

Year two of the war: Russia goes on the offensive, the West trapped in its strategic delusions

Wojciech Konończuk

The second year of Russia's invasion of Ukraine has not brought any breakthrough, let alone a resolution to the conflict, and all indications are that none of this could have been avoided. After 24 months of facing Russia's full-scale assault, the Ukrainian forces are still able to mount a successful defence along a frontline that stretches for some 1000 km, and they have even managed to recapture a significant part of the territories they lost in the first phase of the conflict. Prior to 24 February 2022, anyone who had thought up such a scenario would likely have been dismissed as an unrealistic fantasist.

The military situation has not changed significantly in the past year. In late May 2023, the Russian army succeeded in capturing Bakhmut after ten months of heavy fighting. In the following four months, the Ukrainian Armed Forces seized the initiative and launched a long-awaited counter-offensive on 4 June with the aim of cutting Russia's land connection with Crimea. As we know, it did not achieve any of its key objectives and ended in failure.

Ukrainian disappointment was all the greater as, during the build-up to the offensive operations, some of the country's politicians and military officials had been whipping up hopes for success, including re-entering the Crimean peninsula. However, the Russian defences turned out to be stronger than expected while Western arms supplies were insufficient and arrived late, giving the Russian forces time to build three defensive lines in the south.

In the period between October 2023 and February 2024, Russia seized the initiative and put the Ukrainian forces on the defensive. The trench warfare continued, with the most intense fighting taking place around Avdiivka, Kupiansk, Marinka, Bakhmut, Kreminna and Krynky. The symbolic culmination of this phase came on 19 February, when the Ukrainian defenders finally withdrew from Avdiivka, once a city of 30,000 people, located north of the Donetsk suburbs. This loss was particularly painful as Ukraine had controlled the city since 2014, despite the difficult conditions. However, continuing to defend it would have been an act of desperation. Russia has indeed scored a success here, but nevertheless it falls far short of its ambitions.

On the other hand, Ukraine has achieved an undeniable success in recent months by opening up the transport corridor across the Black Sea after Russia withdrew from an agreement on 17 July 2023



Centre for Eastern Studies

ul. Koszykowa 6a, 00-564 Warsaw, Poland

tel.: (+48) 22 525 80 00, info@osw.waw.pl

www.osw.waw.pl

EDITORS: Tomasz Strzelczyk, Szymon Sztyk,

Katarzyna Kazimierska

TRANSLATION: Radosław Alf

CO-OPERATION: Jim Todd

DTP: Wojciech Mańkowski

The views expressed by the authors of the papers do not necessarily reflect the opinion of Polish authorities.

that guaranteed Ukrainian agricultural exports from Odesa and two neighbouring ports. This became possible after Ukraine had effectively deprived Russia's Black Sea Fleet of the ability to operate in parts of the Black Sea, thus thwarting one of Russia's major goals: to bleed its neighbour dry economically. In December 2023, grain exports from Ukrainian ports on the Black Sea were almost as high as before the full-scale invasion.

The list of Ukrainian successes also includes bold drone attacks on facilities within the Russian Federation. Ukraine has been targeting Russian military and energy infrastructure with increasing frequency, and there are many indications that its retaliatory potential involving the use of drones will continue to grow. This will allow it to substitute many of its conventional Western-supplied weapons. At this stage, however, this factor alone is unlikely to become a game-changer in the war.

Determination on both sides of the frontline

Two years into the war, Ukrainian society is exhausted and has definitively lost hope of a quick and positive end to the conflict. At the same time, it is aware that, despite the extremely difficult situation, there is no alternative to continuing the defensive war. Moreover, 85% of the public still believes that the Russian invasion can be repelled. This sustained consolidation of the population is one of the most important factors affecting the country's political and social situation. At the same time, however, Ukraine has seen a resurgence of political rivalry, while a series of corruption scandals has made it clear that the old problems have not disappeared during this existential conflict. President Volodymyr Zelensky's long-rumoured decision to dismiss General Valerii Zaluzhnyi as Commander-in-Chief, which came on 8 February, should also be seen as part of a political game.

Just as Ukraine is determined to defend its independence, on the other side of the frontline Russia is determined to continue its on-

slaught. By late summer 2023 at the latest, after a period of uncertainty preceding the opponent's counter-offensive, the Kremlin began to believe again that it could turn the tide of the war and achieve victory. Russia has discerned the growing vulnerabilities within Ukraine and the West, but it has also continued to underestimate the Ukrainians while failing to learn from its own mistakes.

” The Kremlin has openly stated its objectives towards both Ukraine and, more broadly, the international order in this part of the world.

The Kremlin has openly stated its objectives towards both Ukraine and, more broadly, the international order in this part of the world. Russian officials have made numerous statements to this effect, but the most striking example is the remark by Dmitry Medvedev, who once embodied Western hopes for liberalisation in Russia, that “there was no Ukraine and there won't be one”. This kind of narrative, amplified by the Kremlin's propaganda outlets, is commonplace. Despite the many examples of Russia's atrocities in Ukraine, it appears that some in the West still refuse to acknowledge them.

The war has become the most important political project of the Putin regime, which does not seek any sort of agreement or 'compromise' but is only interested in dictating the terms of surrender to Ukraine. The Kremlin has been rhetorically flexing its muscles in a partly successful attempt to project its resilience to Western sanctions and its internal stability, although this has nothing in common with the reality of Russia's situation. Russia, in fact, is weaker than it wants the world to see.

Alexei Navalny's recent death in an Arctic penal colony and Yevgeny Prigozhin's mutiny eight months earlier have exposed the regime's concealed weaknesses rather than its strength. At the same time, there is no doubt that the ongoing war has profoundly changed Russia, rapidly exacerbating the increasingly totalitarian nature of its system. A new law allowing the confiscation of assets for 'discrediting the army' or 'activities against state security', which was passed in mid-February, is only

the latest in a long list of similar moves. The fact that the majority of Russian people appear to support the conflict with Ukraine has reinforced the Kremlin's conviction that it is in complete control of the social situation.

However, the war and Western sanctions have driven the Russian economy into stagnation; its 'primitivisation' and the shift to a war footing have been deepening. Consequently, the defence sector has been expanding at the expense of other industries. In addition, Russia's economic dependence on China has been growing. As the presidential 'elections' (15–17 March) draw near, the Kremlin has been striving to maintain a sense of socio-economic stability. It will probably still be able to provide the necessary resources over the next year or so. However this stability may prove to be fragile, and a serious collapse seems only a matter of time.

The West's strategic weakness

Russia sees its chances for success in the war primarily in the weakness of the West. The attitude of the Western community, led by the United States, during the invasion's first months was an unexpected and unpleasant surprise for the Kremlin. Without Western military and financial support, the Ukrainian state is not and will not be able to continue the fight or preserve its economic and social stability. The problem is that even though the Western political elite was shocked by the outbreak of the war, it has been unable to turn this into a long-term strategy for dealing with Russia. Moreover, the gap between the approach of Western Europe and that of the countries on NATO's eastern flank (apart from Hungary) and the Nordic countries is becoming increasingly evident. They differ fundamentally in their diagnosis of the situation and their vision of what needs to be done.

Western support for Ukraine since 24 February 2022 has also been accompanied by self-restraint on the part of certain key countries in terms of the quantity and quality

” Even though the Western political elite was shocked by the outbreak of the war, it has been unable to turn this into a long-term strategy for dealing with Russia.

of the equipment they have transferred to Ukraine, which stems from their deep-rooted fear that the war could escalate. Despite the assurances of “support for as long as it takes”, the US and Germany actually wanted to create conditions that would force Russia to negotiate with Ukraine, or at least to freeze the conflict. However, this approach was based on a misreading of the Putin regime's mindset. It views politics as a zero-sum game, and has treated the attitude of the major Western capitals as a sign of their weakness, which must be ruthlessly exploited. What could exacerbate the conflict is not an increase in supplies of weapons such as missile systems and long-range artillery shells, but a failure to deliver them to Ukraine. After all, nothing provokes Russia more than the West's weakness, its internal disputes and its efforts to seek a 'compromise' with Moscow.

Just as Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 went beyond the strategic imagination of the majority of the Western elite, today the West (or at least a part of it) continues to suffer from a bewildering malaise. This is the impression one can get when watching its failure to take action and make policy decisions on providing further support for the embattled Ukrainians – decisions which should have been taken months ago as a matter of urgency. The Kremlin has been keeping an eye on the endless discussions in the US Congress about the next package of military aid to Ukraine, the protracted talks within the EU about the shape of a fund to provide military support to Ukraine within the framework of the European Peace Facility, and the belated and highly inadequate steps designed to help Western arms companies ramp up production. The West could afford this kind of protracted internal negotiations in peacetime, but not during Europe's biggest conflict in more than seven decades – a conflict which threatens to escalate further if it is not extinguished.

Worse still, sometimes the assistance given to Ukraine has turned into a form of self-promotion. Germany has excelled in this area. We may get the impression that some countries are not only keen to support Ukraine, but also to trumpet their support as widely as possible, regardless of whether they have backed up their narrative with real action. In the case of Germany, this is also intended to repair the disasters incurred to its image in the early months of the full-scale war.

The Kremlin's renewed faith in victory is thus based on its diagnosis of the West's numerous, deepening weaknesses and, above all, on

” The West, or at least a crucial part of it, seems to be trapped in its strategic delusions, as if it did not want to realise the stakes of this war.

its hope for a change in the White House if Donald Trump returns as the next US president. In Russian calculations, this would trigger a crisis in transatlantic relations, and at the very least, lead to a significant reduction in the US security umbrella over the Old Continent. This is why the Kremlin, which has long sought to expand its power by exploiting the West's divisions and internal problems, has kept a close eye on the situation in the US and spotted an emerging window of political opportunity. Russia is a country that knows how to take advantage of arising opportunities and undeserved gifts. This raises the spectre that the Kremlin could make another wrong diagnosis and consequently take even riskier and more dangerous decisions. Indeed, the Putin regime may conclude that external circumstances in the US and the EU are ripe for testing Western resilience; that runs the risk that it could choose to escalate its ongoing hybrid war against the West, or even launch a limited military operation. This makes it imperative for NATO countries to develop an effective policy for deterring Russia through appropriate strategic communication, and even more broadly, rapid changes to their defence plans.

* * *

The most important question concerns the war's future and its possible end. Since its first weeks, or at least since it became clear that Kyiv would not fall (contrary to Russian assumptions), it has been obvious that this conflict would last a long time. Everything indicates that this diagnosis remains valid. If we assume that the Ukrainian Armed Forces get the means to defend themselves – which requires quick decisions in the West (mainly in the US Congress) – we can cautiously predict that no strategic finale will be reached within the next twelve months.

Ukraine can still end this war with a victory, understood as a successful defence of its independence – albeit perhaps within different borders than in 1991. But it can also lose this war if the West fails. The latter's potential is many times greater than Russia's, but potential is one thing, the political will to use it is another. The Kremlin has demonstrated that it has such a will, and it has been exercising it systematically. On the other hand, the West (or at least a crucial part of it) seems to be mired in its strategic delusions, as if it did not want to realise the stakes of this war.