

Russia's strategy of outsuffering and the war in Ukraine

Toms Rostoks, director, Centre for Security and Strategic Research, Latvian National Defence Academy

When the Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu was told two weeks before the start of the war by his British counterpart Ben Wallace that Russia would face steep economic costs if it invades Ukraine, Shoigu responded that “We [Russians] can suffer like no one else” (Harris et al. 2022). Leaving aside the obvious point that Russians do not have a unique ability to suffer when compared with other nationalities, it is easy to dismiss Shoigu's remark as a mere attempt to brush off a subject that he was uncomfortable with. After all, Russia had seemingly developed a world-class military, and it had a clever, albeit risky, plan to accomplish regime change in Kyiv in a bold military move. Once Volodimir Zelensky would have either fled or been captured, the remnants of Ukrainian military resistance would be dealt with.

Russia's plan ultimately failed because the Ukrainian leadership chose to stay and fight, and the Ukrainians rallied around their leaders. As the result, Russia became bogged down in prolonged, costly, and bloody war against Ukraine. It has lost the Western energy markets, and the EU and NATO member states have provided Ukraine with military assistance that may not just allow it to stave off Russia's attacks but also conduct offensive operations with the aim to retake territories occupied by Russia. The decisions taken by Ukraine's partners in the West in 2023 to provide main battle tanks and F-16 fighter jets is further proof of that.

How did Russia commit a blunder of such epic proportions that is likely to leave it severely weakened for decades? This manuscript claims that this outcome has been the result of the implicit strategy that Russia has adopted in its efforts to confront the West. For the lack of a better term, Russia's approach can be called the strategy of outsuffering. In the following sections, this manuscript introduces, defines, and characterizes the strategy of outsuffering. This manuscript explores its origins, key elements, and limitations of this strategy. Then, the strategy of outsuffering is used to explain Russia's war against Ukraine.

The strategy of outsuffering represents a paradox. Normally, states do not aim to outsuffer their adversaries when they decide to use military force. Instead, they aim to achieve quick and decisive victories, and yet they may end up in grinding fights against their adversaries. It has been noted in literature on conventional deterrence that efforts to deter the adversary are likely to fail if the adversary can reasonably assume that its use of military force will produce a *fait accompli* that will be hard to reverse for the defender. Thus, states use military force in the hope that it would produce quick and decisive victories. Sometimes they succeed, but on other occasions it turns out that they have miscalculated, and wars become protracted and costly. This description aptly characterized Russia's war effort against Ukraine. Russia's initial plan was to win quickly, but it became apparent early on that Russia failed to achieve the results it anticipated.

Attempting to outsuffer the adversary is hardly what states aim for, but it is the implicit assumption that a state can absorb high costs resulting from its confrontational foreign policy that makes this strategy possible in the first place. Since the use of military force in international relations can backfire, its use can be considered a risky choice. States

usually refrain from pursuing costly military policies unless there are important interests at stake and a relatively safe fallback option. The strategy of outlasting represents such an option. Importantly, states are more likely to use military force against their peers with an aim to win quickly if they have a backup option that may eventually allow them to win through attrition when the initial effort fails. In other words, a viable plan B makes the pursuit of plan A more likely. Thus, it can be concluded that although insensitivity to costs can be an important advantage when states pursue confrontational foreign policy strategies, Russia's use of the strategy of outlasting raises questions about its ability to achieve its stated foreign policy objectives through this strategy and perhaps even to sustain this strategy in the long run. Unless that happens, the strategy's ominous promise for Russia is suffering without end rather than victory through outlasting the adversary.

Biographical note: Toms Rostoks, PhD, is the director of the Centre for Security and Strategic Studies at the Latvian National Defence Academy. He also holds the position of associate professor in international relations at the Department of Political Science, University of Latvia. He earned his PhD in 2008 when defended the doctoral thesis 'Integration and regionalization in the Baltic Sea region'. In 2001-2002 Toms Rostoks was a visiting researcher at the Northern European Institute at Humboldt University in Berlin, Germany. In 2006-2007 he was a visiting scholar at the Center for European Studies at Rutgers University in New Jersey, USA. Toms Rostoks has written extensively on deterrence, state intentions, Latvia's foreign and security policy, Latvian-Russian relations, human security, and small states. His current research interests include deterrence, state intentions, Latvia's decisions regarding conscription vs all-volunteer force, and the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy.