

Opinion **War in Ukraine**

The west is divided over how the war in Ukraine must end

Leaders are at odds over the question of just how crushing a Russian defeat should be

SYLVIE KAUFFMANN



Nato heads of state take a video call from Volodymyr Zelensky, president of Ukraine, during a summit at the alliance's headquarters in Brussels in March 2022 © Denzel/Bundesregierung/Getty Images

Sylvie Kauffmann YESTERDAY

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The writer is a columnist at Le Monde and fellow of the Robert Bosch Academy in Berlin

Three days before Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, [in a fateful televised meeting of the Kremlin Security Council](#), former president Dmitry Medvedev assured Vladimir Putin that there was nothing to fear from the west's reaction.

“We know what will happen,” he said. There would be pressure and sanctions. “But after a while, the tension will subside. Sooner or later, they will get tired and will themselves ask us to resume discussions and talks on all issues of ensuring strategic security. Let's face it, Russia means a lot more than Ukraine for our friends in the United States and the [EU].”

So far, Medvedev has been proven wrong. By all accounts, Moscow has been surprised by the strength and unity of the west in its solidarity with Ukraine. But as the Russian war enters its fourth month, western leaders now ponder the prospect of a protracted conflict. They also realise that they threw their weight behind Ukraine's valiant fighters without specifying the endgame.

Early on in the war, the goal was to help Ukraine withstand a totally unjustified aggression by one of the biggest armies of the world. Then something unexpected happened: that mighty army, led by incompetent commanders and faced with fierce resistance, had to retreat to a more accessible part of the country. It suddenly became plausible that Ukraine, equipped with heavier weapons from the west, could actually win this war.

This raises multiple questions for Ukraine's backers. What does "winning" mean? Is victory just pushing the Russians back to where they started on February 24? Or does it also mean taking back the territories occupied since 2014, namely Crimea and two regions of Donbas?

If the Ukrainian leadership decides that its armed forces should lead a counteroffensive to recover all of its territory, will the west continue to help? What should trigger the lifting of sanctions? If victory for Ukraine means defeat for Russia, how crushing should the defeat be? If this is a contest between two world orders, one based on rules and the other on spheres of influence, what can a settlement look like?

Faced with the brutal return of the Russian question, the west needs a plan and it does not seem to have one. Two schools of thought have emerged. According to one, Russia must be punished for its aggression in such a way that it will not try again. Had we reacted more firmly when Putin invaded Georgia in 2008 and seized Crimea in 2014, the argument goes, he would have been deterred from attacking Ukraine in 2022. Russia should now be "weakened" by military means, US defense secretary Lloyd Austin said on April 25, opening a new perspective on Washington's aims, which remain unclear.

The second school also wants Ukraine to win the war and stresses that it is up to the Ukrainians to decide which territorial goal they want to fight for. But it takes a different view of the future with Russia. Even defeated, Russia, a nuclear power, will still be the largest country on the continent, and Moscow will have to be part of any new security order built in Europe. On May 9 in Strasbourg, President Emmanuel Macron of France used a word freighted with history to make this point. Russia, he said, should not be "humiliated".

This very sensitive debate is reopening the deep wounds of the 20th century in Europe — those caused by the first world war and the ensuing treaty of Versailles, which led to the rise of Nazi Germany and, 20 years later, to the second world war, and the wounds of the Soviet occupation of central and eastern Europe. Beyond the caricature of appeasers versus warmongers the current debate revealingly nits

caricature of appeasers versus warmongers, the current debate revealingly pits western European leaders against their counterparts in Europe's former Soviet satellites.

The Russian war in Ukraine has laid bare an entirely new intra-European dynamic. Germany, France and Italy are the powers most unsettled by the new situation because it has shattered the model of a relationship with post-cold war Russia built on trade and energy or, in Macron's case, on the dream of building a future European security architecture.

On the other hand, Poland and the Baltic states feel that their profound distrust of Russia has been vindicated and are buoyed by the prospect of Finland and Sweden joining Nato. Poland now envisages a partnership with Ukraine in a future Europe that could be as strong and influential in its way as the Franco-German tandem was in the old Europe.

As for Russia, it does not need the west to humiliate it. Putin has done a very good job of that himself.

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