

Arkady Moshes, Programme Director, FIIA

TWO YEARS OF WAR IN UKRAINE

WILL THE WEST NEED ANOTHER SHOCK TO ACT DECISIVELY?

The West is failing to provide Ukraine with sufficient resources to resist Russia's invasion, and lacks a vision for the future of West-Russia relations. This may push Ukraine to the brink of defeat as early as 2024. Western capitals should realize the risks and stop procrastinating.

With the second anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the tenth anniversary of Crimea's annexation approaching, it is high time to admit that, against all hope, Ukraine has not been included in the Western security perimeter as such. Ukraine has remained crucially important but still an external partner of the West. The West rejoices when Ukraine is successful on the battlefield and laments when it is not, but it does not seem to perceive Ukraine's hypothetical defeat in the war as its own.

Rhetorically, Western leaders have made a commitment to support Ukraine for as long as it takes. In reality, the assistance is dwindling. Agreeing on every subsequent

financial tranche is an uphill battle, while decisions about a massive increase in defence production are being postponed. A huge amount of time was wasted before the Western countries realized that the economic sanctions they had imposed on Russia were way too easy to evade.

Meanwhile, the Kremlin is consolidating control over the constitutional territories in Ukraine that it holds. It is granting the locals Russian citizenship, conducting "elections", and teaching schoolchildren the Russian version of history. Most importantly, the Russian leadership is reaffirming its conviction that the West will "blink first" and that Russia will eventually win the war of attrition.

Why is it that once again the West has turned out to be unprepared for a long and costly conflict with Russia? The answer to this question cannot be reduced to the economic situation, lobbying by some Western companies, domestic politics, Hungary, Donald Trump and the Republican party, and so on, although all of these are pieces of the puzzle. Fundamentally, the answer lies deeper. It is, as before, the lack of a vision for how to deal with Russia now and how to live next door to it later. Should Russia be crushed, weakened or, on the contrary, offered a compromise?

The Western debate is apparently reverting to an unfortunate circular trajectory. Unlike in 2022,

the Western political community is currently less concerned about the rapid defeat of Ukraine and a possible Russian invasion of one or more NATO countries. These developments are considered possible in principle in the medium term, but not in the immediate future, given the heavy losses that Russia has sustained in Ukraine. Such an analysis creates a comfortable, albeit mistaken, sense that the West has plenty of time.

Instead, the West is once again beginning to be concerned about Russia's possible defeat. Understandably, Western leaders want to prevent the risk of nuclear escalation by Russia. For this reason, they are hesitant to supply Ukraine with a number of weapon systems that could change the situation on the ground, and do not approve of Ukraine's strikes on the internationally recognized territories of Russia.

Less understandably, the West is paying too much attention to Russia's own potential disintegration and Moscow's loss of control over the same nuclear weapons – just as it did when the Soviet Union was collapsing at the end of the 1980s.

The arguments in support of these fears are not convincing. First, both in 1917 and in 1991, the collapse of the Russian state was not a consequence of a military debacle. Moreover, the defeats in the Crimean War (1853–56) and the Russo-Japanese war (1904–05) actually became drivers of reform. Second, it is hard to comprehend why Putin's regime would lose its grip on a country in which the opposition has been totally destroyed or forced to emigrate. Yet the assumption of the collapse of the Russian state persists and continues to influence the Western policy towards Ukraine.

If these and similar considerations prevail in the Western approach, Ukraine's future in the medium term will be very challenging. It is likely that the conflict will remain semi-frozen along the current front lines. Russia may or may not be able to make tactical advances, even if it decides to conduct some minor offensive operations, but its main achievements will be the secured land corridor to Crimea and the capability to strike Ukraine's major industrial centres. Ukraine will not be able to liberate

more territories. The likelihood of Ukraine joining NATO and the European Union will be slim. Economic reconstruction will not even begin, as seized Russian assets will not be used for this purpose and Western private investments will not be made in a country at war. Millions of Ukrainian refugees will be integrated into the societies that now host them and will gradually become citizens of the respective countries, losing ties with Ukraine.

This may sound gloomy, but it is worth pointing out that this is an optimistic scenario. The alternative scenario is a new, larger and more successful Russian offensive several years down the road, if not in the second half of 2024, which Ukraine and the West will have no resolve or capacity to withstand.

This is why the West should put an end to its procrastination and start acting with vigour. The necessary financial decisions in the US, and defence procurement decisions in both the US and in Europe, are long overdue and should be taken now, before the scenarios outlined above come to pass. /