

# UKRAINE MUST WIN

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The war in Ukraine has reached a turning point. The Russian troops that invaded the country from the north, south, and east are now scarcely moving. They have targeted schools, hospitals, apartment buildings, and a theater sheltering children, but they are not yet in control even of the places they occupy.

And no wonder: Few Ukrainians are willing to collaborate with the occupiers. The overwhelming majority, more than 90 percent, believe they will defeat them. The Ukrainian army refuses to surrender, even in cities badly damaged by bombardment.

Russian planners expected the entire war, the conquest of Ukraine, to last no more than six weeks. More than half that time has already passed. There must be an endgame, a moment when the conflict stops. The Ukrainians, and the democratic powers that support Ukraine, must work toward a goal.

That goal should not be a truce, or a muddle, or a decision to maintain some kind of Ukrainian resistance over the next decade, or a vow to “bleed Russia dry,” or anything else that will prolong the fighting and the instability. That goal should be a *Ukrainian victory*.

Before you can achieve something, you have to imagine what it will look like. And in this war, *victory* can be imagined without difficulty.

Victory means that Ukraine remains a sovereign democracy, with the right to choose its own leaders and make its own treaties. There will be no pro-Russian puppet regime in Kyiv, no need for a prolonged Ukrainian resistance, no continued fighting. The Russian army retreats back over the borders.

Maybe those borders could change, or maybe Ukraine could pledge neutrality, but that is for the Ukrainians to decide and not for outsiders to dictate. Maybe international peacekeepers are needed. Whatever happens, Ukraine must have strong reasons to believe that Russian troops will not quickly return.

Imagine, too, the consequences of such a victory. In Washington, most people have long believed that Ukraine is part of a regional conflict, and that Ukraine is a piece of territory that the Russians care more about than we do and always will. But this is no longer true.

The Ukrainians, and especially their president, Volodymyr Zelensky, have made their cause a global one by arguing that they fight for a set of universal ideas—for democracy, yes, but also for a form of civic nationalism, based on patriotism and a respect for the rule of law; for a peaceful Europe, where disputes are resolved by institutions and not warfare; for resistance to dictatorship.

Zelensky has urged Americans to remember Pearl Harbor. He appealed to the German Parliament with the phrase “Never again”—a mantra used to mean that no Hitler would be allowed to arise again—and told members that, in light of the brutal war in his country, those words are now “worthless.” He called on the European Parliament to “prove that you indeed are Europeans” and admit Ukraine to the European Union.

This language is effective because it evokes the principles that bind together the majority of Europeans, Americans, and many other people around the world, reminding them of how much worse the world was in the bloodier past, and how much worse it could be in the future if those principles no longer matter.

The words Zelensky uses also reverberate because they are true. A victory for Ukraine really will be a victory for all who believe in democracy and the rule of law. Citizens of existing democracies and members of the democratic opposition in Russia, Cuba, Belarus, and Hong Kong will all be emboldened. “Their struggle is ours,” a Venezuelan acquaintance told me last week. The institutions protecting the states that embody those ideas, most notably the European Union and NATO, will be strengthened too.

Zelensky’s words resonated further because the Russians have also given this conflict enormous significance. Russian foreign minister Lavrov has just declared that this war will change global politics:

*“This is not about Ukraine at all, but the world order. The current crisis is a fateful, epoch-making moment in modern history. It reflects the battle over what the world order will look like.”*

Exactly – and exactly why Ukraine must win and Russia must lose.

Much as Stalin once declared that, when the Second World War ended, “everyone imposes his own system as far as his army can reach,” Putin had planned for the Russian army to impose Russia’s autocratic, kleptocratic political system on all of Ukraine.

Already, the Russian occupation of some eastern-Ukrainian towns resembles the Soviet occupation of Central Europe at the end of World War II. Public officials and civic leaders—mayors and police but also members of Parliament, journalists, museum curators—have been arrested and not seen since. Civilians have been terrorized at random.

In Mariupol, authorities report that citizens are being forcibly deported to Russia, just as Soviet secret police deported Balts, Poles, and others to Russia after the invasions of 1939 and 1945.

In the case of a Russian victory, these tactics would be applied all over Ukraine, creating mass terror, mass violence, and instability for years to come. And, yes, if we accept that outcome, autocrats from Minsk to Caracas to Beijing will take note: *Genocide is now allowed.*

Precisely because the stakes are so high, the next few weeks will be extremely dangerous. Putin will do what he

can to create fear. The extraordinary speech he made last week, describing Russian critics of the war as “scum,” “traitors,” and “gnats,” had exactly that purpose. He spoke of Russia’s need for “self-purification” using a word with the same root as *purge*, the term that Stalin used when ordering the liquidation of his enemies.

Putin is deliberately evoking the worst and bloodiest era of Soviet history to avoid even a hint of domestic opposition. He has just thrown away 30 years of economic gains, 30 years of Russian integration with the outside world, 30 years of investment in order to turn the clock back to the era of his youth—an era that the majority of Russians no longer remember and few wish to see restored.

He seems to believe that only elevated levels of fear will prevent them from protesting, once they understand what has happened to their country. He may be right.

Putin and his propagandists are dropping hints about chemical and nuclear weapons for the same reason. They want outsiders, and especially Americans, to fear the consequences of helping Ukraine.

The use of hypersonic weaponry; the threats of nuclear war made on Russian television; even the habit, established a few years back, of practicing the use of nuclear weapons during military exercises, sometimes to simulate a hit on Warsaw, sometimes to simulate a bomb exploding in the air—all of that has a purpose.

So does the strange, ranting, anti-Polish letter issued by Dimitri Medvedev, the Putin crony who briefly served as president of Russia before Putin decided he wanted the job back again. This screed contained insults, veiled threats, and an old Soviet-era complaint that the Poles were “ungrateful” that the Red Army pushed Hitler out of Poland, and then established a brutal new occupation regime in Hitler’s wake.

Among other things, Medvedev was sending a reminder: Poland could be next. The recent Russian strike on a base near the Polish border sent the same message.

*How should the West respond? There is only one rule: We cannot be afraid.*

Russia wants us to be afraid—so afraid that we are crippled by fear, that we cannot make decisions, that we withdraw altogether, leaving the way open for a Russian conquest of Ukraine, and eventually of Poland or even further into Europe.

Putin remembers very well an era when Soviet troops controlled the eastern half of Germany. But the threat to those countries will not decrease if Russia carries out massacres in Ukraine. It will grow.

*Instead of fear, we must focus on a Ukrainian victory.*

Once we understand that this is the goal, then we can think about how to achieve it, whether through boycotts of Russian gas, oil, and coal; military exercises elsewhere in the world that will distract Russian troops; humanitarian airlifts on the scale of 1948 Berlin; and more and better weapons.

The specific tactics will be determined by those who best understand diplomacy and military strategy. But the strategy has to be clear. A month ago, nobody believed this war would matter so much, and I’m sure many people wish it did not. But it does.

That’s why *every move we make must have a single goal: How does it help Ukraine win?*

“It’s not our war” was something we might have been able to say three weeks ago. Not now.

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