

Why Both Ukraine and Russia Need Peace after a Third Summer of War

Written by Maksym Beznosiuk and Martin A. Smith

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MAKSYM BEZNOSIUK AND MARTIN A. SMITH, NOV 10 2024

After another summer of strategic stalemate in the Russo-Ukraine war, recent weeks and months have seen a growing number of calls, including from staunch Ukraine supporters, for some kind of negotiated settlement. Usually, these have focused on the depletion of the Ukrainian defence effort, or at least the perceived inability of the Ukrainian military, state, and society to sustain a potentially open-ended military effort when compared to Russia. Proponents of this view often suggest that a negotiated end to the conflict must entail some concession of Ukrainian territory to Russia. So far, less attention has been paid to the pressures and potential concessions that Russia might be required to make. In this short article, the authors aim to redress the balance by identifying and discussing the key pressures that *both* sides are increasingly facing to seriously consider a negotiated end to the war and which will perhaps see movement in 2025 towards some kind of durable negotiated settlement.

Manpower Shortages and High Casualty Rates

Dwindling manpower resources and heavy casualty rates are foremost among the challenges facing both the Russian and Ukrainian armies on the battlefield. As of September 2024, the combined number of Ukrainians and Russians killed or wounded in battle has reached roughly one million, a particularly shocking number in light of the pre-existing demographic challenges faced by both states and societies, with shrinking populations exacerbating an already difficult economic situation.

In Ukraine, there are severe manpower shortages, which translates, in turn, to restricted battlefield performance. Since August 2024, Russian forces have accelerated their offensive in Donbas, seizing over 1,000 sq. km of additional territory. Overall, Ukraine has – by some estimates – lost almost half a million men killed or injured since the start of the full-scale Russian invasion. Moreover, the recently introduced Mobilization Law has not so far helped Ukrainian authorities address the manpower shortage. Ukrainian military territorial centres are not mobilising even 20 percent of what is needed. Moreover, the Ukrainian army is also experiencing a desertion challenge, with many soldiers reportedly abandoning their posts, blaming poor conditions on the front lines and open-ended service commitments.

This is also a problem for the Russian military, which has made limited territorial advances overall since the start of its invasion, but at an enormous cost in terms of personnel and equipment. Conservative estimates of Russian losses suggest at least 115,000 killed and 500,000–600,000 total casualties. For comparison, the battle death figures alone exceed the total losses suffered by the Soviet Army during its decade in Afghanistan from 1979–1989 by a factor of almost eight. They are also almost twice the number of total losses suffered by the US Army during the peak years of its involvement in the Vietnam War in the 1960s and early 1970s, a scale of loss that had profoundly and durably traumatising impacts on both leaders and wider society in the US.

Despite the ongoing westward push by its military, taking several Ukrainian towns and cities, the current Russian advance has not been rapid and certainly not strategically decisive, mainly due to manpower shortages. In Autumn 2024, Russia occupied less than 20 percent of Ukrainian territory overall. It still did not fully occupy any of the four eastern oblasts it claimed to have annexed two years earlier, and indeed, it occupied less territory than it had

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controlled before being driven out of most of Kharkiv and the western parts of Kherson in September–November 2022.

Although relatively less publicised in the Western debates, Russia also faces a manpower challenge. Due to the heavy casualties, it is having to cope with an ongoing manpower shortage on the front lines despite having committed its military and security forces to the war in Ukraine to such an extent that it has left itself virtually defenceless at home. The consequences were apparent in the lack of any effective military response to preventing either the Wagner Group 'March on Moscow' in June 2023, or Ukraine's military incursion into the Kursk region 14 months later, with the deployment of up to 12,000 North Korean troops reportedly being required to assist in pushing the latter back in Autumn 2024.

Nor has the rate of Russia's attrition in Ukraine shown any sign of slowing down. September 2024 was a deadly month for Russian troops, for example, with an average of more than 1,000 of its soldiers reportedly killed or injured daily. This explains the much-discussed deployment of the North Korean troops to the war effort the following month. Although it is not entirely clear at the time of writing whether they will eventually be sent to the frontlines in the Donbas or elsewhere, or used exclusively to shore up the Russian effort to roll back Ukraine's Kursk incursion, it is apparent that their arrival is indicative of the depleted Russian ability to adequately staff its own armed forces, despite repeated claims by Russian officials and spokespeople that it continues to attract 1,000 new volunteer recruits every day.

Weaponry Shortages

Apart from the manpower shortage, Ukraine has also experienced a severe and ongoing shortage of weaponry, which has contributed directly to the recent loss of strategically important towns and cities in eastern Donbas (e.g., Avdiivka and Vuhledar). If Ukraine fails to sustainably secure more weaponry, it risks losing more territories in the south and east of the country. To date, the US has played the central role in providing different types of aid, amounting to around \$106bn. It has provided the largest share of foreign military aid (\$69.8bn), helping Ukraine to survive and hold off any decisive Russian advances. If, in his second term President Donald Trump decides to limit or terminate this assistance, the other NATO and EU countries would need to double the present rate of their own military aid to replace it entirely. This ramping-up seems highly improbable considering the ongoing economic challenges and uncertain political climate in NATO and EU Europe.

Although it has received less coverage in western debates, the Russian state also struggles to provide ammunition and weapons for its own war effort. Russia's domestic ammunition production capabilities are currently insufficient to meet the demands necessary to achieve decisive military breakthroughs. This situation has been exacerbated by a continuing shortage of workers and technical expertise in Russia's defence production industries. Heavy losses of military equipment in Ukraine have exacerbated the shortfalls and could adversely affect Moscow's ability to sufficiently resource and supply a prolonged war in Ukraine lasting through 2025 and potentially beyond. Russia has managed to boost its military supplies by seeking alternative sources of weaponry and ammunition, most successfully thus far from Iran and North Korea. This, however, probably does not offer a dependable or likely long-term solution to its challenges, especially with its Iranian partner potentially being drawn in to its own increasingly 'hot' conflict with Israel.

Adverse Impact on Economies and Civilian Populations

As one would expect, the war has also had an adverse effect on the civilian populations of Ukraine. According to figures collated by the UN, since February 2022, 11,973 civilians, including 622 children, have been killed. Between June and August 2024 alone, 589 civilians were killed and 2,685 injured from war-related violence, with the number of civilian casualties over this reporting period being 45 percent higher than in the previous three-month period. By the beginning of 2024, the conflict had also substantially impacted the Ukrainian economy, costing \$152bn in direct damage alone. The World Bank estimated that at existing levels of war damage, Ukraine will require \$486bn in recovery and reconstruction funding within a decade. The energy (\$47bn), housing (\$80bn), and transportation (\$74bn) sectors will potentially account for nearly half of the recovery needs during this period.

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The Russian economy has also been negatively impacted by the war, due to the labour shortages caused by mobilisation, economic sanctions, and other war-related factors. Russia has also experienced high inflation, and labour shortages triggered by waves of emigration of younger, qualified workers since the invasion of Ukraine. These outflows spiked in September 2022 after President Putin announced the first—and so far only—mass mobilisation to replenish Russia's early losses in Ukraine. It is significant in this context that he has not since risked repeating that exercise in order to replenish Russia's further depleted military manpower levels, even for the defence of the homeland.

Western analysts and commentators have often noted the Russian core economy's ability to withstand the impact of Western sanctions thus far. This is crucially dependent on the state's continuing ability to extract and export oil and gas, even at discounted prices. Ukraine's political and military leaders are well aware of this dependency, of course, and they have sought – often successfully – to target oil and gas facilities, sometimes deep inside Russia, with drone strikes. In another telling indication of military debilitation, Russian air defences have, thus far, proved unable to respond reliably effectively to this ongoing threat, even though some Ukrainian drones have reportedly flown 1,000km or more over Russian territory to reach their targets.

Given the fundamental role of oil and gas exports in underpinning the economy, Russian officials are naturally concerned about these enduring vulnerabilities if the state continues to be unable to adequately defend against them. In this context, it is interesting to note the reports that emerged in the summer of 2024, suggesting that secret negotiations had been taking place between Russian and Ukrainian representatives seeking a mutual agreement or understanding not to target each other's national energy infrastructure. These talks were broken off following Ukraine's Kursk incursion in August. Still, their existence speaks of the Russian concerns about a continuing inability to adequately safeguard the country's own critical energy infrastructure.

The War of Exhaustion and a Mutual Need for Peaceful Resolution

2024 has continued to witness a war of mutual exhaustion in Ukraine, with Russia gaining an upper hand militarily, with its forces continuing to advance in eastern Ukraine, but without making any decisive breakthroughs and with continuing severe losses on both sides. At the same time, Russian missile and drone attacks have significantly damaged much of Ukraine's power generation capacity, putting the Ukrainian economy at some risk of collapse during the upcoming winter. In turn, the Ukrainian offensive in Kursk is facing increasing military challenges, and it has arguably overly depleted its military reserves in light of creeping territorial losses in the Donbas.

On the other hand, Russia has failed to make any *decisive* military breakthroughs for over two years, despite promises (or fears) in both 2023 and 2024 of great new offensives. The Spring 2024 effort in Kharkiv eventually amounted to two small and isolated military pockets extending barely 10km into Ukrainian territory and hardly visible on the map. While not negligible, Russian territorial gains in the Donbas and elsewhere have been incremental and bought at continuing prohibitive cost in terms of personnel and materiel losses. After three years of this 'meatgrinder' approach, it is apparent that Russia's ability to be strategically creative – such as it ever was – has completely dissipated. Its leaders and commanders have little to offer beyond more of the same. Although it has been asserted that Vladimir Putin perhaps *could* continue this kind of war indefinitely, it is less clear why he would *want* to do so if the prospect of tangible gains were on offer as part of a negotiated settlement.

After three years of war and at least two effective strategic stalemates, it is in both sides' interests to seek a potential ceasefire agreement followed by some kind of durable compromise agreement, as neither is strong enough to achieve a decisive military victory. It is especially in Ukraine's interest as Russia has the edge in military manpower and a more robust military production base and reserves compared to Ukraine. Yet, Russia still incurs heavy casualties for only incremental gains and perhaps reflecting this, it is willing – in principle at least – to seek some form of ceasefire, something the Russian leadership has signalled on numerous occasions, and indeed continues to do so.

A ceasefire alone will not be sufficient as it would simply freeze in place the gains Russia has made militarily since February 2022. To be meaningful and sustainable, any cessation of hostilities would need to open the way for a negotiated settlement. Any such resolution would, by definition, necessitate painful compromises on *both* sides. Yet,

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it is the only viable option to save lives and stabilise the economies of both countries.

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