



PERSPECTIVES

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Mariupol: An On-Site Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Although Vladimir Putin has not articulated the final objective of his proxy war in eastern Ukraine, his actions seem to indicate that he is determined to create a land bridge from Mariupol to Odessa – two major seaports vitally important to Ukraine's economy. Putin's overall strategy in Ukraine seems to be to strangle it economically by disrupting shipping between the Odessa and Azov Sea ports, with the aim of eventually subjugating Ukraine to Russia.

On April 3, 2018, Russian President Vladimir Putin – having essentially won the war in Syria on behalf of his beleaguered client, Syrian President Bashar Assad – had some more good news. US President Donald Trump had given instructions to the American military to [begin planning](#) for the withdrawal of US troops from Syria. Although the official decision was not announced until December 21, the Kremlin evidently gambled that Trump was serious about the withdrawal.

On November 25, 2018, the West awakened to a new and unsettling threat to world peace, this time in the Sea of Azov. Putin, who had largely frozen his war there in 2015, was now defrosting it, without any serious response from the West.

The Russian Navy attacked three Ukrainian ships in the Sea of Azov that were heading towards the Ukrainian city of Mariupol. A Russian Coast Guard vessel [rammed](#) a Ukrainian navy tugboat, several sailors were injured, and 24 were taken prisoner. Those sailors are still awaiting trial.

Some history is in order. Immediately after a blood-soaked [revolution](#) in Kiev in February 2014, Putin retaliated by [invading](#) Crimea with soldiers wearing unmarked green [uniforms](#) (his “little green men”).

The invasion was preceded by skirmishes in January 2014 between Russian separatists and Ukrainians in both Mariupol, the largest port on the Azov Sea, and Odessa, the largest Ukrainian port on the Black Sea. The Crimean invasion was synchronized

during the following weeks with a violent [new kind of hybrid war](#) in which the Russian used proxies – “separatists,” “volunteers,” Cossacks, and eventually Chechens – in the three eastern Ukrainian industrial cities of Donetsk, Lugansk, and Mariupol.

On May 2, 2014, Odessa saw [lethal](#) street fighting, and people died in a burning [building](#). In early 2015, Russian proxies killed 30 people and injured 128 in a [rocket attack on Mariupol](#).

While Putin has not articulated the final objective of his proxy war in eastern Ukraine, his actions seem to indicate that he is determined to create a land bridge from Mariupol to Odessa – two major seaports vitally important to Ukraine's economy. Putin's overall strategy in Ukraine seems to be to strangle it economically by disrupting shipping between the Odessa and Azov Sea ports, with the aim of eventually subjugating Ukraine to Russia.

In early 2015, Putin froze his conflict in eastern Ukraine and instead began deploying some of his proxy units to Syria. His seeming objectives, besides rescuing his client, Assad, appeared to be saving and enlarging [Russia's naval base](#), Tartus, on the Mediterranean, and its [airbase](#) at Latakia, as well as [planning](#) for future oil and gas pipelines through Syria.

If you happen to find yourself interviewing residents in Mariupol, as we did recently, you will find that many are reluctant to discuss the war – hardly surprising in a city where at least a third of the population are Russian-speakers or Russians. Some simply say they wish there were no war.

One day during our visit to Mariupol, a drab, poor city with stained, nondescript buildings and bleak, skeletal trees, we sat at a café with a young captain in the Ukrainian army. At the table next to ours sat a man with a grim, round face. Someone's bodyguard? A sergeant? He never spoke, but attentively followed our conversation. Had he just happened to sit down close to us, or was he following us?

The captain told us that as a student at Taras Shevchenko University in 2014, he witnessed the ousting of Ukraine's corrupt, pro-Russian [president](#), Viktor Yanukovich, by a popular uprising in Kiev. The huge crowd, he recalled, was peacefully demonstrating against the president's economic tilt towards Russia's Customs Union rather than towards a more [lucrative](#) alliance with the EU. Suddenly, Yanukovich's paramilitary police fired into the crowd. Dozens [were killed](#) or injured. The crowd armed itself and fought back. Those deaths were followed by more. Yanukovich was quickly run out of town and took refuge in Russia.

After seeing some of his friends die, the young man decided to become a military officer and not a professor. “The popular revolution against a corrupt leader in Venezuela,” he noted, “is similar to what happened in Ukraine.”

In response to Putin's aggressions, President Trump last year [called for](#) “providing lethal defensive weapons to the Ukrainian military” in the form of [Javelin anti-tank](#)

[missiles](#), which were [delivered](#) last April. The captain said the Javelins had “a huge psychological effect” on Russia's tank crews, who were now [afraid](#) to approach positions they had approached with ease in the past.

A few days later, we took a taxi ride through Mariupol. Passing through the heart of its huge industrial complex, we saw dark factory buildings, railway cars full of coal, and tall smokestacks belching smoke and fumes into the air.

This huge complex, our driver said, was Systems Capital Management (SCM), a [holding](#) company with more than a hundred different enterprises, founded, owned and controlled by one man, Rinat Akhmetov. A Tartar Sunni Muslim and the richest man in Ukraine, he worked closely with [Yanukovych](#) and the American lobbyist, Paul Manafort, in 2006-14.

Akhmetov, as a member of parliament in Yanukovych's Party of Regions, had held separatist sympathies. With the fall of Yanukovych, however, Akhmetov, who found himself trying to fight off rumors of criminal connections, did an about-face. He declared himself a proponent of reconciliation with Russia and opened a [humanitarian center](#) to help victims of the war. When the Russians massacred several dozen Mariupol civilians, our driver pointed out, they did not attack Akhmetov's enterprise. It appears that Putin has his eyes set on acquiring the most important steelworks in Ukraine – intact.

In December 2018, our driver continued, children of Mariupol were featured in a [video](#) in which they pleaded with Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko and Akhmetov to limit the plants' toxic emissions. The video had no effect on Akhmetov, who was more interested in building ballparks and buying the [most expensive penthouse in London](#).

Although we were unable to visit the Port of Mariupol due to security restrictions, we found, sitting on a bench near the port, a husky Ukrainian man with a tattoo between thumb and forefinger of his left hand. "It's the symbol of the Ukrainian fleet," he said.

He said he was a Ukrainian sailor, and that he had been on one of the first ships the Russians had let pass on November 25 before they attacked the others. In August, he said, the Russians completed the Kerch Strait Bridge, which connects Russia and the Crimea over the Kerch Strait – a bottleneck between the Sea of Azov and the Black Sea.

Because the bridge is only 115 feet high, tall Ukrainian ships are unable to pass under it. The purpose of the bridge thus appears to have been to strangle Mariupol [economically](#). Since its construction, the sailor told us, “production in the shipyard is [down](#) 40%.” Ukrainian Navy intelligence has apparently concluded that the Kerch Strait Bridge might not even stay up for more than a few years due to seismic conditions underwater. “If Putin wants to do something about Mariupol,” the sailor said, “he has only a short time in which to do it. We have a small navy. We hope your country [America] will give us more ships to defend the port.”

In addition to its interest in Mariupol, Russia is concerned about activities taking place at a second Azov port, [Berdyansk](#), which is becoming a naval base with help from the US and [NATO](#). The objective is to resist Russia's policy goal of turning the Azov Sea into a Russian lake.

In a village northeast of Mariupol, our driver pointed to a cemetery. There, on February 2, he said, Russian separatists fired on a minibus containing mourners. Fortunately, no one was killed or injured, but many Ukrainians were shocked at the Russian assault on civilians.

At the front, weapons were already camouflaged. Were some of them Javelin missiles? It would have been improper to ask. After a tour, we asked the platoon leader if we could take a picture with him. "Not here," he said. He led us to a stony building, put on a black mask, and only then allowed us to take the picture. "This time," he said, "if the Russians come, we are not going to let them through. We would rather die."

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