



# Cheering and Jeering on the Escalator to Hell: One Year of UK Media Coverage on the War in Ukraine

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## Abstract

While there is a common awareness of wartime media censorship in both Ukraine and Russia, there has been less research on Western media coverage and expert analysis of the war in Ukraine. This essay considers the extent to which a skewed and partisan version of the war's evolution has been presented in UK media. Five stages are identified in the emergence and evolution of a British meta-narrative on the war in Ukraine, replete with 'cheering' and 'jeering', that works against a realistic understanding of the war's nature and reasonable consideration of possible future scenarios. It is argued this coverage has sidestepped critical questions of the war's stage-by-stage escalation and has essentially avoided serious debate of the risks, costs and benefits of such a course.

## Keywords

Russo-Ukrainian war – military reporting – information warfare – conflict resolution – political communication

The first anniversary of the war between Russia and Ukraine has come and gone, with leaders on both sides producing no serious surprises in their respective high-level speeches. Both sides claim to be on the right side of history and ready to fight on as long as is needed. While Ukrainian and Russian governments have clamped down on wartime dissent, in the West the only clear

move in this direction has been the banning of RT and Sputnik as sources of 'disinformation'. This essay considers the extent to which, even without any direct government control, Western media coverage and expert analysis has presented a skewed version of the war's causes and evolution.

Summarizing the outputs of mainstream media and expert analysis emanating from Washington, New York and London,<sup>1</sup> audiences have been steadily bombarded with a stock phrase that sums up the whole coverage of the war: 'Putin's unprovoked full-scale invasion of Ukraine'. Each part of this formulation contains significant elements: 'Putin's' points to the sole responsibility of an unhinged ghastly dictator in starting the war; 'unprovoked' refers to the illegitimacy of Russia's aggression which seeks to wipe out Ukraine's sovereignty and rebuild a Russian empire; 'full-scale' refers to the brutal extent of Russia's military campaign on a peaceful and unsuspecting Ukrainian population.

The uniformity in UK media coverage and expert opinion for this war contrasts strongly to another foreign invasion by a major power – the Iraq war of 2003 – which provoked heated public exchanges and mass protests. In contrast, a year into the war in Ukraine there is still little open mainstream media debate over the apparent consensus that Putin must be defeated; the only solution is more war, or to quote NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, 'weapons are the way to peace'.<sup>2</sup> One way to summarize the UK media coverage is in terms of 'cheering' Ukrainian valor and successes while 'jeering' Russian wickedness and failure. Such cheering and jeering convinces British public opinion to support Ukraine, because Russia is losing the war. On the 14 February 2023 the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley, went one step further to claim Russia had *already* lost the war 'strategically, operationally and tactically'.<sup>3</sup>

As we enter the second year of the war in Ukraine, it is worth reviewing the various orthodoxies in Western coverage and analysis, in functional terms. Presenting Ukraine as winning allows opinion leaders to avoid any discussion of the desirability or risks of further escalation. After all, if Russia is on

1 While the focus in this article is on UK media, much of US mainstream media such as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *CNN* and *MSNBC* has followed a similar pattern in their coverage.

2 "NATO's Jens Stoltenberg: "weapons are the way to peace" in Ukraine," *Defence Engage*, 23 January 2023, <https://www.defence-engage.com/news/natos-jens-stoltenberg-weapons-way-peace-ukraine> (accessed 20 March 2023).

3 "Russia-Ukraine war: Putin has already lost", *The Guardian* 14 February 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2023/February/14/russia-ukraine-war-nato-defence-ministers-to-meet-in-brussels-bakhmut-under-heavy-fire-live?page=with:block-63eba6f78f08bb2550a97b6e> (accessed 20 March 2023).

the verge of falling apart, why talk of negotiation? In this essay I identify five key stages in the emergence and evolution of the Western meta-narrative on the nature and progress of the war in Ukraine and consider the evidence for alternative explanations. The aim is to shed light on whether Russia actually is losing the war as, if it is not, then clearly a whole range of claims about this conflict would need to be reconsidered, including possible roads to peace.

## 1 Stage One: Putin's 'Mad Gamble' and the 'Unprovoked' Invasion (January 1st to February 23rd 2022)

The first foundation in the meta-narrative on Russian military operations, was to establish that the war was unprovoked. Even before the war began UK Defense Minister Ben Wallace claimed that Putin's designs on Ukraine were akin to Hitler's in Czechoslovakia, and complained of a 'whiff of Munich in the air from some in the West'.<sup>4</sup> Reacting on the same day Russia's invasion began, US President Biden set out a position that would be repeated again and again in UK media:

This was never about genuine security concerns on their part. It was always about naked aggression, about Putin's desire for empire by any means necessary – by bullying Russia's neighbors through coercion and corruption, by changing borders by force, and, ultimately, by choosing a war without a cause.<sup>5</sup>

In the frenzied atmosphere following the invasion, a consensus was built about Putin's motivations. He was a modern-day Hitler attempting to gobble up a weaker neighbor and reconstitute a Russian empire.<sup>6</sup>

4 Sophie Gallagher, "Whiff of Munich in the air, says Ben Wallace" *BBC News* 13 February 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-60366088> (accessed 20 March 2023).

5 "Remarks by President Biden" *The White House*, 24 February 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/02/24/remarks-by-president-biden-on-russias-unprovoked-and-unjustified-attack-on-ukraine/> (accessed 20 March 2023).

6 Ian Bond, "The west knows the cost of appeasement", *The Guardian*, 22 February 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/February/22/west-appeasement-putin-russia-ukraine>; Richard J Evans, "Vladimir Putin's war of delusions" *The New Statesman*, 9 April 2022, <https://www.newstatesman.com/international-politics/2022/04/vladimir-putins-war-of-delusions>; Joshua Cho, "Calling Putin 'Hitler' to Smear Diplomacy as 'Appeasement,'" *FAIR*, 21 July 2022, <https://fair.org/slider/calling-putin-hitler-to-smear-diplomacy-as-appeasement/> (accessed 20 March 2023).

Personalizing the conflict and presenting it as one with Putin alone follows the pattern established with the precedents of Saddam Hussein, Muammar Gaddafi, and Bashar al-Assad, all of whom were depicted as vile and inhuman dictators who could not be allowed to remain in power, regardless of what might replace them. In equating Putin with Hitler, it is easy to stop all talk of negotiations by calling them appeasement. By fixating on Putin as the sole aggressor who cannot 'get away with this' and 'must be punished', no space is allowed to even conceive of Russia having interests in Ukraine.

Alternative explanations are easily available to anyone with a basic knowledge of background to the Ukraine-Russia conflict and the failed diplomacy between Russia, Ukraine and America before the war. Behind the scenes, and in public, Russia had long made clear to the West that it had red lines. Russia demanded its security concerns in Ukraine should be recognized and respected. If they were not, it would result in the use military force to halt Ukraine's drift into the Western military and security orbit.<sup>7</sup>

Over the course of 2021 Washington essentially ignored these demands, refusing to recognize Russia's claim to any interests in Ukraine, confident that Russia could not cope with both a sanctions blitzkrieg and the task of subduing Ukraine militarily. Following up on previous bilateral agreements, in November 2021, American Secretary of State Anthony Blinken announced a 'Strategic Partnership' with Ukraine. This announcement contained a commitment to support Ukraine's efforts to restore its territorial integrity, including Crimea. It also deepened security and military cooperation between the countries, reaffirmed Ukraine's right to join NATO and urged Ukraine to 'maximize its status as a NATO Enhanced Opportunities Partner to promote interoperability'.<sup>8</sup>

This partially explains why on the 17th December Russia sent an ultimatum demanding a reduction of Western military deployments in Eastern Europe, and an official end to attempts to bring Ukraine into NATO.<sup>9</sup> In making these

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7 Mark Trevelyan, "Why is Russia's Putin drawing 'red lines' over Ukraine?", *Reuters*, 26 January 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/why-is-russias-putin-so-focused-ukraine-2021-12-15/>; Andrew Roth, "Russia will act if NATO countries cross Ukraine 'red lines', Putin says", *The Guardian*, 30 November 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/30/russia-will-act-if-nato-countries-cross-ukraine-red-lines-putin-says> (accessed 20 March 2023).

8 "US-Ukraine Charter on Strategic Partnership", *US Department of State*, 10 November 2021, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-ukraine-charter-on-strategic-partnership/> (accessed 20 March 2023).

9 "Moscow will Insist Washington guarantees security for Russia's borders, TASS 9 December 2021, <https://tass.com/world/1373249>; Steven Pifer, "Russia's draft agreements with NATO and the United States: Intended for rejection?" 21 December 2021 <https://www.brookings>

demands Moscow was asking for recognition as a great power with special interests; it was asserting it was no longer in the weak position it occupied immediately after the end of the Cold War.<sup>10</sup> These red lines were repeated by Putin on the 26 December 2022: ‘We have nowhere to retreat (...) They have pushed us to a line that we can’t cross. They have taken it to the point where we simply must tell them; “Stop!”’.<sup>11</sup>

NATO’s publicly unexplained total rejection of the 17th December demands in January 2022 are not enough to explain Russia’s course of action. From the Russian point of view, things had also taken a turn for the worse in Ukraine. From 2020 onwards, the Ukrainian government took an increasingly tough stance on Russia, reversing the campaign promises of Zelensky in 2019 to bring about peace in Eastern Ukraine. A key turning point came in February 2021, when President Zelensky, facing low ratings and political weakness, decided to sanction three ‘pro-Russian’ TV channels and arrest the leader of the Opposition Platform for Life (OPL) party, Viktor Medvedchuk.<sup>12</sup>

These decisions, supported by the American embassy,<sup>13</sup> signaled that Russia’s peaceful if subversive attempts to influence Ukraine’s domestic politics had been checked; Kremlin plans to render post-Maidan Ukraine more neutral or friendly to the Russian Federation had failed. Zelensky’s speech at the 2022 Munich conference several days before the Russian invasion underlined the chasm separating the Russian and Ukrainian positions. In it Zelensky condemned appeasement of Putin, demanded new and immediate sanctions, and questioned why Ukraine did not have an ‘open door’ into NATO given that it was functioning as Europe’s ‘reliable shield’ against the Russian military.<sup>14</sup> The speech received strong support and admiration in UK media.

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.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/12/21/russias-draft-agreements-with-nato-and-the-united-states-intended-for-rejection (accessed 20 March 2023).

10 Alexander Baunov, “The West has responded to Russia’s ultimatum. Is it enough?” *Carnegie Moscow*, 1 February 2022, <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/86326>. (accessed 20 March 2023).

11 Euronews, Putin to ponder options if West refuses guarantees on Ukraine, 26 December 2021, <https://www.euronews.com/2021/12/26/putin-to-ponder-options-if-west-refuses-guarantees-on-ukraine> (accessed 20 March 2023).

12 “Lozhnaya tsel,” *Strana.ua*, 24 February 2023 <https://strana.news/articles/istorii/426144-pochemu-putin-nachal-vtorzhenie-a-zelenskij-v-neho-ne-veril-rekonstruktsija-sobytij.html> (accessed 20 March 2023).

13 <https://twitter.com/USEmbassyKyiv/status/1363137405331656705?s=20> (accessed 20 March 2023).

14 “Zelensky’s full speech at Munich Security Conference” *Kyiv Independent* 19 February 2022, <https://kyivindependent.com/national/zelenskys-full-speech-at-munich-security-conference> (accessed 20 March 2023).

Rather than an act of “sheer madness”, Russia’s decision to launch the Special Military Operation (SMO) can be viewed in Clausewitzian terms, as a continuation of ‘political intercourse’ by ‘other means’, namely military force.<sup>15</sup> Putin decided that further diplomacy with the West and Ukraine could achieve nothing. The arming, funding and training of the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) would continue, the Donbass conflict would smolder on without resolution, and no guarantee would ever be given about the end of NATO expansion. Moscow resorted to force to deal with a situation that many in the Russian political establishment saw as an existential threat to Russian national security. In this sense, from Moscow’s point of view it would be “madness” to do nothing about an increasingly militarized and powerful Ukraine set on recapturing its territory. In addition, in what Stephen Walt refers to as the ‘fundamental asymmetry of interest and motivation’ between Russia and the USA in Ukraine, Putin calculated that Russians would be willing to accept the new risks and additional costs to resolve the Ukraine question far more than Western publics.<sup>16</sup>

But in UK media coverage of the buildup to and outbreak of war, this historical and political background fell away, along with any suggestion that more could have been done to reach a fundamental agreement on NATO expansion, Ukraine’s militarization, and the failure of the Minsk Accords. Purely focusing on Putin as an imperialist intent on land grab resulted in a simplistic distortion of the events leading up to February 24th 2022. It allowed people in the West to rest easy; everything is, after all, Putin’s fault alone.

## 2 Stage Two: Putin’s ‘Full-Scale’ Invasion, Russia’s ‘Catastrophe’ and the Ukraine’s First ‘Great’ Victory (24th Feb-27th March)

The immediate UK media response was to paint Russia’s SMO as a ‘full-scale invasion’ that aimed to invest and occupy the whole country. Russia was throwing all its might at Ukraine, and would struggle to hold out for even a week.<sup>17</sup> One does not have to be a military expert, however, to notice that Moscow’s

15 Carl Clausewitz, *On war* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 280; Sharma, “A social theory of war: Clausewitz and war reconsidered”, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol 28, no. 3, 327-347.

16 Stephen F. Walt “What Putin Got Right”, *Foreign Policy*, 15 February 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/02/15/putin-right-ukraine-war/> (accessed 20 March 2023).

17 Mark Trevelyan, “Ukraine’s forces no match for Russia in manpower, gear and experience”, *Reuters*, 24 February 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukraines-forces-no-match-russia-manpower-gear-experience-2022-02-24/> (accessed 20 March 2023).

SMO was not a full-scale maximum use of force invasion akin to Hitler's invasions of Poland and the USSR, or, more recently, America's invasion of Iraq. The 150,000-180,000 troops deployed across the Ukrainian border in the SMO faced 196,600 Ukrainian troops and 900,000 reservists.<sup>18</sup> Russia thus came nowhere to the 3:1 attacker-defender ratio needed to breakthrough enemy positions. Indeed, at first Ukraine's substantial lines of fortifications in Luhansk and Donetsk were not subjected to any kind of Russian blitzkrieg or head-on attack, nor were Russia's rockets, bombs and drones deployed in any systematic manner to destroy Ukraine's critical infrastructure. Russia launched 600 airstrikes in the first ten days,<sup>19</sup> far fewer than the 2000 strikes launched in the first days of the US-led 'shock and awe' invasion of Iraq in 2003.<sup>20</sup> Civilian casualties in Ukraine were also much lower by 31 March 2022 than in Iraq at a similar stage of the US invasion.<sup>21</sup>

Likely out of concern for the political, economic and social stability of the system he built over twenty years, Putin did not, to use a poker term, 'go all-in' on Feb 24th. The SMO was launched without conducting a large-scale military mobilization, without seriously tilting Russia's economy to a war-footing, and without extensive and sustained rearming and military spending pre-invasion. In this Putin followed the established pattern of waging war 'on the cheap' he had pursued in Georgia (2008), Crimea (2014) and Syria (2015). In the first phase of the war (24 February-25 March 2022), the SMO was a limited use of force to compel Kyiv to terms more favorable to Russia. The initiation of peace negotiations between Russia and Ukraine in March 2022 indicates Moscow's strategy was to cut out Kyiv's Western allies and pressure Zelensky directly.<sup>22</sup>

18 Mark F. Cancian, "Russian Casualties in Ukraine: Reaching the Tipping Point", CSIS, 31 March 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russian-casualties-ukraine-reaching-tipping-point> (accessed 20 March 2023).

19 CNN, "Russia has fired 600 missiles", 6 March 2022, [https://edition.cnn.com/europe/live-news/ukraine-russia-putin-news-03-06-22/h\\_9a75a46d4bfa8041016b60472351f411](https://edition.cnn.com/europe/live-news/ukraine-russia-putin-news-03-06-22/h_9a75a46d4bfa8041016b60472351f411) (accessed 20 March 2023).

20 John T. Correll, What Happened to Shock and Awe? *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, 1 November 2003, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/article/1103shock/> (accessed 20 March 2023).

21 United Nations Human Rights, "Ukraine: Civilian casualty update", 1 April 2022, [https://ukraine.un.org/sites/default/files/2022-04/Ukraine%20-%20civilian%20casualty%20update%20as%20of%2024.00%2031%20March%202022%20ENG\\_o.pdf](https://ukraine.un.org/sites/default/files/2022-04/Ukraine%20-%20civilian%20casualty%20update%20as%20of%2024.00%2031%20March%202022%20ENG_o.pdf) (accessed 20 March 2023).

22 Tovah Lazaroff, 'Putin assured me he wouldn't kill Zelensky,' Bennett recalls *Jerusalem Post*, February 5, 2023, <https://m.jpost.com/international/article-730603/amp> (accessed 20 March 2023).

Launching the SMO in this initial form was thus intended to achieve a clear political objective.

Misrepresenting the SMO as a full-scale invasion aimed at the occupation of Ukraine made it all the easier for experts in the coming months to present it as a total failure. According to this logic, Russian columns on the road to Kyiv, and the capture of Hostomel airport by paratroopers, was part of a botched attempt to encircle Kyiv and quickly decapitate the Ukrainian state to install a puppet regime.<sup>23</sup> Here a key claim is that Putin underestimated Ukrainian resolve, expected Ukraine to crumble as a state, and underestimated Western unity.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, many Western commentators also expected a Ukrainian military collapse, but claimed it would be followed by a long and bloody insurgency against Russian occupation that the West should prepare to support.<sup>25</sup>

What appears to have happened was that Ukrainian forces successfully used hit and run tactics to cause substantial Russian losses. Putin's call for Ukrainian troops to lay down their arms was not heeded.<sup>26</sup> Kyiv did not fall and Zelensky did not flee. Ukraine won a victory in the first key event of the war: the 'Battle' for Kyiv. Of course, what happened around Kyiv was more a series of skirmishes than a massive full-frontal assault resembling the battles of Stalingrad, Kursk or Verdun. It was also hyperbole to call this a military catastrophe for Russia. Nonetheless, the foundations of the UK media coverage of the war were now set: Russia is incompetent in its military operations; they are sustaining high numbers of casualties; they are on the road to defeat.

This picture of the first phase of the war is dependent on the idea Russia based their entire SMO plan around capturing or encircling Kyiv. Indeed, deploying Russian troops around Kyiv could sow panic and fear, producing the maximum positive result for Moscow (regime change) at a relatively cheap price. This opening gambit failed to provide its maximum pay-out for Russia,

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23 Sunita Patel-Carstairs, Ukraine invasion: Russia launches 'war of the cities' as its forces shift to 'siege' tactics, *SkyNews*, 4 March 2022, <https://news.sky.com/story/ukraine-invasion-russia-launches-war-of-the-cities-as-its-forces-shift-to-siege-tactics-12556362> (accessed 20 March 2023).

24 Fiona Hill and Angela Stent, "The Kremlin's Grand Delusions", *Foreign Affairs*, 15 February 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/kremlins-grand-delusions> (accessed 20 March 2023).

25 Douglas London, The Coming Ukrainian Insurgency, *Foreign Affairs*, 25 February 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-02-25/coming-ukrainian-insurgency> (accessed 20 March 2023).

26 Editorial, "The Guardian view on Putin's war in Ukraine: Moscow's on the losing side", *The Guardian*, 7 Mar 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/mar/07/the-guardian-view-on-putins-war-in-ukraine-moscows-on-the-losing-side> (accessed 20 March 2023).



but there were other benefits, which have been largely ignored by UK expert observers. Whatever the size of Russian forces around Kyiv, they were never large enough to storm a city of this size. At the time, however, the Russians gave the opposite impression, causing the AFU to shift its forces and operational focus to the defense of the capital. Meanwhile, Russia was able to make territorial gains in the area most important to them in strategic terms: the Eastern corridor around Crimea, where Kherson was captured and gains made around Mariupol and Zaporizhzhia with few losses for Russian forces. No serious offensive efforts were made in the heavily fortified Donbass, which would have been costly in casualties. To reiterate, the first phase of the SMO was done 'on the cheap' and aimed at seizing territory, inflicting losses on the AFU and sowing panic in Ukraine at the lowest possible cost to Russia.<sup>27</sup>

Such a view, however, is nowhere to be found in the UK media. Western commentators went from overestimating to underestimating Russian military capabilities with lightning speed. The euphoria of the moment was indeed memorable. Zelensky was a brave hero who had risked his life to stay in Kyiv. Ukrainian courage helped the West to rediscover its sense of purpose. Russia could not take Kyiv and could, in fact, be defeated. A flurry of optimistic expert assessments of Ukraine's military prospects eventually appeared in the press and online to support the euphoria with more logical argument.<sup>28</sup> It became clear that Russia's problems on the operational and tactical level (insufficient infantry, a dysfunctional command system, compromised communications, logistical problems) were compounded by its strategic failure (Ukraine held firm). The issue is whether it was accurate to present these problems as a shocking catastrophe for Russia, or if this is more in the category of teething problems for any army adapting to operations on a new scale.<sup>29</sup>

The Russian pull-out from Kyiv was sold as a great victory of Ukrainian arms and clear evidence that Russia's invasion was a complete debacle.<sup>30</sup> Zelensky

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27 Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, "Speech of the Head of the Main Operational Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation Colonel General Sergei Rudskoy" 25 March 2022 [https://eng.mil.ru/en/special\\_operation/news/more.htm?id=12414735@egNews](https://eng.mil.ru/en/special_operation/news/more.htm?id=12414735@egNews) (accessed 20 March 2023).

28 Frederick Kagan, "Ukraine can defeat Russia – but the West must help", *The Hill*, 27 March 2022. <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/599945-ukraine-can-defeat-russia-but-the-west-must-help/> (accessed 20 March 2023).

29 Alex Vershinin, "Russia's logistical problems may slow down Russia's advance – but they are unlikely to stop it", *Modern War Institute*, 3 March 2022. <https://mwi.usma.edu/russias-logistical-problems-may-slow-down-russias-advance-but-they-are-unlikely-to-stop-it/> (accessed 20 March 2023).

30 Peter Dickinson, "Russia in retreat: Putin appears to admit defeat in the Battle for Kyiv" *Atlantic Council* 29 March 2022. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert>

was now the hero, although the elevation of his status in UK media actually had begun from the very first days of the war.<sup>31</sup> The discovery of dead bodies in Bucha provoked the first serious accusations of Russian war crimes. A new layer was added to the argument against negotiations: how can Ukrainians be asked to make territorial concessions to those who have murdered, tortured and raped their way through their land? Would such agreements be of any value from a 'bad-faith' actor?<sup>32</sup> UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson visited Zelensky in Kyiv to urge him to fight on until Russia was expelled from Ukraine, and Kyiv withdrew from ceasefire talks in Istanbul.<sup>33</sup> This was done despite indications of significant concessions from Russia by former Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, who was an intermediary in the March talks. He claims Russia was ready to surrender two of the announced war aims: 'de-nazification' (removing Zelensky or regime change<sup>34</sup>) and 'de-militarization' (the complete disarmament of Ukraine).<sup>35</sup>

According to the new UK media narrative in place by the end of phase one, the West would support Ukraine's efforts to restore its territorial integrity for as long as was required by Kyiv. Soon, this open-ended commitment to support Ukraine was buttressed by a broader ideological vision: Ukraine was not simply fighting for its own freedom, but for the whole of the Europe. Speaking in Warsaw, President Biden declared the war in Ukraine was one of democracy against autocracy, and concluded his speech with a call for Putin to be removed from office<sup>36</sup> (which he later retracted, then reaffirmed).<sup>37</sup> Ukrainians would

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/russia-in-retreat-putin-appears-to-admit-defeat-in-the-battle-for-kyiv/ (accessed 20 March 2023).

- 31 John Reed, "Zelensky steps up in crisis to become Ukraine's wartime commander-in-chief", *Financial Times*, 24 February 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/6930cebb-9c20-4ae2-bd58-8a2fc78e7cd4> (accessed 20 March 2023).
- 32 Alina Polyakova and John Herbst, "Ukraine Can Win", 22 April 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-04-22/ukraine-can-win> (accessed 20 March 2023).
- 33 Roman Romaniuk, "From Zelenskyy's 'surrender' to Putin's surrender: how the negotiations with Russia are going" *Pravda.ua* 5 May 2022, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/articles/2022/05/5/7344096/>.
- 34 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qKgtLDeWBzs&t=9660s> (accessed 20 March 2023).
- 35 "Bennett Speaks Out," 4 February 2023, <https://youtu.be/qKgtLDeWBzs> (2:36:15 to 3:00:41).
- 36 The White House, "Remarks by President Biden" 26 March 2022 <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/03/26/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-united-efforts-of-the-free-world-to-support-the-people-of-ukraine/> (accessed 20 March 2023).
- 37 Steven Nelson, "Biden contradicts aides and reaffirms his call for Putin's overthrow" *New York Post*, 28 March 2022 <https://nypost.com/2022/03/28/biden-contradicts-aides-reaffirms-call-for-putins-overthrow/> (accessed 20 March 2023).

fight to push Russia out and thereby strengthen the Free World. The basis for a 'just war' was established in the West. All the focus on Russian incompetence and blundering around Kyiv, the cheering of Ukraine's 'triumph' and jeering at Russia's 'catastrophe', however, served to distort the actual military situation on the ground and conceal the simple fact that, with negotiations cancelled, the war would escalate into a new phase.

### 3 Stage Three: Russia's 'Disastrous' Military Performance and Impending 'Collapse-Through-Attrition' (March 25th to August 31st)

On March 25, Russia announced a shift in focus to the full 'liberation' of the Donbass. Forces withdrawn from around Kyiv, joined with those released after the fall of Mariupol, and were redeployed to Luhansk. This signaled the end of Russia's war of movement and the start of a grinding, artillery-led, war of attrition. This approach was better suited to Russia's superior artillery ratio,<sup>38</sup> and sought to maximize Ukrainian losses. In repeated briefings, the Russian military made it clear that progress would be slow but methodical. There would be no full-frontal storming of Ukrainian positions due to the likelihood of high Russian casualties.<sup>39</sup> The number of destroyed Ukrainian military equipment and installations continued to rise, and while some British reporting recognized this as a war of attrition, very few concluded that it necessarily put Ukraine on the road to defeat.<sup>40</sup>

Instead, media coverage of this second phase was still very much cheering and jeering. Putin had destroyed Russia's reputation with his 'disastrous invasion'; the Russian military machine had proved to be utterly dysfunctional.<sup>41</sup> Ukraine's plucky resistance had surprised the world and Zelensky's stock as

38 UKRINFORM, "Russia-Ukraine artillery ratio in some areas is 10:1 – Podolyak", 15 June 2022. <https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-ato/3507235-russiaukraine-artillery-ratio-in-some-areas-is-101-podolyak.html>.

39 "Vladimir Putin answered journalists' questions", *Kremlin.ru*, June 29, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68783> (accessed 20 March 2023).

40 Stephen Kalin, "Ukraine's War of Attrition Exacts Heavy Toll on Both Sides," *Wall Street Journal*, June 29, 2022. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/ukraines-war-of-attrition-exacts-heavy-toll-on-both-sides-11656498825>.

41 Frederick W. Kagan and Mason Clark, "How Not to Invade a Nation" *Foreign Affairs*, 29 April 2022 <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-04-29/how-not-invade-nation>; Brian Milakovsky, Putin's Pyrrhic Victory, *Foreign Affairs* 31 March 2022 <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-03-31/putins-pyrrhic-victory> Foreign Affairs Podcast, How Putin's Flawed Assumptions Doomed Russian Victory in Ukraine: A Conversation With Lawrence Freedman <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/podcasts/how-putin-flawed-assumptions-doomed-russia-victory-ukraine>.

a war leader continued to rise. The ineffectiveness of Putin's corrupt autocracy in waging war was exposed.<sup>42</sup> A steady stream of predictions flowed about Russia's impending collapse, presented as inevitable given its pariah status.<sup>43</sup> Russian military successes (such as the fall of Mariupol) were presented as pyrrhic victories,<sup>44</sup> while any Ukrainian successes (such as the sinking of the *Moskva* or the recapture of Snake Island) were celebrated as audacious and important victories.<sup>45</sup> Russian generals were being identified and eliminated in precision strikes.<sup>46</sup> Media experts even took to inventing timetables for Russian progress so that they could then point to their failure to achieve said targets. One example of this was the failure to capture Mariupol before May 9th Victory Day celebrations in Moscow.<sup>47</sup>

Overestimating Russian losses is key to the 'collapse-though-attribution' argument, as a result of which it would be Russia that falls apart and sues for peace on Ukrainian terms.<sup>48</sup> The UK media coverage of the war was skewed in such a way as to close off any discussion of stopping the war of attrition and returning to negotiations. Why do this if the Russians were set to collapse? What was being studiously ignored was that Russia's larger population and degree of self-sufficiency in economy and military production not only gave the country

42 Lawrence Freedman "Why War Fails" *Foreign Affairs* 14 June 2022 <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2022-06-14/ukraine-war-russia-why-fails>.

43 Simon Saradzhyan, "No End in Sight to 'Beginning of Putin's End', *Russia Matters*, 10 August 2022 <https://www.russiamatters.org/node/28486>.

44 Todd Prince, "Russia's Capture Of Azovstal: Symbolic Success, 'Pyrrhic' Victory?" *Radio Liberty Europe*, <https://www.rferl.org/a/azovstal-russia-ukraine-captured/31856565.html>.

45 Isobel Koshiw, "Ukraine pushes Russian forces from strategic Snake Island", *The Guardian*, 30 June 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/30/ukraine-forces-report-edly-recapture-snake-island-in-strategic-win>; Dominic Nicholls, "Why Ukraine's Snake Island victory could be a major blow for Putin", *The Telegraph*, 30 June 2022; <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2022/06/30/how-russias-retreat-snake-island-could-restart-grain-trade/>; Andrew Roth, "Loss of Moskva strikes serious blow to Russian military's prestige", *The Guardian*, 15 April 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/15/loss-of-moskva-strikes-serious-blow-to-russian-militarys-prestige>; Deborah Haynes, "Sinking of Russia's Black Sea flagship is a big embarrassment for Vladimir Putin", *Sky News*, 15 April 2022; <https://news.sky.com/story/ukraine-war-losing-russias-black-sea-flagship-is-a-big-embarrassment-for-vladimir-putin-12590501> (accessed 20 March 2023).

46 Peter Beaumont and Julian Borger, "US intelligence helping Ukraine kill Russian generals, report says", *The Guardian*, 5 May 2022 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/05/us-intelligence-helping-ukraine-kill-russian-generals-report> (accessed 20 March 2023).

47 Andrew Roth, "Putin hopes to claim Mariupol as key prop in Victory Day celebrations" *The Guardian*, 5 May 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/05/putin-hopes-to-claim-mariupol-as-key-prop-in-victory-day-celebrations> (accessed 20 March 2023).

48 Barry R. Posen, "Ukraine's Implausible Theories of Victory", *Foreign Affairs*, 8 July 2022 <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-07-08/ukraines-implausible-theories-victory> (accessed 20 March 2023).

the clear advantage in a war of attrition; it also meant Russia had ‘escalation dominance’: the ability to increase the scale and destructiveness of the war on the territory of an enemy lacking the ability to do the same.

There is a very plausible alternative analysis of what was going on in this second phase of the war. Firstly, it is clear the ‘war of attrition’ strategy was chosen by Russia and the entire point of it was to inflict a much higher casualty ratio on Ukrainians. Capturing territory was a welcome secondary objective behind the primary aim of destroying AFU men and materials. In phase two of the war, entrenched lines of Ukrainian defense in the Donbass were subjected to massive artillery bombardment resembling the warfare of World War One.<sup>49</sup> Russia used its firepower superiority in artillery to drive a slow and methodical advance in the summer of 2022, while Ukraine utilized its manpower advantage to slow the Russian advance, at a cost of an estimated 100-200 deaths a day.<sup>50</sup> This resulted in Russia’s steady capture of the rest of Luhansk oblast’ with the fall of Severodonetsk in late June, and of Lisichansk in early July.

While evidence on these casualty ratios is sparse, Ukraine certainly has had to replace a lot of destroyed equipment. NATO countries emptied their stock of Soviet-era weapons to allow Ukraine to reconstitute these losses.<sup>51</sup> All the same, British media coverage uncritically accepted Ukrainian claims of high Russian losses in this period without independent verification. Russian morale was still falling<sup>52</sup> and they were running out of weapons.<sup>53</sup> Ukraine was still on the road to victory.<sup>54</sup>

49 Kirstin J.H. Brathwaite and Margarita Konaev, “The Real Key to Victory in Ukraine”, *Foreign Affairs*, 29 June 2022 <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-06-29/real-key-victory-ukraine> (accessed 20 March 2023).

50 BBC News, “Ukrainian casualties: Kyiv losing up to 200 troops a day – Zelensky aide”, 9 June 2022 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-61742736> (accessed 20 March 2023).

51 France 24, Ukraine dependent on arms from allies after exhausting Soviet-era weaponry, 10 June 2022 <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220610-ukraine-dependent-on-arms-from-allies-after-exhausting-soviet-era-weaponry> (accessed 20 March 2023).

52 Brad Dress, “UK military intelligence: Multiple factors driving low morale among Russian forces in Ukraine”, *The Hill*, 19 June 2022 <https://thehill.com/policy/international/3529224-uk-military-intelligence-multiple-factors-driving-low-morale-among-russian-forces-in-ukraine/> (accessed 20 March 2023).

53 Sky News, “Russia has ‘strategically lost’”, 17 June 2022, <https://news.sky.com/story/ukraine-war-russia-has-strategically-lost-uk-armed-forces-chief-admiral-sir-tony-rada-kin-says-12635312>; Dominic Nicholls, “Vladimir Putin’s forces are running out of tanks”, *The Telegraph*, 27 May 2022, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2022/05/27/vladimir-putins-forces-running-tanks/> (accessed 20 March 2023).

54 Deborah Haynes, “Russia ‘about to run out of steam’ after ‘epic fails’ in Ukraine”, *Sky News*, 22 July 2022 <https://news.sky.com/story/russia-about-to-run-out-of-steam-after-epic-fails-in-ukraine-mi6-chief-says-12656390> (accessed 20 March 2023).

Those ‘in-the-know’ in the West had reason to be optimistic about Ukrainian prospects in the war and dismiss talk of peace: they knew that Ukrainian forces were being trained and equipped in the rear for a war of offensive maneuver. By August 2022, NATO training, supplies and organization had helped Ukraine reconstitute its army<sup>55</sup> and take the offensive. These reconstituted forces were deployed against Russian forces that were thinly spread across a 1000 km front-line and regrouping after the lengthy offensive operations in Luhansk. The next escalation of the war was about to begin.

#### 4 Stage Four: Ukraine’s Offensives as the ‘Turning Point to Victory’; Russia’s ‘Brutal Desperation’ (1st September to November 11th)

Ukraine’s successful counter-offensives around Kharkov and Kherson were crucial moments in the course of the war. UK media coverage presented them as proof that Ukraine was on the road to final victory.<sup>56</sup> A crucial aspect of this phase of the war, often lost in this coverage, was that it marked another level of escalation. NATO’s involvement in these offensives was indisputable, from the 400 HIMARS strikes,<sup>57</sup> to the composition of the offensive forces and the use of intelligence for the timing and location of these offensives. Billions of dollars in aid and equipment, together with the tens of thousands of Ukrainian soldiers trained in NATO countries in the preceding months, were finally bringing a clear return in the investment.

Just as essential to these offensives was the complementary informational barrage about Russia’s losses. While it is hard to ascertain whether the retreat around Kharkov brought heavy losses for Russia, the staged withdrawal from Kherson certainly did not, since its swiftness and completeness caught NATO

55 Alina Polyakova and Ilya Timtchenko, “Time for NATO to Take the Lead in Ukraine”, *Foreign Affairs* 4 August 2022 <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/time-nato-take-lead-ukraine> (accessed 20 March 2023).

56 Mike Martin “Putin is finished. The Ukrainians have him on the ropes”, *The Telegraph*, 11 Sept 2022, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2022/09/11/putin-finished-ukrainians-have-ropes-stunning-victory-sights/>; Luke Harding, “Humiliation for Vladimir Putin as Ukrainians liberate key city of Lyman”, *The Guardian*, 1 Oct 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/01/humiliation-for-vladimir-putin-as-ukrainians-liberate-key-city-of-lyman>; Roland Oliphant, “Ukraine takes ‘substantial’ victory over Russians in Kharkiv offensive”, *The Telegraph*, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2022/09/09/ukraine-takes-substantial-victory-russians-kharkiv-offensive/> (accessed 20 March 2023).

57 Reuters, “Ukraine Has Struck More Than 400 Russian Targets with HIMARS – U.S. Top General,” September 8, 2022 (accessed 20 March 2023).

intelligence by surprise.<sup>58</sup> In contrast to the bloody Ukrainian defense of Luhansk that summer, Russia did not ‘stand and fight’ to hold territory against overwhelming odds. While the Russians withdrew to build and consolidate new defense lines, the media failed to ask: what losses did the Ukrainians suffer for these offensives?

Undoubtedly, the battles won in this period attest to the operational and tactical skills of a NATO-led rearmed and highly-motivated Ukrainian army. Experts in the West grew excited about the next Ukrainian victory: the Russian bear was wounded. It was time to go in for the kill; the Ukrainians would retake Crimea by Christmas.<sup>59</sup> Russia was either on the verge of, or had already suffered, a resounding defeat in strategic terms.<sup>60</sup>

None of the above materialized. Instead, Ukraine’s successes ensured the next serious escalation of the war: On 21 September 2022 Putin announced voting would be held on the annexation of four regions into Russia, and there would be a partial mobilization of up to 300,000 men. Russia had upped the ante; it was ready to see NATO and raise the bet, with tragic destructive consequences for Ukraine. Rather than recognize these developments as dangerous evidence of Russia’s ‘escalation dominance’ in Ukraine, experts in the West argued that Putin, was playing with a ‘losing hand’.<sup>61</sup>

Russia’s annexation of four Ukrainian regions was cited as further evidence Putin’s detachment from reality. Amid a stream of claims that Putin’s health was failing<sup>62</sup> the key point was often lost: these annexations not only made future negotiations much harder, but they allowed Moscow to deploy conscripts to places now considered Russian national territory. Additionally,

58 Barry R. Posen, “Russia’s Rebound”, *Foreign Affairs*, 4 January 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/russia-rebound-moscow-recovered-military-setbacks> (accessed 20 March 2023).

59 UKRINFORM, “Defense Ministry predicts Ukrainian forces be back in Crimea by end of December”, 19 November 2022 <https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-ato/3617947-defense-ministry-predicts-ukrainian-forces-be-back-in-crimea-by-end-of-Decemberember.html> (accessed 20 March 2023).

60 Con Coughlin, “Vladimir Putin’s total defeat is now within reach”, *The Telegraph*, 8 Sept 2022, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2022/09/08/vladimir-putins-total-defeat-now-within-reach/> (accessed 20 March 2023).

61 Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Michael Kofman, “Russia’s Dangerous Decline”, *Foreign Affairs* 1 November 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/russia-dangerous-decline> (accessed 20 March 2023).

62 Tim Norton, “The year Putin didn’t die” *Newsweek*, 24 February 2023, <https://www.newsweek.com/putin-health-cancer-parkinsons-rumors-1783665> (accessed 20 March 2023).

Russia's mobilization was portrayed in UK media as a disaster,<sup>63</sup> showing the incompetence of the Russian state, leading to a mass outflow of young men from the country, and making the regime vulnerable to unrest.<sup>64</sup> Mobilization could not save Russia from its impending defeat.<sup>65</sup> In fact, the mobilization has proven to be rather successful and reinforced new defensive lines making them much less vulnerable to Ukrainian offensive operations. The expansion of Russian forces was projected to reach 500,000 by the spring 2023.

The final element of escalation during this phase came in response to a Ukrainian attack on Kherson and the Crimean Bridge on 6 October 2022. After that Russia began a new campaign to destroy Ukraine's critical infrastructure. General Sergei Surovikin was appointed to direct the military operations, and a Coordination Council was set up to support military supplies and logistics.<sup>66</sup> With winter coming, Russia had essentially announced its intention to fight to the end with all the resources at its disposal. The next, bloodier phase of Russia's war of attrition, temporarily interrupted by Ukraine's successful counter-offensives, would mark the next escalation of the war.

## 5 Stage Five: The 'Quagmire' of the Winter, Russia as 'Terrorist State' and Its 'Human-Wave' Assaults (November 11th 2022 to February 24th 2023)

UK media coverage of this latest phase of the war has focused on two themes. Firstly, Russia's continuing winter air strikes on Ukraine,<sup>67</sup> which were framed

63 Andrew Roth, "Kremlin attempts to calm Russian fury over chaotic mobilisation", *The Guardian*, 1 October 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/01/kremlin-attempts-to-calm-russian-fury-over-chaotic-mobilisation>; Financial Times, "Kremlin attempts to calm Russian fury over chaotic mobilisation", 28 Sept 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/d6cf2d9e-e417-4768-ad5a-32083ae61b60> (accessed 20 March 2023).

64 Michael Kimmage and Maria Lipman, "What Mobilization Means for Russia", *Foreign Affairs* 27 Sept 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russian-federation/what-mobilization-means-russia> (accessed 20 March 2023).

65 Lawrence Freedman, "All the Tsar's Men: Why Mobilization Can't Save Putin's War", *Foreign Affairs*, 23 September 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/all-tsars-men> (accessed 20 March 2023).

66 Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, "Putin's Warriors: How the Kremlin Has Co-opted Its Critics and Militarized the Home Front", *Foreign Affairs*, 6 December 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russian-federation/putin-warriors> (accessed 20 March 2023).

67 Jamie Dettmer, "Can Putin's 'Butcher of Syria' save Russia from another rout?" *Politico*, 26 October 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/butcher-syria-sergei-surovikin-russia-vladimir-putin-kremlin-ukraine-kherson/> (accessed 20 March 2023).



as deliberate targeting of civilians. With the Ukrainian authorities declaring their discovery of Russian atrocities in the recaptured territory around Kharkov and Kherson,<sup>68</sup> a new level of agitation pushed for the Russian leadership to be declared war criminals and Russia a 'terrorist state'.<sup>69</sup> The EU Parliament declared Russia to be 'a state sponsor of terrorism'<sup>70</sup> and established a tribunal to investigate and prosecute 'Russian' war crimes, implying that Ukrainian war crimes would not be included.<sup>71</sup> Secondly, Russia's offensive operations in Donetsk Oblast' were increasingly characterized as 'brutal', involving 'human wave attacks' reliant on conscripted convict soldiers being cynically used as 'cannon fodder'.<sup>72</sup>

What this framing conceals is how the war had once again changed in this phase. For one thing, Russia's airstrikes served a strategic purpose: to severely degrade the functioning of the Ukrainian economy and state, as well as its transport and energy infrastructure. This reflects the longer-term Russian goal to weaken and collapse the political center of Ukraine. It has been estimated that nearly 50% of the energy network is out of commission, with 40% of the Ukrainian population in need of humanitarian aid.<sup>73</sup> These airstrikes also served the operational and tactical purpose of diverting Ukrainian resources away from offensive operations, to improving air defenses, repairing energy networks and scrambling to provide ad hoc solutions to energy outages on the military and home fronts. The air escalation immediately provoked Ukrainian

68 Michael Biesecker and Erika Kinetz, "Evidence of Russian Crimes Mounts as War in Ukraine Drags On," AP, December 30, 2022. <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-war-crimes-government-international-criminal-court-a6edd7e6ed0de527b42a1790dc33ea> (accessed 20 March 2023).

69 BBC News, "Ukraine conflict: What war crimes is Russia accused of?" 14 November 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-60690688> (accessed 20 March 2023).

70 European Parliament, "European Parliament declares Russia to be a state sponsor of terrorism", 23 November 2022, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20221118IPR55707/european-parliament-decemberlares-russia-to-be-a-state-sponsor-of-terrorism> (accessed 20 March 2023).

71 Reuters, "EU seeks tribunal to probe possible Russian war crimes in Ukraine" 30 November 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eu-seeks-set-up-russian-war-crimes-tribunal-von-der-leyen-2022-11-30/>.

72 Nataliya Vasilyeva, "Russia running out of 'single-use' soldiers", *The Telegraph* 3 February 2022. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2023/02/03/tactics-behind-russias-human-wave-attacks-bakhmut/> (accessed 20 March 2023).

73 UNGeneva.org, "Press briefing by the United Nations information service" 13 December 2022 <https://www.ungeneva.org/en/news-media/bi-weekly-briefing/2022/12/press-briefing-united-nations-information-service-2#:~:text=An%20estimated%2050%20oper%20cent,Ukraine's%20population%20-%20needed%20humanitarian%20aid> (accessed 20 March 2023).

demands for new weapons to protect its airspace, along with huge financial support to stave off bankruptcy. Ukraine rapidly went from capturing Crimea by Christmas, to the more modest goal of simply surviving the winter.<sup>74</sup>

Second, Russia was able to resume its slow, grinding advance in the Donbass, deploying drones together with massive artillery strikes, and selectively storming weakened positions. While Western observers reassure themselves by looking at Russia's meagre territorial gains, in a war of attrition the goal is to inflict a higher rate of casualties and destruction on the enemy. The veil of secrecy over death figures on both sides is telling. UK and US officials have claimed the causality ratio is 1:1, around 100,000 for both sides.<sup>75</sup> A more careful counting of Russian deaths, based on media reports and funeral notices, however, arrives at a figure of just 14,093.<sup>76</sup> Yet even if we accept American and British claims that the causality ratio is 1:1, this should be deeply worrying given that Russia's population is three times larger than Ukraine's. All in all, Russia has upped the costs not only for Ukraine, but also the bill that the West must pay to keep it in the fight.

As early as October 2022, Ukrainian general Valery Zaluzhny demanded 300 tanks, 600-700 IFVs, 500 Howitzers in order for Ukraine to return to the offensive.<sup>77</sup> His remarkable shopping list essentially is tantamount to building an almost brand-new Ukrainian army at a time when NATO stocks are run very low. The need for Ukraine to continue offensive operations seems to be politically driven: Ukrainian victories keep the war on the front pages of the Western media. In the latest phase of the war Ukrainian offensive operations ground to a halt; Ukraine has no answer to Russia's strategic bombing campaign; the slow encirclement of Bakhmut continues with Kyiv apparently unwilling to permit a withdrawal. Meanwhile, estimates of Russian forces available for deployment now dwarf Zaluzhny's latest request, which is for 1800 tanks, 3950 armored vehicles, 2700 artillery systems and 810 self-propelled guns, 400 fighter jets,

74 Melinda Haring and Jacob Heilbrunn, "Can Ukraine Survive the Winter?" *Foreign Affairs* 8 November 2022 <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/can-ukraine-survive-winter> (accessed 20 March 2023).

75 Congressional Research Service, "Russia's War in Ukraine: Military and Intelligence Aspects" 13 February 2022 <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R47068> (accessed 20 March 2023).

76 Meduza, "Mediazona and BBC News Russian publish further figures on Russia's losses in Ukraine", 13 February 2022 <https://meduza.io/en/news/2023/02/13/mediazona-and-bbc-news-russian-publish-further-figures-on-russia-s-losses-in-ukraine> (accessed 20 March 2023).

77 "An interview with General Valery Zaluzhny, head of Ukraine's armed forces" *The Economist*, 15 December 2022, <https://www.economist.com/zaluzhny-transcript> (accessed 20 March 2023).

and 300 helicopters.<sup>78</sup> It is clear that promised Western arm deliveries will cover only a small part of what Ukraine would need to hold its own.

A January op-ed from former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and former Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates recognized the disadvantageous nature of this new phase of the war for Ukraine.<sup>79</sup> Yet, far from suggesting it was time for peace talks, they called for a massive increase in new and more sophisticated weapons. This new escalation, which began mid-January 2023, is bringing tanks and fighter jets to Ukraine as I write. The Pentagon's proposal,<sup>80</sup> that the USA should deploy special forces inside Ukraine, is another indication of a new and more dangerous levels of Western involvement. The likelihood of a Russian retaliation is high and has indeed been promised by Kremlin officials.<sup>81</sup> We may be on the verge of a new and deadly escalation

A year on, while the cheering and the jeering has not stopped, its intensity has certainly died down. Russia has neither collapsed nor shown any sign that its resolve has weakened. Speaking to Defense Ministry officials on the planned expansion of the Russian army to 1.5 million men, Putin underlined that all the objectives of the SMO would be achieved.<sup>82</sup> Extensive increases in military expenditure and production for 2023-24 will be financed through deficit spending.<sup>83</sup> The precedent of plugging military equipment gaps with purchases from Iran, may also be extended to North Korea and China.<sup>84</sup>

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78 Amy Mackinnon and Jack Detsch, "Ukraine Braces for Grisly Russian Offensive in the East" *Foreign Policy*, 8 February 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/02/08/ukraine-russia-counteroffensive-abrams-tanks-putin-war/> (accessed 20 March 2023).

79 Condoleezza Rice and Robert M. Gates, "Time is not on Ukraine's side", *The Washington Post*, 7 January 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/01/07/condoleezza-rice-robert-gates-ukraine-repel-russia/> (accessed 20 March 2023).

80 Wesley Morgan, "Pentagon looks to restart top secret programs in Ukraine" *The Washington Post*, 10 February 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/02/10/us-special-operations-ukraine-surrogate-program/> (accessed 20 March 2023).

81 Nicola Slawson, "First Thing: Putin threatens nuclear retaliation in escalation of Ukraine war", *The Guardian*, 21 September 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/sep/21/first-thing-putin-threatens-nuclear-retaliation-in-escalation-of-ukraine-war> (accessed 20 March 2023).

82 "Meeting of Defence Ministry Board," *Kremlin.ru*, 21 December 2022 <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/70159> (accessed 20 March 2023).

83 Reuters, "Russia Rainy Day Fund Shrinks by \$38 Billion as Government Plugs Deficit," January 18, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/europe/russias-national-wealth-fund-148-bln-january-1-finance-ministry-2023-01-18/> (accessed 20 March 2023).

84 James Beardsworth, "Is Russia Receiving Weapons from North Korea?" *Moscow Times*, December 18, 2022, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/12/18/is-russia-receiving-weapons-from-north-korea-a79641>.

Meanwhile, the Ukrainians are committed to their own objectives. President Zelensky expressed the key aim of ‘return all lands, because I believe that the battlefield is the way when there is no diplomacy’.<sup>85</sup> Head of Ukraine Military Intelligence Kyrylo Budanov echoed this declaring ‘we must do everything to ensure that Crimea returns home by summer’.<sup>86</sup> Ukraine’s foreign minister Dmytro Kuleba went even further in articulating his ‘personal endgame’:

for me, the end of the war will be when the Russian president, whatever his name will be, will pay a visit to Ukraine, will [get down] on his knees in front of the monument to the victims of Russian aggression, and will beg for an apology. For me, this will be the end of the war. Everything between here and then is war, one way or another.<sup>87</sup>

In contrast, news of further Western weapons deliveries to Ukraine are not combined with any clear announcement of Western war aims. Is a Ukrainian offensive to create conditions for peace negotiations, or is it part of an effort to win back all of Ukraine’s occupied territory? Is it an open-ended commitment to fight Russia to its total exhaustion and collapse? The answer to this all-important question was not forthcoming in President Biden’s recent visits to Kyiv and Warsaw, where he declared the West must support Ukraine for ‘as long as it takes’.<sup>88</sup> Such announcements are food and drink to propagandists in Russia, who claim that the West is waging an open-ended hybrid war that threatens Russia’s very existence. Crucially, such messaging contains no carrots that could induce Russia to come to the negotiating table.<sup>89</sup>

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85 Roula Khalaf, Christopher Miller, Roman Olearchyk and Ben Hall, “Zelensky vows Ukraine will withstand Russian attacks on power networks”, 24 November 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/0103abe6-9129-4545-b805-00eb1ea4c849> (accessed 20 March 2023).

86 Isabelle Khurshudyan, “Ukraine’s intel chief predicted Russia’s war. He says Crimea will be retaken” *The Washington Post*, 31 January 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/01/31/kyrylo-budanov-ukraine-intelligence-boss-interview/> (accessed 20 March 2023).

87 Kevin Baron, “Why War Pledges for Ukraine Fell Flat in Munich”, *Defense One*, 23 February 2023, <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2023/02/why-war-pledges-ukraine-fell-flat-munich/383249> (accessed 20 March 2023).

88 “Support for Ukraine: Whatever It Takes, as Long as It Takes ... to Do What?”, *Russia Matters*, 17 February 2023, <https://www.russiamatters.org/blog/support-ukraine-what-ever-it-takes-long-it-takes-do-what> *Russia Matters*.

89 Vladislav Zubok, “No One Would Win a Long War in Ukraine”, *Foreign Affairs*, 21 December 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/no-one-would-win-long-war-ukraine> (accessed 20 March 2023).

Everything is set up for the scenario of ‘neither victory nor peace’.<sup>90</sup> The war is likely to rage on for all of 2023, producing worse and worse consequences, as recognized in a recent RAND report.<sup>91</sup> Since the start of the war, it has been estimated the West has sent nearly \$50 billion of security aid, a figure that matches the entire Russian military budget of 2022.<sup>92</sup> Ukraine’s dependence on the West is now almost total. Given the depth of this military commitment, the notion that Western countries are not belligerents in this war is rather hard to believe, as is the casual assumption there will not be further deadly escalations.

## 6 Concluding Thoughts: Softening Rhetoric is the Precursor to Debate

Over the course of the first year of the war, the UK media and its sundry experts have cheered and jeered, apparently oblivious to the fact they were welcoming the next more deadly stage of the war. In presenting Russia’s Special Military Operation’ (SMO) as mad, ‘crazy’, ‘meaningless’, ‘disastrous’, UK media coverage argued that with the right level of Western backing, Ukraine can win this war. The corollary to this is that Russia is not far from serious defeat and collapse, and that all it takes is a bit more pushing for the whole rotten structure to cave in. This media rhetoric not only obscures the issues surrounding conduct of the war, it also forestalls more open and frank discussion about the risks, costs, and benefits of the current course. Indeed, the media rhetoric has ensured there is no shift to discussing where peace and reconciliation could begin, and thus almost inevitably supports further escalation by default.

More research is of course required to substantiate the degree of this uniformity, and there is no reason to think that UK coverage will be the same as coverage in Italy, Greece or Poland. It should be expected that some Western

90 Ivo H. Daalder and James Goldgeier, “The Long War in Ukraine”, *Foreign Affairs*, 9 January 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/long-war-ukraine-russia-protracted-conflict> (accessed 20 March 2023).

91 Samuel Charap and Miranda Priebe, “Avoiding a Long War: US Policy and the Trajectory of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict” *RAND Corporation*, January 2023, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA2510-1.html> (accessed 20 March 2023).

92 Jahara Matissek, Will Reno and Sam Rosenberg, “The Good, the Bad and the Ugly: Assessing a Year of Military Aid to Ukraine” *RUSI*, 22 February 2023, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/good-bad-and-ugly-assessing-year-military-aid-ukraine> (accessed 20 March 2023).

countries, depending on the extent of their government's commitment to the war in Ukraine, will have media coverage on the conflict that is closer or further from the "Propaganda Model" concept of Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky.<sup>93</sup> Nonetheless, it is worth noting two aspects of the doublethink at the heart of UK media coverage, which may also apply to other countries.

Doublethink number one is that Western countries, with their discourses, military involvement and sanctions regime, are now *de facto* belligerents in a conflict with Russia. Yet, at the same time an open NATO-Russia conflict, including a declaration of war or 'boots on the ground', is considered hugely undesirable, due to the risk of a nuclear exchange. Doublethink number two is that Russia is derided for its military failures, while at the same time, the point is repeatedly made that if Russia is not defeated in Ukraine, then Putin's tanks will somehow steamroll over other European countries.

It is reasonable to expect that in any open debate, such doublethink would be exposed and the path to a more balanced and reasoned consideration would open. Instead, however, there has been a consistent informational barrage for the better part of the past year describing Russia's invasion as not just morally unjustifiable (which from my point of view it is), but also analytically, intellectually and conceptually corrupt. In cheering Ukraine, the Western media can feel better about themselves. In jeering Russia, however, they are merely projecting their negative emotions onto the situation in a way that distorts reality. One can only hope that this is not a case of *hubris*, the excessive show of pride that the ancient Greeks always saw as the precursor to *nemesis*, the great downfall.

The current coverage ensures there is almost no capacity to see Russia's situation from their point of view. Media coverage presenting the war in Ukraine as an epic struggle between good and evil removes the need for any statesmanship or diplomacy, allowing viewers to feel righteous about war without forcing them to face its consequences directly. Rather than seriously entertaining the notion the fighting should be stopped and negotiations begun, the media's focus has been on the selfless sacrifice that Ukraine is making, which is often presented as bringing about the rebirth of the West through the common purpose of opposing Russia. All in all, the media rhetoric is largely prohibitive to any discussion of what can be done to move toward peace and reconciliation among all parties. Indeed, such sentiment, on the rare occasions it is given a platform, is routinely shot down as utterly delusional thinking.

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93 Edward Herman, and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing consent: the political economy of the mass media* (New York: Vintage, 1994).

A critical function of a free press is to consider the possible consequences of state policy and question its wisdom. One of the great advantages of living in a liberal democracy is the right to a free and fair discussion of the pros and cons behind political decisions. This includes weighing the risks, costs and benefits of each option, and balancing it against what is right and wrong. Looking at future scenarios of the war in Ukraine, six can be outlined. These can be ordered based on an estimate of their potential destructiveness: (1) a serious military escalation that leads to all-out war between NATO and Russia; (2) a long drawn out war at huge cost to both sides, ending in the collapse of the Russian state, potentially sparking civil war in country with nuclear weapons; (3) a long drawn out war that ends in the collapse of the Ukrainian state leading to an insurgency and related long-term instability in neighboring states; (4) utilizing support from China, Iran and North Korea a Ukraine defeated by Russia, with enormous cost to both sides; (5) utilizing Western support, Ukraine either expels the Russians, or reaches a frozen peace with a heavily militarized Ukraine serving as the bulwark against future Russian aggression; (6) an unexpected diplomatic breakthrough leads to concessions on both sides and an imperfect peace deal.

Of the six scenarios, the second and the fifth are given the most attention in UK media, while the risk of scenario one is largely dismissed.<sup>94</sup> There appears to be little recognition that only scenario six will stop the ongoing destruction of Ukraine and the deaths of its citizens. It appears unrealistic to expect democratic societies to give open-ended support for a war of attrition without a serious debate about the goals, risks, costs and benefits of this approach. Serious questions arise as to the stance of mainstream media and their very selective engagement with government and expert figures on the Ukraine war. It remains to be seen if, in response to growing public skepticism of the narrative that Ukraine is winning,<sup>95</sup> broadcasters such as the BBC and Sky News will abandon the 'there is no alternative' line. From this review of one year of war coverage, it can be surmised that, on the discursive level at least, the long road to peace and reconciliation will remain closed until media rhetoric changes.

94 "Ukraine war: Five ways conflict could go in 2023" *BBC News*, 27 December 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-63987113> (accessed 20 March 2023).

95 "Polls Show Western Public Favors General Support for Ukraine, But Is Increasingly Skeptical About Supplying Arms", *Russia Matters*, 9 February 2023, <https://www.rusiamatters.org/blog/polls-show-western-public-favors-general-support-ukraine-increasingly-skeptical-about> (accessed 20 March 2023).

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