Making sense of the war

Tatiana Zhurzhenko
16 June 2022

As the shock of war gives way to reflection, Ukrainian public discourse has turned to questions of the past, present and future: When did Russia’s war on Ukraine start? What is it doing to society? And how will it end?

For more than three months, Ukrainians have been living in a new reality. People’s experiences differ strongly, depending on whether they are in Russia-occupied Kherson or in permanently shelled Kharkiv; in devastated Mariupol or in Lviv, with its hundreds of thousands of refugees; or in Poland or another neighbour state as refugees themselves. But all have one thing in common: Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 has changed their lives dramatically.

Most Russians believed the Kremlin propaganda about a ‘special military operation’ that would not affect civilians and be completed in a matter of days. But Ukrainians have known from day one that this is a full-fledged war. How do we react as individuals when we see our previous life lying in ruins, our existential security shattered and our future deeply uncertain? What when this happens to a country of forty million? To a society already traumatized by the Maidan massacre, the annexation of Crimea and the eight-year military conflict in Donbas?

In Ukraine, the initial shock, anger and sorrow has slowly given way to the sober realization that the war is not going to end soon. The first month passed like one day, but meanwhile the feeling of time has returned. People and institutions are adjusting and even trying to make plans. In Ukrainian public discourse, strong emotional statements are giving way to attempts to make sense of things. What is the war about? Did it start on 24 February or much earlier? Whose war is this – Putin’s or Russia’s? What is it doing to us as a society, as a nation? What are we fighting for? And how do we imagine victory? Knowing how these vital questions are being answered in the Ukrainian public debate helps the West to understand Ukraine’s strong motivation to resist the Russian invasion.

Ursula von der Leyen in Kyiv, 11 June 2022. Source: Wikimedia Commons

Putin’s war?

In the first weeks of the invasion, the question whether the Russian population supported
Vladimir Putin in his military adventure animated Ukrainian society. Few had illusions about Putin’s regime, but could a full-fledged war against a neighbouring country enjoy the mass support of ordinary Russians? Until recently Russia had referred to Ukraine as a ‘brotherly people’. Surely they were just confused by the propaganda and would change their minds as soon as they learned the truth?

For Ukrainians, this was an existential question. On the night of 24 February, a couple of hours before the invasion started, Volodymyr Zelensky addressed the citizens of Russia ‘not as a president but as a Ukrainian’. He called on them to prevent a war that, he said, would have disastrous consequences for their country too. During the first days of the invasion, Zelensky repeatedly switched to Russian, asking Russian citizens to protest. Disappointment and anger about the reaction (or lack thereof) of the majority of Russians manifested itself in Ukrainian social media. Many Ukrainians called their relatives across the border to share with them their horrible new experience, just to discover that they preferred to believe Russian TV.

As the war unfolded, Ukrainian society was increasingly confronted with the bitter truth that the Russians passively but overwhelmingly supported the ‘special military operation’. One source was opinion polls. As of 30 March, the figure was 76%, according to VCIOM, the state-owned Russian polling agency. This had grown from 65% on February 25. On 11 April, support for the war had increased to 81%, according to the independent Levada Centre. Ukrainian media started publishing intercepted telephone calls between Russian soldiers and their families, as well as short interviews with ordinary people on the streets of Russian cities. These left little room for doubt about their state of mind.

Oleksandr Solon’ko, a Ukrainian commentator blogging for Ukrainska Pravda, felt obliged to acknowledge ‘the empirical fact’ that ‘this is not Putin’s war, it’s a war of all Russians. Or at least the vast majority.’ In an interview for oppositional Russian media, Zelensky expressed deep disappointment at the level of support for the invasion. The attitude of Ukrainians to Russians, even in the Russian-speaking regions, had changed ‘irreversibly’ to the worse. ‘We are dealing with a radical historical and cultural split,’ he said.

The statements of US president Biden, German chancellor Scholz and other western leaders that ‘ordinary Russians do not want the war’ – and were not responsible for it – caused critical and even angry reactions in Ukraine. Ukrainian commentators stressed that it was not enough to bring Putin and his regime to justice; rather, Russian society should go through an active process of reckoning with its imperial history. Dmytro Kuleba, the foreign minister, Anton Drobovych, director of the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance, and Oleh Sentsov, the Ukrainian filmmaker and former political prisoner of Russia, all addressed the issue of collective responsibility.

The turning point was the revelation of the atrocities committed by the Russian army in Bucha and other suburbs of Kyiv. Even after the brutal fight for Mariupol, the reports about mass murder, torture, rape and looting of civilians shocked the Ukrainian public. For many, the crimes recalled how the Russian army had dealt with civilians in Syria and Chechnya. There were also comparisons with the crimes of the Red Army in eastern Germany in 1945 and the Russian imperial army’s brutal occupation of in Galicia during the First World War. Attempts to grasp the meaning and implications of Bucha fed
discourse about the ‘dehumanisation of Russian society’ (Yuriy Andrukhovych) and the essentialization of Russia as a civilization of rapists and looters. The video of Russian soldiers sending home stolen goods from a post-office at the Belarusian border went viral in Ukrainian social media. Rubtsovsk, the impoverished provincial town in Siberia where most of the TV sets and vacuum cleaners were sent, became an embodiment of the ‘Russian World’ in the negative sense.

The crimes against civilians committed also evoked comparison with Nazi crimes in Soviet Ukraine. The neologism ‘ruscism’ has become popular in the Ukrainian media. Some Ukrainian journalists, however, have insisted that one should not use euphemisms but call the enemy by their name: ‘the Russians’.

**When did it start?**

Since 24 February, the lives of Ukrainians have been divided into a ‘before’ and ‘after’. In an abrupt and irreversible way, the war became an everyday reality, brutal and unescapable. And yet, in the preceding weeks and even months, the signs had been difficult to ignore: when Vladimir Putin officially recognized the ‘peoples republics’ and gave his notorious speech denying the legitimacy of the Ukrainian state; when he repeatedly threatened and mocked the Ukrainian leadership; when the warnings of western partners became louder and Ukrainian media started publishing maps of nearby bomb shelters. Nevertheless, the government sought to calm the country and people tried to ignore the signs of imminent war, continuing to live their peaceful lives.

And yet, for many Ukrainians, life has not been peaceful for the last eight years. Between the collapse of the Yanukovych regime and the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Duma’s sanctioning of the deployment of the Russian military on Ukrainian territory raised the spectre of a real war. In the event, Russia chose to rely on a ‘civil war’ scenario that would supposedly lead to the territorial disintegration of Ukraine without requiring full-scale military intervention. Despite clear evidence to the contrary, Russia claimed not to be militarily involved in the Donbas and posed as a peacekeeper and mediator. Even in Ukraine, there was still some ambiguity about this half-tamed, seemingly controlled war. But for those forced to leave their homes in Donetsk and Luhansk, for people living in the ‘grey zone’ or regularly crossing the front line, or for Ukrainian soldiers and the volunteers and journalists working in Donbas, war was a reality. It was the human price of a normal life for the rest of the country.

With the Russian invasion, all ambiguity disappeared. With the shock came renewed awareness that the country had been at war with Russia for the past eight years. As Zelensky put it: ‘Russia didn’t start the war against Ukraine on 24 February. The Russian army came to us back in 2014. They took Crimea. They turned it into one huge military base. They turned the Black Sea and the Azov Sea into the most dangerous waters on the planet. They launched a horrible, cynical war in our Donbas. They have been killing our people for eight years. Fourteen thousand killed during this time!’

Some argued that the war with Russia – conceived in broader terms – began even earlier. According to the journalist Roman Romaniuk, ‘in 2004 and 2013, our Maidans were in fact protests against Putin. The first time, his henchman was supposed to become president; the second time, the same henchman wanted to turn the country round and
hand it to Putin. This war against Putin is our final Maidan.’ Others drew parallels with events in Soviet history. For the Ukrainian pop star Jamala, who has Crimean Tatar origins, today’s war resonates with the tragic history of her people. In 2016 she won the Eurovision song contest with ‘1944’, addressing the mass deportation of Crimean Tatars by the Stalin. The song was meant – and widely understood – as a protest against the annexation of Crimea. Now, forced to flee Ukraine with her children and to separate from her husband, she has been performing the song all over Europe to raise donations for Ukraine.

Asked what new meanings it has gained since the Russian invasion, she says that ‘before the war this was my personal story – a song about how the Soviets deported my great grandmother from Crimea. But history repeats itself. Almost eighty years later, we again have intruders in our home who have come to destroy, kill, starve and rape, claiming that they are “not responsible”. Today, unfortunately, this is a song for the whole of Ukraine. For the millions of people who are trying to save their lives under bombardment.’

Commenting on reports that Russia plans to expropriate the harvest of Ukrainian farmers on the occupied territories, the Ukrainian philosopher Volodymyr Yermolenko has evoked the Holodomor, the famine organized by the Soviet regime in Ukraine in 1932–33: ‘This is not just a genocide. This is a repeated genocide. A genocide for the second, third, fifth, tenth time. Because it was not properly denounced and not punished. Because, after 1932–33, nobody said “never again” to this evil. One did say that to other evils, but not this one.’ Yermolenko then connected the Holodomor with the Russian tradition of imperial oppression: ‘The evil of Ivan, Peter, Ekaterina, Nikolai, Vladimir, Josif, Vladimir. Unpunished, unrepentant, unredeemed, this evil will roam the world forever. Because it has no exit. It was not locked in hell. That’s why they use the same language: “expropriation of the harvest”. Because they were not punished for the Holodomor. Therefore “We can do it again”. This is an evil that returns from the grave again and again. That’s why Z – Zombie evil.’

The idea that the current conflict with Russia is just another phase in the long history of Ukraine’s fight against Russian imperial oppression is not new. In the years after the Euromaidan, the narrative of a hundred years’ war with Russia was promoted by the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance, in particular its director Volodymyr Viatrovych. From this perspective, the Euromaidan 2013–2014 was a continuation of the Ukrainian Revolution of 1917–21, which attempted to create an independent Ukrainian state but was defeated by Bolshevik Russia. Since 2014, as hundred years earlier, Ukraine has been threatened with losing its independence to Russia, which, as Viatrovych noted, deploys the same tactics as a century ago:

Only those who did not study the history of 1917–18 can consider the ‘hybrid war’ as a new form of aggressive military operations. The methods of Putin’s occupiers are like those used by the Bolsheviks a hundred years ago: create puppet ‘state bodies’ and then send them military help. In this way, external aggression appears as ‘support to a brotherly people’.

Since 24 February, the narrative of the hundred years’ war with Russia has reached new levels of popularity. In April, the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy published a video on its official YouTube channel entitled ‘A history of 100 years of the Russian-
Ukrainian war’. It constructs the narrative of Ukrainian martyrdom and resistance during the Soviet and post-Soviet decades, beginning with the Bolshevik war against the Ukrainian Peoples Republic in 1917–1921, and continuing with the Holodomor and Stalinist repressions in Soviet Ukraine, the Ukrainian nationalist underground during and after World War II, the fight of Ukrainian dissidents for Ukraine’s independence in 1991, Russia’s aggression in 2014 and the full-fledged military invasion in 2022. Now an MP for Petro Poroshenko’s opposition party ‘European Solidarity’ and fighting in the Ukrainian army, Viatrovych recapitulated this narrative in a recent blog post:

Today we are living through another day of the eight-year war that has already lasted more than a hundred years ... Ukraine has never been so strong, Russia has never suffered such significant losses from Ukraine, and the world has never showed so much solidarity and active support. This gives us a chance to finish our long, hundred-years’ war for independence.

A patriotic war? A war for independence?

The narrative of the hundred years’ war for independence has not, however, been the most obvious historical reference for millions of Ukrainians on the first day of the Russian invasion. The sudden attack in the early morning, the announcement of the Kremlin to take Kyiv in five days (‘Blitzkrieg’), the scale of destruction and human suffering even during the first days of the war: all this was reminiscent of Hitler Germany’s invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, which the oldest generation of Ukrainians still remembers and the younger generations know about from school, popular culture and family memories. The words of the the most popular Soviet song from World War II immediately came to the minds of many Ukrainians who on February 24 were woken up by Russian bombs and rockets falling from the sky:

On June 22  
At four o’clock sharp  
Kiev was bombed,  
And we were told  
The War had started...

The Ukrainian journalist Nataliya Gumenyuk, who has been one of the most attentive chronists of the events, recently visited liberated towns and villages near Kyiv and talked to the local residents about their experience under Russian occupation. Older people often referred to Russian soldiers as ‘Germans’ or ‘fascists’. Eighty years after the Nazi invasion, a foreign power was again depriving the local people of their dignity, of basic rights and private property; a foreign army was once again looting, kidnapping, torturing, raping and mass murdering. The bitter irony is that Russia is fighting today’s war under the banner of ‘liberation from Ukrainian fascism’ and using the myth of the ‘Great Patriotic War’ to legitimize its aggression.

In the Soviet Union, the ‘Great Patriotic War’ was narrated as a heroic act of resistance carried out jointly by the people, the Soviet army and the Communist Party – all united by comrade Stalin – against the cruel aggression of Nazi Germany. Fragments of this narrative – mostly concerning the contribution of the whole people to the victory –
survived the Soviet regime and have been internalized by many Ukrainians. But in Ukraine, a pluralistic (and often conflictual) memory culture has developed and efforts have been made to adopt the European narrative of World War II as a tragedy. In Russia, on the other hand, the triumphalist myth of the ‘Great Patriotic War’ has been monopolized and become the backbone of post-Soviet national identity. This is most strikingly demonstrated every year on 9 May, or ‘Victory Day’, when Russia’s might as a military superpower is paraded on the Red Square.

For many in Ukraine, especially in the east and south, it seems natural to call the current war with Russia a ‘patriotic war’ (usually without the adjective ‘great’). Even if it resonates with the Soviet/Russian narrative of the ‘Great Patriotic War’, the word ‘patriotic’ refers to the immediate individual experience of millions of Ukrainians, whose obvious choice is to defend their homeland. ‘For us Ukrainians, this is a patriotic war,’ said Volodymyr Zelensky in his daily address to the Ukrainian citizens on 3 March: ‘We remember how patriotic wars start. And we know how they end. For the invaders.’ Three days later, Zelensky issued a decree introducing the new honorary title ‘Hero City of Ukraine’. Volnovakha, Hostomel, Mariupol, Kharkiv, Kherson and Chernihiv were awarded the title for the ‘mass heroism and resilience’ of their citizens during the defence against Russian aggression.

This was an obvious reference to the Soviet tradition: the title of ‘Hero City’ was given to a dozen Soviet cities during the post-war decades as the myth of the ‘Great Patriotic War’ was institutionalized. Four recipients of the title were in Soviet Ukraine: Odesa, Kyiv, Sevastopol and Kerch. In post-Soviet Russia, the tradition continued with a long list of the ‘Cities of Military Glory’. This was not the case in Ukraine. Zelensky’s decision – in the context of a new war – thus created an ambivalent precedent. While some welcomed the symbolic appreciation of sacrifice and resilience, many considered the continuation of the Soviet symbolic tradition a political mistake. Even Zelensky’s minister of defence, Oleksiy Reznikov, was mildly critical, arguing that the ‘old-fashioned’ term ‘Hero City’ be replaced by ‘City of Heroes’: ‘Because it is the people that represents the highest value of modern European Ukraine!’

Volodymyr Viatrovych offered a more radical criticism, arguing that the ‘Hero City’ was a Soviet trope that conveyed the narrative of the enemy. By using it, Ukrainians were locking themselves into a common ideological space with Russia. Instead, he proposed alternative titles such as ‘fortress city’, ‘unbroken city’, ‘city of the unconquered’, or, indeed, ‘city of heroes’. For Viatrovych and many others, the Russian invasion offered an opportunity to get rid of the last remnants of the ‘Great Patriotic War’ narrative in the public space, and thus complete Ukraine’s decommunization. For example, a long-contested monument to Soviet marshal Georgy Zhukov in Kharkiv was finally toppled on 17 April, after years of legal battle between activists and the municipal authorities. The mayor, who had long opposed the dismantling of the monument, refused to comment as long as the war lasted and proposed conducting an opinion poll ‘after the victory’.

On 18 April, Viatrovych and a group of deputies from several parties drafted a bill proposing to make 8 May a public holiday, the ‘Day of Memory and Victory over Nazism in the Second World War’, and turning 9 May into a workday and re-naming it the ‘Day of Europe’. [1] The change, so its supporters believe, would finally break the symbolic link with the Soviet narrative weaponized by Russia in the war against Ukraine. But the bill
was not adopted by the parliament. One reason might have been to avoid politicizing this sensitive issue on the eve of Victory Day, traditionally used by Moscow for pro-Russian mobilization in the post-Soviet space.

Rumours about Russian plans to stage fake referendums on the occupied territories at the beginning of May might also have prompted the Ukrainian leadership to downplay the issue. Anton Drobovych, the acting Director of the Ukrainian Institute for National Remembrance now also fighting in the Ukrainian army, argued that ‘eight million Ukrainians died for victory over Nazism. This narrative, which is anchored in our legislation, is very strong because it is not empty and has much truth behind it’. Drobovych, who since 2019 has continued the official policy of decommunization, but in a more balanced and dialogical way, recommended studying and discussing the issue carefully before taking a decision.

In the same interview, he contemplated on the name for the current war with Russia. ‘Patriotic war’ and ‘war for national independence’ were not mutually exclusive notions; they drew on the current individual and collective experiences of the Ukrainians rather than on pre-existing historical narratives. According to Drobovych, the current war could also be called a ‘war for justice’ or a ‘war for dignity’. ‘We are defending not only our independence and not only the values of freedom, but more – European values, the human right of individual self-determination, the right of a nation to decide about its fate.’

A European war? A war for Europe?

The idea that Ukraine’s resistance to the Russian invasion is not just a military conflict between the two countries but a civilizational conflict in which Ukraine is fighting on behalf of Europe, is central in Ukrainian public discourse today. The notion goes back to the Euromaidan protest in 2013/2014, which was caused by the decision of the Yanukovych government – under pressure from Moscow – to postpone the signing of an Association Agreement with the EU. As the protests against police violence, corruption and authoritarian rule unfolded, the Euromaidan movement increasingly identified itself with ‘European values’: freedom, democracy and the right to self-determination.

Having paid a high price for its European aspirations, post-Maidan Ukraine made important steps towards economic and political integration with the EU. The long-awaited visa-free regime introduced in 2017 opened the Schengen space to Ukrainians who previously had not had much opportunity to visit Europe: the younger generation, people with lower incomes, and residents of eastern and southern parts of the country. The positive trends in Ukraine in recent years were associated with Europeanization, while the main challenges – above all the war in Donbas – were attributed to Russian aggression.

However, in the conflict with Russia, Europe’s actions were perceived with ambivalence. Ukrainians approved of EU sanctions on Russia, of the non-recognition of the annexation of Crimea, and of the financial, institutional and moral support; but they were disappointed by Europe’s half-heartedness and the dominance of realpolitik over values. European governments were unable to contain Russian ambitions or settle the conflict in Donbas; and above all, they persisted with economic cooperation with Putin’s regime.
This was particularly the case in the energy sector, where the Nord Stream 2 project clearly contradicted Ukrainian interests. Ukrainian politicians and journalists often claimed that Ukraine was defending the ‘European frontier’ in Donbas, but this rhetoric hardly impressed the European public and the political elites in the EU. For them, the war in Donbas was just one of several local conflicts in the post-Soviet space.

The latest Russian invasion has changed things radically on both sides. Even if some European politicians did not believe that Ukraine was going to survive the Russian aggression for more than a few days, European support has been univocal from the beginning. The EU managed to agree on immediate serious sanctions against Russia, the EU border was opened for Ukrainian refugees who were given temporary protection, and a process of re-thinking policy towards Putin’s Russia started, notably in Germany. In the new situation, Zelensky told European governments that supporting Ukraine was not only a moral obligation, but also a matter of self-defence, since Russia was threatening not only Ukrainian sovereignty, but that of Europe as a whole. After Moscow declared war on the ‘western liberal order’ and threatened to use nuclear weapons in case of a threat to ‘Russia’s existence’, Kyiv’s claim suddenly appeared much less absurd. It found particular resonance in Poland and the Baltic states, which feared that they might be the next target of Russia’s military aggression.

And yet the EU and NATO, taking Putin’s threats seriously and afraid of an escalation of the conflict, were unwilling to do much in military terms in the first weeks of the invasion. Calls from the Ukrainian government as well as civil society to ‘close the sky’ were not heeded. Ukrainians kept insisting that they were fighting this war for Europe, but EU governments – following the lead of the US – were mainly concerned about how to prevent an escalation into a world war. In Ukraine this was perceived as cowardice, egoism and lack of compassion – a point of view expressed, for example, by the Ukrainian filmmaker Iryna Tsilyk, who also referred to Ukraine’s mission to protect Europe:

We see open letters signed by German intellectuals or Italian feminists who ask their governments not to give weapons to Ukraine, otherwise the hostilities will last longer, and Russia will kill even more people. Give Mariupol etc. to Russia, throw meat to the bear so it will eat and calm down. A part of Ukraine should be simply sacrificed, because Europeans are tired of watching the news about Russian atrocities …

The truth is that the bear won’t feel full. Its main goal is the destruction of the entire Ukraine and its identity, i.e., all people who consider themselves Ukrainians. And then, if the mad beast feels strong enough, it will go on. Poland, the Baltic countries etc. Ukraine is covering the rest of Europe with a human shield. To deprive us of weapons is a vile gesture, we are defending not only our own future but Europe’s too.

Among some Ukrainians, the hesitation of the EU countries to provide military aid to Ukraine and impose harder sanctions on Russia’s energy and financial sectors evoked the old topos of the ‘betrayal by Europe’, exemplified in a poem of the Ukrainian poet in exile Oleksandr Oles (1878–1944). Written in 1931, following the first decade of the Bolshevik rule and on the eve of the Great Famine, the poem passes moral judgement on interwar
Europe, which failed to solve the ‘Ukrainian question’ after World War I:

When Ukraine fought the torturers
Giving life and death for its right to live,
Asking only for compassion,
Europe stayed silent.
When Ukraine lost blood and tears
In an unequal struggle,
Looking for friendly assistance,
Europe stayed silent.
When Ukraine, maimed, laboured for the master,
Dragging an iron yoke across the earth,
When even the mute mountains moved,
Europe stayed silent.
When Ukraine was dying,
Having reaped a bloody harvest for the torturer,
Too hungry even to speak,
Europe stayed silent.
When Ukraine cursed its life
And became a mass grave,
When the devil himself wept,
Europe stayed silent.

It took the destruction of Mariupol and the Bucha massacre – among other mass crimes committed by the Russian army – to change the mood in the EU in favour of more significant military support. Germany was, and still is, a particularly important and difficult case, due to its central role in the EU and its political culture, in which recognition of historical responsibility for the crimes committed by Nazi Germany in other countries, above all the former Soviet Union, traditionally translates into pacifism.
After the Soviet collapse, it was the Russian Federation rather than Ukraine (which paid the highest human costs during World War II) that profited from the ‘German guilt’. German political elites firmly believed that no stable European order was possible without Russia and that economic cooperation would liberalize Russia’s authoritarian regime (‘Wandel durch Handel’). But Russia’s invasion of Ukraine forced German elites to finally rethink Germany’s interpretation of its historical responsibility.

The more apparent the genocidal features of Russia’s war in Ukraine became, the more the German government came under moral pressure from the Ukrainian side. This pressure was exercised not only by government, but also by prominent public figures. One of them is the German-Ukrainian writer Katja Petrowskaja, whose novel *Maybe Esther* – investigating the fate of her Jewish family in the Holocaust – became a bestseller in 2014. In mid-April, as the criticism of German inaction was at its peak, Petrowskaja wrote an open letter to the German president Franz-Walter Steinmeier, reminding him of his commitment to ‘international law and human dignity, the freedom of all peoples and their right to political self-determination and territorial integrity, and a safe and peaceful Europe’. Petrowskaja called on Steinmeier to take seriously the duties that he had publicly confirmed at the eightieth anniversary of Babiy Yar in 2021 and to send weapons to Ukraine.

In another open letter to Steinmeier, also referring to the German president’s visit to Babiy Yar, Victor Pinchuk, a Ukrainian Jew and well-known Ukrainian businessman and patron of the arts, appealed to Germany ‘to do everything to stop the Russian war machinery’. Speaking as Ukrainians and at the same time in the name of the victims of the Holocaust, both Petrowskaja and Pinchuk referred to the European values that Germany had promoted for so long as a foundation for the united Europe.

The narrative of Ukraine defending Europe against Putin’s aggression has served to support Ukraine’s claim not just for military help and harder sanctions on Russia. The issue of EU membership, which had seemed hardly realistic only a few months ago, has suddenly returned to the political agenda. In the eyes of the Ukrainian leadership, a fast track to EU membership would be not only very helpful but well-deserved. In the words of Zelensky: ‘We have already proved that the Ukrainian state and public institutions are efficient enough to stand even the test of the war. What we are already doing for the defence of freedom on the European continent, other nations have never had a chance to do’.

On 28 February, the fifth day of the Russian invasion, Ukraine officially applied for EU membership and asked for a fast-track procedure due to the exceptional situation. Although shortcutting the accession procedure remains unlikely, the EU summit in Versailles on 11 March confirmed that ‘Ukraine belongs to our European family’. In early April, the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen travelled to Kyiv to hand over to Zelensky a questionnaire on EU membership, a symbolic start of the accession process. Ukraine has since submitted the completed questionnaire and is now waiting for the decision on candidate status at the end of June.

The collective experience of the war with Russia has contributed to a rethinking of Ukraine from object of geopolitical contestation to a subject of its own. Ukrainian intellectuals have commented that the country should be seen as an asset rather than a
liability for the EU, as a possible solution to the crisis of the European project and as a source of inspiration. According to Volodymyr Yermolenko, the war will make Ukrainians stronger and wiser. The existential experience on the border between life and death will give birth to a new thinking and a new culture; a new vision of society, economy and state. ‘In many issues in which we felt like the pupils of the great European culture, we will now feel like its teachers’.

**What kind of victory?**

Ukrainians desire nothing more than the end of the war. But what would the end mean? When the negotiations between Russia and Ukraine started shortly after the invasion, western analysts, politicians and publics contemplated what concessions Ukraine would be ready to accept. The author of this text was asked by journalists whether a division of the country along the Dniepr river would be an acceptable solution for the Ukrainians. It was not easy to explain that the absurdity of Russia’s demands turned peace negotiations into a farce. While the question of NATO membership and alternative security guarantees could still be discussed in rational terms, the demands of ‘denazification’ and ‘demilitarisation’ belonged to the imaginary Russian script of re-enacting World War II. Moreover, Ukrainian public opinion was against any territorial cessions to Russia, which would clearly only invite Russia to grab even more.

After the first weeks of fighting, several factors contributed to a new consensus in Ukraine that it could (and should) win the war, and not just stop it. There was no quick victory for Russia in sight, and the ‘special military operation’ had turned into a protracted war with high costs for the aggressor. The professionalism and motivation of the Ukrainian army has stopped or slowed down the advance of the invaders, and control over parts of occupied Ukrainian territory has been restored. Ukraine is receiving unprecedented international support, and Ukrainian society and state institutions have demonstrated remarkable resilience. Unlike in 2014, there has been no pro-Russian mobilization and no support for the Russian occupation from below, while collaboration has been low. Russia’s war crimes, accompanied by the genocidal rhetoric of the Kremlin and its media outlets, have made it clear that the war is about the very existence of the Ukrainian nation. Soon after the Russian atrocities in Bucha came to light, negotiations between the two countries were broken off entirely.

But what would a Ukrainian victory - rather than just an end to the war - mean exactly? In April, the Ukrainian news agency Ukrinform put this question to prominent public figures and intellectuals. They included the director of the Institute of Sociology, Evhen Holovakha, the religious studies expert Ivan Kozlovsky, who spent years in the captivity of Donetsk separatists, and Viacheslav Briukhovetsky, the former rector and now president of the Kyiv Mohyla Academy. Their answers coincided in one important point: a Ukrainian victory in the present war would mean regaining control over the territories that Russia occupied after 24 February. A final victory, however, would mean re-instating Ukraine’s borders before 2014. This was a distant aim that would not be reached by military means alone, but would require diplomatic efforts.

Ukraine’s victory thus appears to be a process rather than a short-term goal. Valeriy Pekar, an entrepreneur and professor at the Kyiv Mohyla Academy, stressed that real victory would mean a stable peace arrangement that guarantees more than just a pause
before the next military confrontation. Instead, it would introduce a world where Russia no longer poses a threat to Ukraine. ‘What would this look like? Removing Putin from power, the withdrawal of the Russian army, putting the war criminals on trial. But the Russian threat will only disappear if some serious changes happen within the Russian Federation’.

Regime change and democratic transformation in Russia would need to be irreversible, unlike in the 1990s. For many Ukrainian commentators, the de-imperialization of Russia is the most important precondition for a stable peace. As the Ukrainian historian Yaroslav Hrytsak put it, in a new post-war order that would emerge after Ukrainian and European victory, Russia would forget about its ambition to be a civilization of its own and would finally become a normal country. Russia would also need to demilitarize; as a nuclear power, it would need to be put under international control, having proved to be an irresponsible aggressor.

Ukrainian media and social networks speculate eagerly about a possible territorial disintegration of the Russian Federation. Driven by emotion, Ukrainians usually underestimate the risks of such a scenario. The realists, however, warn against building on hopes of Russia’s democratic transformation or disintegration. According to prominent journalist and Ukrainska Pravda blogger Mykhailo Dubynianskyi, ‘our strategic goal should be not just surviving the Kremlin’s strikes but endowing the Russian society with some kind of “Ukraine syndrome”, similar to the “Vietnam syndrome” in the USA or the “Afghanistan syndrome” in the post-USSR. This is not a universal medicine against militarism and messianism, but a good vaccine’. In other words, if the war against Ukraine is associated in Russia with economic hardship and senseless loss of life, another act of aggression will be less probable.

Especially after the Bucha massacre, an essential aspect of any Ukrainian victory is justice for the Ukrainian victims of Russian war crimes. The hope that Putin and the representatives of his regime and the Russian military will one day be brought to an international court helps Ukrainians survive the horrors of the war. Numerous state, civil society and media initiatives are now documenting not just crimes against civilians, but also the destruction of civil infrastructure and cultural heritage. According to Zelensky, ‘there is no peace without justice. We will do everything to bring to justice every Russian soldier and commander responsible for military crimes. Modern technologies help to identify details. Each name, each home address, each bank account – we will find them all.’ Some Ukrainian commentators argue that Russia should also pay for Ukraine’s post-war reconstruction and that confiscated Russian capital and assets should be used for this purpose.

Finally, it is a common belief that, after the war, Ukraine will become a stronger nation, more confident and less divided. The positive side of Ukrainians’ war experience is that they have learnt to appreciate their strengths: horizontal solidarity, strong civic identity, resilience, aversion to authoritarianism and love of freedom. Trust in political leadership, local self-government and the army has been renewed. There is confidence that, after victory, these sides of Ukrainian society will help the country to complete reforms, defeat corruption and to take its proper place in a united and strengthened Europe. The Ukrainian public discourse on the war with Russia is thus not only about suffering and sacrifice; the war is also seen as an opportunity. Yaroslav Hrytsak predicts that Ukraine
will become ‘a Central European economic tiger’, while Evhen Hlibovytsky, a sociologist and political analyst, believes that Ukraine will re-emerge from this war as a self-reliant, European ‘frontier nation’.

One can dismiss such words as wishful thinking; after all, the Euromaidan evoked similar hopes that the way had finally been paved to a stable and democratic future. That road proved rather bumpy. From an outside perspective, it might seem that Ukrainians have little cause for optimism. Yet now is the moment that the contours of a post-war European order for the coming decades are being drawn. It is time Ukraine finds its place in that order.

**Footnotes**

1. Since 2015, 8 May has been called in Ukraine the ‘Day of Memory and Reconciliation’ and is a workday, while 9 May is the ‘Day of Victory over Nazism’ and a holiday, as in Russia and Belarus.

**Published 16 June 2022**

Original in **English**
First published in **Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik (German version); Eurozine (English version)**
Downloaded from eurozine.com (https://www.eurozine.com/making-sense-of-the-war/)
© Tatiana Zhurzhenko / Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik / Eurozine