

# Ukraine: Over a Year of War with No End in Sight

Monday 22 May 2023, by [ARTIUKH Volodymyr](#), [TSONEVA Jana](#) (Date first published: 19 May 2023).

## **Volodymyr Artiukh on how Russia's invasion has changed Ukraine and the dim prospects for peace**

When Russian president Vladimir Putin announced his misleadingly named “special military operation” in Ukraine on 24 February last year, few analysts in East or West expected Russian victory to be more than a few weeks or months away. Yet, Ukraine's enemies and allies alike severely estimated the country's capacity for resistance, and 15 months since the invasion began, the Kremlin's military goals are no closer to being realized than they were one year ago. The Russian advance has ground to a halt, and a Ukrainian counter-offensive looms. Ukrainian society has rallied behind the armed forces and an overwhelming majority continues to support the goal of restoring Ukraine's 1991 borders.

At the same time, the war has had devastating consequences for the Ukrainian people as a whole, with millions now living abroad as refugees and much of its infrastructure — not to mention the parts of the country under Russian occupation — destroyed or rendered unusable. Reports that Ukraine's Western allies are beginning to entertain a Korean Peninsula-style solution to the war, with Crimea and most of the Donbas remaining under Russian control for the foreseeable future, have grown more frequent over the last few weeks.

How long can Ukraine — and Russia — continue to fight? What could a resolution, as distant as it may seem, look like? Jana Tsoneva of the Collective for Social Interventions, a Rosa Luxemburg Foundation partner in Bulgaria, spoke with Ukrainian sociologist Volodymyr Artiukh about the mood in Ukrainian society after a year of war, the ripple effects of the invasion, and why he is pessimistic about peace returning to the region anytime soon.

**Putin seems to have dropped the “denazification” discourse with which he tried to justify the invasion of Ukraine in recent months. With the war dragging on for over a year now, do we know what the Kremlin really wants to achieve?**

There are many layers of Russian official discourse on the aims of the war, even more so in the domain of the incoherent [“firehose” of wartime propaganda](#). On the official level, both “denazification” and “demilitarization” [still hold](#) as the “goals of the special military operation” that [“will be achieved”](#).

That said, the head of Russia Today, Margarita Simonyan, a figure somewhere between official discourse and pure propaganda, [admitted](#) that the goals of the war are deliberately kept vague to disorient the enemy. She probably admitted this because polls show that Russians don't understand what these two aims mean. Her job is to prove that Putin knows what he is doing, which is crucial to [popular support](#) for the war.

As far as the purely propaganda level is concerned, we hear various and sometimes contradictory

statements, ranging from some priests' injunction to [annihilate Ukraine](#) as a nation serving Satan to Putin's *condottiere* Prigozhin pledging to take over [half of Ukraine](#) in three years, to more cautious words by some members of the State Duma that the war is only about conquering the southeast of Ukraine.

I personally don't think there is evidence to conclude that Putin abandoned the idea of complete control over Ukraine. What is certain is that Putin's minimal goal since last September is to conquer not only the two Donbas provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk, but also the two regions adjacent to the Black Sea, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia. They were annexed without full military control over either of them last year, so conquering them is now a matter of the Russian state's integrity as understood by the Kremlin. The maximalist goals can also be seen in PR stunts by former Ukrainian politician [Victor Medvedchuk](#) and in Sergey Lavrov's numerous threats to Moldova.

It is increasingly a consensus among political and economic analysts that Putin, encouraged by the relatively robust performance of the Russian economy and growing "Ukraine fatigue" in the West, is preparing for a long war. Thus, in my opinion, there has been no goal recalibration since March 2022 — Putin still entertains maximalist goals and remains optimistic he will achieve them sooner or later.

Ukraine, however, is not a goal in itself, but rather a springboard for what Russian foreign policy pundits call a "[new security architecture](#)". Achieving control over Ukraine doesn't offer clear economic or political advantages for the Russian ruling elite in the medium term, which led many to reject the likelihood of Russia's invasion last year. This war, as Russia's semi-official foreign policy spokesperson [admits](#), was an opportunistic move at a time of the West's perceived weakness, designed to dismantle the post-Cold War and even post-World War II security architecture in anticipation of China's own gambit.

**How effective have the economic sanctions against Russia been? How does Russia finance the war, and how long can it continue financing it, given the price caps and other punitive measures against Russian raw material exports?**

The Russian economy [managed to avoid the worst-case scenario](#) and shifted some branches of industry onto war footing. Notably, Russia's hydrocarbon earnings increased as compared to the pre-war year and many Western companies [failed to fully exit](#) the Russian market. This, however, is somewhat mitigated by the [traditional shadow schemes](#) that drain Russia's heavily militarized budget.

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The sanctions have been effective, however, in that they managed to slow down replenishment of ammunition and spare parts for missiles and other weaponry. The evidence for this is that Russia failed to completely destroy Ukraine's energy infrastructure despite a massive missile strike campaign since last September. There is also some evidence of "ammunition hunger" among the frontline artillery.

In general, Western sanctions worked for what they were designed for: limiting Russia's capacity to inflict damage. We need to bear in mind, however, that Russia accumulated significant resources prior to the start of the war and still enjoys high levels of hydrocarbon export income, which means that we should not expect any catastrophe in the Russian economy, especially if China decides to throw its weight behind the war effort.

## **Weren't weapons shipments from the West just as important in limiting Russia's capacity to inflict damage?**

The shipment of weapons to Ukraine has been the other crucial factor slowing Russia's invasion, simply because Ukraine's own stock of weapons and ammunition is completely incommensurable with Russia's.

The two most significant factors in terms of the Western shipments are calibration and timeliness. The delivery of weapons have been calibrated in such a way that the Russian leadership would not feel "cornered" and do something reckless like use chemical or tactical nuclear weapons. This has largely been successful. The timeliness is less certain: contrary to some alarmist accounts, it has been difficult to agree on and organize shipments of key types of weaponry in line with the Ukrainian military's planning. In that sense, this "almost just-in-time" delivery of military equipment contributed to unnecessary losses among Ukrainian soldiers and civilians.

It is important to point out, however, that the extent of weapons deliveries to Ukraine goes beyond what we read in the media and is not restricted to the West. We have already learned that Bulgaria, Morocco, and Pakistan delivered machines and ammunition behind the scenes, and we will likely learn of more such stories in the near future. Thus, contrary to the naïve slogan of "less weaponry, less war", stopping weapons shipment from NATO countries will not completely starve Ukraine's army of the means to fight. Ukraine will find other pathways to procure weapons, although they would be less advanced and effective, which would lead to more casualties.

In that sense, "less — modern — weaponry" means "more brutal war". If you follow the "less weaponry, less war" slogan to its logical conclusion, you would have to campaign for a global blockade of Ukraine, which doesn't seem feasible.

## **How mobilized is Ukrainian society at this point? Has a kind of war fatigue begun to set in?**

The mood in Ukrainian society and the military seems to slowly be wearing down, albeit far from collapsing. The initial affective unity — a sort of collective adrenaline rush — gradually gave way to a mix of perseverance and resignation. Although this is [still not visible](#) in the polls, qualitative observations suggest a growing negative trend in morale.

I see this in my fieldwork with refugees in a country neighbouring Ukraine: although they still hope to return, this hope is expressed in increasingly uncertain terms as people take practical steps to establish long-term residency abroad. Over one third of Ukrainians left their homes, while the home of every tenth person has been either destroyed or damaged. As the old ways of life were shattered and no planning is possible under previous assumptions about one's career, family, etc., people live day-by-day and by very practical steps to survive strain, limiting or cutting their relations with their homeland and with each other.

Separated for almost a year, families break down. Torn away from networks, children learn new languages and find new friends. Young people enter universities and find jobs. Although not representative of the whole society, the mood of the forced migrants gives a glimpse into the dynamic after a year of war.

The morale in the army is also [falling significantly](#) as the number of desertions increases and enlistment officials [face difficulties](#) recruiting Ukraine's male population. This is evidenced by numerous videos showing people in military fatigues detaining civilians on the streets and squares of various Ukrainian cities, while the border service reports weekly how Ukrainian males between 18 and 60 try to cross the border into neighbouring countries.

This leads to a vicious circle: the more brutal conditions are on the frontline, the less motivated people are to enlist in the army, and those forced to enlist further undermine the discipline, thus exacerbating the situation in the frontline. High morale has been Ukraine's advantage since the first months of invasion, but now as the war enters its second year, this advantage has waned.

**On that note, all wars typically rally society around the flag, but surely, there are dissenting voices, both from the Left and the Right within Ukraine, breaking with the official line. What does the domestic debate look like?**

There isn't much debate happening under martial law in the most widely read mass media outlets. The extent of public discussion is limited to corruption scandals in the government, especially around military procurement and conspicuous consumption. This led to the sacking of a range of government officials and a ban on leaving the country for state officials. The second line of contention is the campaign to ban Russian symbols and language in the public sphere, which comes more from civil society than from the state, although there are significant dissenting voices close to Zelensky's administration.

The far right has been largely absorbed by the fighting and currently doesn't exist as an independent political or military force. In a way, Russia is repeating the path Ukraine took after the start of the Donbas war in 2014: highly autonomous military units like Prigozhin's Wagner PMC and Kadyrov's fighters have their own political ambitions and ultra-nationalist or ultra-conservative ideologies. Ukraine's army appears more integrated and subordinated to the chain of command, including the units whose members espouse far-right ideology. However, some far-right symbols and slogans entered civil society and became normalized as part of a general wartime mobilization.

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Ukraine's Left consists of several groups that either function on a [purely intellectual level](#) or are engaged in the [defence of labour rights](#) and [humanitarian efforts](#). Some on the Left have either volunteered or been drafted into the armed forces, and a few of them [continue](#) their intellectual and organizational work from the army. Naturally, these groups are squeezed between the threat of the Russian occupation, which is virtually unanimously condemned, the anti-labour and anti-welfare reforms underway even in wartime conditions in Ukraine, and the general right-wing sentiment in civil society.

The majority of left-wing groups do not consider the demand to starve Ukraine of the means to resist the Russian invasion a particularly progressive slogan, as it necessarily entails a faster advance of Russian troops, accompanying slaughter of Ukraine's soldiers and civilian population, and the possibility of a direct clash with NATO if Russia reaches Ukraine's southern and western borders. A minority that functions underground calls for an immediate proletarian revolution, turning inter-imperialist war into a civil war, which I personally consider a purely aesthetic pose detached from any rational analysis of the current situation.

**What about in Russia? Are there any energies left within Russian society to oppose the war on the ground, such as instances of [sabotage](#)? There are reports that the draft has been deeply ethnically and class-biased. Are Russia's ethnic minorities resisting becoming cannon fodder for Putin's imperial ambitions? What about the Russian working class?**

It seems that the majority of Russian society has embraced a sombre fatalism regarding the war and the necessity to sacrifice their lives for it. As I [predicted](#) days after Putin ordered mobilization, this didn't have significant disruptive effects. Protests petered out and the families of the soldiers who

died in Ukraine grew vengeful.

There is a minority of imperialist nationalists and a smaller minority of anti-war-minded people, but the latter have been drained by brutal, unending repression and mass emigration. Protests are impossible and the instances of sabotage don't have any significant effect. Russian emigre dissidents are ridden with splits and quarrels.

I don't see much evidence that Russian ethnic minorities are more prone to resisting the government or organizing for this purpose. I also don't see much evidence of any independent working-class activity. It is too early to talk about even nascent signs of anti-war working-class or ethnic minority movements, if they ever appear.

**How has the war affected the balance of forces *within* Ukraine itself? Have certain groups within the elite grown more or less powerful?**

There is an obvious thing that needs to be mentioned, even if ritually: the working class has lost the most both in terms of lives and in terms of life chances. Workers are at the nadir of their collective economic power in Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus. Workers' organizational, structural, and ideological resources are all but non-existent.

It is possible that Russian labour gained structural power in some sectors related to the military-industrial complex, but they lost immensely in terms of organizational and ideological strength, as the whole of civil society is strictly subordinated to the state through terror. The situation for workers in Belarus is even worse — recently, the leaders of independent trade unions ended up in jail, and many activists emigrated.

Ukraine is under martial law, so the government can easily pass [anti-worker legislation](#) confident that it will not face mass protests. War-related destruction and high unemployment led to a decrease in structural power for Ukrainian workers. However, some organized labour activity is possible, albeit in the form of petitions and workplace bargaining.

The capitalists lost, as well — due to the destruction of fixed capital in Ukraine and economic sanctions in Russia. Individual capitalists managed to get contracts related to the military-industrial complex, but it would be silly to explain the war by economic interests of individual entrepreneurs as some on the Left do. In the case of Russia, it is more state coercion than profit-seeking that makes entrepreneurs fulfil military contracts.

In general, the war significantly undercut the political clout of those whom we used to call "oligarchs" both in Russia and in Ukraine. In Russia, they became completely dependent on the Kremlin, and in Ukraine, they fell victim to de-oligarchization campaigns co-sponsored by the presidential office and Western allies.

"I'm not entirely sure I will live to see a long stretch of peace in Ukraine."

The only group that gained something out of the war are the military-bureaucratic elites who are largely parasitical in relation to both workers and productive capitalists. Putin's decision to start the full-scale war came from a narrow circle within this milieu. Their goal is not capital accumulation per se, but rather accumulation of sovereignty that can be traded for capital in the long run. They are forming a power bloc, co-opting select capitalists and groups of workers.

In that sense, Putin's stories about his historical mission should not be treated as an ideological facade that hides petty material interests. On the contrary, accumulation of power over territory is the ultimate material interest that subordinates more immediate concerns of capital accumulation.

**Let's talk a bit about the Left and the recent decolonization debates. Some voices call for the break-up of Russia as the only long-term solution to Russian imperialism, while others insist on democratizing and decentralizing the country. I, for one, see grave security dangers from a Russia descending into chaos and civil war. Sorry if I sound too bleak, but I don't see the working class immediately taking power and ushering in a foreign policy based on peaceful internationalism and self-determination.**

Concerning the decolonization discourse in and around Ukraine, it boils down to a fight for symbolic capital among scholars working on the post-Soviet space. This debate has been of a very low quality, mobilizing cognitive biases instead of rational arguments. Many scholars of and from Ukraine hide nationalist ideology behind a thin veil of anti-imperialist rhetoric, and this trick works as long as they are perceived as victims worthy of compassion rather than scholarly peers to be treated seriously.

For now, scholars of and from Ukraine are on the offensive. They're trying to dethrone the older area studies elite, mostly Western tenured white males with a strong Russian emigre component. Instead of rational arguments, they resort to the argument about "Ukrainian voices", which they supposedly represent by virtue of citizenship or blood and have the duty to make heard. Other "voices", consequently, need to be toned down.

However, I think this moment has already passed. It is clear that the money will flow to studying Russia as the main adversary of the West in the region, much like it was during the Cold War. Here, real expertise and a legacy position in academia rather than the metaphysics of "voices" will count. The old guard of area studies will return with a vengeance, probably joined by a younger group of Russian dissident emigre scholars, and students will flock to Russian language, culture, and politics classes. Time will show how many non-Russian or non-Russo-centric "voices" find their place there.

**How do you think this will end? Is there any possibility for negotiations and compromise?**

Well, define "this" and "end". I'm not entirely sure I will live to see a long stretch of peace in Ukraine. There will likely be a significant escalation between the US and China in a few years, and this is the moment the Kremlin leadership is waiting for. Then, Russia will be indispensable to China, and will get all the support it needs — which in turn will reignite the conflict over Ukraine even if it does go through a "frozen" phase.

The talk about 1991 borders is something Ukraine's leadership can't escape — it's in Ukraine's constitution. Anything less would sound like a betrayal in the middle of war. It's up to you to judge what these words are worth, given that Washington throws around all sorts of hints that they would not be happy to see a war for Crimea. I personally don't see much sense in discussing Crimea or the fate of the occupied regions of the Donbas until the Ukrainian army proves capable of even approaching these territories.

**Still, could you try to imagine a post-war Ukraine, maybe in the distant future? Suppose China forces a ceasefire. What will reconstruction look like? Will it be a neoliberal bonanza, or an opportunity for the so-called "international community" to show solidarity and do something akin to the reconstruction of Skopje in 1963?**

There are more or less solid facts: the utter destruction of the Ukrainian economy, and social and psychological dislocations in Ukrainian society. This is something that will get worse with time. The [plans for post-war reconstruction](#) being discussed don't instil any hope — they sound like something [from the 1990s](#). I suggest following publications in [OpenDemocracy](#) and [Commons](#) with a critical analysis of such proposals. There are also attempts to [propose](#) a [just reconstruction](#) for Ukraine, which are also worth following.



As for the role of China, I don't have any hope for a just end of the war through China's mediation, i.e. a settlement that would respect the UN Charter. We need to start with defining the interests of the Chinese elites. It seems pretty transparent that their interest is threefold: to distract the US from Southeast Asia, avoid Russia's defeat and a potential political collapse, and maintain economic ties with Europe. Thus, at the current conjuncture, it seems logical that the Chinese will first and foremost help Russia stay afloat economically and even help it militarily if needed.

The Chinese declarations regarding peaceful negotiations are contradictory and devoid of concreteness — reflecting Chinese interests in the conflict. However, one cannot blame anyone who engages with the Chinese leadership in the hope that the Chinese could influence Russia and manage the conflict.

Now, we see that not only Paris but also some Washington officials are contemplating deals with China in exchange for exerting some influence over the Kremlin. I suspect it's less about peace, as this would contradict Moscow's and Beijing's interests, and more about restraining the Kremlin's recklessness. This balance of forces may change with time, depending on the situation on the battlefield.

One cannot exclude that the Chinese may become mediators in a possible ceasefire deal if both armies are exhausted. But China would be equally happy with a "peace" that comes after Russia's full occupation of Ukraine. That said, I don't think this will happen this year, and I would not try to speculate about anything further than that.

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