation (Russian: Совет Безопасности Российской Федерации). Its implementation led to the annexation by the RF of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea – part of Ukraine. The complex nature of this type of operation requires two aspects to be examined: hard power and political. The analysis of the meetings of the Security Council of the RF is significant in that both decisions were adopted at meetings with very similar memberships<sup>21</sup>.

The first issue in terms of hard power is the ratio of Ukrainian and Russian forces on the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, which, according to estimates published by Defence Express, were initially evenly matched. Russia had around 18 300 military personnel, including 11 000 Black Sea Fleet sailors, 2000 naval infantry

<sup>20</sup> William Spaniel speculates that the decision may have been taken even earlier. For example, the Russian medal “For the Recapture of Crimea” indicates the time of the operation from 20 II to 18 III. Yet on 20 II there was an incident in Cherkasy, used by Russia for propaganda. See: W. Spaniel, *The “Battle” of Crimea: Inside Russia’s Playbook...*

<sup>21</sup> The meeting was attended by: Dmitry Medvedev, Valentina Matviyenko, Sergei Naryshkin, Sergei Ivanov, Nikolai Patrushev, Rashid Nurgaliyev, Sergei Lavrov, Vladimir Kolokoltsev, Sergei Shoigu, Alexander Bortnikov, Mikhail Fradkov and Boris Gryzlov. Unfortunately, the Kremlin has not published a transcript or recording of this meeting, making it impossible to compare the proceedings of the meetings prior to the annexation of Crimea on 27 II 2014 and the full-scale invasion on 24 II 2022, according to open sources. See: *Meeting with permanent members of the Security Council*, Kremlin.ru, 21 II 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20301> [accessed: 24 IX 2024]. Galeotti claims that only representatives of the force ministries (so-called siloviki) actually attended this meeting, but only the head of the defence ministry, Shoigu, took a rather cautious stance, for fear of international repercussions. See: M. Galeotti, *Putin’s wars. From Chechnya to Ukraine...*, p. 170.



and 5300 Spetsnaz. Another 15 000 troops were waiting at the Kerch Strait from the Krasnodar Krai side<sup>22</sup>. Ukraine was initially to have 14 600 soldiers and sailors<sup>23</sup>. However, the ratio of forces was rapidly changing in favour of Russia, which moved an additional 6000 troops to the Crimea.

The second issue in terms of hard power is the pace at which territory was seized. From 27 February to 4 March, Russia managed to take control of major cities, including the capital of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea – Simferopol, as well as the Perekop Isthmus, which connects the Crimean Peninsula to the rest of Ukraine. The Armed Forces of the RF blocked Ukrainian units in Balaklava, Sevastopol, Belbek, Saki, Eupatoria, Novozerny, Chornomorsk, Theodosia, Kerch, Vesele and Dzhankoi. Russian air operations, including Il-76 transport flights to airfields in Sevastopol and Gvardeysk or helicopter flights in other parts of the peninsula, were in no way disrupted. Russian troops were also carrying out reconnaissance for 3 km beyond the Crimean borders, into the Kherson region.

A peculiarity of the annexation of Crimea was that Russian troops were already present on the peninsula as a result of agreements with Ukraine, and the sites of their permanent dislocation were very close to Ukrainian military infrastructure. Russian units, both those leaving Black Sea Fleet military bases and those dislocated to the peninsula from Russian territory, were able to move quickly around Crimea without having to cross the protected state border.

### 'Special military operation' – planning considerations, organisational behaviour model

In July 2021, Russia created a cell (based on the 5<sup>th</sup> FSB Service<sup>24</sup>) responsible for planning the invasion. Its task was to investigate Ukraine's vulnerability to

<sup>22</sup> Standoff. *A chronicle of Russian invasion of Crimea*, Defense Express, 4 III 2014, [https://web.archive.org/web/20230226183728/https://issuu.com/ukrainian\\_defense\\_review/docs/chronicles-of-russian-aggression-cr](https://web.archive.org/web/20230226183728/https://issuu.com/ukrainian_defense_review/docs/chronicles-of-russian-aggression-cr) [accessed: 13 VII 2025].

<sup>23</sup> A. Wilk, *Russian military intervention in Crimea*, Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich, 5 III 2014, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2014-03-05/russian-military-intervention-crimea> [accessed: 29 IX 2024].

<sup>24</sup> The Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation is divided into "services" distinguished by numbers, like the General Staff branches. Number 5 is the Service for Operational Information and International Relations (Russian: *Служба оперативной информации и международных связей*, SOIMS). It is responsible for liaising with foreign services, including the SBU. It should be noted that the head of the 5<sup>th</sup> Service, Colonel-General Sergey Beseda, in 2003–2004 headed the Directorate for Coordination of Operational Information of Analysis, Forecast and Strategic Planning of the FSB of the RF, a unit conducting intelligence on the territory of the countries of the Commonwealth



intervention, with the attitude of Ukrainian society, as illustrated by opinion polls, taken as its primary determinant. The results of surveys of Ukrainian public opinion, taken into account, indicated low trust in those in power, indifference to the political situation and focus on economic problems, while describing a full-scale military conflict between Russia and Ukraine as unlikely. Analyses indicated that energy, heating and finance were key areas of public concern<sup>25</sup>. In retrospect, it can be seen as an over-interpretation by the Russian side of the results of the opinion polls – drawn up on the basis of the everyday problems discussed in the surveys – which did not take into account the radical mobilisation of society to resist in the face of armed aggression<sup>26</sup>. Meanwhile, it was the issues of the socio-economic crisis in Ukraine, labour emigration and electricity or gas bills, among others, that were an important part of Putin's speech on 21 February 2022<sup>27</sup>. This seems an appropriate clue for further research based on the decision-making models (described in Table 2), given that most studies in this area point to a Russian error in the assessment of the situation only in terms of the FSB overestimating its network of agents on Ukrainian territory<sup>28</sup> or overestimating the capabilities of its own forces and underestimating those of the enemy<sup>29</sup>.

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of Independent States, after years of the absence of a foreign intelligence division in the FSB structure. He was in Kyiv during Euromaidan and, prior to the 2022 invasion, was responsible for both the formation of the fifth column on Ukrainian territory and analytical work on preparations for the invasion. See: A. Soldatov, *The True Role of the FSB in the Ukrainian Crisis*, The Moscow Times, 15 IV 2014, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/04/15/the-true-role-of-the-fsb-in-the-ukrainian-crisis-a33985> [accessed: 28 IX 2024]; M. Minkina, *FSB. Gwardia Kremla* (Eng. FSB. Kremlin's guard), Warszawa 2016, p. 93, 175.

<sup>25</sup> M. Zabrodskiy et al., *Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting from Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: February-July 2022*, Royal United Services Institute, 30 XI 2022, p. 7.

<sup>26</sup> If the information provided by the Royal United Services Institute is true, this should be considered a serious error of intelligence analysis. Although it is not possible to categorise it precisely without access to the content of these reports, it can be assumed that this was a form of, for example, evaluation error in the form of a lack of critical evaluation of the selection and assessment of public opinion surveys. Cf. J. Kozłowski, *Metody, techniki i narzędzia analityczne* (Eng. Methods, techniques and analytical tools), part III, Warszawa 2024.

<sup>27</sup> "Since 2014, water bills increased by almost a third, and energy bills grew several times, while the price of gas for households surged several dozen times. Many people simply do not have the money to pay for utilities. They literally struggle to survive". Quoted after: *Обращение Президента Российской Федерации*, Президент России (*Obrashcheniye Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii*, Prezident Rossii), 21 II 2022, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828> [accessed: 27 IX 2024].

<sup>28</sup> A.S. Bowen, *Russia's War in Ukraine: Military and Intelligence Aspects*, Congressional Research Service Report, Washington 2023, p. 6.

<sup>29</sup> M. Minkina, *Rosyjskie instrumentarium wpływu, nękania i prowokacji* (Eng. Russian instrumentation of influence, harassment and provocation), Siedlce 2023, pp. 186–188.



The effectiveness of the troops used in operations against Georgia in 2008 was also insufficient according to the Russian authorities, so reforms and investment in the Armed Forces of the RF were undertaken. After their introduction, the annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and the irregular operations conducted in the Lugansk and Donetsk regions were successful, as was the Russian intervention in the civil war in Syria in September 2015. During a visit to Moscow in November 2021, CIA chief William Burns assessed that the Russians were confident in their readiness to seize Ukraine and that their demonstrations of force were not intended to be mere attempts at intimidation<sup>30</sup>. This assessment was exaggerated as a result of the developing tendency in authoritarian systems of power to limit criticism, emphasised by a culture of *vranyo*<sup>31</sup> that made it impossible to eradicate the problem of corruption in the military. The “special military operation” plan envisaged that from the tenth day of the invasion, the leading role of the ground troops would be replaced by the assumption of control of the operation by Russian special services and Rosgvardia forces, whose task would be to pacify possible popular discontent and establish an occupation authority. In preparation for the invasion, the FSB trained with the Airborne Forces of the Russian Federation (VDV) to carry out tasks described in English-language military terminology as kill-or-capture<sup>32</sup>. Subsequently, the plan was to conduct flat searches and set up filtration camps to create files of material for use by offensive counter-intelligence, as well as to select and intimidate Ukrainians who were to be deported to Russia. It was planned to bring teachers and officials from Russia to the occupied territories to re-educate Ukrainians. Once the Ukrainian government and parliament had been eliminated, a pro-Russian “Peace Movement” would be elevated to power. An important element of the planning was the seizure of Ukrainian nuclear power plants and the establishment of military bases and armament depots there, with the aim of blackmailing the conquered population with energy and of politically blackmailing European states with the threat of radioactive contamination<sup>33</sup>. Preparations for the invasion, in the form of troop concentration and deployment,

<sup>30</sup> W. Spaniel, *How Ukraine Survived...*

<sup>31</sup> Standoff. *A chronicle of Russian invasion of Crimea...*

<sup>32</sup> Cf. B. Jagodziński, *Działania i rozwój jednostek specjalnych* (Eng. The activities and the development of special units), “Przegląd Bezpieczeństwa Wewnętrznego” 2022, vol. 12, no. 22, p. 169; Ł. Kułaga, *Używanie dronów w celu zwalczania międzynarodowego terroryzmu w świetle „ius in bello”* (Eng. The use of drones in combating international terrorism in the light of the “ius in bello”), “Zeszyty Prawnicze” 2017, vol. 17, no. 1, p. 109. <https://doi.org/10.21697/zp.2017.17.1.05>.

<sup>33</sup> M. Zabrodskiy et al., *Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting...*, pp. 10–11.



were carried out under the guise of exercises “West-2021” (Russian: Запад-2021) and exercises “Allied Decisiveness-2022” (Russian: Союзная решимость-2022).

### Decision-making circles of the Russian Federation – governmental politics model

The statements from the Security Council of the RF meeting of 21 February 2022 (published a day later), a prelude to the war, could be the subject of analysis for a simplified governmental politics model. The meeting can be described as a test of strength by the “collective Putin”, given the obscured cameras in the meeting room, as well as Putin’s statement that he was testing his advisers with the conduct of these talks<sup>34</sup>. Mark Galeotti analyses this meeting as an indicator of the division into groups of individual participants (Table 3). In the conclusion of his article, Galeotti also highlighted a noticeable division between the President’s trusted people and the institutional staff sitting in the Security Council of the RF<sup>35</sup>. The role of the other participants was not analysed.

**Table 3.** Russian government policy model – division into factions in the Security Council of the Russian Federation.

Determination of the fraction	Members
warriors	Alexander Bortnikov, Nikolai Patrushev, Sergei Shoigu
reliable	Valentina Matviyenko, Dmitry Medvedev, Vladimir Kolokoltsev
sceptical	Sergei Lavrov, Mikhail Mishustin, Dmitry Kozak
reluctant	Sergei Naryshkin

Source: own elaboration based on: M. Galeotti, *The Personal Politics of Putin’s Security Council Meeting*, The Moscow Times, 22 II 2022, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/02/22/the-personal-politics-of-putins-security-council-meeting-a76522> [accessed: 1 IX 2024].

<sup>34</sup> *Заседание Совета Безопасности (Zasedaniye Soveta Bezopasnosti)*, YouTube, 22 II 2022, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_YRUlb\\_7T9o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_YRUlb_7T9o) [accessed: 28 IX 2024].

<sup>35</sup> M. Galeotti, *The Personal Politics of Putin’s Security Council Meeting...*



Table 4 provides a description of the speeches made by 15 participants of the Security Council of the Russian Federation meeting on 21 February 2022.

**Table 4.** Russian government policy model – description of the speeches made by participants at the Security Council of the Russian Federation meeting of 21 February 2022, in order of appearance.

First name and surname	Position	Comment
Vladimir Putin	President	He focused on the threat to annexed Crimea from Ukraine's possible accession to NATO
Sergei Lavrov <sup>36</sup>	Minister of Foreign Affairs	He pointed to the possibility of further talks with the US
Dmitry Kozak <sup>37</sup>	Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Executive Office, representative at the Minsk talks	He stated the lack of prospects for further negotiations and asked about the possibility of considering the annexation of the so-called Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Lugansk People's Republic (LPR). Putin dismissed Kozak's question in a rather disrespectful manner and instead mentioned the need to recognise the sovereignty of these republics
Alexander Bortnikov <sup>38</sup>	Director of the Federal Security Service (FSB)	He spoke primarily about border security in the regions neighbouring Ukraine and the influx of refugees from the territories of the separatist republics

<sup>36</sup> While Lavrov's political position was strong during Medvedev's presidency, in the context of both the 2014 and 2022 decisions, Lavrov appeared to be outside the inner circle of decision-making. It is an open question whether he was pushed away from it or whether he moved away of his own accord.

<sup>37</sup> Born and raised in Ukraine. Specialist in steered separatism operations in the so-called near abroad, in particular in Transnistria, Moldova. His position in power circles was weak and limited to confidence in his substantive competence with the president (In Putin's inner circle, Galeotti distinguishes between officials who owe their position to substantive competence useful in governing the state (meritocracy), and those trusted by the president whose influence stems from close relations with him (coterie)). See: O. Sukhov, *From Olympics to Crimea, Putin Loyalist Kozak Entrusted With Kremlin Mega-Projects*, The Moscow Times, 28 III 2014, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/03/27/from-olympics-to-crimea-putin-loyalist-kozak-entrusted-with-kremlin-mega-projects-a33409> [accessed: 1 IX 2024]. Kozak maintained contact with Andriy Yermak, Head of the Office of the President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky. See: K. Skorkin, *Why President Zelensky Is Purging His Inner Circle*, Carnegie, 15 IV 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2024/04/why-president-zelensky-is-purging-his-inner-circle?lang=en> [accessed: 28 IX 2024].

<sup>38</sup> Coming from the Department of Economic Security (4<sup>th</sup> Department), together with Patrushev, can be considered the closest circle of the president.



First name and surname	Position	Comment
Sergei Shoigu <sup>39</sup>	Minister of Defence	He conveyed propaganda messages about Ukraine's alleged shelling of Lugansk and Donetsk, the humanitarian catastrophe in the separatist republics, Ukraine's readiness to invade these territories, the conduct of terrorist activities and Ukraine's attempts to obtain nuclear weapons
Dmitry Medvedev	Deputy Chairman of the Security Council	He referred to the experience of the 2008 war with Georgia and said that the US conducts special operations around the world all the time, and then the superpowers go back to talking to each other anyway, to the exclusion of states that are objects, not subjects, of superpower policy
Vyacheslav Volodin	Chairman of the State Duma	On behalf of the State Duma, he requested the recognition of the DPR and LPR
Valentina Matviyenko	Chairwoman of the Federation Council	She argued that Western weapons could be taken over by "nationalists and Banderites". This may indicate the lack of awareness of the "denazification" argument (after Maxim Katz of Alexei Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation – discrepancies in the rhetoric used by the various participants in the meeting were indicative of who was privy to the plan to carry out the invasion at the time the meeting was held) to be used as one of the pretexts for invasion
Igor Krasnov	Procurator-General of the RF	Speech was cut from the official transcript
Nikolai Patrushev <sup>40</sup>	secretary of the Security Council	He focused on the unreasonableness of further talks, especially with non-US actors

<sup>39</sup> Hailing from an ethnic minority, he has not formed an effective oligarchic faction with others from the inner circle of power. Continuously in ministerial positions since 1994. He can be characterised as a loyal contractor with limited powers of his own who does not infringe status quo. Transferred to the army from the structures of the Ministry for Emergencies, he did not continue Anatoly Serdyukov's reforms and focused on activities of superficial nature. See: W. Jurasz, H. Grala, *Wataha Putina* (Eng. Putin's pack), Warszawa 2023, p. 74.

<sup>40</sup> Patrushev is a former Head of the FSB, who, due to his close relationship with Putin back in the 1990s, must be considered part of the inner circle of power. Interested in continuity of influence, he entrusted his sons with important positions. Grala attributes to him a critical assessment of the unity of the Russian elite on the eve of the invasion, which did not appear in the recording of the meeting of the Security Council of the RF. Ibid., p. 65.



First name and surname	Position	Comment
Mikhail Mishustin	Prime Minister	He assessed the ability of Russia's economy to perform in the event of Western sanctions
Sergei Naryshkin	Head of the Foreign Intelligence Service	He called for "giving one more chance to Western partners to influence Ukraine", supposedly in agreement with Nikolai Patrushev, but with such a different way of arguing that this position should be interpreted as a recommendation to refrain from invasion. Moreover, he mixed up the issues of recognition of sovereignty and annexation of the separatist republics. During the meeting, Putin treated him in a humiliating manner <sup>41</sup>
Vladimir Kolokoltsev	Minister of Internal Affairs	He limited himself to invectives against Ukraine and Western countries
Igor Shchyogolev	Representative of the President in the Central Federal District	He limited himself to invectives against Ukraine and Western countries
Viktor Zolotov	Head of Rosgvardia	He limited himself to invectives against Ukraine and Western countries

Source: own elaboration based on: *Заседание Совета Безопасности (Zasedaniye Soveta Bezopasnosti)*, YouTube, 22 II 2022, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_YRUlb\\_7T9o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_YRUlb_7T9o) [accessed: 28 IX 2024].

After the failures of the invasion, Sergei Shoigu lost his position and his deputy Timur Ivanov was arrested on corruption charges<sup>42</sup>. Andrei Belousov, who came from a scientific and industrial background<sup>43</sup>, became Minister of Defence. The position of secretary of the Council was lost to Nikolai Patrushev, who, however, later returned to the Council as an advisor<sup>44</sup>. In turn, Sergei Ivanov returned to the permanent

<sup>41</sup> Naryshkin's relationship with Putin's circle and the FSB can be described as complicated due to the organisational conflict between the FSB and the SVR (Foreign Intelligence Service) and the "court" role of the security service in the power system.

<sup>42</sup> М. Кац, *Арестован замминистра обороны Иванов (Arestovan zamministra oborony Ivanov)*, YouTube, 24 IV 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5p4S7AKBPog> [accessed: 28 IX 2024].

<sup>43</sup> Organisational combination of scientific institutions and industrial plants, characteristic of the Russian defence and advanced dual-purpose technology industry. See: И.В. Устинович, *Научно-промышленный комплекс как одна из форм взаимодействия организаций*, "Труды БГТУ" 2023 (I.V. Ustinovich, *Nauchno-promyshlennyy kompleks kak odna iz form vzaimodeystviya organizatsiy*, "Trudy BGTU" 2023), vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 72–77.

<sup>44</sup> *Putin to keep demoted ally Patrushev on Russia's Security Council*, Reuters, 12 VII 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-keep-demoted-ally-patrushev-russias-security-council-2024-06-11/>



composition of the gremium (to a minor position, but according to expert opinions, the personal composition of the gremium is more important than formal positions in this regard). It is worth adding that, after the failures of the 2022 invasion plan, the role of this gremium has indeed diminished<sup>45</sup>.

Hughes pointed to the lack of in-depth analyses on the impact of political and fractional decisions and stressed that simple or even trivial conclusions (mistake, underestimation of the opponent) prevail in the literature<sup>46</sup>. The authors would like to point out that the service-organisational (organisational behaviour model) and government-official (governmental politics model) models, although presented in a general manner, may allow this impasse to be broken.

### Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 as unsuccessful coup de main

The Russian invasion of Ukraine launched on 24 February 2022 was met with divergent reactions from the public and decision-making centres in the Western world. Statements by politicians and evacuations of diplomatic personnel suggested that Ukraine would not withstand the onslaught of Russian troops<sup>47</sup>. Ukraine's effective resistance came as a surprise to many. The effectiveness of this resistance dramatically changed the assessment of the military power of the RF. The Russian government's decision to launch an invasion with forces insufficient (in terms of the art of war<sup>48</sup>) to control such a large territory was seen as an irrational action<sup>49</sup>. Taking into account the situational logic, this is the realisation of a scenario previously observed in Hungary (1956), Czechoslovakia (1968) or Afghanistan (1979). Russia's use of the term "special military operation" is seen as a purely propaganda exercise

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[accessed: 28 IX 2024]; *Security Council structure*, President of Russia, <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/structure/security-council/members> [accessed: 28 IX 2024].

<sup>45</sup> G. Kuczyński, *Zmiany w Radzie Bezpieczeństwa Federacji Rosyjskiej* (Eng. Staff reshuffles in Russia's Security Council), Warsaw Institute, 14 II 2023, <https://warsawinstitute.org/pl/zmiany-w-radzie-bezpieczenstwa-federacji-rosyjskiej/> [accessed: 28 IX 2024].

<sup>46</sup> A. Hughes, *Plan Z. Reassessing Security-Based...*, pp. 174–208.

<sup>47</sup> See for example: S. Westfall, *These countries are withdrawing embassy staffers from Ukraine amid growing fears of an invasion by Russia*, The Washington Post, 14 II 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/01/25/ukraine-embassy-evacuations/> [accessed: 21 IX 2024]; S. Walker, *'It is past time to leave Ukraine': western diplomats flee Kyiv*, The Guardian, 13 II 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/13/it-is-past-time-to-leave-ukraine-western-diplomats-flee-kyiv> [accessed: 21 IX 2024].

<sup>48</sup> Example calculation, see: C.A. Lawrence, *The Battle for Kyiv. The fight for Ukraine's capital*, [n.p.] 2023, pp. 50–64.

<sup>49</sup> T. Cooper et al., *War in Ukraine. Volume 2: Russian Invasion, February 2022*, Warwick 2023, p. 33.



to suppress the truth about the war<sup>50</sup>. The analysis conducted makes it possible to determine why, in the understanding of the Russian leadership, the failed attempt to control Ukraine in February 2022 was to be carried out as a “special military operation” rather than a conventional war. Due to the mixed nature of the operations, which utilised the force structures of the Ministry of Defence and Internal Affairs as well as intelligence structures, there is a conceptual confusion.

While in the east of Ukraine Russian troops acted methodically, most likely on the basis of much pre-prepared plans, in the north the Armed Forces of the RF assumed rapid movement in columns in a marching formation to reach the strategic objective, Kyiv. The priority *coup de main* component in the area was the landing of aeromobile troops at Hostomel Airport to enable the airlift of a significant VDV forces, which was still to be joined by forces based in Belarus. An attack on Kyiv from a northerly direction on the right bank of the Dnieper (for the Ukrainian side – the Polesia Operational Region) may have seemed particularly promising to Russian planners because of the shortest distance to cover, the lack of need to ford the Dnieper and the lack of permanent dislocation of large units of the Ukrainian Armed Forces (Ukrainian: Збройні сили України) in this section. The area of planned activities was secured exclusively by units of the State Border Guard Service of Ukraine (Ukrainian: Державна прикордонна служба України), the National Guard of Ukraine (Ukrainian: Національна гвардія України) and 200 guards of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant<sup>51</sup> (Ukrainian: Чорнобильська атомна електростанція, ChNPP). Moreover, the exclusion zone around the defunct nuclear power plant was a large, virtually uninhabited area (100–150 people in 2600 km<sup>2</sup>) that could be easily controlled. The radiation risk was considered negligible from a military point of view<sup>52</sup>. What was important for Russian planners, however, was that Ukraine's major defence exercise “Blizzard-2022” (Ukrainian: Заметіль-2022) did not envisage significant fighting in this section. According to an analysis of the operational area, the Russians have concentrated troops there under the pretext of the “Allied Resolve-2022” exercises running from 10 to 20 February 2022. Significant forces were dislocated to the right bank of the Dnieper on the Belarusian side.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. *Dylematy rosyjskiej propagandy*. “Specjalna operacja wojskowa stracilaby sens” (Eng. Dilemmas of Russian propaganda. “A special military operation would lose its meaning”), Onet, 27 XII 2022, <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/swiat/dylematy-rosyjskiej-propagandy-specjalna-operacja-wojskowa-stracilaby-sens/2f1tlb0> [accessed: 21 IX 2024]; M. Hess, *Vladimir Putin finally calls Russia's 'special military operation' a war*, UnHerd, 21 II 2023, <https://unherd.com/newsroom/vladimir-putin-finally-calls-russias-special-military-operation-a-war/> [accessed: 21 IX 2024].

<sup>51</sup> М. Жирохов, *Невідбутий блицкриг: оборона аеродромів Гостомелю...*, p. 11.

<sup>52</sup> А. Харук, М. Жирохов, *Бойова хроніка...*, p. 50.



The Russians owed their initial successes in the Polesia Operational Region primarily to the correctly executed elements of a *coup de main* operation, i.e. a surprise attack from the territory of Belarus, whose Defence Minister, Viktor Khrenin, declared in talks with Ukraine's political leadership that he ruled out an attack by Russian troops from that territory<sup>53</sup>. Ukrainian border and National Guard units were successfully surprised and failed to blow up the road and rail bridges in the area. The seized vehicles of these units were in turn used to provoke Russian sabotage and reconnaissance groups. These groups reached Kyiv and operated on equipment with Ukrainian markings, thus creating chaos in the defenders' positions until reconnaissance and sabotage groups (Russian: Диверсионно-разведывательная группа, ДРТ) were dismantled<sup>54</sup>. As the 167 soldiers of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment of Key Facilities Protection of the National Guard of Ukraine were neither trained in armoured vehicle combat nor equipped with the appropriate weaponry, they surrendered when Russian tanks and transporters entered the ChNPP. The defenders were further disadvantaged by the espionage activities of the SBU officer recruited by the Russians, Andrii Naumov, who passed on defence plans for the area to the enemy and also had contacts in the formations protecting the exclusion zone. The surprise caused by the Hostomel landing is, in turn, linked to the controversial role of double agent Denys Kiryeyev, who – despite having warned the authorities in Kyiv of a possible attack – was eliminated by the SBU<sup>55</sup>. While Western sources underestimated the airport's defenders and stated that Hostomel's defensive positions were indicated by a Russian agent located in Antonov<sup>56</sup>, Ukrainian sources did not confirm this information. On the contrary, resistance by the territorial airfield defence unit posed a significant obstacle to the landing and resulted in a loss of equipment, men and time relative to the action plan, as the battlefield evidence confirms<sup>57</sup>. Despite the withdrawal of the territorial defence forces from the airfield and barracks buildings after running out of ammunition and the difficulty of the Ukrainian rapid reaction forces to fully eliminate the elite Russian formations, the destruction of the airstrip by Ukrainian artillery eliminated the threat of VDV transport aircraft landing at the airfield. They were forced to

<sup>53</sup> М. Жирохов, *Невідбутий блицкриг: оборона аеродромів Гостомелю...*, pp. 4–9.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., pp. 10–19.

<sup>55</sup> B. Forrest, *Russian Spy or Ukrainian Hero? The Strange Death of Denys Kiryeyev*, The Wall Street Journal, 18 I 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/russian-spy-or-ukrainian-hero-the-strange-death-of-denys-kiryeyev-11674059395> [accessed: 29 IX 2024].

<sup>56</sup> W. Spaniel, *How Ukraine Survived: Inside the Strategy to Stop Russia's Invasion*, e-book.

<sup>57</sup> *Destination Disaster: Russia's Failure At Hostomel Airport*, Oryx, 13 IV 2022, <https://www.oryxspioenkop.com/2022/04/destination-disaster-russias-failure-at.html> [accessed: 29 IX 2024].



land on Belarusian territory. On the other hand, sabotage and diversionary actions against the Vasyilkovo airfield failed to disable this base from use<sup>58</sup>.

During the attack, the Russian columns did not carry out adequate reconnaissance, infantry rushes with combat infantry vehicles or artillery or sapper preparation until they were forced to do so by the resistance of the defenders<sup>59</sup>, a feature of *coup de main* type operations. Therefore, the stretched Russian columns that had not occupied towns in the Sumy and Chernihiv oblasts, such as Glukhov, Konotop, Nizhyn, Sumy, Romny and Priluki, found it increasingly difficult to secure logistics against the Ukrainian Armed Forces attacks. At the time of the attack on 9 March 2022 on sub-Kyiv Brovary, these were incorrectly secured supply lines of almost 400 km<sup>60</sup>. If the defender's resistance had been overpowered by the infiltration of offensive counter-intelligence, the logistical difficulties would not have been so onerous as to be a decisive obstacle to the continuation of the operation. Meanwhile, contrary to the assumptions of the planners of "the special military operation", in the face of resistance and attacks by Ukraine's defenders on the transport columns, the logistics of the most advanced troops were paralysed. Consequently, the Kyiv operation as a *coup de main* ended in failure.

The direct attack on Kharkiv was based primarily on Spetsnaz columns launching raid-type attacks using lightly armoured Tigr vehicles. An attempt to seize a selected administrative facility on the march was not possible due to resistance from the defenders and instead the assault group captured a school building. After prolonged fighting, however, it was dismantled. It should be noted that the Spetsnaz units were held back and eliminated in the urbanised area by units of the Ukrainian National Guard and improvised units from, among others, the Ivan Kozhedub National University of the Air Force in Kharkiv, or tanks at the disposal of the Military Institute of Tank Troops in Kharkiv<sup>61</sup>. In turn, a column of the Mobile Special Purpose Detachment, OMON (Russian: отряд мобильный особого назначения), was destroyed on the approach to the city, near the village of Vesele, by Ukrainian tanks from the 92<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, against which the forces assigned to suppress the demonstration had neither the appropriate armament nor training<sup>62</sup>.

<sup>58</sup> М. Жирохов, *Невідбутий бліцкриг...*, pp. 60–70.

<sup>59</sup> А. Харук, М. Жирохов, *Бойова хроніка...*, pp. 35–36.

<sup>60</sup> For comparison – the longest "jump" made by Russian columns in the Crimea from Kerch to Armiansk was 288 km in favourable conditions.

<sup>61</sup> А. Харук, М. Жирохов, *Бойова хроніка...*, pp. 111–118.

<sup>62</sup> М. Жирохов, *Війна танків. Україна, лютий-серпень 2022...*, pp. 49–54.



The Russians' only operational successes were in the Kherson direction, where they managed to take over the hydroelectric power station at Nova Kakhovka, the Antonovsky Bridge and the cities of Kherson, Mikolaiv and Voznesensk (where the aeromobile component was used more effectively than in Hostomel<sup>63</sup>). Some of these achievements can also be attributed to the intelligence infiltration of Ukrainian power structures, especially the SBU<sup>64</sup>.

The operation on the Kyiv direction thus had the characteristic features of *coup de main*, while the operations on the Donbas front had the character of classical military actions. They did not presuppose the breaking of resistance by means of suddenness of action and overwhelming use of force, but a classic frontal assault with the intention of pushing the enemy out of occupied positions, after prior fire preparation (artillery as well as air and rocket).

As outlined in the *Introduction*, the authors considered the 1968 Operation “Danube” as an appropriate historical analogy for the Russian operation in 2022. It was an operation that exemplified the real-life activities of the Soviet Army, conducted in conjunction with the Allies, and both the preparations for and the conduct of the operation have numerous common features that can be analysed in terms of the *coup de main* characteristics adopted for the purposes of the article. A comparison of the first phase of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine as a failed *coup de main* operation with the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army of the Polish Army as part of the Joint Armed Forces of Warsaw Pact is shown in the Table 5.

**Table 5.** Comparison of the *modus operandi* of Warsaw Pact troops against Czechoslovakia in Operation “Danube” in 1968 with the actions of the Russian Federation troops in the first phase of the invasion of Ukraine on the Kyiv direction in 2022.

Characteristic feature	Operation “Danube” 1968	The first phase of the invasion of Ukraine on the Kyiv direction in 2022
Deception	Preparations for the invasion were carried out under the guise of the “Cloudy Summer 1968” exercises.	Preparations for the invasion were carried out under the guise of exercises “West-2021” and “Allied Decisiveness-2022”

<sup>63</sup> A. Харук, М. Жирохов, *Бойова хроніка...*, pp. 165–173.

<sup>64</sup> K. Gustafson et al., *Intelligence warning in the Ukraine war, Autumn 2021 – Summer 2022*, “Intelligence and National Security” 2024, vol. 39, no. 3, p. 405. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2024.2322214>.



Characteristic feature	Operation "Danube" 1968	The first phase of the invasion of Ukraine on the Kyiv direction in 2022
Grouping	The 10 <sup>th</sup> and 11 <sup>th</sup> Armoured Divisions were deprived of their rocket artillery, heavy engineering equipment and part of their logistics component. The same changes applied to the 4 <sup>th</sup> Mechanised Division in the 2 <sup>nd</sup> Army reserve. The forces used in the operation were reinforced with aeromobile and long-range reconnaissance units	The Russian grouping on the northern and southern fronts was distinctive. A large part of the force was in a marching formation and belatedly transitioned into a fighting formation, despite encountering determined resistance. This was particularly evident on the northern front, where Russian forces had around 70 000 troops, of which around 15 000–30 000 were in a column stretching 64 km at its peak marching towards Kyiv. The composition of these forces was also unusual, where, in addition to units of the Armed Forces of the RF <sup>65</sup> , the forces included: the 141 <sup>st</sup> Special Motorised Regiment (Chechen), units of Rosgvardia (Special Rapid Response Unit – SOBR), OMON and the Private Military Company Redut
Pace	Time to reach targets 70–100 km from the border: 6–12 hours towards Prague and Brno. Another 12 hours for 4 <sup>th</sup> Mechanised Division to reach designated targets near Prague	Documents seized near Kherson in spring 2022 indicate that, for example, the 1 <sup>st</sup> Battalion Tactical Group from the 810 <sup>th</sup> Guards Naval Infantry Brigade was expected to reach targets between Odessa and Mikolaiv, 200 km from its initial positions, between 20 February and 6 March 2022
Blockades	The 4 <sup>th</sup> Mechanised Division and the 27 <sup>th</sup> Tank Regiment from the 5 <sup>th</sup> Armoured Division were tasked with blocking the Czechoslovak garrisons in the towns of Mladá Boleslav and Milovice. Reinforced by tanks and reconnaissance units of the 6 <sup>th</sup> Airborne Division from the 16 <sup>th</sup> Mechanised Division, they were, in turn, to block garrisons in the towns: Rychów, Kostelec nad Labem, Rokytnice v Orlických horách and Červená Voda	In 2022, the Russians failed to blockade garrisons as they did in Crimea in 2014

<sup>65</sup> The units of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation on the Northern Front in the period 24 II–8 IV 2022 included operational formations: 1<sup>st</sup> Guards Tank Army, 35<sup>th</sup>, 36<sup>th</sup> Combined Arms Armies; tactical formations: 90<sup>th</sup> Guards Tank Division, 11<sup>th</sup> Guards Airborne Brigade, 31<sup>st</sup> Guards Airborne Brigade.



Characteristic feature	Operation “Danube” 1968	The first phase of the invasion of Ukraine on the Kyiv direction in 2022
Subsidiary units	The 15 <sup>th</sup> regiment of the Internal Defence Forces was to blockade the garrison in Krnov	A large part of the Russian grouping was made up of Rosgvardia, OMON and SOBR troops
Power ratio between defender and aggressor	It was assumed that the defenders would have 19 820 troops against 14 400 aggressor troops, 456–490 tanks, 350–405 armoured personnel carriers. The assumed ratio of forces between the Polish Army <sup>66</sup> and the Czechoslovak People’s Army was: – troops (total): 1:1,4 – tanks: 1:1,1 – armoured personnel carriers: 1,3:1. With combat readiness in mind, it was assumed that the ratio of forces would level off at 1:1. In this regard, it can be noted that the 2 <sup>nd</sup> Army operation carried out did not envisage a ratio of forces appropriate for an offensive (the aggressor was not large enough relative to the defender) <sup>67</sup>	The invasion was carried out with some 190 000 Russian troops, which, against a defender force of some 196 600 and 102 000 militia officers, gives a ratio of 1:1,57. Data on the size of the Ukrainian forces varies, but it is clear that the Russian forces did not have the numerical superiority (3:1) appropriate for an offensive <sup>68</sup>
Command, control, communication and intelligence objectives (C3I)	Particular attention was paid to the takeover of television and radio transmission centres in Czechoslovakia, as well as airports. Control of means of communication was crucial to enable increased propaganda activities, and airfields could enable air transport for invading forces.  The operation failed due to insufficient research into the Czechoslovak communications system, creating the need to seize the facility <sup>69</sup>	The inability to destroy Ukrainian command and communications systems resulted in the failure to achieve the political objectives of the “special military operation” through both a <i>coup d’état</i> (an attempt to put Viktor Medvedchuk in power in Kyiv) and a <i>coup de main</i> in Ukraine’s main cities, which ultimately forced Russian forces to retreat

<sup>66</sup> Unofficially: the People’s Army of Poland (LWP). The way this name is written is controversial. Cf. H.Z. Figura, *Ludowe Wojsko Polskie czy Wojsko Polskie?* (Eng. People’s Army or Polish Army), “Kwartalnik Bellona” 2015, vol. 681, no. 2, pp. 215–218.

<sup>67</sup> AIPN, The collection of documents on the Warsaw Pact, *Operation “Danube” on the intervention of Warsaw Pact members in Czechoslovakia*, vol. 1 ref. no. BU 02958/1: Operational issues of the General Staff of the Polish Army, vol. 2 ref. no. BU 02958/2: Operational reports of the General Staff of the Polish Army. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Army report on the course of operation “Danube”.

<sup>68</sup> *The Military Balance 2022. The annual assessment of global military capabilities and defence economics*, [n.p.] 2022.

<sup>69</sup> For the purposes of researching communications interruption operations, it is possible to



Characteristic feature	Operation "Danube" 1968	The first phase of the invasion of Ukraine on the Kyiv direction in 2022
External intervention	The plan included the possibility that NATO forces from the Federal Republic of Germany might intervene to support the Czechoslovaks, risking a change in the nature of the operation from pacification to combat	No information on the inclusion of a foreign military intervention option in the "special military operation" plans
Logistics	Much of the logistics was based on rail transport, as the capacity of road transport was insufficient	"Special military operation" was planning in isolation from doctrinal patterns regarding the use of military force in conventional conflict. The formations were prepared for a short conflict. Logistical support could not keep up with the operation. The use of Russian forces was not in line with either the logistical capabilities or the way the Russian army was organised. Logistics were only adapted to operations in the Donbas in 2022 <sup>70</sup> , which were already classic frontline operations and not <i>coup de main</i>
Air component	The Polish Army's airborne units operated as part of the land component. In Prague, Soviet paratroopers of civilian aircraft managed to take over the airport by impersonating civilian aircraft. This enabled the air transport of invading troops and material directly to the capital of Czechoslovakia	Russia's attempt to take control of Hostomel airfield near Kyiv correlated with the arrival of a column of ground forces from Belarus across the Pripjat marshes was a key premise of the execution of <i>coup de main</i> . The failure to capture the airfield near the capital was one of the main factors behind the failure of the operation and the start of the conventional war in other areas

Source: own elaboration based on: AIPN, The collection of documents on the Warsaw Pact, *Operation "Danube" on the intervention of Warsaw Pact members in Czechoslovakia*, vol. 1 ref. no. BU 02958/1: Operational issues of the General Staff of the Polish Army, vol. 2 ref. no. BU 02958/2: Operational reports of the General Staff of the Polish Army. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Army report on the course

speculate whether the cautious planning of Operation "Malwa" prior to the declaration of martial law in 1981 by the General Staff of the Polish Army was due to the failure of Operation "Danube" in this regard. See: AIPN, the Ministry of the Interior in Warsaw [1944] 1954–1990, *Case object code-named 'Gotowość' (Readiness) concerning the introduction of martial law. Archival materials transferred from Division XII of Department II of the Ministry of the Interior to the Archive of the 'C' Bureau MSW*, ref. no. BU 0236/254.

<sup>70</sup> P. Schwartz et al., *Russian Military Logistics in the Ukraine War. Recent Reforms and Wartime Operations*, September, Stuttgart 2023, p. 68.



of operation “Danube”; A. Харук, М. Жирохов, *Бойова хроніка 2022 року*, Київ 2024 (A. Kharuk, M. Zhirokhov, *Boyova khronika 2022 roku*, Kyiv 2024); М. Жирохов, *Невідбутий блицкриз: оборона аеродромів Гостомелю та Василькова, лютий 2022 року*, Чернігів 2022 (M. Zhirokhov, *Nevidbutiy blitskrig: oborona azerodromiv Gostomelyu ta Vasil'kova, lyutiy 2022 roku*, Chernigiv 2022); *The Military Balance 2022. The annual assessment of global military capabilities and defence economics*, [n.p.] 2022; M. Zabrodskiy, J. Watling, O.V. Danylyuk, N. Reynolds, *Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting from Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: February-July 2022*, Royal United Services Institute, 30 XI 2022; M. Štefánský, “Operation Danube”, in: *Operation Danube Reconsidered. The International Aspects of the Czechoslovak 1968 Crisis*, J. Drabik (ed.), Stuttgart 2021; P. Schwartz, A. Fink, J. Waller, M. Kofman, B. Lennox, M. Chesnut, *Russian Military Logistics in the Ukraine War. Recent Reforms and Wartime Operations*, September, Stuttgart 2023.

## Summary

As part of the research, the authors addressed the issue of a specific use of force, defined by the term *coup de main* for the purpose of creating an operational definition, subsequently used to verify the working hypotheses, according to the research methods adopted.

The research objective of analysing the actions of the RF in its two acts of aggression against Ukraine, in 2014 and 2022, as a *coup de main* operation was achieved by verifying the subsequent working hypotheses using the selected research methods.

The authors draw three conclusions:

1. *Coup de main* operations may be conducted by Russia in the future.
2. With regard to Ukraine, this model for the use of force, used successfully in 2014, has run out of steam in 2022. It may provide a viable model for possible Russian intervention in Belarus and Kazakhstan, as well as in the NATO eastern flank states of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, particularly in those areas with a large Russian minority.
3. As indicated in the analytical section of the article, the success of this type of operation requires proper infiltration of the enemy, which is highly unlikely in the case of Poland, which was neither part of the USSR nor has a large Russian minority. On the other hand, due to Warsaw's geographical proximity to the Belarusian border, the security of the capital should be considered in the event of an attempt at bold surprise action to defeat the opponent with a single blow, i.e. a classically understood *coup de main*.

It can also be presumed that the perception of Russian decision-makers is crucial in choosing the method of achieving a political objective by conducting a military operation. It should be assumed that internal conditions within Russian decision-making structures (including factional issues) will be more important



than intersubjective factors of a geopolitical nature, such as a country's membership of international organisations. The internal stability of a particular state that is a potential target of a *coup de main* operation may play a greater role than, for example, the presence of a large Russian minority on its territory.

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