

# The Russia-Ukraine War: Where Do We Go from Here?

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**The Russia-Ukraine War, underway for two months, continues in full force. Negotiations between the countries, held until about two weeks ago, achieved certain agreements. However, Russia announced the second stage of the invasion, which began on April 19, and it seems that the negotiations will not be renewed in the coming weeks. This raises the question of how the campaign will continue and what might influence its end and its results. At this stage it seems that the end of the war will be determined in the coming weeks in accordance with Russia's military successes or failures in Ukraine.**

Russia's war is not only against Ukraine, but rather, as the Russian regime repeatedly declares, against NATO and the West in general. The sequence of events has changed Russia's initial intention not to become entangled in a long military campaign, but rather, through a short operation, to replace the government of Ukraine or at least to distance Ukraine from the West. But in practice, Russia has been drawn into a prolonged conflict – the result of effective Ukrainian resistance that is supported by NATO, which trained Ukraine's army and helps it with the supply of weapons, intelligence sharing, and technological warfare.

Beyond the direct Russian-Ukrainian confrontation, the war has become a Russian-Western conflict in the territory of Ukraine, and alongside the military campaign, it is waged mainly in the cognitive domain. NATO is exerting pressure on Russia in the cognitive, political, and economic realms in an effort to undermine the government's stability, and Russia for its part is waging a cognitive war against the West, including in the post-Soviet context and in its attempt to retain its influence in this sphere. But to date, the two sides have failed to achieve their objectives and the war continues, while the Ukrainians have scored significant achievements in the struggle for world public opinion.

With the failure of the planned operation and the withdrawal of Russian forces from the Kiev region, and in light of internal pressure in Moscow by those opposed to continuation of the war, accompanied by internal power struggles, the Russian leadership was interested in ending the campaign quickly and easing the domestic challenge. Russia had to formulate its next steps: reaching certain understandings as part of the negotiations with Ukraine and stopping the war, or preparing for continued fighting, while defining new realistic objectives.

As part of the negotiations, which Russia initiated during the first week of the war, Moscow expressed its willingness to end the campaign with limited achievements, which would enable it in the domestic arena to portray the result as a victory. The conditions for a settlement were already formulated during the first two weeks of the negotiations, including a Ukrainian willingness not to join NATO. The issues that remained unresolved were the status of the Crimean Peninsula and Donbas.

As long as there was no progress in the negotiations between Russia and Ukraine, the prevailing assumption was that NATO was preventing the advancement of the settlement. It seems that the West is interested in drawing Russia into a prolonged campaign that will be detrimental to it. This is in parallel with a cognitive effort vis-à-vis the public and the political establishment in Russia itself. This objective was publicly declared by President Biden. It is likely that for this reason NATO worked and is still working to encourage Ukraine to continue the war, despite heavy Ukrainian losses. Recently the United States even increased its aid to Ukraine and transferred it \$800 million in military aid.

At present, it seems that Russia has succeeded in containing the threat to the government's stability and overcoming the opposition, based on vigorous law enforcement and publicity efforts. Tens of thousands of demonstrators against the war and opposition members have been arrested and sent to jail, a curfew has been imposed in several cities, and media channels considered free have been shut down. Meanwhile, there have been increased appearances of pro-Kremlin speakers on the

traditional Russian media channels. Despite the serious sanctions imposed by the United States and other Western countries on Russia and on senior figures in the political establishment, Moscow believes that the economic challenge has been contained and that further endurance has been ensured for the government and the military campaign. Tightened ties with China, Iran, and other countries in Asia and Middle East region, alongside its preplanned reliance on reserves, have enabled Russia to increase the pressure on Ukraine and in particular to persist in the struggle against the West in the energy sphere, in part based on the understanding that at this stage Western Europe has no effective alternatives to the Russian oil and gas market.

Against this backdrop, it seems that Moscow has currently decided to give up on an effort to end to the negotiations and to continue the fighting. This stage, the second in the war, according Moscow, aims at expanding its hold in eastern and southern Ukraine, including the coastal strip between the Crimean Peninsula and the Donbas – hence the effort to achieve control of the port city of Mariupol. If this stage is successful, it is possible that Russia will subsequently seek to achieve control of Odessa, in an effort to complete the conquest of the entire coastal strip and to connect with Transnistria in Moldova. Russia would thus succeed in creating an important area of control in order to use it as a future bargaining chip. Russian control of these regions would also enable it to present it as an achievement in the domestic arena, in accordance with its declared aim in invading Ukraine.

Accordingly, Russia is continuing its efforts to garner achievements, both in the military campaign in Ukraine and in the broader context of its war – the cognitive effort vis-à-vis NATO and the West, and toward the post-Soviet sphere – through several measures:

First, the war crimes that Russia is accused of – widespread destruction, mass killing, and many instances of rape in the Ukrainian cities of Bucha, Irpin, Volnovakha, Borodyanka, and Mariupol – aim to signal not only to Ukraine but to all countries in the post-Soviet sphere the scope of the

damage that Russia can inflict on them too if they try to approach or join NATO and the West.

Second, the heightened attacks on Mariupol, and now also on Odessa, and the continued disclosure of war crimes in additional cities in eastern Ukraine, will enable Russia to increase the pressure on Ukraine and to leverage its demands as part of negotiations in the future.

Third, as part of Russia's cognitive war with the West, the destruction it has wrought, the damage to civilian infrastructure, and its continued westward advance signal to the West that Moscow is not deterred by its portrayal as a war criminal. On the contrary, Russia seeks to sow fear and to convey a threatening message to Western Europe in order to achieve leeway for itself in negotiations.

In the coming weeks the scenario for ending the war is likely to take shape, and it will be influenced mainly by Russia's military successes or failures in Ukraine. To the extent that Moscow achieves significant results in the attack in southern Ukraine, it is possible that it will continue the effort to take over Kiev and to replace the government there – an objective that it defined from the outset of its invasion. However, it is possible that the Ukrainian determination to repel the Russian forces and block their advance in the south will bolster the Russian determination to renew the talks regarding the conditions for stopping the fighting. In this case, the regions that have already been conquered by the Russian army will serve as a bargaining chip in the negotiations.