

Verstka article, “Как Путин возненавидел Украину (How Putin Hated Ukraine),” at <https://verstka.media/kak-putin-pridumal-voynu>, as translated by Google Translate.

As a computer-generated translation it is predictably clunky and awkward. It also mistranslates the name of its publisher Verstka as “Netska,” along with probably other errors.

If you know Russian, please go to the site URL; the original is certain to be elegantly written.

Unfortunately, a polished English translation has not yet been published. This googled version is offered strictly for educational purposes only, since there are many important facts unearthed here for the first time which should be of paramount interest to anyone interested in historic details leading up to the current war in Ukraine. The article also lifts the veil on power dynamics in the Kremlin that are no doubt still at work and important to journalists and policymakers.

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HOW PUTIN HATED UKRAINE

An investigation into how the Russian president came up with the idea of a war with Ukraine

Putin's motives for starting a war with Ukraine were personal resentment and a desire for revenge. The last straw was the closure of the media assets of his godfather Viktor Medvedchuk. Putin decided to attack Kyiv in February-March 2021, the sources of Nestka say. Preparations for the invasion went on for almost a year, but all this time the Kremlin proceeded from the wrong assumptions and calculations.

The author of the text is Ilya Zhegulev, former special correspondent for SmartMoney, Forbes, Meduza, Reuters. Wrote the book “The Tsar's Move: The Secret Struggle for Power and Influence in Modern Russia. From Yeltsin to Putin” about the top Kremlin officials who made key decisions in the last years of Boris Yeltsin's rule, including the choice of Vladimir Putin as his successor.

This investigation was based on conversations with former and current officials in the Russian and Ukrainian authorities. Each of them occupies a certain place either in the Ukrainian political establishment or in the Russian one. What actually led to the war is a difficult topic for both countries. Especially for Nestka, journalist Ilya Zhegulev found out how it happened that Vladimir Putin had the very idea of a war with Ukraine, when the key decision was made and who influenced him. The stories given by former and current functionaries close to the Kremlin cannot serve as an excuse for the tragedy that happened, but they help to understand the evolution of the Russian ruler's thinking that led to it.

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After the gubernatorial elections in the Moscow region in September 2013, one of the curators of a huge team of political technologists, rubbing his hands, said: "Well, guys, well done, now you'll go to Western Ukraine to train," recalls a political strategist close to the administration of the Russian president in a conversation with Nestka . Ten years ago, according to him, there was no discourse that there were any "bad crests" at all: Russian technologists worked both with the team of Viktor Yanukovich and with his opponents from more pro-European oriented politicians, and no one had any questions did not occur. Political technologists received lucrative contracts from all parties and earned money. "And how many communications between football fans were Russians and Ukrainians, there really was friendship. And the nationalists were friends with each other."

The Kremlin's attitude toward Ukraine seemed to have changed in a matter of weeks in February 2014, when Putin single-handedly decided to annex Crimea. But this is not entirely true: judging by the stories of eyewitnesses, in the head of the Russian president, the opinion about the neighboring country evolved much earlier.

"Our son of a bitch"

Before the "orange revolution" of 2004, serious disagreements arose between Moscow and Kiev only once: in 2003, the island of Tuzla in the Sea of Azov, where 30 families of fishermen lived, became a stumbling block. At some point, Russia began to pour the coast towards the fishing island, which caused great tension, up to the strengthening of the defense of Tuzla by regular Ukrainian troops. But in the end, both countries agreed on an agreement on cooperation in the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait, and the conflict was forgotten for a long time.

Leaving the presidency after two terms, Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma asked Moscow to support his successor, Viktor Yanukovich, which the Kremlin did with zeal.

"There is a special program on the air of three national TV channels of Ukraine - TV channel Inter, 1 + 1 and First National: "Vladimir Putin. Live broadcast"... the geography of questions is the whole of Ukraine. All calls from the territory of Ukraine are free, "the host spoke in Russian in the studio, as if he were not in Kyiv, but in Ostankino. In a studio in Kyiv, between two flags - Ukraine and Russia - the president of Russia sat and answered questions from citizens of a neighboring state for an hour. It was the end of October 2004, the final stage of Viktor Yanukovich's presidential campaign, on which Moscow staked.

To support the candidate, Putin came to Kyiv and took part in a direct analogue of the Russian "direct line" with the difference that Ukrainians asked him questions (more than 80,000 questions were received). Putin even said that Russia has much to learn from Ukraine, saying that Ukraine's economic growth under Prime Minister Yanukovich has outpaced Russia's.

From Moscow, Dmitry Medvedev, who then headed the presidential administration of Russia, oversaw the elections, and from Kyiv, Viktor Medvedchuk, head of the presidential administration of Ukraine. It was in that year that Putin became the godfather of his daughter Daria. Then the administration of the President of Ukraine worked closely in conjunction with the Russian one, and the special assistant for relations of the two administrations, by his own admission, was the Russian political strategist Gleb Pavlovsky. One of Moscow's pre-election moves was the map of the "three varieties of Ukraine", into which Viktor Yushchenko allegedly divided the country, where the third class is the south and east of Ukraine.

But all this did not help. As a result of the Orange Revolution, after mass protests and a second vote in 2004, Viktor Yushchenko became president of Ukraine.

But Moscow continued to bet on opposition and even secession of regions. At the height of the Orange Revolution, the first attempt was even made to separate the south and east - a pro-Russian congress of deputies of all levels was held in Severodonetsk, from Russia it was attended at that time by an influential politician, Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov. In turn, the then head of the Donetsk Regional Council, Boris Kolesnikov, directly called for secession from Ukraine: "We propose: to express no confidence in all the highest bodies of state power that violated the law. Create a new southeastern Ukrainian state in the form of a federal republic. Kharkov will become the capital of the new state, thus the first capital of the independent Ukrainian Republic will be restored," Kolesnikov said. However, it didn't come to fruition. Russia then did not interfere with weapons in the affairs of a sovereign state, and no one went to secession without support. Kolesnikov responded to Nyvostka's offer to talk about it now: "Thanks, I'm not interested" (the Kolesnikov Foundation actively supports the Armed Forces of Ukraine, and the entire cover of his Facebook profile is occupied by a huge Ukrainian flag).

By 2010, the pro-Western President Yushchenko had lost most of his ratings, and in early 2010 Yanukovych won the presidential election - and this time there were no mass complaints about the vote count.

After becoming president, Yanukovych immediately began to make decisions that Moscow could not even dream of even during the time of the moderate politician Kuchma - he declared that Ukraine would not join NATO, initiated a law on the status of the Russian language as a regional language, and spoke out that the famine was not genocide Ukrainian people, but a common problem of Soviet history.

"Our special services sat in the leadership of Ukraine, led it and individual business units. What was the point of doing something when everyone was yours? - says a source close to the administration of the Russian president. According to him, the plan was simple - rapprochement with Ukraine, following the model and likeness of rapprochement with Belarus. "There was a whole president in the country, who was actually on our payroll," explains the source of Nestka. - Just as the United States once had President Fulgencio Batista in Cuba, we also had Yanukovych in Ukraine. His attitude was the same. Of course, they played along and helped him. That was our son of a bitch."

At the same time, Russia also worked diplomatically, trying to dissuade Europe from flirting with Ukraine. "Russian diplomats came to Paris, they told the West that we are against the European association, this will not happen, you must stop it," says a source close to Vladislav Surkov, who from 2013 to 2019 was in charge of the Kremlin, including those related to Ukraine questions. - Like, it will be a blow to the relations that exist between Ukraine and Russia. It started with this story, there was no story about the Russian world at all."

Yanukovych abandoned the association agreement with the EU and succumbed to the Kremlin's temptation to enter into a customs union with Russia, which ended in the second Maidan of his life.

"He then got rude"

Putin's attitude towards Ukraine deteriorated along with relations with the West. Quite quickly, the post-Soviet space, and primarily Ukraine and Georgia, became a space of confrontation for the Kremlin leader.

The first blow for Putin was the “Rose Revolution” in Georgia, when, after mass protests in the country, the leader changed to the pro-Western Mikhail Saakashvili, incomprehensible to Putin, the second, more serious, was the “orange revolution” in Ukraine. “It's not about Ukraine. There was not just a Maidan, there was the destruction of all the rules of the game,” a person close to him explains the logic of Putin’s resentment. The right of citizens to change power in their countries through manifestations and elections was not taken seriously in the Kremlin, considering such actions to be solely the result of external influence from the West.

All this led Putin to the Munich speech in 2007, which was interpreted critically by the West. “He was a little rude then, he spoke rather politically incorrectly,” a source close to the Kremlin now estimates. - The West said to this: they say, what a bad one, swears, went to the ass, a rude uncouth mudlan. That was the approximate result of his speech.”

In addition to the revolutions in the post-Soviet space and the expansion of NATO to the East, other annoying things kept popping up in relations between Washington and Moscow. As an example, an official of the presidential administration cites the story of joining the World Trade Organization, for which, according to him, Russia was more ready than Ukraine, and Ukraine was the first to accept it.

And in 2011, Alexander Voloshin, who was then developing the International Financial Center in the capital, received a phone call from the Russian Ambassador to Ukraine, Mikhail Zurabov. He said that the Central Depository is also being created in Kyiv, and the curators of the project suggested signing a cooperation agreement with Moscow. Voloshin was not opposed, but the agreement did not work out. An official of the Russian presidential administration, who previously communicated with the Americans on duty, cites this as an example of not the most friendly behavior of the United States, of which there were many.

New philosophy

Along with the change in attitudes towards the West, Putin was also influenced by domestic stories. During and after the 2012 protests, Putin began to spend more time alone with books of a certain kind. Among people close to the Kremlin, there has been talk that Putin is increasingly sitting in the archives. Around that time, they even created a special working group for him in the presidential administration, which selected books and necessary pages for him on a topic he had set, says a former Kremlin political consultant.

Even before the events on Bolotnaya, Putin became interested in the White Guard philosopher Ivan Ilyin, and after the failed protests, the Russian president became much more immersed in the texts of authors similar to Ilyin's views. He also liked the religious philosopher of the early 20th century, Vasily Rozanov. The latter was critical of the liberals and the intelligentsia: "Yes, I find it better to stand as a policeman on the corner of two streets - more "civilian", more useful, more noble and in line with human dignity - than to sit ... "at an intelligent breakfast" and discuss snobbishly, how “everything is bad with us” and how “we ourselves are good”, righteous, honest and “ready to suffer for the truth” ...”.

Ilyin, in turn, did not feel any reverence for Ukraine as an independent state at all. “Ukraine is recognized as the most threatened part of Russia in terms of separation and conquest,” the philosopher wrote in the resolution of the congress of white emigrants in 1938. - Ukrainian separatism is an artificial phenomenon, devoid of real grounds. It arose from the ambition of the leaders and the international intrigue of conquest.

Quotes from the speeches of Ilyin, Rozanov and other imperial-minded authors, including modern ones, slipped in Putin's speeches and publicly. A technologist familiar with the work of Russian nationalists, who previously worked for the Kremlin, recognizes in the speeches of the Russian president the influence of moderate Russian nationalist Konstantin Krylov, the author of an article on why everyone offends Russians, and even Dmitry Galkovsky, who sees the origins of all Russian riots in foreign influence. "Almost direct quotations from them began to speak," the former Kremlin technologist with a rich past in the circle of moderate nationalists is surprised.

"In this pantheon of gods, everything is simply lined up," says one of the former near-Kremlin technologists. "Western states are cultivating Ukrainians with cunning, deceit, manipulation and technology to make them anti-Russia. It didn't work out with the Old Believers, it worked out with the Ukrainians. These are the ideal Russians for the enemies of Russia. And Ukraine as a state was created, built precisely as part of the USSR, often to the detriment of the Russian population.

Putin's favorite philosophers about Ukraine

Don't care about the consequences

Back in January 2014, Putin was not going to seize Crimea. Three sources tell about this - in the presidential administration, among technologists close to the Kremlin, and among acquaintances close to Putin. The decision came spontaneously when the Kremlin realized in February that protesters in central Kyiv were defeating Yanukovych's rule. First, Moscow once again staked on a congress of deputies with a possible subsequent secession of a part of Ukraine. Russian technologists participated in the organization of the congress, one of the sources close to Vladislav Surkov tells "Layout". The Congress of Deputies of the South-East of Ukraine was supposed to be headed by Viktor Yanukovych himself, who flew to Kharkov, urgently retreating from Kyiv by helicopter.

However, at the last moment, the owners of Kharkov and the region, Gennady Kernes and Mikhail Dobkin, refused to play this game. "When they realized that Russia wanted to play for the collapse of the country, they sharply became pro-Ukrainian and told Yanukovych that they did not support the idea," testifies a source who was involved in the preparation of the congress. On February 22, Yanukovych was already in Kharkov, but realizing that the idea had failed, he did not come to the audience. At the congress, instead of calling for secession, Kernes and Dobkin spoke, calling for peace and promising to keep Ukraine united. The Russian operation failed. On the same day, the Verkhovna Rada removed Yanukovych from power.

It was on the night of February 22-23, after Yanukovych had fled from Kharkov, that Putin decided to annex Crimea. He told about it himself, but sources close to the president also confirm it. The meeting in Sochi, where the Winter Olympics were closing at that moment, lasted until 7 am with the participation of the four security officials closest to it. As one of Putin's close acquaintances testifies, at first the security forces tried to dissuade him: "Putin said, guys, this is our last chance, there won't be another chance, I take responsibility."

Later, in a conversation with another close acquaintance of his, who told him that the annexation of Crimea was a catastrophe and the consequences would be terrible, Putin replied that he did not care about the consequences: "A huge historical piece of its land has returned to Russia, this has not happened in 1000 years, so that practically without blood, without victims, her land was returned. No matter what happens next, now Crimea will still remain Russian."

At first, Putin did not expect the annexation of Crimea to meet such support at home.

In early March, Russian officials began to visit Crimea and the regions of Donbass bordering Russia incognito. "Almost every ministry had a deputy who secretly went there to test the waters," recalls a former official in the government apparatus. The officials were carrying out Putin's secret order to prepare for the future "integration of the Ukrainian regions into Russia." According to the former functionary, in addition to Crimea, government documents analyzed the cost of "joining Donetsk, Lugansk and Kharkov regions into Russia." But these ideas were not destined to come true.

There was no clear plan on how to seize territories. Attempts to gather rebel groups were, moreover, in Odessa and Dnepropetrovsk. With a sin in half it turned out only in Donetsk and Lugansk. "Donbass was a mistake, connected with the fact that it seemed that people would rise up in Donetsk as well as in Crimea," says a source familiar with the participants in the process. "But the attempt to raise the people was not particularly successful."

The story of the separation of Donbass was no longer Putin's personal initiative. "It was the initiative of the FSB officers, who decided to take advantage of the situation and unleashed this whole story," a source close to Putin at that time tells Layout. This is also confirmed by another source close to the presidential administration: "There was a special operation with Crimea, there was no special operation with Donbass, there were several players who told Putin – let's get in, there are pro-Russian forces in Ukraine, we will organize a counter-campaign, we should not abandon people." The Orthodox businessman Konstantin Malofeev, who is close to the FSB, Sergey Glazyev, who has been engaged in the formation of networks of Ukrainians who supported Russia for more than a year, and from the Yanukovych family, businessman Sergey Kurchenko, entered the story.

"Everyone was playing different games and practically no one was coordinating their activities," says a source close to the Kremlin.

After separatist formations arose in Donetsk and Lugansk, Putin instructed other subordinates to integrate into the process, for example, Vladislav Surkov, who began to deal with the political part - building a system for managing the rebellious regions.

Despite the unofficial participation of Russian troops in August 2014, there were no plans and readiness for a full-scale war yet, the Kremlin hoped to outwit the Ukrainian authorities: the Minsk agreements for Putin were a great relief, says a former member of the negotiating team: "Putin himself personally participated in the writing of the Minsk agreements. He himself formulated the points concerning the status and concerning political regulation.

And then Putin could only call for the fulfillment of the Minsk agreements. "What does it mean to fulfill the Minsk agreements? Ukraine introduces a law on the special status of the DNR and LNR, changes the constitution, all the republics formally return to the control of Ukraine with their two army corps and their political structures, chosen under the control of Russia, says a source directly from Russia who participated in their development. And all this is legalized. That is, two foreign bodies appear in Ukraine, which are not subordinate to Kyiv. That's what it means to execute "Minsk". If "Minsk" had been completed, then Donbass would have been used to rebuild the whole of Ukraine along the lines of Donbass. That was the plan."

According to another source close to the president, Putin believed that he simply fooled the then president of Ukraine, Petro Poroshenko: "First the elections, and then the transfer of the border, and not vice versa - it is always clear who will win these elections. That in this fuss it was important for Poroshenko to stop the war, and he didn't get into the details"

The conflict was frozen in the Kremlin. By the end of 2014, the separatist DNR and LNR neutralized or pushed aside the most aggressive and militant, and the presidential administration abandoned military rhetoric for a long time.

“People who worked with the Kremlin never used the word ‘war’. There was a complete feeling that the war was over, they explained to all Russians that Russia does not want war,” a political scientist who worked with the Kremlin at that time shrugged his shoulders. At the same time, according to him, at meetings he often heard the following phrase: “Putin wants all of Ukraine.” “Then it was perceived as some kind of whim. Well, he wants and wants,” he comments. According to another source, the conflict around the so-called DPR and LPR was beneficial precisely in its smoldering form: “The conflict smoldered, smoldered, could not fade, no one was interested in its attenuation. He fed everyone and gave everyone political perspectives.”

The fact that Putin personally is not going to leave the Ukrainian topic at all can be understood from the content of the political programs of Russian state channels over all these years. “A lot of problems, events in the world are happening. And these idiots gather for discussions and all the time about Ukraine,” says a source who was friends with Putin. - Not even about Syria. Not about America, which we strongly dislike. And suddenly about Ukraine. It is clear that this is not the agenda, and it has been imposed and imposed all the time.” According to the source, this could not have been the personal idea of the television curator from the AP. It was definitely a setup from the very top.

Putin continued to aggressively find links between Ukraine and the United States. “He was sure that NATO and the US, in fact, control Ukraine. He has no split on this topic,” says one of the people close to Putin at that time. ““The US Embassy in Ukraine employs more than a thousand people, and we have a hundred people,” his good friend quotes a private conversation with Putin. — The budget of the US Embassy in Ukraine is ten times higher. Putin, of course, believed that the States make all decisions regarding Ukraine, and it was impossible to convince him otherwise. In fact, as Bloomberg reported in January 2022, the US embassy in Kyiv had about 180 American citizens and 560 Ukrainians working at the embassy.

peacekeeper of war

In 2019, Vladimir Zelensky unexpectedly won the presidential election. Of all the Ukrainian presidents, Zelenskiy probably had the widest palette of ties to Moscow. The only one of all presidents, he even lived in Moscow for some time, working in KVN. On the night of the coming 2014, he, together with Maxim Galkin, hosted the New Year's show on the Russia-1 channel.

In parallel with the pre-election rhetoric that one just needs to come to an agreement with Putin, and the promise of peace in Ukraine, he obviously aroused serious suspicions among those Ukrainians who definitely did not want friendship with Russia, and cautious optimism in Moscow. During the first telephone conversation with Zelensky, Putin behaved respectfully. “It was felt that he wanted to find common ground,” said the former head of the Office of the President of Ukraine Andriy Bohdan.

At the same call, the President of Ukraine proposed to exchange Putin's godfather Viktor Medvedchuk in the negotiation process on Donbass for his assistant Andrei Yermak. According to a source close to the administration of the Russian president, Zelensky believed that Medvedchuk “just makes money, uses connections to earn money.”

The Kremlin did not insist and then agreed to change Medvedchuk.

“Obviously, he [Zelensky] is a talented person, trained. And he came with a relatively naive idea that now he will agree on everything in a human way, - says a source close to the Russian government. - Of course, he was not pro-American, he was pro-Ukrainian. And I sincerely wanted to do something good.” According to three sources, Zelensky really wanted to reset relations with Moscow, his team went to different people with advice on how to do this, including Yermak called the former head of the presidential administration, Alexander Voloshin. Putin also hoped that it would be possible to negotiate with Zelensky, assuming, however, that he would beat the inexperienced politician and finally launch the implementation of the Minsk agreements, which for Russia would be tantamount to a big victory.

In December 2019, Putin went to Paris in full confidence that the long-standing issue would move. However, as it turned out, Zelensky was an even more difficult negotiator than his predecessor: he refused to hold elections in Donbas until the transfer of the border, and members of his team even tried to rewrite the key paragraph on the special status of Donbass in the agreements, making it not permanent, but temporary. Surkov, who participated in the negotiations, threatened to stop the peace talks altogether and, according to one of the Ukrainian ministers, almost threw himself at his colleague Andriy Yermak with his fists and allegedly shouted and stamped his feet.

Be that as it may, the warm bath that Putin was counting on turned into a cold shower. “Putin, who descended from the mountain to accept the surrender of Ukraine, in fact turned out to be in the role of an abandoned bride,” Alexander Kharebin, one of those who developed Zelensky’s foreign policy strategy as part of his campaign headquarters, assesses this visit in a conversation with Nestka. - Putin's arrival in Paris was a colossal mistake by the Russian president, who overestimated the unpreparedness of Zelensky and his team. From the great tsar of all Rus', Putin has become almost a laughingstock. Zelensky helped him in this: right during Putin’s speech at a press conference, when the Russian president spoke about the adoption of a document on strict observance of the Minsk agreements, Zelensky smiled and shook his head, and when Putin spoke about a special status, he was completely amused and even covered his mouth with his hand to keep from laughing. “It was unexpected for everyone and for the first time so obvious,” says Ukrainian adviser Kharebin to Layout. - Putin actually received a public slap in the face. And that may have been a traumatic experience.” From the expression on the face of the Russian president, it was clear that he had difficulty withstanding the joint press conference, he did not even look in the direction of Zelensky and often checked his papers. Since then, Zelensky and Putin have never met, and Surkov resigned from his post as curator of Ukraine and Donbass two months later. After the failure in Paris, Moscow relied on soft power. And Viktor Medvedchuk has become a key confidant of the Kremlin.

last point

Putin did not forget the former head of President Kuchma's administration, even when he retired from politics. In 2012, Putin was four hours late for a meeting with President Viktor Yanukovich, and after that he defiantly paid a private visit to Medvedchuk at his home. At dinner, he showed him the water disco - colored fountains that change color in response to music. “Moreover, there was professional filming, it is clear that it was not the paparazzi who filmed, but a personal cameraman openly worked,” TV presenter Yevgeny Kiselev recalled in a conversation with the author of “Layout”. Footage of Putin's visit to Medvedchuk was shown on Ukrainian television.

After 2014, Medvedchuk, as the most friendly politician to Moscow, began to organize negotiations of the trilateral group and the exchange of prisoners. At the end of the reign of Petro Poroshenko, Medvedchuk's associate Taras Kozak acquired three news channels, which later became a stumbling block between Medvedchuk, who was called the real owner of the channels in Ukraine, and Zelensky.

The channel reflected the pro-Russian views of its owners, according to media expert Otar Dovzhenko, propaganda on them looked like “statements like that no one attacked Ukraine, there is a civil war going on, in which Ukraine is to blame, you just need to start making friends with Russia, Crimea he left on his own, because we did not like him, an armed coup took place on the Maidan. At the same time, these TV channels consistently criticized Zelensky's policies, focusing on rising prices for housing and communal services and social problems. Zelensky's rating began to fall, and the Opposition Platform for Life Party, whose political council was headed by Medvedchuk, on the contrary, began to grow. In October 2020, the party won first place in regional elections in six regions, beating Zelensky's Servant of the People party. Zelensky will remember this event even after the start of the war: in the first interview with Russian journalists, at the end of March 22, during the battles for Mariupol, he spoke for a long time about how Medvedchuk won in the regions.

In February 2021, a special operation was carried out, the purpose of which was to neutralize Medvedchuk. The sanctions concerned TV channels 112 Ukraine, NewsOne, ZIK and their owner, Medvedchuk's ally Kozak. According to Zelensky, the TV channels carried out anti-Ukrainian propaganda and interfered with the process of the country's integration into the European Union. The channels were banned from broadcasting. The decision to ban them was taken at an urgently convened National Security and Defense Council. The Office of the President then explained that 112 Ukraine, NewsOne, ZiK are used, in their opinion, as “tools of foreign propaganda in Ukraine”. Mikhail Podolyak, adviser to the head of the Office, added that the channel worked for the “occupiers”. They also said that “there are questions” regarding the financing of TV channels. However, even a year and a half before the channels were closed, Zelensky declared that he knew from which country they received funding, and the head of the Security Service of Ukraine, Ivan Bakanov, said that “an anti-Ukrainian information campaign was being conducted through the channel.”

The sanctions also affected Medvedchuk personally, who, along with his wife, was included in the list of the SBU investigation on the financing of terrorism. On March 11, 2021, the SBU and the tax service conducted a special operation at the facilities of the Glusco gas station network, which are also associated with the Medvedchuk family.

Three sources close to the Russian president confirmed that it was this story of the destruction of Medvedchuk's information resource and the fact that they began to “nightmare” him, which was the last straw in Putin's decision to prepare for a military operation. The Kremlin decided not to resort to the tools of “soft power” anymore.

“The attack, when they took away his television and the party began to play tricks, it really turned Putin on,” says one of the longtime acquaintances of the Russian president. He took it as a personal attack. The existence of Medvedchuk and his channels was like a bridge and a hope to somehow resolve the situation by political means. And suddenly Ukraine escalated. Oh, you decided to go to the escalation? Don't understand who you're dealing with?

Putin's decision was also influenced by Medvedchuk himself, who regularly told the Russian president about the great support for him personally and for pro-Russian sentiments in Ukraine. “He told fairy tales, mastered this money that he was paid for organizing political resistance, and did not believe that anyone would ever check,” recalls a source close to the presidential administration. “He talked about the loyalty of the territory, stupidly misleading Putin.”

The Kremlin did not question Medvedchuk's words. “Instead of drawing conclusions about the adequacy of the information received, analyzing and seeing the obvious picture that they are not

expected here, resentment and anger clouded their eyes,” Ukrainian political adviser Kharebin throws up his hands. However, Medvedchuk could not even imagine that Putin would use his data to decide on a light special operation, the purpose of which was a quick change of power in Kyiv, says a source familiar with him. Putin seriously counted on the support of the population throughout the country, which his trusted godfather told him about. “For Medvedchuk, the decision to go to war turned out to be the most catastrophic scenario,” testifies a person close to Putin.

When deciding on a war Putin did not consult with Medvedchuk. As with no one else. The only person who had permanent access to Putin was his friend Yuri Kovalchuk.

Two sources confirm that Kovalchuk played a decisive role in the President's decision to launch a special operation. During the pandemic, only Yuri Kovalchuk did not leave Putin's residence so as not to undergo quarantine. Kovalchuk never made a secret of his anti-Western sentiments, and it may have been him who previously fascinated Putin with those writers whom the president began to study in the second decade of the 2000s. Since March 2020, they have talked for hours about the conflict with the West and the history of Russia, wrote The Wall Street Journal. This is also confirmed by sources interviewed by Nestka: “Putin at that moment was limited in communicating with adequate people. He tried not to meet with anyone, and if he did, during the 14 days of quarantine, people became so brutalized that a normal conversation did not develop. In addition, a meeting at a distance of 15 meters does not imply confidential communication.

It was Kovalchuk who convinced Putin that Europe is divided by contradictions and now is the best time for a quick operation, says a source close to the Kremlin.

The decision to prepare for the operation was made in late February - early March 2021, a year before the war. Already in April, the first threatening exercises took place near the borders of Ukraine.

The preparation itself took place in the strictest secrecy, but since the summer, talk of a possible war has become a commonplace among people close to the Kremlin. On July 12, the Kremlin website published Putin's article "On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians." According to Layout, the article was changed many times, and in one of the options there was a direct threat about the possibility of starting a military operation. But the threat did not make it into the final version.

The report of the British Royal Joint Security and Defense Research Institute (RUSI), released on March 29, 2023, states that the FSB has been preparing for the occupation of Ukraine since July 2021. To this end, the 9th Directorate of the Department of Operational Information has become a full-fledged department, and its staff has increased from two dozen employees to more than 200 people. Employees were even divided into regions of Ukraine, some people dealt with issues related to the Ukrainian parliament, some - critical infrastructure.

According to a source close to the presidential administration, at the Valdai discussion club in October 2021, one of the security officials present there confirmed in private conversations: Western fears that Russia is preparing for war are not far from reality: “It’s true, we want change the regime in Ukraine. It was about the readiness to achieve this political goal precisely by force. Another source says that in December, three months before the war, they were already discussing how Ukraine would be divided among large corporations. According to the plan, one of the state or private corporations close to the Kremlin was to be responsible for the development of each region. A week before the invasion, an influential closed expert council on foreign and defense policy, close to the Foreign Ministry, met,

where a political scientist close to the Kremlin said directly that a special operation to change the regime in Kiev would begin within the next week, which would not last long.

Putin really believed that it was possible to change the regime in Kyiv quickly and painlessly. Kovalchuk convinced him that the West was weak; that Ukraine is weak and loyal: Medvedchuk.

Simple calculations show that they were not preparing for a long war. "A country of 44 million cannot be taken over by a force of 160,000," said a source close to the political wing of the presidential administration. - If you start such an operation with such forces, you are counting on a massive collaboration of loyal Ukrainians with Russia. And the operation was built, thought out and developed precisely on the basis of this premise.

According to sources, as in the case of the annexation of Crimea, many security officials were against it, as evidenced by the letter of Colonel General and Chairman of the All-Russian Officers' Assembly Leonid Ivashov, and the publications of experts close to the Ministry of Defense.

Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu did not argue, and even rejoiced at Putin's decision. "He did not understand the state of the army, and he was interested. He believed that Putin knew something that he did not know, and really thought that there would be something not much more serious than the annexation of Crimea," says one of Putin's old friends. The rest of the elites were put before the fact already on the day of the invasion.

"This is an amazing war when almost the entire elite is against it. I talk to the bosses in Russia, there is not a single person from the highest echelons of power who would be in favor. But they understand that they need to work as a team," says the former Kremlin official, citing private conversations with Russian officials.

Those who do not understand are shown what needs to be understood. Thus, a source from Nestka tells the story of how one "high-ranking official" in the State Duma in the spring of 2022 came to the curator of the Kremlin's domestic policy, Sergei Kiriyenko, and said that he could no longer and wanted to leave. "The next day, the FSB officers came to my wife, the security forces also came to my son, who has a business. A week later, the official came back to Kiriyenko and said that he had changed his mind about leaving. "That's good," Kiriyenko smiled and casually began to discuss future plans.

Cover: Dmitry Osinnikov

Ilya Zhegulev, especially for Vertska