We Are All Ukrainians Now

Helping Ukraine defeat Russian aggression helps the West reach its security goals.

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June 07, 2022

Katie Godowski / pexels

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has united Western states and societies in outrage. But after a hundred days of war, some analysts now strike a different note. They [argue](#) that Western and Ukrainian interests differ, and that the West should choose the former. Wary of moral fervor, they [warn](#) against getting swept up "in the mood of the moment." Instead, they argue that a quick end to the war is imperative. They advocate a settlement they believe will restore stability by satisfying the major powers — and that Ukraine should be [pressured](#) to accept this.

This position has the virtue of clarity and honesty. After all, the first duty of governments, including Western ones, is to protect the country. The West has prioritized national interests over moral concerns many times — most recently, in abandoning its two-decade

commitment to Afghanistan. If more support for Ukraine poses serious threats to Western security, then seeking a compromise peace would be a rational, if ruthless, policy.

The real question, then, is not whether the West should incur risks for the moral cause of supporting Ukraine. It is whether supporting Ukraine is in the West's own interests. What are the risks and benefits of doing so?

The overriding concern of those who want to accommodate Russia rather than increase support for Ukraine is fear of nuclear war. But almost everyone who has studied this closely judges the risk to be low and [deterrable](#). If Putin's invasion of Ukraine is driven by his concern for legacy, he is unlikely to contemplate actions that could lead to the end of Russian history.

Avoiding escalation is never an absolute priority. If it were, the West should not try to thwart the ambitions of any nuclear adversary, and would have behaved very differently in the many crises of the Cold War. The risks of escalation must be weighed against the consequences of avoiding it. While the former have been much discussed, the latter have not. What are the implications for Western interests of agreeing a compromise beneficial to Russia and pressing Ukraine to accept it?

First, it would leave Russia stronger. If Russia secures control over the whole of the Donbas, it will likely annex it as it did Crimea in 2014 and present these gains as irreversible. Control of Ukraine's southern coastline would give Russia a chokehold over Ukraine and its [exports](#), leaving it well placed to force [concessions](#) on other issues, including the lifting of sanctions. Some argue that Russia is already severely weakened by military losses. But in absolute terms, and relative to Ukraine which has also suffered significant losses, Russia remains a formidable regional power. A compromise peace would also ease the unprecedented strain on Putin's regime by allowing it to claim victory at home.

Second, it would neither satisfy Russia nor stabilize the region. There is no sign that Russia has abandoned the goal of subjugating all of Ukraine. Kremlin sources have [reiterated](#) this, as has General Vladimir Shamanov, a [big beast](#) in military politics who played a brutal role in both Chechen wars and was chair of the State Duma defense committee until last December. He recently [stated](#) that Ukraine's "demilitarization" would take 5-10 years under a regime "not soiled with these neo-Nazis." There is no prospect of a genuine settlement while the Putin regime remains intact — only a breathing space before Russia resumes aggression.

Third, Russia would draw the lesson that it can beat the West in a contest of resolve by exploiting the threat of nuclear escalation. Since the Putin regime now sees itself locked in a war against the West, it will be encouraged to use this threat in other times and places. Other states, too, would conclude that the West can no longer respond effectively to flagrant violations of basic norms. This would embolden the West's adversaries, alarm its allies, and erode international order.

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What is the alternative? Accommodationists are right that a long war carries risks. The way to end it more quickly is not to compromise with Russia but to defeat it. This means, at a minimum, that Russia is no better off in any respect, significantly worse off overall, and unable ever to attempt another invasion of Ukraine. This is turn requires that the West escalate its military support to Ukraine and its sanctions on Russia, and quickly.

This will discomfit many. But the West faces an inescapable choice: either a negotiated outcome that strengthens Russia, weakens Ukraine, harms Western security and undermines the rules-based order; or a fully-resourced commitment to help Ukraine defeat Russia's invasion. Which of these the West chooses will depend above all on how it weighs the large and predictable costs of the first against the small and theoretical risks of nuclear escalation if it embarks on the second — a risk that Russia would not rationally initiate, but fears of which it assiduously stokes.

The argument for compromise is the latest in a series of calls to solve the problem of Russian aggression by imposing constraints on Ukraine. Before the war, it was [argued](#) that the West should pressure Ukraine to make concessions. When the invasion began, that the West should not send [weapons](#) because Ukraine would be defeated quickly. When Ukraine was not defeated quickly, that the West's priority should be to avoid [escalation](#). Now we hear that Ukraine should end the war by [ceding](#) further sovereignty.

But if Ukraine had lost the war in the first days, and Russia had imposed a puppet regime, the results would have been disastrous for the West. Putin would have burnished his reputation as a bold strategist, projecting Russian influence into Europe, renewing domestic support, garnering China's admiration and throwing the West into disarray. At great cost, Kyiv staved off a defeat that would have severely undermined Western security and morale. It would be wholly wrong to repay this debt by seeking a peace that would gravely weaken Ukraine.

The case for helping Ukraine defeat Russia is not only ethical but impeccably self-interested. It aligns three fundamental Western goals: meeting a major security threat, punishing a flagrant violation of the rules-based order, and supporting a democratic state against authoritarian aggression. There are none of the Cold War moral ambiguities of propping up friendly but oppressive regimes, nor the more recent agonies of intervening in countries we did not understand. It is hard to imagine a stronger case for using Western power, far superior to Russia's across multiple domains.

Interest and morality often pull in different directions in international relations. But here they pull together. On the urgent and overriding issue of the time, Ukraine's interests are also the West's. We really are all Ukrainians now.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/06/07/we-are-all-ukrainians-now-a77915