

Opinion **War in Ukraine**

With all eyes on the Middle East, does the west have a viable strategy for Ukraine?

New polling suggests western public opinion is not convinced that this is a winnable war

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EU Commission president Ursula von der Leyen joins Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on a visit to a railroad car equipped with medical equipment at a station in Kyiv earlier this month © Ukrainian Presidential Press Service/AFP/Getty Images

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“Nobody believes in our victory like I do,” declared Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy in a recent interview with Time magazine. And he is right.

Faced with the grim reality of a stalled counteroffensive, and in the aftermath of Hamas’s bloody attack on Israel and the latter’s overwhelming response, many observers are asking whether the west still has a viable strategy for dealing with the Russian war in Europe.

Who realistically believes that Kyiv can regain territory annexed by Russia in the coming year — or two — when even General Valery Zaluzhny, the popular chief of staff of the Ukrainian armed forces, has made it clear that “there will most likely be no deep and beautiful breakthrough”? And who but the most Panglossian among us think that President Vladimir Putin is open to any meaningful negotiations a year out from an American presidential election, when his favoured candidate, Donald Trump, is leading in the polls?

Indeed, both hawks and doves on Ukraine have started to appear dangerously

divorced from reality.

Unsurprisingly, the public mood is darkening — both in Ukraine and in the west. And amid Republican opposition to additional US funding for Kyiv’s war effort and a refocusing of attention towards the Middle East, western support for Ukraine cannot be taken for granted.

Europeans are now facing two very different but interconnected wars that threaten not simply Europe’s security but the political identity of European societies. In both wars there are nuclear powers involved, and both are of great symbolic importance.

The Israel-Hamas war has not only shifted public attention towards the Middle East and created competition for resources, it has also weakened the notion that there is something exceptional about the nature of Russia’s aggression. When Russia has cut energy supplies to towns and cities in Ukraine it has been accused of committing war crimes. Israel has deprived Gaza of energy and water supplies. Are Ukraine and the west ready to call these war crimes?

A [recent study](#) of the “geopolitics of emotions” conducted by the European Council on Foreign Relations just prior to the war in Gaza reveals a disturbing, if unsurprising, trend. Public opinion in large non-western countries is more interested in *when* the war will end than in *how* it will end.

The public view the west and Ukraine, rather than Russia, as the major obstacle to peace. Most in the so-called Global South expect that in the next five years Moscow will prevail and see the conflict as a proxy for confrontation between the US and Russia.

So, the question is: can the west triumph if its own population does not believe that it should be at war while most others do?

In the early months of the conflict, the Kremlin was in the grip of the deluded belief that its “special military operation” would be concluded in a matter of weeks and that Russian troops would be welcomed in Ukraine as liberators. But the aggressive war that Putin launched in 2022 is not the one that is now being waged.

Many commentators fail to recognise that Putin today sees the conflict in Ukraine as part of a kind of “forever war” with the west. His objective is no longer to establish a pro-Russian Ukraine, but to demonstrate that a pro-western Ukraine would be little more than a failed state, and that, in any case, western support for Ukraine will eventually evaporate.

In this new environment, the challenge the west faces is strikingly similar to that which the US once faced in West Germany (especially West Berlin) in the early years of the cold war.

The west needs to prove that Ukraine is a place into which investors are ready to put their money — protected, naturally, by batteries of Patriot missiles — before the war is over. It must also be a country to which the large numbers of Ukrainians currently living outside their homeland are ready to return. And finally Ukraine's accession negotiations with the EU must be able to start even as the war continues to rage.

The most striking finding of the ECFR survey, however, is that many in non-western countries who believe that Russia will prevail in Ukraine also believe that the EU will not exist in 20 years' time. This should make European leaders wake up to the fact that what is at stake here is not Ukrainian sovereignty alone.

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