

The Ukrainian perspective

The long-awaited counteroffensive, which began on 4 June, failed to achieve its objectives in any aspect. The efforts to break through the land corridor connecting Crimea with Russia in Zaporizhzhia were unsuccessful. Ukrainian troops encountered fortifications and minefields that had been built up for over a year. The Ukrainians breached the first belt of fortifications west of the village of Verbove only after a long effort. They sustained heavy losses in soldiers and equipment, and managed to create a several-kilometre wedge in the enemy's positions, but this did not have any major impact on the enemy's morale. The Ukrainian forces thus not only failed to move any closer to the port of Melitopol near the Sea of Azov, but also did not capture the town of Tokmak, a communication hub which plays a major role in the enemy's war logistics.

As for Donetsk oblast, Kyiv claimed it would recapture Bakhmut, a symbolic city which it lost in May after almost a year of heavy fighting. The Ukrainians retained the initiative, but the goal was not

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achieved. So far, attempts to fortify the left bank of the Dnieper in Kherson oblast have also been unsuccessful: although the Ukrainians have captured (and still maintain) some bridgeheads and are engaging Russian forces, they have not undertaken a large-scale landing operation. Therefore – after five months of intense hostilities, but before the Ukrainian troops are expected to slow down as the weather deteriorates – it can be understood that General Zaluzhnyi's interview for the *Economist* represented a public confession that the summer-autumn counteroffensive had been unsuccessful.² He also criticised the West for deciding too late about the tempo and technological advancement of its military aid. These omissions, in the opinion of the Ukrainian commander-in-chief, may lead to Ukraine's eventual defeat.

The deteriorating international situation

The Ukrainian government is continuing its efforts to keep its war with Russia high on the international political agenda. This is primarily manifested through President Volodymyr Zelensky's increasingly frequent visits to key allies. Over the last year he has visited the USA twice, and since the beginning of this year, he has visited France & the UK twice each, and has held talks in Warsaw, Berlin, Istanbul, Rome, Stockholm, Bucharest and other places. The main aim of these visits has been to boost military and financial support, without which Ukraine's chances of victory would fall dramatically. Kyiv also came up with the initiative of holding meetings of national security advisers. The planned summits in Copenhagen, Jeddah and Malta are intended to convince the world – including key players in the Global South, such as India, South Africa and Brazil, as well as China – to support the Ukrainian vision for the end of the war (the so-called peace formula), which envisages regaining its territorial integrity, the withdrawal of Russian troops and forcing Moscow to pay reparations, among other demands.

Kyiv fears that the lack of obvious successes on the front is undermining the West's motivation to continue its support. Back in September Zelensky declared that Ukraine was ready for a long war, while at the same time bitterly pointing out the insincerity of Western partners' assurances of support for his country and their suggestions that Kyiv should consider negotiating with Moscow.³

² 'Ukraine's commander-in-chief on the breakthrough he needs to beat Russia', *The Economist*, 1 November 2023, [economist.com](https://www.economist.com).

³ 'Donald Trump will "never" support Putin, says Volodymyr Zelensky', *The Economist*, 10 September 2023, [economist.com](https://www.economist.com). ("I have this intuition, reading, hearing and seeing their eyes [when they say] 'we'll be always with you'" he says. "But I see that he or she is not here, not with us". Some partners might see Ukraine's recent difficulties on the battlefield as a reason to force it into negotiations with Russia. But "this is a bad moment, since Putin sees the same".)

The war, which has been ongoing for over 20 months and to which no end is imminently in sight, no longer resonates in the West as strongly as before, and the president's power of persuasion over other leaders has weakened. His visit to the US in September did not go as planned (for example, his request to address a joint session of the US Congress was denied and, according to some sources, his proposals to give television interviews for Fox News and Oprah Winfrey were turned down). He also failed to achieve the expected results in overcoming the scepticism of some Republican congressmen regarding the quick approval of another military aid package worth \$24 billion. This should be attributed primarily to the accelerating election campaign in the US, where support for Kyiv is already being discussed, and also to the allegations of corruption and state capture which have been brought against Zelensky's inner circle.

Furthermore, the outbreak of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is stopping the Ukraine war from remaining high on the international agenda: the attention of the media, and therefore of the public and politicians, is currently focused on the Middle East. The Ukrainian government is increasingly concerned that this factor may further weaken the West's will to provide support, and in particular could alter the priorities for aid in the US.

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Kyiv's unwillingness to make concessions

Despite the lack of clear success on the front and the growing fatigue with the war, 94% of Ukrainians believe in victory⁴ and are not ready to make any concessions. They are right to view the idea of so-called 'compromise', which involves limiting their country's sovereignty, territorial concessions and freezing military operations, as nothing more than a postponement of acts of aggression by the Kremlin in the future, and do not accept it. Most Ukrainians still share the belief that, without a military victory which forces Russian troops to leave the constitutional borders of their country, no stable and long-lasting peace will be possible.

At the same time, Ukrainians are more and more aware of the fact that Russia has significant reserves and can continue the war for many years, even if Western support for their nation is maintained.⁵ The percentage of respondents who declare the need to fight until final victory is also decreasing (although they are still the majority): over the last year it has dropped from 70% to 60%. At the same time, the share of those who see the need for negotiations to quickly end the conflict has risen from 26% to 31%.⁶ These sentiments are growing fastest in the eastern and southern parts of the country, which are most affected by the hostilities.

The Russian perspective

Despite the heavy losses sustained in Ukraine and the Russian army's shift to strategic defence, as well as the economic costs of the sanctions regime, there are no signs that the Kremlin is ready to withdraw from its strategic goals towards Kyiv and the West. These remain: discontinuing Ukraine's efforts to integrate with the West and adopt Western democratic standards, limiting Ukraine's sovereignty (and obtaining the West's assent to it), the transfer of power in Kyiv to politicians who are ready to accept Russian conditions, and terrorising the Ukrainian public into understanding that accepting

⁴ See the survey 'Всеукраїнське опитування' conducted by Ukraine's Rating Group for the International Republican Institute in September this year.

⁵ Zob. 'Dynamics of the perception of Russia's safety margin in the war against Ukraine: the results of a telephone survey conducted on September 29 – October 9, 2023', Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 23 October 2023, kiis.com.ua.

⁶ B. Vigers, 'Ukrainians Stand Behind War Effort Despite Some Fatigue', Gallup, 9 October 2023, news.gallup.com.

the Russian demands is the only way to end the conflict. However unrealistic these goals may seem, the Kremlin still hopes that it can achieve them by continuing a war of attrition in Ukraine. Hence its unwillingness to start negotiations that would bring peace or even a ceasefire.

What is behind the Kremlin's calculation?

This stance is a consequence of the assumptions the Russian government has made regarding the international and domestic situation. Moscow believes that:

- the direction in which the global balance of power is evolving plays to its advantage: the United States and the entire West are becoming weaker, and their rivals are gaining strength;
- the US-China rivalry does not and will not allow the US to significantly increase its aid to Ukraine, let alone engage directly in the conflict;
- Russia is such a valuable ally for China that the latter cannot let it be defeated; hence its expectations that China will continue (even if reluctantly and cautiously) to support it economically, diplomatically and politically, so that Russia can afford to continue its 'war of attrition';
- Western societies will grow tired of the war in Ukraine, which may result in a reduction in the assistance provided to it.

The Kremlin believes that the West is in a state of political and social crisis, and that this crisis may lead to forces taking over political power which are ready to stop supporting Kyiv or resisting Russia's geopolitical revisionism (such as Donald Trump in the USA and Robert Fico in Slovakia). Moreover, Moscow estimates that its struggle against 'Western neo-colonialism' has already proven so effective that the West will not be able to persuade a sufficient number of Global South countries to break their economic ties with Russia, and these ties are not only saving its economy from collapse, but they also allow the Russian government to increase its war spending significantly.

The outbreak of the Israeli-Palestinian war has additionally strengthened the Kremlin's belief that Washington and Brussels will have to reduce their support

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for Kyiv, and that the pro-Palestinian position Moscow has adopted will contribute to increased sympathy for it, as well as the escalation of anti-Western sentiments in the countries of the Global South. Therefore, the Kremlin is confident that time is on its side. It assumes that, given Ukraine's much smaller population and its dependence on foreign aid, that the attritional war strategy it has adopted must, in the next few years, lead to the collapse of Ukrainian resistance and to Russian victory. A possible suspension of hostilities would thus not be beneficial for the Kremlin, because it would give Ukraine the opportunity to strengthen its military potential. Moreover, Moscow is closely following all the Western discussions about security guarantees for Kyiv. Russia fears that once the fighting stops (for example as a result of a ceasefire or truce), the West would provide Ukraine with security guarantees to deter Russia from resuming military operations.

The existential nature of the war with Ukraine

The recent unrest in the North Caucasus⁷ has only made the Kremlin more determined to continue the war in Ukraine until it achieves complete victory. It is obvious to those who share the mindset and outlook typical of the Russian special services with roots in the KGB, including Vladimir Putin and his

⁷ K. Chawryło, M. Bartosiewicz, 'Anti-Israeli riots in the North Caucasus', OSW, 31 October 2023, osw.waw.pl.

entourage, that these riots were the result of deliberate provocations by the US secret services. This further strengthened the Russian political leaders' belief that, contrary to Joe Biden administration's official declarations, the US has set itself the goal of bringing about regime change in Russia. This makes them even more convinced that the Ukraine war is a matter of existential importance. If Russia wins the war, this will be a groundbreaking step towards dismantling the post-Cold War international system based on the primacy of the United States. Such a change will create a situation in which the Kremlin is no longer exposed to the danger of 'colour revolutions' supported and inspired by the West.

The Kremlin is not giving up on its maximum goals for Ukraine, but nor has it outright rejected the idea of peace negotiations. The desired scenario, reflecting its approach to international politics, envisages bringing an end to the war by striking a deal with the US (the West) on redistributing the spheres of influence in Central and Eastern Europe on Russian terms, and then 'jointly' imposing these conditions on Ukraine. This scenario assumes either a complete collapse of Ukraine's ability to put up military resistance as a result of defeats on the front, or a radical change in Washington's course after the presidential elections in 2024.

At the same time, Moscow is trying to shift the odium for the prolongation of the war onto Kyiv: Russia accuses Ukraine of refusing to negotiate (referring to the resolution passed by the Ukrainian parliament prohibiting negotiations with Putin) or to end the conflict (calling President Zelensky's 'peace plan' an ultimatum). At the same time, it pretends to be interested in peace proposals formulated by non-Western countries (China, African countries and Brazil) so as not to alienate them. Its positive assessment of China's 'peace plan' for Ukraine is intended to help Beijing in its game of maintaining a semblance of neutrality, while economically, diplomatically and politically it has effectively been supporting the Russian war effort.

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Prospects

The failure of the Ukrainian counteroffensive dashed the hopes of Kyiv and the West for a quick end to the war. Although local successes are still possible, the front line is not expected to shift significantly in the defenders' favour over the coming months. This puts the Ukrainians in a difficult position: unlike the Russians, the continuation of their fight largely depends on external financial and military assistance, and the scope of support they will obtain next year is still questionable. This raises a serious dilemma: whether Ukraine should continue the offensive operations, or focus on defending the territories regained, fortifying the front, and waiting for the enemy's next attack.

The Ukrainian public will not accept any concessions or a freeze to the conflict; these solutions would only suspend the Russian invasion, while at the same time ruining the chances for the extensive reconstruction of their country and putting it back on the path to economic growth. The government is therefore preparing for a long war of attrition, knowing that the country may have to rely more and more on its own resources. Ukraine still has human reserves (people under 27 have still not yet been mobilised), high determination and morale. What it has problems with is armament, ammunition and military equipment; the rapidly available post-Soviet resources of these have already been largely drained, both in Ukraine and the countries that are its allies.

Moscow is aware of (and is even exaggerating) Kyiv's increasingly difficult situation. The Kremlin is very optimistic about the development of the international situation, and is convinced that it will be

able to control the situation in Russia itself. All this will encourage it to continue the war in order to force Ukraine to capitulate and make the West accept a revision of the status quo in Eastern Europe. If the West (or Kyiv) comes up with the initiative to start negotiations, or even suggests a readiness to negotiate, Moscow will treat it as a sign of weakness, which will only strengthen its determination to achieve its strategic goals. If negotiations do take place, the Kremlin will translate its demands for 'demilitarisation' and 'de-Nazification' of Ukraine and 'security guarantees for Russia' into a language of specific obligations that it will want to impose on the West and Ukraine. There is no doubt that in the current conditions, the Kremlin only intends to treat any such talks as a path to determining the terms of Kyiv's (and the West's) surrender. It will also use it as a tool to demoralise its foreign adversaries, and take the advantage to play off the members of the pro-Ukrainian coalition against each other by creating the illusion of a possible diplomatic and 'compromise' resolution to the conflict.

The West should not be deceived into thinking that accepting Russian demands towards Ukraine will permanently stabilise its relationship with Russia. Moscow does not hide the fact that it has not withdrawn the ultimatums it gave to Washington and Brussels in December 2021. The idea is to create a buffer security zone in Central Europe and eliminate the US military presence on the Old Continent, including its nuclear deterrent. If the Kremlin's use of a policy of force against Ukraine is successful, that will only encourage it to resort to it again to force the West to accept Russian demands.