



Opinion

Ukraine must grasp peace from jaws of unwinnable war

Instead of prolonging proxy battle with Russia, West should use moral and material might to extract best deal for Kyiv from Putin

Expand



A bombed warehouse in Sloviansk in Ukraine: The longer the war goes on the greater will be Ukraine's human, material and territorial losses, putting in peril the future viability of an independent Ukrainian state. Photograph: Tyler Hicks/New York Times

Geoffrey Roberts

Wed Jul 13 2022 - 00:01



The greater Russia's military successes in the Donbas, the louder the voices of those opposed to Ukraine seeking a ceasefire and negotiating a peace settlement. Yet there is an emerging consensus among western military experts that if the war continues beyond the summer it will bog down into a prolonged conflict in which Ukraine has little or no hope of recovering its lost territories.

Ukraine's defiant and heroic defence against Vladimir Putin's aggressive war has inflicted huge damage on Russia's armed forces but there is no sign the Kremlin's war machine is running out of steam. Because of its overwhelmingly superior firepower, Russia is winning a war that Ukraine cannot but lose, irrespective of the amount of western military aid or "wonder weapons" it receives.

Predictions that Putin would be forced to declare national mobilisation have yet to materialise. Daily are the reports that western sanctions are damaging the EU more than Russia. Putin is riding high in domestic opinion polls and the Russian elite and people are united in support of a war they see as an existential struggle for national survival.

Ukraine has suffered tens of thousands of casualties and is now losing up to a thousand soldiers a day killed, wounded or taken prisoner. Millions of its citizens have evacuated the war zone and millions more have fled the country. Russian air, artillery and missile attacks have inflicted hundreds of billions of dollars of damage. Ukraine has lost a quarter of its territory to Russian occupation, including its industrial heartland and most of its Black Sea coast.

The longer the war goes on the greater will be Ukraine's human, material and territorial losses, putting in peril the future viability of an independent Ukrainian state. It is a very bitter pill but now is the time for Ukraine to seek peace.

Instead of pouring arms into a losing battle, western states should be encouraging and assisting Ukraine to secure a ceasefire and peace deal that will safeguard its future freedom and independence.

Instead of fighting a proxy war with Russia, the West should be using its moral and material might to extract concessions from Putin that will get Ukraine the best deal possible.

City targets

Realistically, there will be no ceasefire or peace agreement until Putin's armed forces have completed their military operations in southern and eastern Ukraine. But President Volodymyr Zelenskiy and his western backers may be able to bring forward the end of hostilities by seeking an immediate resumption of peace talks.

There is little or no chance Russia will withdraw from the territories it has occupied so far but Ukraine would retain control of the great majority of its territory, including Kharkov, Odesa and Dnipro. If the war drags on, these key cities will be among the Russians' next targets.

Crucial to any peace deal would be guarantees of Ukraine's future security and western support for a large-scale programme that will aid its post-war economic recovery.

Above all, peace will end the death and destruction of a devastating war that contains the ever-present danger of spiralling out of control. Analysts of the Cuban missile crisis estimate that in 1962 the odds of an inadvertent nuclear war were 100-1. Today, when it is western weapons that are prolonging an actual war that is killing thousands of Russian soldiers, the chances of escalation are significantly greater.

But will Putin make a deal, or is he intent, as some argue, on the

destruction of a state he doesn't even consider a real country?

The idea that Putin thinks Ukraine is an artificial construct with no basis in history or culture and therefore does not deserve to exist dates from his reported remarks to former US president George W Bush at a summit in Sochi in 2008.

Territorial integrity

So far, there is no official confirmation that Putin said any such thing, but he certainly believes the borders of modern Ukraine were arbitrarily drawn. He has long complained that Ukraine's southern and eastern territories were gifted by Lenin and the Bolsheviks, that Lviv and western Ukraine were added as the result of the Stalin-Hitler carve-up of Poland in 1939, and that the 1954 transfer of Russian-speaking Crimea to Ukraine was a whimsical celebratory present from Nikita Khrushchev in honour of the tercentenary of Russo-Ukrainian unity.

But not until 2014 did Putin begin to publicly question Ukraine's territorial integrity. The trigger was the anti-Russian Maidan Revolution, which prompted him to occupy Crimea and support Donbas separatists fighting to become part of Russia.

Even so, Putin has never publicly denied Ukraine's right to independence and sovereignty. While there was never any question of Russia giving up Crimea, Moscow spent years trying to implement the so-called Minsk Accord under which rebel Donbas would be reintegrated into Ukraine, providing there were guarantees of regional autonomy. These negotiations failed because Kyiv feared that Minsk's implementation would preclude Ukrainian membership of Nato.

When Zelenskiy was elected president in 2019 on a pro-peace platform,

Putin hoped the Donbas problem could be resolved peacefully. Instead, he witnessed what he saw as the further development of Ukraine into an “anti-Russia” – a Nato-armed bastion on Russia’s borders whose ultra-nationalist leaders threatened to recover their lost territories by force.

Putin’s stated war aims are to occupy greater Donbas, to destroy Ukraine’s armed forces and to “denazify” Ukrainian society. In pursuit of these goals, Russia has occupied vast swathes of additional territory and, if war continues indefinitely, Moscow may well strive to expand its occupation to the eastern banks of the Dnieper river.

The war might pause or wind down, but there will be no peace, or even a ceasefire, if Ukraine does not agree to demilitarise and to eschew any ambition to join Nato.

All this is a grim prospect but the alternative to a ceasefire and a negotiated peace is the continuation of an unwinnable war that may help western leaders save face but its gruesome price will be paid by Ukraine and its people.

Geoffrey Roberts is emeritus professor of history at UCC, a member of the Royal Irish Academy and a specialist on Russian and Soviet foreign and military policy

Latest Stories

Ikea Ireland pieces together 9% profit growth despite higher costs

All Blacks vs Ireland third Test: Kick-off time, TV details and team news

Mario Draghi's government under threat as Italy's Five Star threatens to pull out

Kevin Spacey pleads not guilty to sexual assault charges in UK

Martin Shanahan on leaving IDA Ireland: "I'm happy with the progress that we've made"

Download the app



OUR PARTNERS: [MyHome.ie](#) • [Top 1000](#) • [The Gloss](#) • [Recruit Ireland](#) • [Irish Times Training](#)

[Terms & Conditions](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Cookie Information](#) | [Cookie Settings](#) | [Community Standards](#) | [Copyright](#)