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Nine Lessons for the West About Ending Russia's War on Ukraine in 2023

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In 2022, most Western assumptions about Russia's war on Ukraine proved to be wrong. Russia was weaker and more depraved than assumed; Ukraine was stronger and more virtuous. As we enter 2023, the West needs to take a fresh look at Russia's war, as well as Western policies, and draw some strategic conclusions. In a nutshell – there will be no security in Europe as long as Putin's war continues. To assure the security of Europe in the future, we must first help Ukraine achieve victory in its defense against Russia – the sooner the better.

The State of Play

As Ukraine enters 2023, Russia shows no signs of ending its ill-fated war. Putin continues to hold contrived and maximalist demands of “de-nazification” and “de-militarization” of Ukraine and annexation of pieces of Ukrainian territory. He is willing to entertain the notion of negotiations only if it is with the United States (and perhaps the West), not with Ukraine, and only for the purpose of ratifying his demands. To get his way, he is deliberately targeting Ukrainian civilians and the civilian power and water infrastructure, hoping to create a new humanitarian crisis that leads to Western pressure on Ukraine to end the war.

Despite these demands, however, Russia increasingly lacks the ability to achieve them. Russia has significantly depleted its conventional military forces, including personnel, heavy equipment, ammunition, missiles and more. It is sending untrained and poorly equipped recruits to the front, where they suffer heavy casualties. Russian forces are unable to take new territory and have failed to hold territories already taken, including areas Russia claims to have “annexed.” Russia is dependent on purchases from Iran and is seeking support from North Korea and Belarus – hardly capable and determined allies. Russian missile and drone attacks on Ukraine continue, but with decreasing impact as Ukrainian air defenses are improving.

When the large-scale invasion began in February, most observers believed Russia would defeat Ukraine quickly. That prediction, and many others over the course of months, all proved wrong. Ukrainians stood and fought. The Russian army was far less capable, disciplined and motivated than had been believed. The Ukrainian army was far better trained, more innovative and motivated than had been believed. The Ukrainian population proved remarkably resilient, and through that inspired the world. Putin turned out to be poorly informed and advised, and far less competent as a leader than expected. Zelenskyy turned out to be far better.

As a result of these past misjudgments about Russia's war in Ukraine, the beginning of 2023 is a good time to take stock of the lessons the West *should* by now have learned, and to allow these lessons to guide Western policies in the future. Fundamentally, there is no possibility that Russia can achieve its objectives in Ukraine. There is, however, a good possibility that Ukraine can achieve its objectives of restoring its sovereignty and territorial integrity. The West should therefore be making decisions to accelerate the achievement of that Ukrainian goal as quickly as possible, and with the least suffering and loss of life possible.

Here are nine lessons the West should learn about Russia's war against Ukraine:

- 1. Under Putin, Russia has explicitly adopted a fascist and imperialist ideology by which it justifies aggression and war crimes, making it a threat to all of Europe.** If Russia defeats Ukraine, Putinism will continue to define Russian policy, and countries such as the Baltic States, Poland, Sweden and Finland will all be potential targets of future attacks. For Europe to be secure in the future, Putinism must be defeated and Russian forces expelled from Ukraine. Just as with Germany and Japan after World War II, at the end of this war, Russia must accept responsibility for the crimes committed by the Putin regime and must agree in future to live within its borders.
- 2. Ukraine will never willingly cede any territory to Russia and must not be pressured to do so.** Any land in Ukraine that Russia controls is land where Ukrainians may be tortured, raped, executed and persecuted, as we have seen in Bucha, Irpin, Kherson, Lyman and elsewhere. Ukrainians will not leave their compatriots to such a fate – and it would be reprehensible for anyone in the West to suggest they should do so. As President Zelenskyy has said, any negotiations with Russia must be premised on the full withdrawal of Russian forces, reparations to Ukraine for damage caused by Russia, prosecution of Russian war crimes, and the provision of security guarantees to *Ukraine* against future Russian aggression.
- 3. Crimea has only been “annexed” by Russia for 8 years.** The West must not fall for Putin's disinformation campaign suggesting that Crimea (or other provinces of Ukraine) have always been Russian. Crimea has a thousands-year history which far pre-dates any time when it was controlled by Russia. At various times it was under Ukrainian, Turkish, Greek or Russian rule. It was part of an independent Ukraine for 25 years before Russia seized it in 2014 – far longer than the time since Russia's recent claimed annexation. The West should therefore fully support Ukraine's expulsion of Russian forces from all of Ukraine – not imply that there is some difference between territory seized after February 24, 2022, and that seized in 2014 and 2015.

4. Ukraine is fully justified in striking military targets inside Russia. This is, after all, where Russia's attacks on Ukraine originate. The latest phase of Russia's aggression deliberately seeks to deny light, heat, water and food to the Ukrainian population. It is barbaric, inhuman and a crime against humanity. The bombs are mostly launched not from occupied Ukraine, but from Russia ships in the Black Sea, and Russia aircraft flying over southern Russia and the Caspian Sea. All of those airfields, ships, and aircraft are legitimate military targets for Ukraine in seeking to stop Russia's aggression.

5. Given the imperative for European security of Ukraine defeating Russia, there is no reason for the West to self-impose restrictions on its military aid. The West still refuses to provide the longest range artillery shells, multipurpose aircraft, advanced tanks, and advanced air and maritime drones to Ukraine. There is no reason for such restrictions. Avoiding "provoking" Putin reflects a policy mindset from a different era – when Russia could be reasoned with, was acting with restraint, and had substantial capabilities it was not using. Today, Russia is using every conventional means at its disposal to destroy Ukraine. In the face of such aggression, the only prudent course of action is to provide everything necessary to ensure Russia is defeated as quickly as possible.

6. Putin will not back down, yet Russian military forces lack the ability to win. This puts Russia military personnel in an untenable position. They are facing enormous casualties, as well as disease and hypothermia. As they die, Putin only throws more untrained Russian personnel into the fight. Russia lacks the ability to provide them with necessary personal gear, unit-based equipment, and logistical support. Putin's crimes against his own people are second only to his crimes against Ukrainians. For the sake of Russia as well, it is imperative that the West help Ukraine win the war as quickly as possible.

7. The West must significantly ramp up its information campaign aimed at the Russia military and intelligence services, the Russian people, and Western public opinion. Putin's regime continues to spew out false information about Ukraine, the West, and the war itself. While many Russians know not to trust information controlled by the Kremlin, they lack clear messages from the West that are essential to re-setting Russian thinking during and after the war. Among the key messages the West must convey:

- *The West is not attacking Russia and will not do so. The only threat to Russia comes from Putin's war against Ukraine.*
- *The West supports the aspirations of Russian people for freedom, peace, prosperity, and security, which are denied to them under the Putin regime.*
- *Nuclear weapons must never be used. Any use of nuclear weapons by Russia would have devastating consequences for the Russian military.*

8. The West must immediately adopt an economic strategy for helping Ukraine that equals its military support for Ukraine. Instead of merely backfilling Ukraine's massive budget deficit, the G7 (including the EU) must act urgently to help revive the Ukrainian economy. Frozen Russian Central Bank assets should be seized and used to help Ukraine recover. As they agreed on December 12, 2022, G7 members should appoint senior coordinators for Ukraine reconstruction. Sovereigns should provide risk insurance to investors to cover acts of war, thus facilitating investment in Ukraine.

Ukraine should become an energy supplier to the EU, replacing Russia as a source of energy. Emphasis should be on enabling private sector investment and economic development, not centralization, government control, and state-owned enterprises.

9. When the war is over, Ukraine must be part of the EU and NATO. The EU has already offered candidate status for Ukraine – but it must move expeditiously on accession negotiations. As for NATO, Finland's and Sweden's decisions to seek NATO membership are a clear indicator that there is no safety in Europe without it. If Sweden and Finland are making this choice, we cannot ask Ukraine (or Georgia) to accept less security. From an American perspective, the U.S. would not want to guarantee Ukraine's security alone: why not with 32 other countries instead? From a European perspective, is a security guarantee that leaves out the United States actually credible? Would Europeans even accept that risk, if the United States was not involved? Clearly, the only solution for Ukraine and Europe is for everyone to be “all in” – which, after all, is the founding premise of NATO from its inception.

All of these observations point to the same conclusion: the future of European security depends on the future of Ukraine. If Putin's war continues, the rest of Europe is at risk. But a Ukraine that defeats Putinism on the front lines, and defends freedom, democracy, and security for its own people, will in fact assure those values, and the security, of all of Europe.



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