

Ukraine: War and Resistance Report No. 9

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Russia calls for new talks but once again without Ukraine's participation

Foreign minister Sergei Lavrov announced on 30 October that Russia is ready "as always" to enter into serious negotiations over the war in Ukraine. He made the offer to the United States and the Western powers, not to Ukraine. He admitted no place at all for Ukraine as a subject of negotiations. Lavrov noted that President Zelensky is bound under Ukrainian law to putting any negotiated offer between Ukraine and Russia to a referendum, which makes any role for him in direct talks even more unacceptable for Russia.

Lavrov could not resist trying to belittle Zelensky with a lame joke that now is not the time for the former comedian to engage in comedy. Political leaders and serious analysts have given Zelensky the respect he has earned as his country's leader in war, which makes Lavrov look very much out of touch with such a joke.

What is the intention behind Lavrov's latest offer and how does it fit in with the most recent statements by Putin and other Russian officials? On 26 October Putin told security officials at a meeting of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) that Ukraine "has lost its sovereignty". The United States, he went on to say, is using Ukraine as a "battering ram" against Russia, the Russian-Belarusian Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), which is the Russian-led NATO equivalent in Eurasia.

Speaker of the Russian State Duma Dmitri Volodin expanded on Putin's remarks by asserting that Ukraine has become "a colony of the United States", that it is "occupied by NATO" and "Ukraine has lost the ability to exist as a state". These statements show clearly that Putin's regime has no intention at all to negotiate an end to the war with Ukraine as it regards Ukraine without the capacity to do so. But it will continue its scorched earth policy until it bombs the Ukrainians into submission and/or it persuades the Americans and EU member states to cut a compromise deal unilaterally with Russia that spares Ukraine its agony in exchange for some kind of partition or interstate tutelage as a protectorate.

All this depends, of course, on how long Ukraine can go on fighting, whether it is Ukraine or Russia that is the last man standing. It is not a foregone conclusion anymore that Russia will prevail.

A faltering Russian offensive

Russian efforts to maintain their offensive are concentrated in the Donbas around Bakhmut, Donetsk city, Soledar and Avdiivka where the fiercest battles are now underway. Putin wants to claim a significant victory here for his "special military operation" given the strategic and symbolic importance of the Donbas for Russia's wider war aims. However, these wider aims have been twice revised since February. One possible reason why foreign minister Sergei Lavrov has called for talks with the US and NATO now is because Russian forces need time to regroup and revise their objectives once more. Their long awaited offensive from Belarus has not materialised and Russian forces are preparing to withdraw from Kherson in the south.

Russia's difficulties appear in recruitment and training of troops for its forces in the Donbas. Putin fears ordering a general mobilisation because it would lay bare the failure of his "special military operation". The announcement of a limited mobilisation of 300,000 reservists provoked the exodus of at least that many eligible men to Turkey, Georgia, Armenia, Ukraine, the EU and other countries.

Putin has adopted legal provisions permitting new categories of convicted criminals to serve in the battalions being financed by the financier and friend of the president Yevgeniy Prigozin. Putin has also now permitted regional and local government authorities to form their own autonomous militia, which has been taken up by wealthier cities and regional authorities. Meanwhile, the Russian army is trying to recruit in poorer outlying regions, especially among the non-Russian peoples of the Caucasus, Siberia and the far east. These efforts to employ them as contract soldiers have not brought the desired influx of raw recruits or trained reservists.

Ukrainian air defences

Simultaneously, there has been a steady improvement of Ukrainian anti-aircraft defences against Russian rockets, missiles and drones. Ukrainian designers are combining Soviet technologies with contemporary IT applications to build imaging instruments to detect missiles coming into their territory that gives them sufficient time to target and destroy many more of them than before.

However, Iranian missiles and drones are more difficult, if not impossible to intercept. Their possible elimination or denial to the Russians will depend ultimately on a radical change, if not the popular overthrow of the Iranian regime.

Ukraine could establish a much more secure cover over almost all its airspace if its NATO allies gave it sufficient up-to-date anti-aircraft systems. But US and NATO promises are still not matched by actual timely deliveries of the arms Ukraine needs to secure a decisive victory over Russia in the war from the air.

The same is true for the war on the ground. Without NATO and the EU countries delivering tanks and longer range artillery to match the Russians the Ukraine cannot achieve a decisive victory in the ground war.

Russian air strikes on 31 October saw around 100 winged missiles launched in two or three waves from distances of up to several hundred kilometres. Ukrainian anti-aircraft defences intercepted and destroyed eighty percent of them. Some of the Russian missiles were armed with two independently targeted warheads, making their complete destruction even more difficult. The Russians are using missiles at a rate of simultaneous launch that Ukrainian experts believe is close to Russian current capacity. The Ukrainians also believe that Russian current supplies of the soviet era missiles it has been launching have left them with around 40 percent of their available stocks when they invaded deep into Ukraine on 24 February. Their replacement as usable munitions depends on CSTO member states handing over to Russia what they hold in storage, the prospect of which becomes more uncertain as their original confidence in Russia's military prowess fades and as they themselves become embroiled in fighting in their own region, as between Kyrgyzstan and Tadjikistan and between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Kherson

The current situation in Kherson oblast presents us with contradictory signals concerning Russia's ability to hold on to it and even to resist the Ukrainian counter-offensive that has been predicted now for the past few weeks. Russian authorities are ordering evacuations of homeowners along the left bank of the Dnipro River in Kherson and around the Kakhovka water reservoir. The evacuations

are meant to make it easier for the Russians to dig in and fight the coming counter-offensive. Russian soldiers and kadyrovtsi are moving in to replace the local residents and consume everything they had to leave behind. About 16-17,000 people have been forced to leave and 100,000 are still in Zkherson of the original population of 300,000. The Russians authorities are also preventing the health services from working, taking away equipment and medications and are not replacing them with their own health workers, equipment or medicines. It is a critical situation for people needing insulin and other life saving medication.

There is a good chance that Ukrainian forces will drive the Russians out of Kherson city and oblast. Kherson is the only oblast capital to have fallen to them in the war. Its recapture would give the Ukrainian side a further boost in self confidence after it defeated the Russians around Kharkiv, in Izium and retook large parts of Sumy, Luhansk and Donetsk. It would also deny the Russians the strategic position they need to defend Crimea or to advance on Mykolayiv and Odesa. They are no longer thinking about any offensive, but how to force the civilian population out and to dig their own soldiers into position to hold Kherson for as long as they need to make an orderly retreat.

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