

Putin is gambling that the west will grow impatient with Ukraine. We have to prove him wrong

Jonathan Freedland - The Guardian

The image was stunning, the optics perfect: a war leader addressing the nation in an ancient hall, the rays of stained-glass sunlight all but crowning him with a halo. And yet there was something wrong with that picture.

Volodymyr Zelenskiy was not stiffening the resolve of his own people, who after a year of war, bereavement and pain might be forgiven for losing heart. Rather, he was [in Westminster](#) to steady the nerves of British politicians – and, later, European ones – to ensure they do not abandon a fight that has cost them so much less.



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His official request was [for fighter planes](#) – “Give us wings,” he said – but he had a wider purpose. His lightning trip to London, Paris and Brussels was aimed at ensuring the west does not grow impatient, that as the first anniversary of Vladimir Putin’s invasion of Ukraine approaches, it does not start looking at its watch – and for an early way out.

It’s odd that it should be this way around. It is the Ukrainians who are doing the suffering; it is on their soil that trench warfare is once again under way – the kind of combat that many assumed had been banished into history, to be glimpsed only via lavish [Netflix re-enactments](#). It is Ukrainian men who are living in the ground, in networks of trenches and subterranean shelters along a frontline that stretches for 1,500km (930 miles) – and yet it is fear of quiet on the western front that preoccupies Zelenskiy.

You can see why. Admittedly, the calls for Kyiv to agree to an immediate ceasefire and negotiate with Moscow are fairly marginal right now. It fell, for example, to the former Pink Floyd frontman Roger Waters to make that case [to the United Nations this week](#), his stance as an anti-war campaigner neutral between the two combatants

only slightly undermined by the fact that he spoke as the invited guest of the Russian delegation, and has described well-documented accounts of Russian war crimes as “lies, lies, lies”.

But others less easily dismissed have also begun to drum their fingers on the table, reminding Zelenskiy that all conflicts end in talks eventually, and so he should start thinking pragmatically now – among them no less than the former US secretary of state [Henry Kissinger](#).

Whether articulated by the arena rock left or the establishment right, it sounds like the reasonable, humanitarian position: who could be against an immediate end to this horrendous war? But it’s a hollow call.

For one thing, the conditions simply do not exist for the two sides to negotiate now. To quote a recent [Prospect](#) essay by Jonathan Powell, who played a critical role in brokering the Good Friday agreement, which turns 25 this spring: “Successful peace negotiations usually require both a mutually hurting stalemate (a specific concept in diplomacy) and leadership on both sides prepared to take political risks for peace. Neither condition currently exists,” in the case of Ukraine.

In Northern Ireland, neither the British government nor the IRA could see a path to military victory: it was that stalemate that made negotiations possible. But, wrote Powell, “Both Ukraine and Russia still think they can achieve their objectives militarily.”

What complicates things further is the specific figure of Putin. It’s not clear that the traditional carrot-and-stick calculus works with him. If Ukraine and its western allies were to de-escalate, Putin’s past conduct suggests he would see that as weakness and press harder.

But if Kyiv and its backers were to escalate, the same track record suggests an identical response: he would feel compelled to appear strong and hit back. Nor does the huge number of casualties on his own side count as any kind of pressure on Putin: given the clampdown on all internal dissent inside Russia, public grief is scarcely a consideration. He is happy to keep sending his young men into the meat grinder.

Watch the third episode of Norma Percy’s riveting new BBC documentary series [Putin vs the West](#), and it becomes clearer still that the traditional methods don’t apply.

Zelenskiy tells Percy of his repeated requests to join NATO: the alliance kept rebuffing him for fear of antagonizing Putin. Several European nations extended that caution into the rest of their dealings with Putin, attempting emollient even in early 2022, hoping not to provoke him into invading Ukraine. But it was all in vain: Putin invaded anyway.

Still, let’s say that could be overcome, and somehow it was possible to get Putin and Zelenskiy to agree an immediate ceasefire. It would not end the suffering.

Contemplate for a moment the fate of those places conquered by Putin, which would remain in Russian hands under an armistice that would freeze the current map in place.

Think for a moment of what has happened already in those places: the [mass rape in Bucha](#); the [massacre in Mariupol](#); the [torture chambers in Izium](#); the [mass deportations of Ukrainians to Russia](#), including the transfer of [hundreds of thousands of children](#), to face forced adoption and “Russification”. Those crimes would not end if there were a ceasefire. They would continue, except now Russia would have an even freer hand.

And who believes that Putin would stop there? What grounds would a Ukrainian have to trust that the Russian leader would be content to pocket the gains he had won and leave it at that?

One would have to ignore everything that has happened these last two decades. Much more likely is that Putin would simply regard an armistice as a pause to regroup for the next push.

After all, he is not after a mere adjustment of boundaries: [he has been clear](#) that he regards the very existence of an independent Ukraine as an affront to Russia. Vadym Prystaiko, Ukraine’s former foreign minister, tells Percy: “You cannot bargain with him. Putin does not need anything from us. There is no reward, no building or city or prize. He wants us not to exist.”

Of course, enemies in every conflict would say their adversary is uniquely evil or impervious to reason. Often that assessment is wrong. But sometimes the world really does face a threat of a different order.

Putin’s dictatorship inside Russia’s borders and his repeated territorial expansion beyond them – whether in Georgia in 2008, Crimea in 2014 or the rest of Ukraine in 2022 – suggest a man bent on reviving the spectre that haunted Europe in the middle of the last century.

He has played the long game and is playing it again now, gambling that he can absorb more death and devastation than we can, that we have less stomach for it, even when it’s not our people who are doing the dying.

He believes he has greater strength and greater patience. It’s no exaggeration to say that the fate of Europe depends on proving him wrong.

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