



Józef Lang

How to end the war in Ukraine?

Scenarios for ending the conflict





**Klub
Jagielloński**

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Contents

- 7 / Executive summary**

- 11 / Chapter I – Factors influencing the conflict dynamic**
- 11 / General factors and international influence**
- 14 / Internal factors in Ukraine**
- 17 / Internal factors in Russia**

- 23 / Chapter II – Possible scenarios**
- 23 / Deciding factors**
- 26 / Negative scenario**
- 30 / Neutral scenario**
- 32 / Positive scenario**

- 36 / Chapter III – Ending the war – desired scenario for the West and factors to consider**

- 45 / Conclusions and recommendations**

Executive summary

- The overall factors influencing the conflict dynamic remain unchanged since the early summer of 2022. Russia at this stage is unwilling to accept the failure of its initial plans of subduing Ukraine under its political control. While Moscow does seek ways to freeze the conflict and retain the territories it currently controls, it is not willing to concede enough to make the possible agreement acceptable to Kyiv as it would be viewed as defeat both internally and externally, and might create risks for the regime. Ukrainian decision makers and society are unwilling to accept an agreement demanding territorial concessions from Ukraine. Altogether, this creates conditions where potential compromise agreement ending the conflict or freezing it through a ceasefire seems improbable at the moment without a major change in the overall parameters of the conflict.
- Three sets of factors can be distinguished as having the key role in determining the future scenario in which the war between Russia and Ukraine could unfold. These factors are: 1) the ability of the Ukrainian Armed Forces to successfully engage Russian Armed Forces and reclaim control over the Ukrainian territories occupied by Russia; 2) continuity of the Western support to Ukraine, including military and financial aid, both crucial to Ukraine's ability to continue its war efforts; 3) internal situation within the Russian Federation, its fragility and unpredictability, demonstrated by the coup attempt by the Wagner Group in July 2023.

- The negative scenario is further escalation of the conflict by Russia, which would have dire consequences for Ukraine and the West. Russia is already engaged in a full-scale conventional war with Ukraine, which leaves little room for escalation of the conflict in its current paradigm. Escalation therefore would either mean the use of weapons of mass destruction in Ukraine or territorial expansion of the conflict. The aim of such escalation would be to override the current conflict paradigm and settle/freeze the conflict on the terms that Russia may portray as its victory in Ukraine, i.e. including at least partial territorial gains compared to what Russia had been occupying prior to 24 February 2022.
- The neutral scenario is a continuation of the conflict in its current trajectory: with occasional tactical advances of either of the sides, yet little signs of a significant change in the overall conflict dynamic in the foreseeable future. This scenario should not, however, be interpreted as static – prolongation of the conflict will potentially lead to a change in the overall conflict paradigm by weakening militarily, politically and economically one of the sides more than the other. Given the slower than expected pace of the Ukrainian counteroffensive, it seems to be the most probable scenario for the coming months.
- The positive scenario is a relatively swift Ukrainian victory, understood as Ukraine being able to regain control over all of its territories, including Crimea, Donbas and other areas currently occupied by Russia, and Moscow being too weak to prevent it. Two factors will determine the possibility of this scenario: the capability of Ukrainian Armed Forces to secure military victories on the ground and more importantly the internal political situation in Russia.

- The preferable for the West scenario of ending the war is the quickest possible Ukrainian victory. In this case the Western states do not have to bear the rising indirect costs of the conflict and to compromise their long-term strategic interests. Success of this scenario is largely dependent on factors outside of control of the Western countries. Yet a number of measures can be undertaken by the West to accelerate it. First of all, by increasing the scale and scope of their support for Ukraine. Given the high indirect costs of war (mainly rise of energy prices and inflation rate), the intensified military support for Ukraine is likely a cheaper alternative in total costs than the prolongation of the conflict.
- In order for the West to be prepared for the challenges that will arise with the end of the war, appropriate considerations and planning should already take place. This includes the shape of the post-conflict policy towards both Ukraine and Russia. Policy towards Ukraine should not only focus on how to win the war, but also include support for the necessary reforms and setting conditionalities which will ensure the implementation of the reforms. The post-conflict policy towards Russia should be largely dependent on the state of the Russian Federation after the end of the war. In case Russia remains autocratic, the first priority should be given to the measures preventing it from aggressive policy towards the EU, NATO, and their partners. In case of a regime change in Russia and the beginning of its democratization, the support should focus on the reform process and democratization and liberalization of the Russian state and society. Finally, if an internal crisis would occur in Russia, the West should focus on minimizing the negative impact of the situation in Russia on its surroundings and global processes. This scenario would be the most difficult for the West to handle. At the same time the West is unable to prevent it

without sacrificing its strategic interests. Its occurrence depends on internal factors within the Russian Federation, including the structural challenges present even before the launch of aggression against Ukraine in 2022, some of which were exacerbated by the ongoing conflict.

Chapter I – Factors influencing the conflict dynamic

Discussions on the possible scenarios of how the Russian-Ukrainian war may evolve and what is the realistic course of action that the West (i.e. NATO and the EU) can pursue, should be preceded by outlining the major factors influencing the overall conflict dynamic in strategic terms. This is true especially for the internal factors within Ukraine and Russia. They are often overlooked in the broader conflict analyses, yet are crucial to Kyiv's and Moscow's approach to the conflict, and thus play a determining role in how the conflict unfolds.

1. General factors and international influence

The overall parameters of the conflict and factors influencing the conflict dynamics remain unchanged since early summer of 2022. After the failure of the initial Russian attack to reach its maximalist objectives, the war has entered its current stage.

Russia at this stage is unwilling to accept the defeat of its initial plans of subduing Ukraine under its political control. While Moscow does seek ways to freeze the conflict and retain the territories it currently controls through offers of ceasefire on terms favorable to Russia¹, it is not willing to concede enough to make the possible peace agreement acceptable to Kyiv. It would be viewed as defeat both internally and externally, which might create risks for the regime.

¹ For example the talks in Istanbul in March 2022.

Ukraine, despite the human, territorial and economic losses, remains unaltered in its stance that the conflict must end only after it reestablishes control over its entire internationally recognized territory, including the Crimean Peninsula. This has remained a clearly articulated position of both Ukrainian authorities and Ukrainian society (see further below).

The rising costs of war for Ukraine were accommodated by the large-scale support that Ukraine receives from its international partners. It includes not only military aid, but also macro financial support and direct budgetary support. Without them Ukraine would not be able to continue its war effort. In terms of military aid, international partners have provided more than 80 billion euro worth of military assistance.² It involves crucial assistance in delivering large quantities of artillery munitions or training Ukrainian troops, significantly influencing the ability of Ukrainian Armed Forces not only to halt Russian advances, but also launch counter offensives and reclaim control over territories previously occupied by Russian forces in Kharkiv and Kherson regions. More importantly, Ukraine has received the financial support it needs to maintain its budget liquidity and functioning of the state and its institutions. The downfall of Ukrainian economy (Ukraine's GDP decreased by 30 per cent in 2022)³ and increased spending on military (about 43 per cent of 2023 budget)⁴ only exacerbated the need for foreign financial aid. Despite the presence of a large shadow economy sector in Ukraine (estimated to be even as high as 30 per cent of GDP)⁵, it only dampens the effects of the economic downfall on the society, but does not contribute to budget income. In this context the direct budgetary support and financial assistance that Ukraine has received from the European

² Based on data gathered by Kiel Institute for The World Economy, available here: <https://www.ifw-kiel.de/publications/ukraine-support-tracker-data-20758/>

³ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/ukraine/overview>

⁴ https://mof.gov.ua/uk/budget_2023-582

⁵ <https://www.unian.ua/economics/finance/ponad-30-ukrajinskoji-ekonomiki-znahoditsya-v-tini-minekonomiki-novini-ukrajina-11699974.html>

Union, United States, IMF and other partners, which totaled about 71 billion euro, has been crucial.⁶

Actions of the international community, such as freezing Russian assets, sanctions and restrictive measures towards Russian energy commodities exports have also played a role. The effect of these measures has been downplayed by both supporters of more strict policy towards Russia and Moscow itself which in its narrative often portrays them as not effective. At the same time the long-term effects of Western sanctions and restrictions increases the cost of war for Russia. This can be best seen by the growing budget deficit in Russia and shrinking of reserves which takes place since the beginning of the war (further described in the chapter 1.3). In the short term however, Russia still has the capacity to circumvent the sanctions and maintain its budget liquidity.

Together, this creates conditions where potential compromise agreement ending the conflict or freezing it through a ceasefire seems improbable at the moment without a major change to the overall parameters of the conflict.

Internal factors in Russia and Ukraine are either nontransparent (Russia – see below) or unlikely to change in the predictable future (Ukraine), hence it is the influence of the outside actors that potentially has the ability to shift the strategic outlook of the conflict dynamic. Ukraine is largely dependent on the military and financial assistance from its partners. Up until now Ukraine's key partners assure of the unwavering character of this support. Yet as the war prolongs, the necessary level of support may be growing more difficult to maintain.

⁶ Based on data gathered by Kiel Institute for The World Economy, available here: <https://www.ifw-kiel.de/publications/ukraine-support-tracker-data-20758/>

2. Internal factors in Ukraine

One of the key, yet often overlooked, set of elements influencing the conflict dynamic are the internal political and social factors within Ukraine. Ukraine has withstood the initial Russian military attack, was able to regain control of 45 per cent of the territories occupied by Russia⁷ and functions as a state despite the war-time limitations. This has created socio-political conditions in which expectation to continue the war until the full Ukrainian victory is widely shared amongst the Ukrainian society. This limits options for a compromise agreement and forces the country's leadership to continue its war effort despite the challenges.

Ukrainian decision makers and society are unwilling to accept an agreement conserving the current status on the ground, even with some possible minor concessions from Russia. Public opinion polls show that 97 percent of the Ukrainian society believe that the war will end with Ukraine's victory⁸, with 64 percent clearly defining it as return of control over its internationally recognized territory, i.e. including the Crimean Peninsula.⁹ These numbers have remained steady despite Russia's attempts to raise the cost of war for the Ukrainian society, such as attacks on Ukrainian critical energy infrastructure in the winter of 2022/2023¹⁰, deliberate attacks on civilian targets far beyond the frontlines¹¹ or numerous informational operations against Ukrainian society (emphasizing the scale of Ukrainian losses, doubting the unwavering character of Western support etc.).¹²

⁷ <https://tsn.ua/politika/ukrayina-povernula-blizko-45-vlasnih-teritoriy-derzhdep-2376940.html>

⁸ https://ratinggroup.ua/research/ukraine/nineteenth_national_survey_results_of_the_year_expectations_for_the_future_november_20-21_2022.html

⁹ https://ratinggroup.ua/research/ukraine/opros_iri_obschestvenno-politicheskie_nastroeniya_v_ukraine_ilyun_2022.html

¹⁰ <https://klubjagiellonski.pl/2022/11/23/ukrainscy-wojownicy-swiatla-na-energetycznym-froncie-gdzie-tak-naprawde-rozstrzygnie-sie-wojna/>

¹¹ <https://civiliansinconflict.org/press-releases/one-year-on-ukraine-war-characterized-by-systematic-targeting-of-civilians/>

The rationale behind these views is that any settlement short of unquestioned Ukrainian victory would only pause the conflict rather than end it. The fear is that Ukraine would repeat the same path as it did in 2014, when Western-backed Minsk Agreements were able to contain the conflict to Donbas, but not halt it: low-level fighting and ceasefire violations were taking place daily – after signing of the Package of Measures for the Implementation of the Minsk Agreements (so-called Second Minsk Agreements) in February 2015, the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine has reported over 1.8 million ceasefire violations until 24 February 2022.¹³ Additionally, the Minsk Agreements had not prevented the full-scale Russian aggression in 2022. Ukrainians largely believe that any ceasefire now would result in a similar situation – territorial containment of the war, low-level fighting along the frontlines with occasional larger escalations, and return to the full-scale war after several years when Russia would recover its offensive potential.¹⁴

The realism of the above views and stance of Ukrainian society can be questioned, yet it is not a factor determining their impact on the course Ukraine follows. It clearly demonstrates the expectations of Ukrainian society. These expectations create an internal political reality in which president Volodymyr Zelenskyy, as a democratically elected leader aspiring for reelection, has to operate. Thus, they influence the state policy as such. After the initial attempts to negotiate a ceasefire with Russia (talks in Belarus and Istanbul in February and March 2022)¹⁵ and their harsh reception by the Ukrainian society, Zelenskyy and his administration have altered their course and clearly outlined the parameters of Ukrainian victory as regaining full control of the internationally recognized Ukrainian

¹² <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-polytics/3666859-ak-provalilas-masstabna-rosijska-ipsa.html>

¹³ OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine Daily Reports, available at: <https://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/reports>

¹⁴ <https://tsn.ua/politika/znovu-pidut-viynoyu-v-op-poyasnili-chomu-zayavi-rosiyi-pro-peregovori-brehnya-2198554.html>

¹⁵ <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2022-03-30/atak-rosji-na-ukraine-stan-po-34-dniach>

territory, reparations from Russia and some form of security guarantees to Ukraine – preferably membership in NATO, or series of bilateral security guarantees as a temporary measure.¹⁶

Additionally, no major political actor in Ukraine has raised the question of possible ceasefire or agreement ending the conflict – all major political figures emphasize the need to continue the war until Ukraine’s victory and Russia’s defeat. Stance like that is understandable, as no public demand for the contrary is present. In case external factors force Kyiv to enter into this sort of agreement, it would present a political opportunity for the opposition to attack Zelenskyy and the ruling Servant of People party.

Given all of the above, the Kyiv’s calculus, at times even publicly voiced by Ukrainian statesmen and experts, seems to be to continue the fight until an internal crisis in Russia occurs, creating ground for easier liberation of the Ukrainian territories.¹⁷ Regardless of the probability of this scenario, it is the only feasible option for Zelenskyy to accommodate the society’s expectations and in case it is needed, attempt to put the blame on inadequate Western support. Similar narrative was already used by Kyiv to justify the slower than expected pace of the Ukrainian counteroffensive in Zaporizhia oblast in summer of 2023.¹⁸

¹⁶ <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-politics/3671434-ukraina-peremoze-i-bude-v-evrosouzi-j-nato-zelenskij-vistupiv-na-munhenskij-konferencii.html>

¹⁷ <https://glavcom.ua/news/reznikov-sprohnozuav-jak-kriza-vladi-u-rosiji-posprijajepovernennju-krimu-889084.html>

¹⁸ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/06/30/valery-zaluzhny-ukraine-general-interview/>

3. Internal factors in Russia

Russia is unable to achieve its objectives of securing control over Ukraine and its offensive military potential has been diminished.¹⁹ At the same time it still has significant overall military potential and is capable of defending its control over the currently occupied Ukrainian territories. Moscow is unwilling to recognize the defeat of its original plans and its inability to militarily overcome Ukraine, as it fears it may pose a threat to regime stability. Number of internal factors may limit Russia's ability to continue the conflict in its current form. The most important ones include conflict within the elites and the gradual erosion of the state, Russia's financial situation, and to a much lesser extent the role of the society.

The most important internal factor within Russia influencing the conflict dynamic are the internal rivalries and tensions within the Russian elites, which historically have been the single largest threat to the stability of the Russian state in its various forms. Russian internal political life is far from transparent and the war made it even more impenetrable. However, even those events and processes that can be observed indicate growing tensions and polarization within the Russian elite, especially its military and security apparatus.²⁰ The coup attempt by Yevgeny Prigozhin, Wagner Group financier, in early July 2023 has demonstrated the destructive potential of such tensions. These tensions do not limit to the rivalry between the Wagner Group and Ministry of Defense which have escalated in the months prior to the coup attempt, but also take place within the military establishment itself, what can be seen in dismissal of top generals (like the commander of the so-called Special Military Operation general Sergey Surovikin)²¹ or even at times their publicly voiced criticism of how Russia conducts the war against Ukraine (for example the commander of the 58th Army general Ivan Popov).²²

¹⁹ <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-has-lost-half-its-combat-capability-ukraine-uk-defense-chief-1811042>

²⁰ <https://re-russia.net/en/analytics/056/>

²¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-64235713>

There are little available facts to illustrate tensions within the political and business elites of the Russian Federation. Independent Russian media and researchers even prior to the war speculated about rising tensions between the high-level security officials and some of the oligarchs, supported by the so-called technocratic group within the Russian government. In the months after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Russian elite has been described as divided into three groups: “peace party”, which is led by oligarchs directly influenced by the sanctions (such as VTB bank CEO Andrey Kostin, Rostech CEO Sergey Chemezov or Sberbank CEO German Gref, or even Yuriy Kovalchuk, closely linked to Putin), who hope that in case of a ceasefire sanctions affecting them would be lifted; “war party” centered around Putin and high-level security officials who opt for continuation of the conflict and current policies; and finally the “silent party” composed largely of technocratic members of the Russian political elite (including Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin), who distance themselves from the war and avoid taking a stance on what course should be followed. While the above does not seem improbable, there is little or anecdotal evidence beside media publications to prove it. Additionally, ties within the Russian elite are not transparent or based on ideological/political differences, but business and personal ties. This creates informal groups that include figures from different sections of the Russian elite, defying simple divisions and categorizations. Example of that can be the Novye Liudi (“New People”) pro-Kremlin, controlled-opposition political party that entered the State Duma in 2021 elections (15 mandates) and was viewed as a project of Yuriy and Mikhail Kovalchuks supported by Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin (previously involved with the Rodina party).

Tensions within the elites are also linked to another political process ongoing in Russia since the beginning of war against Ukraine – gradual erosion of the state. This process dictated by the war-time

²² <https://meduza.io/feature/2023/07/13/vyskazal-na-samom-vysokom-urovne-otkrovenno-i-predelno-zhestko>

necessities can already be observed in the Russian Federation. The most visible case of it is functioning of the Wagner Group and other smaller private military companies (including those affiliated with state-owned enterprises like Gazprom)²³ and the erosion of the state monopoly on the use of violence. Other cases include factual deconstruction of the power vertical, established by Putin during his early years in power, by shifting the responsibility to create volunteer battalions to the regional authorities. The formation of volunteer battalions started in June 2022 and was initially aimed at preventing formal mobilization to replenish the lacking manpower.²⁴ The process did not stop with the launch of partial mobilization in September 2022, with multiple information campaigns advertising volunteer service being launched afterwards.²⁵ Until the summer of 2023 almost 100 volunteer units had been formed in over 60 regions of the Russian Federation and two additional in occupied Ukrainian entities.²⁶ Additionally almost 30 so-called BARS (Country's Combat Army Reserve) reserve battalions were formed, which are also often supported by the local authorities, yet have stronger links to the local Military Commissariats which are tasked with organizing and manning them.²⁷

These processes began as ad-hoc measures dictated by military necessity, but have far-reaching consequences as they erode state functions and provide non-state actors, or new actors within the state, with the instruments and powers previously reserved only for the federal state apparatus and its specialized institutions.

²³ <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-february-7-2023>

²⁴ <https://rtvi.com/news/vmesto-mobilizaczii-gde-v-rossii-sozdayut-imennye-batalony-dlya-otpravki-na-voennuyu-operacziyu-na-ukraine/>

²⁵ <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-december-6>

²⁶ Calculations based on available data and analysis and mentions of the battalions in Russian media and social media.

²⁷ Calculations based on available data and analysis and mentions of the BARS battalions in Russian media and social media.

Another major factor that could influence the overall conflict dynamic is the economic and fiscal situation of the Russian Federation. The Russian economy has suffered a decline due to Western sanctions and withdrawal of Western companies responsible for about 40 percent of Russian GDP.²⁸ The visible effects of it are currently minimized by large budgetary subventions that did manage to stabilize the nominal downfall of GDP, which in combination with other cherry-picked statistical data is used by Moscow to show that sanctions are not effective in containing Russia.²⁹

Russia, however, does not likely have the capacity to uphold such measures for an extended period of time – even the record prices of natural gas and oil did not compensate for additional spending and Russia ended 2022 with a budget deficit of 3.3 trillion rubles (45 billion US\$), which amounts to 2.3 per cent GDP, while initially the budget was planned to end with 1.3 trillion rubles (17.7 billion US\$) rubles surplus.³⁰ The trend continues throughout 2023 – during the first seven months of the year the Russian budget deficit reached 2.817 trillion rubles (28.44 billion US\$), due to both expanded spending and shrinking income.³¹ For comparison, at the beginning of August 2023 the liquid share of Russia's National Welfare Fund which collects additional revenues from exports of energy commodities decreased to 7.183 trillion rubles (78.96 billion US\$)³² from about 8.3 trillion rubles (115 billion US\$ at the time) in 2021.³³ Currently the fund is used as one of the sources to finance the growing budget deficit, due to limited access to financial markets abroad.

²⁸ Sonnenfeld, Jeffrey and Tian, Steven and Sokolowski, Franek and Wyrebkowski, Michal and Kasprowicz, Mateusz, Business Retreats and Sanctions Are Crippling the Russian Economy (July 19, 2022). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4167193> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4167193>

²⁹ Ibidem.

³⁰ <https://www.interfax.ru/business/880140>

³¹ https://minfin.gov.ru/ru/press-center/?id_4=38632-predvaritel'naya_otsenka_ispolneniya_federalnogo_byudzheta_za_yanvar-iyul_2023_goda

³² <https://www.interfax-russia.ru/main/fnb-v-iyule-vyros-na-643-2-mlrd-rub-do-13-3-trln-rub-likvidnaya-chast-sostavila-4-8-vvp>

³³ <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4889391>

The influence of Russian society on the country's political course and conflict dynamic is minimal, yet should not be dismissed completely. Russian society is reluctant to engage in protest activity. This is caused by overall political apathy of the Russian society, lack of interest in political developments and the presumption that this sort of actions will not influence the state of affairs, but may be detrimental to those engaged in them.³⁴ On the contrary, local protests with non-political agenda, like protests against deterioration of local environmental or economic conditions show the potential for non-political protest activity in Russia.

Economic factors may also play a role – in January 2023 about 65 percent of Russians felt that their standard of living has decreased compared to 2022.³⁵ In case of Russian elites, the costs are more tangible, with estimates showing that the wealthiest Russian oligarchs may have lost up to 94 billion US\$ since the beginning of the war as a result of Western sanctions and downfall of Russia's stock markets.³⁶

The probable continuation of the conflict in a trajectory not favorable to Russia may lead to increased tensions within the Russian Federation. First of all the discrepancy between official propaganda and the prolongation of conflict may lead to decline in trust towards the state and its institutions, potentially leading to increased questioning of the regime and its policies. These processes will likely not mean a rise of pacifist or pro-democratic tendencies, but to the contrary – nationalist and hawkish agenda. Russian nationalism and imperialism remains a popular ideology amongst the politically active, passionate part of the Russian society, especially given little available legally operating alternative. In the past, organizations and individuals referring to these kinds of ideologies were actively used by Moscow

³⁴ <https://www.lrt.lt/ru/novosti/17/1823155/sotsiolog-iz-rossii-rossiiskoe-obshchestvo-ne-gotovo-k-bol-shomu-protestu-i-v-kremle-eto-ponimaiut>

³⁵ <https://pltf.ru/2023/01/27/krupnyj-biznes-v-oczenke-obshhestva-chto-ot-nego-zhdat-na-kogo-polagatsya-v-krizis/>

³⁶ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2022-12-29/billionaire-wealth-losses-in-2022-hit-1-4-trillion-led-by-elon-musk-jeff-bezos>

as means to channel sentiments present amongst parts of the Russian society to causes beneficial to the Kremlin in a controlled way.³⁷ During Russia's operations in Crimea and Donbas in 2014, such groups and individuals were actively used and then successfully transferred to a backtrack following the signing of the Minsk Agreements in September 2014 and February 2015. The scale of the current conflict, tensions within the elite and sentiment the ongoing war creates within the nationalist milieus may create a situation, where Kremlin's control over nationalistic and imperialist agenda may be more difficult. This already can be seen in nationalist leaders' criticism of the way the Kremlin wages the war and subsequent arrests of some of them.³⁸

³⁷ <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2017-08-08/russian-nationalism-three-years-after-annexation-crimea>

³⁸ First of all the arrest of Igor Girkin (Strelkov) in July 2023, <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2023/07/22/strelkova-girkina-arestovali>

Chapter II – Possible scenarios

1. Deciding factors

Based on the overall conflict dynamic and the parameters influencing it, three sets of factors can be distinguished as having the major role in determining the future scenario in which the war between Russia and Ukraine could unfold. These factors are: 1) the ability of the Ukrainian Armed Forces to successfully engage Russian Armed Forces and reclaim control over the Ukrainian territories occupied by Russia; 2) continuity of the Western support to Ukraine, including military and financial aid, both crucial to Ukraine's ability to continue its war efforts; 3) internal situation within the Russian Federation, the fragility and unpredictability of which was demonstrated by the coup attempt by the Wagner Group in July 2023. Analysis of these factors allows to create a general matrix of possible scenarios.

The most important factor determining the course of the conflict is the military situation on the ground, which given the current stage of the conflict is largely dependent on the ability of Ukrainian Armed Forces to achieve further victories following two successful counteroffensive operations last year in Kharkiv and Kherson oblasts. The counteroffensive in the south of Ukraine, which has been planned and prepared for several months, despite earlier Ukrainian announcements and claims³⁹, has so far had limited success in breaking through the Russian defensive lines. Kyiv's goal in the current counteroffensive, on several occasions articulated by Ukrainian command and civilian leaders is to cut the logistic routes between Russia and the occupied Crimean Peninsula, setting the

³⁹ <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/news-budanov-kontrnastup-viyna-rosiya/32385946.html>

ground for a siege, which could result in Russian withdrawal from the peninsula or create favorable conditions for further Ukrainian military action.⁴⁰ The fact that Russian forces have been building defensive positions in Crimea, far from the current frontlines, shows that the Russian military command does not exclude the possibility of this scenario.⁴¹

The present results of the Ukrainian counteroffensive are relatively modest, yet it is still far from over therefore it is too early to judge overall success. Ukraine has not yet utilized all of its Western-trained and equipped reserve forces⁴² and it has been able to successfully target Russian headquarters⁴³ and ammunition depots far from the front line⁴⁴, as well as to disrupt to some extent the logistic capabilities of Russia to supply its forces in the southern theater, including the Crimean Peninsula.⁴⁵

The ability of the Ukrainian Armed Forces to successfully engage Russian forces, especially the final result of the current Ukrainian counteroffensive, will also influence the other two deciding factors. In case Ukraine is able to secure military victories on the ground it will create more favorable political conditions for further enhancement of the foreign aid to Ukraine and affect the internal situation in Russia.

⁴⁰ Interviews of Head of the General Directorate of Intelligence (HUR), Ukrainian military intelligence agency Kyrylo Budanov or Secretary of the National Security and Defense Council Oleksiy Danylov, available respectively here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mwokf86Z2zs> and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V9Zs_RcxdOs

⁴¹ <https://meduza.io/news/2022/11/18/vlasti-anneksirovannogo-kryma-ob-yavili-o-stroitelstve-fortifikatsionnyh-sooruzheniy-na-poluostrove>

⁴² <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/ukraines-counteroffensive-is-a-marathon-not-a-blitzkrieg/>

⁴³ <https://zn.ua/war/v-vsu-podtverdili-udar-po-shtabu-i-sostavu-rossijan-v-berdjanske.html>

⁴⁴ <https://www.unn.com.ua/uk/news/2032779-u-povitryanikh-silakh-pidtverdili-znischennya-skladu-boyepripasiv-rosiyan-na-khersonschini>

⁴⁵ <https://kyivindependent.com/southern-command-russian-logistics-severely-impacted-by-attacks-on-crimean-bridges/>

The Western support for Ukraine – its scale and quality – is key to Ukraine’s ability to continue the conflict in its current shape. Without the military and financial support, Ukraine would certainly be unable to have the same effectiveness of the military operations, inflict the same level of losses to the Russian forces, or defend itself against the continuing Russian missile and UAV strikes against military and civilian targets across the entire territory of Ukraine. At the same time, even in the case of decrease of the Western support flowing to Ukraine, it would likely not translate directly to Kyiv’s willingness to freeze the conflict along the current lines. Internal social and political factors in Ukraine, as well as Kyiv’s assertive stance towards its partners in the past and present suggest that the direct result would be a political campaign targeting the decisions of Ukraine’s Western partners, combined with a transition to defensive posture along the front line, with some possible territorial losses.

At the moment the continuity and unwavering character of the support to Ukraine is often voiced by Western leaders, who assure that Ukraine will continue to receive the aid as long as it would be needed.⁴⁶ Simultaneously, in case the conflict prolongs, this level of support may be more difficult to maintain and its political costs may grow.⁴⁷ Elections and internal political developments in countries which are Ukraine’s top partners may also influence the scope and size of the aid delivered, influencing directly the general dynamic of the conflict.

Finally, the last strategic factor which may influence the overall conflict dynamic is the internal situation within the Russian Federation. This factor is the least transparent, yet could play a determining role in the future course of the conflict. The possibilities range from Russia being able to further mobilize its resources and continue the conflict to occurrence of an internal crisis in Russia, which could

⁴⁶ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/joe-biden-rishi-sunak-news-press-conference-watch-live-stream-today-2023-06-08/>

⁴⁷ <https://www.gmfus.org/news/threat-war-fatigue>

hinder its ability to effectively conduct military operations in Ukraine. At the moment such crisis does not seem imminent, yet given the latest developments in Russia, especially the coup attempt by the Wagner Group in July 2023, it could not be excluded. The possible causes could be tensions within the Russian elites, economic difficulties or military failures at the frontlines. The consequences of the crisis would depend on Moscow's ability to swiftly contain and resolve it – in case it prolongs the structural problems present in Russia could further fuel it, leading to Russia's inability to effectively continue its war against Ukraine.

2. Negative scenario

The negative scenario is a further escalation of the conflict, which would have dire consequences for Ukraine and the West. Russia is already engaged in full-scale conventional war with Ukraine, which leaves little room for escalation of the conflict in its current paradigm. Russia already is using its entire conventional military potential in Ukraine.⁴⁸ Escalation therefore would either mean use of weapons of mass destruction in Ukraine, or territorial expansion of the conflict. This could entail either the use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine (including actions leading to similar results as use of such weapons) or shifting the geography of the conflict outside of Ukraine to raise the costs of the Western support of Ukraine.

The rationale behind these actions may be first of all Moscow's desire to end the conflict on its terms – with at least some territorial and/or political gains compared to what Russia had occupied prior to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Russia is unable to reach its initial strategic objectives in Ukraine, yet it is not willing to settle the conflict on terms acceptable to Ukraine. This leaves little room for maneuver to end the war on terms acceptable by the Kremlin.

⁴⁸ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/russia-has-deployed-97-of-army-in-ukraine-but-is-struggling-to-advance-u-k-says-91086284>

Currently Russia continues the conflict in its present paradigm, possibly hoping that Kyiv's desire to fight the war until victory or extensive Western support for Ukraine will end sooner than Russia's ability to continue the war (due to e.g. tensions within the elites or economic and fiscal conditions). Russia deliberately tries to undermine these two factors, especially the socio-political consensus in Ukraine, which can be seen by the attacks on the civilian targets and the energy infrastructure, the purpose of which was to raise the costs of the ongoing war on Ukrainian society.⁴⁹ Russian actions so far have failed to deliver the desired result. In the optics of Russian decision makers, it may lead to a situation, where in order to end the conflict and cement the current status on the ground, Russia will be tempted to use unconventional methods to achieve its goals. In order to either break Ukraine's ability to continue its war effort or to by-pass Ukraine in conflict settlement by raising the stakes for the West to the point it would engage in negotiations with Russia, Moscow may resort to escalation. The aim of this kind of escalation would be to override the current conflict paradigm and settle/freeze it on terms that Russia may portray as its victory in Ukraine.

This scenario may entail different options, all of which share the same set of basic parameters. It would have to be an option potent enough to raise serious concerns in the West and alter the overall political climate surrounding the war between Russia and Ukraine. The threat of further escalation to a previously unimaginable scale should present itself real enough to override previous policy considerations. Finally, it should allow for a quick de-escalation and conflict settlement on terms acceptable by the Russian leadership. This leaves two potential escalation scenarios – use of weapons of mass destruction in Ukraine or provoking a threat of direct military confrontation with NATO in case the conflict is not resolved immediately.

⁴⁹ <https://klubjagiellonski.pl/2022/11/23/ukrainscy-wojownicy-swiatla-na-energetycznym-froncie-gdzie-tak-naprawde-rozstrzygnie-sie-wojna/>

The first category may include the use of weapons of mass destruction in Ukraine. The aim of this would probably be not so much to shift the military balance on the ground, as to create a political effect – a situation where continuation of the conflict would be deemed as too risky by Ukrainian society, leadership as well as the Western countries delivering support to Ukraine. In order to create such effect, nuclear weapons are more suited than the use of chemical and biological ones. Alternatively, Russia could also resort to actions posing similar political effect – first of all involving the nuclear power plants in Ukraine, especially the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Station in Enerhodar (currently under Russian control) or nuclear weapons tests in the former nuclear test grounds in Russia. Russian leadership had previously voiced threats over possible use of nuclear weapons on several occasions⁵⁰, yet the levels of intimidation from these threats have decreased, after consecutive self-declared Russian red lines have been crossed during the course of the conflict (attacks on Ukrainian territories Russia has annexed in September 2022, attacks on Crimea, attacks on the territory of Russia etc.).

Second option – threat of direct military confrontation between Russia and NATO – could deliver the same results for Russia. In case of a credible threat of confrontation, Russia may hope that the Western states would rather deescalate than risk engaging in an open conflict with Russia. Conditions of de-escalation would include settlement of the conflict with Ukraine, bypassing Kyiv in this regard. Russian actions in this regard may include overt Russian strike on targets within NATO member state, that Russia would claim a result of ongoing Western support to Ukraine, and diplomatic/informational campaign aimed at Western societies and leaders to present them with a choice between ending the war in Ukraine on conditions favorable to Moscow, or risking entering into a war with Russia. Alternatively, covert and hybrid Russian actions may take place – e.g. escalation of the situation on the

⁵⁰ <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/07/31/europe/medvedev-russia-nuclear-weapons-intl-hnk/index.html>

borders between Belarus and NATO states (Poland, Lithuania, Latvia), including border skirmishes and incursions by the Wagner Group troops stationed in Belarus. This would provide Moscow with political deniability in case of strong Western response.

Russia seems to lay foundations for the possibility of such actions in future. This can be seen in the rhetoric of Russian decision makers and propaganda calling for strikes against supply routes of military aid to Ukraine⁵¹, including on NATO territory⁵², and the relocation of the Wagner Group into Belarus. Number of reports suggest that Wagner Group has been deployed on a limited scale to areas adjacent to the Belarus border with NATO states, first of all Poland and Lithuania.⁵³ Rhetoric surrounding possible escalation of the situation at Belarus's border with NATO states, especially Poland, is also starting to appear in the Russian and Belarusian discourse, including statements by Belarusian leadership.⁵⁴

The factors which may trigger the scenario of escalation are linked mainly to the internal factors within Russia and to a lesser extent the actions of Ukraine and the West. The risks for Russia associated with execution of this scenario are colossal, especially if Moscow miscalculates the response of the West, but also other players including China.⁵⁵ Effectively, it would be a one-time, high-stake geopolitical gamble for Russia. So far Russia has refrained from engaging in such high risk actions, apart from the very decision to launch the aggression against Ukraine last year. Judging by the decisions of Russian leadership undertaken since the beginning of the war against Ukraine, Moscow understands, that the West, especially the United States, have the ability to effectively inflict costs

⁵¹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/12/29/russia-aims-to-disrupt-new-western-arms-supplies-to-kyiv-lavrov>

⁵² <https://news.obozrevatel.com/russia/dazhe-dumat-lishnij-raz-ne-budem-propagandist-solovev-prigrozil-unichtozhit-polskie-goroda-raketami-video.htm>

⁵³ <https://www.cnn.com/2023/07/29/europe/wagner-poland-suwalki-intl/index.html>

⁵⁴ <https://www.golosameriki.com/a/wagner-mercenaries-want-to-get-to-warsaw-rzeszow-lukashenko/7193301.html>

⁵⁵ China has already voiced its concerns and called for no use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine.

on Russia on a scale much larger than the current one, without directly engaging in direct military confrontation.⁵⁶ It is the reason why Moscow has refrained from major response after its numerous self-declared red lines have been crossed by Ukraine and the West, like deliveries of new types of military aid to Ukraine. In this regard, the perception of Russian leadership of no other alternative than escalation of the conflict or defeat in it, is the key factor that may trigger realization of the above mentioned scenario.

Russia already actively exploits the Western fears of escalation of the conflict. The aim of it is to force the Western states to self-limit their assistance to Ukraine in the fear that Russia may further escalate the war. Russian rhetoric and even actions in this regard are calculated at a more modest result and do not necessarily point to a possible escalation of the conflict. At the same time, they do not also preclude the occurrence of this scenario, which first of all would be used to secure strategic political effects and would have to be accompanied by information campaigns aimed at societies and decision makers in Ukraine and the West.

3. Neutral scenario

Neutral scenario is the continuation of the conflict in its current trajectory: with occasional tactical advances of either of the sides, yet little signs for a significant change in the overall conflict dynamic in the foreseeable future. This scenario should not, however, be understood as static – prolongation of the conflict will have impact on both Ukraine and Russia, potentially leading to a change in the overall conflict paradigm by weakening one of the sides more than the other.

The consequences may include growing war fatigue in Ukraine. On a military level it may create growing problems with replenishing

⁵⁶ Such measures may include transfer of additional types of weapon systems to Ukraine, cyber-attacks on Russia, covert actions aimed at Russian stability etc.

the manpower of Ukrainian Armed Forces and creating new units necessary for regaining control over territories occupied by Russia.⁵⁷ On the political level it may influence the current socio-political consensus in Ukraine and lead to questioning of the policy to continue the war until full Ukrainian victory. Continuation of the war in its present form with little perspective for progress in the foreseeable future may also weaken the support that Ukraine receives from the West, mainly due to internal political factors, such as elections and growing indirect costs of the war. It may result in increased calls for even a temporary conflict settlement (ceasefire halting, or even limiting the conflict without its full settlement) between Ukraine and Russia. Russia may hope that repetition of attacks on the energy infrastructure during the upcoming winter would bring more significant effect on Ukraine than during the winter of 2022/2023 and that the election in the United States in 2024 will negatively impact the levels of Western military aid provided to Ukraine.

Prolongation of the conflict may also have its negative effect on the Russian Federation. Russia faces economic and financial challenges as it suffers from a growing budget deficit and economic decline.⁵⁸ Prolongation of the conflict with little perspective of achieving its far-reaching goals may result in growing tensions within Russian elites, potentially even leading to new internal crises, similar to one involving the Wagner Group in July 2023.

At the moment, given the slower than expected tempo of the Ukrainian counteroffensive and Russia's ability to restrain its internal problems, this remains the most probable scenario for the upcoming months. Simultaneously the realization of this scenario does not exclude that the other ones, both positive and negative, may take place later in the course of the war, as the role of particular factors will change under new developments.

⁵⁷ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/a-year-into-war-ukraine-faces-challenges-mobilizing-troops-64dcdc49>

⁵⁸ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/russias-economy-is-starting-to-come-undone-431a2878>

4. Positive scenario

Positive scenario is the relatively swift Ukrainian victory, understood as a situation in which Ukraine is able to regain control over its territories currently occupied by Russia, and Moscow is too weak to prevent it and continue the war. The probability of this scenario within the next months remains low, yet its possibility increases in the more distant future.

Two factors will determine the possibility of this scenario: the capability of Ukrainian Armed Forces to secure military victories on the ground especially on the strategic southern direction and more importantly the internal political situation in Russia. The latter one is the deciding factor for materialization of the above scenario. Given the military disparity between Ukraine and Russia, Ukraine is likely capable of restoring its control over its territory only in the situation when Russia is unable/unwilling to continue the war due to its internal situation, although under the right conditions (increased military support to Ukraine) it may not be necessary. crisis in Russia or regime/leadership change in Moscow. In the first case Russia may be forced to focus its resources on the internal developments, which could weaken its ability to conduct war against Ukraine. In the second case, the new leadership will have to divert resources (first of all political and economic resources) to consolidate its power and may be interested in ending the conflict on terms less favorable for Russia – accepting its loss of Ukrainian territories occupied since 2014. Additionally, any new leadership (even in the case the regime remains autocratic) will have the capability to put the blame for starting the war on Vladimir Putin, which would provide them with more room for political maneuver both internally and on the international arena.

Continuous Ukrainian successes on the battlefield are less important in this regard, yet still a vital component of this scenario. First of all, spectacular Ukrainian military victories may be the trigger for internal developments within Russia. Secondly, Ukraine must be

strong enough to use Russia's weakened state to regain control over its territories.

The probability of this scenario is difficult to measure due to the limited transparency of the internal political developments in Russia. The autocratic character of the Russian regime and limited circle of the decision makers limit the ability to effectively analyze the internal politics within the regime. Political crisis in Russia is highly unlikely to be caused by the actions of the Russian society, but rather the elite and infighting between particular factions/groups of interests. Such events are likely to appear suddenly, with little previous warning, as was demonstrated by the Wagner Group coup attempt in July 2023. The aftermath of the coup attempt does raise a number of questions regarding the coup and its character. Options range from coup being a genuine attempt to seize power by the Wagner Group and its backers⁵⁹, and an orchestrated action aimed primarily at identifying military supportive commanders (a number of high ranking military officers, mainly from the elite Russian Air Assault Forces remain in custody).⁶⁰ Both options, however, prove the existence of deep conflicts within the political and military elites, which could lead to internal political crisis in the future.

Ukraine was likely hoping for this scenario while planning its counteroffensive in the South. In case of success, it would have been able to cut the supply lines to the Crimean Peninsula. This would lead to Russian forces in Crimea, running low on the necessary supplies, either being forced to evacuate (the way it took place on a much smaller scale in Kherson in autumn of 2022) or being weakened to the point that Ukrainian military seizure of the peninsula would be possible.⁶¹ Ukrainian calculus was likely that the loss of Crimea would be a strong signal to Russia that the war against

⁵⁹ <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2023-07-04/prigozhins-mutiny-a-stress-test-putin-system-events>

⁶⁰ https://lb.ua/society/2023/08/08/569178_danilov_vvazhaie_shcho_zakolot.html

⁶¹ <https://prm.ua/krym-treba-vidrizaty-vid-materykovoi-rosii-shchob-zmusyty-voroha-do-zhestu-dobroi-voli-hur/>

Ukraine is a lost cause. This could serve as a trigger for further events in Russia, leading to an internal political crisis. Ukrainian counteroffensive is progressing slowly, with only limited tactical successes, yet as of early September 2023 it is still not over. It is still possible that Ukrainian forces may accomplish their initial goals later on in the future.⁶²

The realization of the positive scenario would likely solve numerous challenges for Ukraine and the West caused by the ongoing war, yet it could also create a number of new security threats and challenges. Internal political crisis in Russia may trigger the previously contained stability threats within the Russian Federation and lead to instability within the Russian Federation. Russia has number of structural problems, that in the past led to local crisis and even conflicts⁶³, yet was able to contain them with a combination of repressive measures and stimuli financed by the income from export of energy commodities. The challenges include the demographic situation, socio-economic situation (especially visible in the so-called monofunctional cities)⁶⁴, ethnic tensions (including problems associated with mass migration to Russia)⁶⁵, Islamic radicalism and terrorism⁶⁶ and to a much lesser extent possible separatisms.⁶⁷ Internal political crisis, losses in the war against Ukraine and tensions within the elite likely to appear during a regime/leadership change will increase the chances that these challenges will manifest themselves and lead to growing instability within the Russian Federation. It would create security threats for the West, which, depending on

⁶² <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/12/world/europe/russia-ukraine-war.html>

⁶³ Two Chechen wars which caused between 80 and 170 thousand fatal casualties, Islamic insurgency in Northern Caucasus (mainly Dagestan) which as late as 2010 cost lives of almost 300 Russian servicemembers annually. Data sources: <https://www.rferl.org/a/1060708.html> ; https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/Conflict_victims_North_Caucasus_and <https://memohrc.org/sites/all/themes/memo/templates/pdf.php?pdf=/uploads/files/465.pdf>

⁶⁴ <https://www.rbc.ru/economics/24/02/2016/56cdb2b69a7947557237c6c3>

⁶⁵ <https://ria.ru/20211025/konflikty-1756125644.html>

⁶⁶ <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-report/2015-09-21/homo-jihadicus>

⁶⁷ <https://lr.semnasem.org/nonrussian/>

the scale of internal problems in Russia, could range from influx of refugees to risks of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and other sensitive materials. The above course of events is highly unlikely at the moment and far from certain even in the case when Russia will face an internal political crisis and lose the war against Ukraine. At the same time, given the gravity of potential consequences for the West, it also should not be disregarded as completely impossible – the Russian state in its various forms collapsed twice in the 20th century, in both cases with little prior warning before the events unfolded.

Chapter III – Ending the war – desired scenario for the West and factors to consider

The preferable for the West scenario of ending the war is the possibly quickest Ukrainian victory. In that case the Western states do not have to bear the rising indirect costs of the conflict and to compromise their long-term strategic interests of promoting rules-based international order. Success of this scenario is largely dependent on factors outside of the control of the Western countries, yet a number of measures can be undertaken by the West to accelerate it. Priority should be given to measures that accelerate Ukrainian victory, i.e. increased scope and quantity of military aid to Ukraine. First factor to consider in this regard is that the West has limited capability to force both Ukraine and Russia to end or even freeze the conflict without detrimental effects on its strategic interests. The decision to continue or end the war will be undertaken by Kyiv and Moscow, not the West.

The West can raise the cost of war for Russia by sanctions, military support for Ukraine and similar measures, yet just as it was unable to stop Moscow from launching the aggression, it is unable to persuade it to end it. The rationale behind launching the aggression and continuing the war despite failure of the initial attack was based on Moscow's perceptions of its security, mainly the threats to regime survivability in case Ukraine can become an alternative development model for the post-Soviet area or if Russia is forced to admit its defeat and inability to subdue Ukraine through military means.

Similarly with Ukraine, Kyiv's decision to continue the war until regaining control over all of its internationally recognized territory and to reject calls for a ceasefire freezing the conflict is based on internal factors. Kyiv will likely continue its war efforts regardless of the scope of the Western aid, albeit with different results. In case the West uses Ukraine's dependence on Western assistance as a leverage to force Kyiv into agreeing to an agreement halting the conflict through ceasefire or settlement short of Ukrainian definition of victory, this will likely cause a rift within NATO allies, while Ukraine is likely to continue its war effort, as the internal factors are more prone to influence the decision makers in Kyiv than the external pressure.

The above leaves the West with just two options how its actions may directly end the conflict: 1) direct military engagement in the war to provide swift Ukrainian victory and 2) complete halt of aid to Ukraine, which would leave it with choice between defeat or conflict settlement on terms highly unfavorable to Kyiv. Both of these options have highly detrimental consequences for the West, which far outweigh their benefit of ending the conflict, and therefore are not feasible. This provides the West with little room for maneuver to accelerate the end of the conflict without undermining its strategic interests.

Second factor shaping the optimal scenario of ending the war for the West are the economic costs of the war. The indirect cost of war is high for the West, especially for the European countries. This includes additional spending on 4.07 million Ukrainian refugees currently reside in the EU⁶⁸, high energy prices or high inflation rates. The latest takes the largest toll – in 2022 the annual inflation rate in the Eurozone has more than tripled compared to the previous year, reaching a record of 9.2 per cent.⁶⁹ The increase of inflation rate, caused largely by the rising prices of the energy and food (due to the large share of Russian energy commodities and fertilizer

⁶⁸ <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20230809-1>

⁶⁹ <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/DDN-20230309-2>

exports to EU) have led to slowdown in GDP growth in most European countries and made the recovery from the previous recession caused by the COVID-19 pandemic difficult.⁷⁰ This in turn negatively influences the overall global economic growth, due to the global role of the EU economy and its interdependencies with economies worldwide.⁷¹ The above costs are likely to increase as the war will continue.

Simultaneously, the costs of military aid to Ukraine are relatively lower, especially when compared to previous large-scale Western military engagement. This creates a situation, where increased military support to Ukraine is likely a cheaper alternative in total costs than the prolongation of the conflict and rising indirect costs that the West, especially Europe continue to pay.

The military aid provided to Ukraine by the United States, the largest donor, can serve as an illustration of this. Since the beginning of the Russian aggression, the US has provided about 43 billion dollars of military assistance to Ukraine⁷², in addition to about 3.6 billion dollars of humanitarian support⁷³ and over 24 billion dollars of financial assistance⁷⁴, totaling almost 71 billion dollars. For comparison, the costs of war in Iraq between 2003 and 2010 are estimated to be about 2 trillion dollars (on average about 250 billion per year)⁷⁵, and the costs of war in Afghanistan 2.3 trillion dollars (on average about 115 billion annually).⁷⁶ Both of these wars failed to achieve lasting success. On the contrary to that, the

⁷⁰ <https://www.oecd.org/newsroom/oecd-economic-outlook-reveals-heavy-global-price-of-russia-s-war-against-ukraine.htm>

⁷¹ Ibidem.

⁷² <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-ukraine/>

⁷³ Based on data gathered by Kiel Institute for The World Economy, available here: <https://www.ifw-kiel.de/publications/ukraine-support-tracker-data-20758/>

⁷⁴ Ibidem.

⁷⁵ <https://www.businessinsider.com/us-taxpayers-spent-8000-each-2-trillion-iraq-war-study-2020-2?IR=T>

⁷⁶ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2021/09/01/how-much-did-war-afghanistan-cost-how-many-people-died/5669656001/>

Western support to Ukraine has led to diminishing the conventional offensive military potential of the Russian Federation, therefore improving the security of European states and removing the threat of direct conventional military confrontation with Russia in the next years.

Based on the above, the increase of military aid for Ukraine remains the only feasible option to accelerate the end of the war without undermining Western interests. This may include an increase in the quantity of the aid delivered (first of all in terms of artillery munitions) as well as the types of systems provided to Ukraine. Western weapon systems have a qualitative edge over the Soviet and Russian-made systems used by the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation. This qualitative advantage allowed Ukraine to effectively compensate for the quantitative advantage that Russia and its armed forces still possess.⁷⁷ In this regard, priority should be given to weapon systems that Ukraine can use to target ammunition depots, logistical routes and command centers beyond the range of the ones currently in Ukraine's arsenal.

Third factor in determining the desired way for the West to end the conflict is the risk of escalation. This factor has been present in the Western calculations since the beginning of the war, with numerous measures being undertaken to effectively support Ukraine, while not provoking Russia to resort to measures including those that would potentially lead to direct Western military involvement.⁷⁸ The course of the war has shown that the West has been at times too cautious in its calculations, as transfer of new weapon systems to Ukraine has not resulted in Russian response, contrary to the previous assessments. Moscow's warnings and self-declared red lines have had primarily psychological effect – when faced with Western and Ukrainian determination, Russia was unable to stop or effectively respond to such measures. This shows the limits of

⁷⁷ <https://www.reuters.com/graphics/UKRAINE-CRISIS/ARMS/lqvdkoygnpo/>

⁷⁸ <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/flawed-assumptions-hamper-western-response-to-russias-ukraine-war/>

Russia's capabilities to counter the West without entering into a level of confrontation which it would not be able to handle.

Greater threat lies in possible escalation of the conflict by Russia in case Moscow would assess that it is on the brink of defeat. This scenario (described in the chapter II of the report) could involve the use of weapons of mass destruction in Ukraine or the attack against NATO member states in order to present the West with a choice between direct military confrontation or agreement on conflict settlement bypassing Ukraine. This scenario is highly negative for the West, yet if it materializes, it would be decided based on Moscow's perception of the conflict dynamics, not particular actions of the West or Ukraine.

In this regard credible deterrence is key to prevent an escalation by Russia. If Moscow is assured that execution of this scenario would lead to serious consequences for Russia and only accelerate its defeat, the Kremlin would be less likely to engage in it. To create uncertainty and test Western willingness to defend itself while maintaining a back-up option and at least rhetorical deniability in case of strong Western response, Russia may put in motion hybrid scenarios, involving Belarus or other actors nominally not under the control of the Russian state apparatus, like the Wagner Group. In this case deterrence prior to such actions, and adequate response to them once they occur, will decrease the chances for a further escalation (not only limited to military responses – for example communication that Poland and Baltic states will shut down their borders with Belarus in case of a critical incident occurring, what would have dire economic consequences for Minsk).⁷⁹ On the contrary, a weak response would be viewed by Moscow as an indicator that the West is unwilling to confront Russia and if given a choice between confrontation or halting its support for Ukraine, it would likely choose the latter.

⁷⁹ [https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/poland-baltics-will-shut-belarus-border-if-critical-incident-occurs-minister-2023-08-28/#:~:text=WARSAW%2C%20Aug%2028%20\(Reuters\),tensions%20on%20NATO's%20eastern%20flank](https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/poland-baltics-will-shut-belarus-border-if-critical-incident-occurs-minister-2023-08-28/#:~:text=WARSAW%2C%20Aug%2028%20(Reuters),tensions%20on%20NATO's%20eastern%20flank)

Finally, in order for the West to be prepared for the challenges that will arise with the end of the war, appropriate considerations and planning should take place now. This includes the shape of the post-conflict policy towards both Ukraine and Russia.

In terms of policy towards Ukraine, the progress of reforms is crucial. Prior to the full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2022, Ukraine had been criticized by the Western countries and independent international institutions for the slow pace of the necessary reforms.⁸⁰ Despite the declarations of its European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations (proscribed even in Ukraine's constitution in 2019)⁸¹, Kyiv was reluctant to conduct the reforms outlined by the EU and NATO, as their genuine implementation would disrupt the political and business environment in Ukraine and undermine the role of the largest internal players (mainly interests of largest oligarchs and their political proteges).⁸² Some progress did take place, yet its pace and scope was slower than planned, especially in the key areas such as justice reform, combating corruption and establishing necessary safeguards.⁸³

During the war Ukraine decision makers adopted a highly assertive approach towards the West, which at times led to tensions between them.⁸⁴ Kyiv is likely to continue this stance and after the end of war utilize a similar narrative as it did earlier– slow pace of reforms will be justified by urgency of the other priorities, first of all the need to rebuild the war-torn country. This may create a risk of stalling the reform process. In order to mitigate this risk, a *more for more* approach could be used, with aid to Ukraine (on which it will

⁸⁰ <https://biz.nv.ua/finance/sotrudnichestvo-s-mvf-chego-zhdut-ukraine-intervyu-s-predstavitelem-fonda-lyungmanom-50122181.html>

⁸¹ <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/2680-19#Text>

⁸² <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/punkt-widzenia/2016-08-18/fundament-systemu>

⁸³ https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/53485_en

⁸⁴ <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/03/12/biden-united-states-ukraine-relationship-cracks-00086654>

most likely still be dependent) being conditioned and directly linked to the progress of the reforms required by the West.

In order for this policy to be effective, the West must also focus on creating direct communication channels with Ukrainian society. Contrary to the Ukrainian elites who benefit from the current political and business system in Ukraine, the Ukrainian society is supportive of the reform process necessary for modernization of the country and its entry into the EU and NATO. This can be seen in public opinion polls in which 73 per cent of Ukrainians declare the need for the reforms prior to further integration with the UE.⁸⁵ 85 per cent are supportive of accession into the EU⁸⁶, while 77 per cent declare corruption as the largest problem the country faces (third highest result after the war and damages caused by it).⁸⁷ Effective and direct communication channels with Ukrainian society (like effective communication campaigns, Western-sponsored and independent of oligarchic and political influence media) could be helpful in turning the aspirations of Ukrainian society into a leverage aiding Western efforts to promote necessary reforms in Ukraine.

The post-conflict policy towards Russia should be largely dependent on the state of the Russian Federation after the end of the war, yet preparations for particular scenarios should begin at an earlier phase. What is important to note, any developments in Russia will most likely be caused by internal factors, with the West having at best limited capacity to influence them.

In case Russia remains autocratic, the first priority should be given to the measures that would prevent it from aggressive policy (including military aggressions) towards the EU, NATO and their partners. This includes continuation of credible deterrence (first of all strong military presence on the eastern flank), possibly continuation

⁸⁵ <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/news/2023/01/10/7153897/>

⁸⁶ https://ratinggroup.ua/research/ukraine/p_dtrimka_m_zhnarodnih_soyuz_v_opituvannya_v_ukra_n_ta_vrop_4-10_lipnya_2023.html

⁸⁷ <https://ti-ukraine.org/news/u-majbutnij-vidbudovi-ukrayintsi-boyatsya-koruptsiyi-bilshhe-nizh-vijny-sotsiologichne-opytuvannya/>

of some of the sanctions preventing Russia from acquiring military or dual-purpose technologies and materials from the West, as well as support to the countries which may be at higher risk of being targeted by Russia. This may include not only NATO states and Ukraine, but possibly other post-Soviet states, e.g. Georgia, Azerbaijan or Kazakhstan.⁸⁸

In case of a regime change in Russia and beginning of its democratization, focus should be given to support of the reform process, including liberalization of the Russian state and society. Given the scale of indoctrination of the Russian society and structural problems in Russia, this task would potentially require significant resources. Yet if neglected, it could lead to return of authoritarianism and aggressive foreign policy towards its neighbors, as it has already taken place after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, when some progress on reforms and democratization in the 1990's have quickly been reverted during Putin's reign.

Finally, if an internal crisis would occur in Russia, the West should focus first of all on minimizing the negative impact of the situation in Russia on its surroundings and global processes, rather than on prevention of the crisis itself, as the latter would depend on factors inside Russia, largely outside of Western control. Damage control measures may include prevention of spillover effect on Russia's neighbors and depending on the situation in Russia, in case of lasting destabilization, may even require measures aimed at countering proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and other sensitive materials.

This scenario would be the most difficult for the West to handle. At the same time the West is unable to prevent it without sacrificing its strategic interests. Its occurrence is dependent on internal factors within the Russian Federation, including the structural challenges which had been present even before the launch of aggression against Ukraine in 2022, some of which were exacerbated by the

⁸⁸ Russian decisionmakers have threatened Kazakhstan on several occasions and made calls for annexation of the northern regions of the country, where large Russian minority is present.

ongoing conflict. If the West conducts its policy based mainly on prevention of internal crisis in Russia, it risks losing its credibility and undermining its strategic interests without a guarantee of actually preventing it.

Conclusions and recommendations

1. The West has limited capability to force both Ukraine and Russia to end or even freeze the conflict without detrimental effects to its own strategic interests. The decision to continue or to end the war will be undertaken by Kyiv and Moscow. This should be taken into consideration to prevent policy mistakes based on faulty considerations.
2. The optimal scenario for the West is the possibly quickest Ukrainian victory. In such scenario the Western states do not have to bear the rising indirect costs of the conflict and also do not need to compromise their long-term strategic interests. Success of this scenario is largely dependent on factors outside of control of the Western countries. Yet a number of measures can be undertaken by the West to accelerate it. First of all by increasing the scale and scope of their support to Ukraine. This includes an increase in the quantity of the aid delivered (primarily artillery munitions) as well as the types of systems provided to Ukraine. Priority should be given to the weapon system that Ukraine can use to target ammunition depots, logistical routes and command centers beyond the range of the ones currently in Ukraine's arsenal. Given the high indirect costs of the war (mainly increase of energy prices and inflation rate), increased military support to Ukraine is likely a cheaper alternative in total costs than the prolongation of the conflict.
3. Providing the necessary support for Ukraine is vital for ending the war on terms desired by the West, yet it should not undermine broader policy goals towards

Ukraine. In this regard support for a wider reform process in Ukraine and making Kyiv accountable to its previous commitments should be a priority. A *more for more* approach could be used, with aid to Ukraine (on which it will likely still be dependent) being provided with conditionalities and directly linked to the progress of the reforms required by the West. In order for such policy to be effective, the West must also focus on creating direct communication channels with Ukrainian society, i.e. effective campaigns or Western-sponsored media, independent of oligarchic and political influence. It could be helpful in turning the aspirations of Ukrainian society into a leverage, aiding Western efforts to promote necessary reforms in Ukraine.

4. Russian defeat in the war will aid realization of Western interests in the other theaters, demonstration of Western credibility as well as capability to influence the course of events through providing effective support to its partners. First of all, Ukrainian victory and defeat of Russia will be a limiting factor for Chinese policy makers. Russia's failed attempt to quickly seize Ukraine, scale of war and Western response (sanctions, aid to Ukraine) has already been one of the factors that led to a change of Beijing's policy to a less confrontational towards the West. Regardless of whether it is only a temporary shift, it shows that Western support for Ukraine and Russia's inability to reach its objectives tone down Beijing's foreign policy. In case of an internal crisis in Russia, China will likely be more focused on containing the spill-over effect on its territory and less willing to confront Western interests.
5. Credible deterrence is key to prevent escalation of the conflict by Russia. If Moscow is assured that the execution of such scenario leads to serious consequences for Russia and only accelerates its defeat, the Kremlin will be less

likely to engage in it. To create uncertainty, test Western willingness to defend itself while maintaining a back-up option in case of strong Western response, Russia may utilize hybrid scenarios, involving Belarus or other actors nominally not under the control of the Russian state apparatus, like the Wagner Group. In this case, deterrence prior to such actions and adequate response to them once they occur, will decrease the chances of a further escalation. To the contrary, a weak response would be viewed by Moscow as an indicator that the West is unwilling to confront Russia and if given a choice between confrontation or surrender of its support to Ukraine, it will likely choose the latter.

6. The occurrence of an internal crisis in Russia should be considered as one of the possible consequences of the war. The Wagner Group coup attempt in July 2023 illustrates that alike development of events remains a possibility. This scenario would be difficult for the West to handle. At the same time the West is unable to prevent it without sacrificing its strategic interests. Its occurrence is dependent on internal factors within the Russian Federation. This includes the structural challenges which had been present even before the launch of aggression against Ukraine in 2022. Some of them were exacerbated by the ongoing conflict. If the West conducts current policy towards the war between Russia and Ukraine based primarily on the prevention of this scenario, it risks losing its credibility and undermining its strategic interests without a guarantee of actually preventing it.
7. The potential of an occurrence of an internal crisis in Russia sparks fears of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). During the fall of the USSR several effective mechanisms that mitigated these sort of risks were established. The United States provided financial

and technical aid to Russia to secure its nuclear stockpiles⁸⁹, made successful efforts that led to denuclearization of Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan⁹⁰ and in some cases involved directly on the ground to secure sensitive materials. The latter included US work in securing and decontaminating biological testing grounds on the Vozrozhdeniya Island in Aral Sea⁹¹ or securing nuclear materials from Oskemen in Kazakhstan and their transfer to the United States in 1994 (project Sapphire).⁹² The above mechanisms show that the threat of proliferation of WMDs could be successfully addressed and in the worst case scenario the United States and the West are capable of overbidding any potential hostile actor interested in using the situation to acquire WMDs or sensitive materials and technologies. In this regard greater threat lies in possible proliferation of WMDs by the Russian Federation in case of prolongation of the conflict. Depletion of Russian rocket/artillery munition stockpiles to critical levels may create a situation where Moscow is considering options of sharing sensitive materials or technologies in exchange for rocket/munition deliveries.

⁸⁹ The Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) program.

⁹⁰ Politically finalized by memoranda signed in December 1994 in Budapest on accession of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons as non-nuclear states and providing these states with security guarantees.

⁹¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2001/10/23/us-to-help-uzbekistan-clean-up-anthrax-site/e785ad2b-a82c-4551-92d6-050df15809e8/>

⁹² <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/article/0895sapphire/>

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