

Ukraine: 100 days of existential war

Tadeusz Iwański

President Volodymyr Zelensky's decision to stay in Kyiv after the start of the Russian invasion on 24 February and his immediate assumption of leadership in defending the country on the very first day of the war made him the leader around whom society and most of the political elite consolidated. His attitude fully reflected the public mood. Together with the army's effective resistance, it allowed Ukraine, despite losing control over part of its territories in the east and south of the country (a total of around 80,000 km²), to maintain its sovereignty, the functionality of its state institutions and prevent the Kremlin from achieving its original military and political objectives. The 100 days of effective resistance is an undoubted success. It has boosted the pride and ambitions of Ukrainians and prompted the authorities and society to formulate far-reaching political goals: to regain Crimea and Donbas, to cut themselves off from everything Russian, and ultimately to build a new Ukraine – a modern one, institutionally belonging to Europe. The scale of Russian war crimes has drastically reduced public consent to any compromise with Russia. At the same time, the prolonged war has increased the number of military and civilian casualties and deepened the economic and infrastructural disaster, making the country dependent on aid from Western countries. Similarly, capabilities on the battlefield depend on Western military aid: arms and ammunition supplies and, by the same token, the political will of the ruling elites of these countries.

The foundation: community resistance and resilience

The invasion confirmed the huge mobilisation potential of Ukrainian society, already evident during the so-called Orange Revolution (2004/2005) or the Revolution of Dignity (2013/2014). The threat of Russian troops occupying the country and restricting both political sovereignty and individual civil liberties became an existential threat and provoked determined resistance. During the first ten days of the war, over 100 000 citizens signed up for the territorial defence forces, several hundred local volunteer units were created and the general mobilisation plan is being implemented without major problems. Ukrainians practice various forms of resistance against Russia, and it is not only armed struggle: they help financially by depositing funds in special accounts, they conduct collections for the purchase of military equipment for the army, they provide soldiers with food and clothing, they volunteer at centres for internally displaced persons, and they help in the distribution and distribution of humanitarian aid. Although there are no surveys measuring the percentage of citizens actively involved



in resistance, the majority of the population, even if they do not take concrete action against the occupier, support those who are fighting. This can also include men, who often return to the country.

Apart from active resistance, the phenomenon of open collaboration in the territories occupied by Russia should be assessed as relatively marginal. However, as a result of the occupier's actions adaptive attitudes will become more common (their explanation is the necessity to obtain means of subsistence), it also results from pressure and often terror from the Russian forces. Also, social support for the occupation authorities is low. This is evidenced not so much by optimistic reports from Ukrainian local authorities as by postponement of the so-called referendum on annexation of the occupied territories to Russia due to organisational difficulties. Reconnaissance and sabotage activities in the enemy's rear are becoming more and more visible. They take form of small but courageous acts, such as removing Russian flags from masts or painting patriotic graffiti on walls, but also assassinations of collaborators, attacks on occupation administration buildings or destruction of Russian military equipment.

The brutality of Russian actions – bombing of civilian objects, rocket fire on blockaded urban centres (Mariupol), numerous war crimes (Bucha, Irpin, etc.) increases the

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determination of the defenders, for whom the prospect of living under Russian occupation in case of losing the war is an unacceptable scenario. Although war fatigue inevitably progresses with the growing impoverishment of the population, humanitarian crisis, internal displacement of the population and other living problems, so far it has not translated into open opposition to the policy of the authorities and a willingness to compromise with Russia, which would imply significant territorial or political concessions.

Against the background of social consolidation and mobilisation against aggression, the process of rejection of everything Russian is progressing. The decommunisation of public space that began after the Russian aggression in 2014 has turned into a spontaneous derusification of various spheres of social life. More and more cities – both in the west of the country like Uzhhorod or Lviv, but also in the capital or in Dnipro and Kharkiv in the east – are removing monuments related to Russian history and culture, as well as street or square names and giving them the names of heroes of the ongoing war, the names of heroically defending cities, but also of allied countries (e.g. Polska Street in Dnipro). Russian as the language of public communication is also rejected. The message of the media – not only the traditional ones, bound by quotas established after 2014, but above all social media – is being consciously ukrainised: public figures and celebrities are demonstratively abandoning Russian. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate is experiencing a crisis, as it tries to reduce ties with Moscow, which most of its believers consider toxic. Derusification trends – both in culture and in political orientations, where the attraction of Russia has reached the level of statistical error – are forming a new consciousness. It is based on the conviction that Ukraine is the bulwark of western civilisation against the eastern invaders, that it belongs mentally to Europe and politically to the EU.

Political war games

The total resistance of Ukrainian society would not have been possible without trust in political leaders. Zelensky demonstrated courage and uncompromisingness, which amazed not only Ukrainians but also the Western world. Through active diplomacy and well-tailored speeches in national parliaments, he became a global icon of the struggle for freedom and an object of pride for citizens. If opinion polls from the time of the war are reliable, Zelensky now enjoys over 90% public support.

In the first weeks of the invasion, the political elite stopped criticising the president, focusing instead on the fight against the aggressor. Private televisions joined forces to carry joint coverage, and political life receded into the background. This was partly because politicians wanted to demonstrate unanimity in the face of the aggressor and not to exude vested interests, and partly because martial law regulations and security issues drastically reduced the possibility of competing for voters' votes. Not without significance is also the fact that criticism of the popular Zelensky was becoming unproductive, and in the face of external aggression could be considered by the public as betrayal. In the following weeks, the media coverage was subordinated by law to the information needs of the fighting country, which further limited its pluralism. De facto, the main political tribune that was the Supreme Council also disappeared – it deliberates online and without cameras during the war, and votes on the most important laws in short offline sessions with a constitutional majority to show unity and determination in containing Russia.

Having gained control over the media, Zelensky's camp did not fail to take advantage of this situation to consolidate its position on the

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political scene. The full discrediting of pro-Russian forces, first of all, of the opposition Platform For Life, was used first to suspend it and then to dissolve its fractions in parliament (in May pro-Russian parties were banned by law). As a result, its MPs decided to cooperate with the government. There was also a renewed fight with former president Petro Poroshenko, who had been charged with treason before the invasion.¹ In May, TV stations favourable to him were disconnected from digital broadcasting, this decision was justified on the grounds of the former head of state's 'narcissism'. The case of criminal charges was also reheated and the testimony of Viktor Medvedchuk, a pro-Russian politician who had been detained earlier, was published (however it did not bring much new to the case). Others, such as Yulia Tymoshenko or the former speaker of parliament Dmytro Razumkov, who was popular before the invasion but feuded with Zelensky, have lost most of their support and are struggling to survive in the voters' minds, trying to gain access to news programmes. It seems that with the stabilisation of the situation on the fronts, the president's team decided that the threat of loss of statehood was (at least for some time) removed, and the war and high support can be used to discredit political opponents.

The state of war in which Ukraine finds itself has significantly reduced the influence of the Ukrainian oligarchs on politics.² Before the war started, they have exercised their influence through the content promoted in the main media owned by them, above all television channels, politicians invited to the studio, as well as through their influence in political parties and their control over some MPs during voting sessions. The disappearance of political life, including parliamentary life, and the restrictions on media coverage imposed under martial law regulations meant that the political importance of the oligarchs declined. Their role in the country's economy also weakened: military action and the loss of territories deprived them of some of their assets, including production capacity, and made it difficult to sell goods to foreign markets. At the same time, however, most big business condemned the Russian invasion and actively supported resistance to it – they have been providing humanitarian aid, supporting the army and territorial defence troops, and have paid taxes to the budget in advance.

¹ J. Rogoża, 'Ukraine: Poroshenko faces charges', OSW, 12 January 2022, osw.waw.pl.

² S. Matuszak, 'Ukraińscy oligarchowie w czasie wojny', *Komentarze OSW*, no. 449, 30 May 2022, osw.waw.pl.

Economic ruin

The Russian invasion destroyed much of the Ukrainian economy and caused a deep financial crisis. According to various estimates, Ukraine's GDP will shrink by up to 45% in 2022, although this will largely depend on the scope and intensity of military operations in the months ahead. Balancing the budget on an ongoing basis is a challenge – it is estimated that Ukraine needs around 5 billion dollars in external financial assistance every month. To this end, the authorities are making strenuous efforts to obtain foreign support, primarily non-refundable grants, but also low-interest loans, as the country is only able to finance around half of its current budget expenditure on its own. According to the Minister of Finance, Serhiy Marchenko,³ since the beginning of the invasion, Ukraine has received over 6 billion dollars in foreign aid, and the government has been issuing so-called war bonds, bought mainly by the National Bank of Ukraine (over 4 billion dollars). However, this is in fact money printing, which sooner or later will be reflected in an even faster increase in inflation and a fall in the value of the Ukrainian currency. The economic losses resulting directly from the damage to the infrastructure were estimated at the end of May at 105.5 billion dollars. After adding the indirect losses, as a result of a decrease in GDP (by 16% in the first quarter), the suspension of investment and the outflow of workforce, it was estimated at 600 billion dollars.⁴ With the current state of the budget, the government is only able to repair a small part of the infrastructure, mainly critical, and the bulk of the funds are allocated to the needs of the army. Ukraine's economy has shifted to a war footing – according to Marchenko, military spending accounted for three quarters of the entire Ukrainian budget in late May and early June.

In addition to the losses, allowing production to be sold abroad is a major challenge. The Ukrainian economy has relied heavily on

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exports (around 50% of GDP), two thirds of which have been carried out by sea. As a result of the blockade of ports by the Russian fleet these sales are radically reduced. In view of the destruction of the Azovstal and Ilyichi MMK complexes, as well as other large enterprises in the Donbas (including the coke-chemical complex in Avdiivka), the importance of exports of metallurgical production through the ports of Mariupol and Berdyansk has relatively decreased. However, the Black Sea ports of Nikolayev, Yuzhny, Odesa and Chernomorsk, which are key to foreign sales of cereals and foodstuffs (over 40% of export revenue), are currently not reloading. This has a negative impact on the mood of producers – although the government declares that more than 70% of last year's acreage has been sown, the lack of prospects for exporting most of the crop weakens the motivation of agrobusiness owners to invest in increasingly expensive and scarce fertilisers and fuels. In turn, redirecting transport flows to road and rail border crossings with the EU is a costly and lengthy task (it is estimated that by the end of the year there will be around 50 million tonnes of grain alone to be exported from Ukraine), as it faces a number of bottlenecks in the form of the capacity of border crossings, the availability of rolling stock, etc.

³ T. Омельченко, 'Сергій Марченко: «Військовий бюджет складає три чверті всього бюджету України»', 1 June 2022, mind.ua.

⁴ Based on calculations by the Kyiv School of Economics. For more macroeconomic data and information on financial aid to Ukraine, see S. Matuszak, 'Trzy miesiące wojny: zachodnie wsparcie finansowe dla Ukrainy', OSW, 27 May 2022, osw.waw.pl.

Outlook

The war in Ukraine is expected to last at least a few months. The state and society will be adapting to life in the new conditions. The continuation of military action will continue to hamper economic life in the affected areas, but outside them, business and services are already recovering, new supply chains and logistics routes are being established. Political life will slowly thaw, and criticism of the authorities will grow with it. At the same time, time is not playing in Ukraine's favour. Even with high morale and a great determination of citizens to win, the country is not able to provide the means for a long-term continuation of effective resistance on its own, and its reserves: human, military and financial are smaller than Russia's. The economic ruin and superiority in equipment and armaments of the Russian army have led to a situation in which the continuation of resistance (not to mention the counter-offensive) is dependent on external assistance.

The Western countries have come a long way in the short time of the ongoing invasion: whereas four months ago the supply of post-Soviet military equipment to Ukraine was controversial, in recent weeks Kyiv has also been acquiring heavy weaponry of Western types, although still in far from sufficient quantities. Ukraine's success will therefore depend not so much on continuing this trend as on increasing the scope and pace of supplies. There are also promising initiatives aimed at increasing budget liquidity and facilitating the sale of production on foreign markets – social security for citizens will increase both its resistance and resilience.

The successful resistance on the battlefield so far resulted in a change in Kyiv's priorities. In the first days of the invasion, the aim was to repel the Russian attack on all three fronts: north, east and south. Kyiv also entered into negotiations with Russia, which viewed them as a tool to force surrender. The first defeats of the Russian army and, after a month, the withdrawal of the aggressor from the northern regions of Ukraine confirmed the authorities' belief that resistance was effective. The disclosed scale of war crimes further stiffened its position on the possibility of continuing negotiations with Russia – talks with the Kremlin became socially unacceptable.

Reading the public mood well and feeling the military, financial and diplomatic support of the West, the Ukrainian authorities – without rejecting the option of direct talks with Putin – did not rule out in May the recapture not only of the territories occupied after 24 February, but also of those taken in 2014: the Crimea and Donbas. These bold declarations triggered fears among some of the Western allies that if Ukraine's military advances too far it could provoke an escalation on Putin's part, including the use of tactical nuclear weapons. As a result, in the months ahead, Zelensky will have to navigate precisely between public expectations and the concerns of Western partners in order to maintain support from both.