

Ukraine: A Left-Wing Proposal for De-Escalation in the Donbas

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Acknowledging Ukraine's legitimate security concerns while avoiding armed conflict on all sides

When the US media began writing again about the threat of a Russian invasion in Ukraine in the fall of 2021, the first reaction of many Ukrainians was surprise. Until mid-December, it seemed that Western media paid more attention to the issue and took it more seriously than their Ukrainian counterparts – especially since the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine initially denied information about a renewed amassing of Russian troops near the Ukrainian border.

When the German tabloid *Bild* published a map of “Putin’s plans”, which looked as if it had been drawn by a high school student, it caused not only surprise, but also served as the butt of [jokes](#) by many Ukrainian authors. Many Ukrainians thought that Russia’s actions would not end in anything serious, just like during the spring sabre-rattling.

But gradually, the Russian leadership’s irrefutable statements and their new ambitious demands forced many to change their view on the seriousness of the threat. The purpose of the demonstrative concentration of Russian troops in the spring and autumn was not to launch a war, but to blackmail the United States, the EU, and Ukraine into making concessions.

It is easy to see why the Russian authorities consider the current moment to be appropriate, as the Russian opposition has been defeated, Europe is worried about the energy crisis, and the US has been humiliated in Afghanistan, while its relations with China have deteriorated significantly. Thus, if Putin now wants a grand bargain, not a big war, the obvious and increasingly relevant question is: what will he do if he does not get what he wants? As Vladimir Frolov, an expert at the Carnegie Moscow Center, [noted](#), “with such a scale of Russia’s demands ... there is almost no room to declare victory if what one manages to get is much less than what he wanted and demanded.”

However, the real threat to be considered is not a full-scale Russian offensive and the occupation of large parts of Ukraine, as that would be too expensive, too risky, and too unpopular with Russians. It would much more likely be an escalation in the Donbas, a limited invasion, and an expansion of the territories of the Kremlin-controlled Luhansk People’s Republic (LPR) and Donbas People’s Republic (DPR).

Particularly alarming in this regard was Sergey Shoygu’s statement that private US military companies are preparing a chemical weapons provocation in the Donbas. The statement was made against the backdrop of the [paralysis of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons](#) due to the Russia-EU conflict over the Navalny poisoning investigation. Despite the widespread [talk in Moscow about a “South Ossetian scenario”](#), there is a risk that this time Russian troops will not wait for an enemy offensive, as in the [2008 war in Georgia](#), but will act as the Americans did in 2003 to justify their aggression against Iraq. Equally disturbing is an investigation by [Meduza](#) that

Russian recruiters gathering groups of former Russian private mercenaries to be sent to the Donbas with an unknown mission.

That said, I am not a military analyst, so this text is not about what a Russian invasion might look like. I will focus on political issues and comment on the two main responses of Russian officials to the question about the concentration of Russian troops near Ukrainian borders. The first response is that it is Kyiv that is planning an offensive in the Donbas, while the Russians are only reacting. The second is that this is a reaction to the threat of NATO expansion. I will also try to suggest what the international Left should do in this situation.

A Ukrainian Offensive?

The Kremlin's statements that Ukrainian authorities were planning an offensive in the Donbas may have sounded plausible to some in the spring of 2021. Shortly before that, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky had made an abrupt political turn: he began to apply sanctions against citizens of Ukraine (currently about 2,000 people) and shut down three TV channels (two more have been shut down recently). As [noted by Ukrainian human rights activists](#), these actions undermined the fundamental principles of law, grossly violated the Constitution and international agreements, and exhibited signs of usurpation of power. In these circumstances, it was hard to know what to expect — although there were no real signs of preparation for an offensive, accusations of offensive plans sound even more dubious now than they did in the spring.

On 26 October, shortly before the first publications about the new accumulation of Russian troops, the Ukrainian military deployed Bayraktar TB2 unmanned combat aerial vehicles (UCAV) in the Donbas for the first time, sparking a harsh reaction from Russia and concern from Germany and France. But Zelensky's personal behaviour was indicative in this story. The first reference to the Bayraktar strike was not made by any of the official resources, but by the journalist Yuri Butusov, a mouthpiece of Ukrainian hawks. A month after the incident Zelensky complained about pressure from the United States and the EU on this matter: they demanded that such steps not be repeated.

He also [accused Butusov](#) of killing people because his disclosure of information about Bayraktar led to a return fire. A few days later, during his annual report to the parliament, Zelensky [declared](#) that Ukraine would not stop the war without direct negotiations with Russia. This example shows that Zelensky's discourse is so far noticeably less militant and more committed to a diplomatic resolution of the conflict than Poroshenko's was during his last years in office. In general, the policy of the Ukrainian authorities over the past year does not resemble preparations for a military offensive, but rather the abandonment of plans to significantly change anything in the Donbas while Zelensky is still in office.

One could even say that the Donbas problem has become a secondary issue for Zelensky. Instead of achieving peace, he is now trying to win the favor of the Ukrainian electorate with a flashy anti-oligarch campaign. This has led to his conflict with Ukraine's richest oligarch, Rinat Akhmetov, which unfolded in October and November along with the concentration of Russian troops near the Ukrainian borders. Before that, in September and October, everyone in Ukraine watched the conflict between Zelensky and his former associate Dmytro Razumkov, which led to the latter's resignation as the speaker of the parliament.

Moreover, when the Minister of Internal Affairs Arsen Avakov resigned in the summer of 2021, there were arrests of some members of the National Corps Party, which aggravated the relationship between Zelensky and right-wing radicals. Subsequently, prosecutors suddenly announced suspicion of high treason against the former President Petro Poroshenko already in the second half of December. If the authorities were really planning an offensive in the Donbas, all of these steps would

be inappropriate and harmful to them.

After all, an offensive would be counterproductive for Zelensky. To defeat the Ukrainian army in the event of a hypothetical offensive, Russia would not need a hundred-thousand-strong army along the Ukrainian border — a limited contingent in the Donbas would be enough, as in August 2014, especially since it has become easier to move new troops into the Donbas now that Russia failed to extend the mandate of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission at the border between Russia and Ukraine's non-controlled territories in September. An adventurous offensive and military defeat would make Zelensky's ratings tank, and it is unclear why he would take such a risk under the current circumstances. However, this does not rule out the possibility of an offensive if the situation changes dramatically.

During his presidency, Zelensky has shown that he is more attentive to voters' sentiments than any previous Ukrainian president. Of course, he took very unpopular steps, such as [land reform](#). However, the opening of the land market came under pressure from circumstances and the IMF, while the US and the EU would not approve an offensive in the Donbas. It would be a lose-lose situation for Zelensky, as such actions would be condemned not only by the West, but also by most voters: a military resolution of the conflict is unpopular among Ukrainians. Only about 20 percent of Ukrainians support it, and Zelensky will not be able to win the trust of these hawks no matter what he does. On the other hand, the full implementation of the Minsk agreements in their current version is also supported by a minority, while the [absolute majority is in favour of revising them and concluding a new agreement](#).

NATO Expansion to the East

Putin [claims](#) that the non-expansion of NATO to the east is a "legitimate Russian security concern", and many leftist authors agree with him on this. But could there also be "legitimate Ukrainian security concerns"? Or is it a privilege of big imperialist states?

Russia's proposed [draft treaties](#) with the US and NATO offer no security guarantees for Ukraine, only for NATO. On the other hand, some Western authors, such as [Jeffrey Sachs](#), have proposed a very simple solution to the security issue: "NATO should take Ukraine's membership off the table, and Russia should forswear any invasion."

The problem is that Russia *already invaded* in 2014. As a result, there is still a low-intensity armed conflict in the Donbas, while the Kremlin has turned the annexed Crimea into one big military base over the years. Therefore, a stable peace requires much more than a promise to refrain from another invasion.

Putin tells the truth that the US [promised Gorbachev](#) and [Yeltsin](#) not to expand NATO eastward, and has broken that promise. But does this give Russia the right to military aggression against Ukraine, occupation and annexation of Crimea, not to mention a new war?

Putin uses the fact that the Americans violated their verbal promise to justify his own violation of the [Budapest Memorandum on Security Guarantees](#), an international agreement in exchange for which Ukraine gave up the third-largest nuclear arsenal it possessed after the collapse of the USSR. Under this agreement, Russia, the US, and the UK pledged "to respect the independence, sovereignty and effective borders of Ukraine", "to refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of Ukraine, and that no weapons of any kind will ever be used against Ukraine". By violating this agreement, Putin has not only failed the Ukrainian people, but also the global cause of nuclear non-proliferation. Would it be easy to convince anyone else to give up nuclear weapons after that?

Left-wing discussions about NATO's eastward expansion often take place in the context of US-Russian relations — but this problem is impossible to understand and solve if we fail to consider the position of small Eastern European states. Even the very decision to expand NATO in the 1990s was [made by Bill Clinton](#) not only due to Republican electoral successes, but also under pressure from Eastern European states, which were affected by Yeltsin's anti-parliamentary coup in 1993 and the war in Chechnya. Yes, the policy of NATO enlargement was a mistake. If the US had prioritized a more inclusive Partnership for Peace, the interests of both Russia and Ukraine [would have been taken into account](#). However, even if we recognize this fact, we do not get an answer to the question of what to do now.

After the collapse of the USSR, Ukraine found itself at the junction of the interests of Western and Russian imperialisms, and the [contradictions between them eventually led to the so-called "Ukrainian crisis"](#). The role of Western imperialism in these events requires a separate text, but it is important to note several points here. First, one should not exaggerate the degree of US influence on Ukraine's politics. The West prevents Kyiv from pursuing a protectionist economic policy and cooperating with China, and [promotes free-market](#) and anti-corruption reforms. But Zelensky's policies have shown that the Ukrainian authorities have a high degree of independence on many domestic and foreign policy issues. Second, independent Ukraine has been often treated by NATO as a buffer zone that should not be accepted into the alliance (even if Eastern European NATO members support Ukraine's membership).

Despite attempts by the Ukrainian authorities to obtain a Membership Action Plan (MAP), this never happened, and NATO repeatedly stated that the issue was not on the agenda at the moment. At the NATO Bucharest Summit in 2008, George W. Bush suggested granting a MAP to Ukraine, but European NATO members opposed the initiative. Hence, the summit only [adopted a vague declaration](#) that Georgia and Ukraine should become NATO members at some point. In general, the EU and the US restrain Ukraine in military and security matters with military assistance being mostly limited to defence weapons. It is telling that Ukraine was only able to buy efficient offensive Bayraktar weapons from Turkey.

In his article "[On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians](#)", Putin complained that Ukraine was being turned into an "anti-Russia" project. But he is in fact responsible for the situation. According to earlier polls in Ukraine, support for Ukraine's accession to NATO fluctuated between 20 and 30 percent before 2014, and there was a certain balance between supporters of EU accession and supporters of rapprochement with Russia. This proportion was true even after the change of power as a result of the Maidan uprising.

But after the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of war in the Donbas, there was a [dramatic change in sentiment](#), reinforced by the fact that the regions where pro-Russian sympathies were strongest found themselves on the other side of the border and the front line. Every poll since then has [shown that a relative](#) or [absolute majority of Ukrainians](#) support NATO accession. Without the Russian intervention in 2014, anti-Russian sentiment would never have achieved such influence in Ukraine — and a new invasion could only strengthen it.

What Is to Be Done?

At the beginning of this article I claimed that the real threat to be considered is not a full-scale offensive, but a limited invasion in the Donbas. However, it is impossible to predict how events would unfold afterwards. The Kremlin might be planning a "small victorious war", but the Ukrainian army is no longer what it was in 2014. If the Kremlin failed to achieve its goals, a "small" war could escalate into a much larger one.

Jacobin author Branko Marcetic [warns](#) about the threat of nuclear war should the US Army engage in war and writes that “a war for Ukraine would be madness”. Certainly, we cannot start World War III because of Ukraine. But first of all, Biden has already said that the US will not go to war over Ukraine. Secondly, letting Putin understand that he can get away with another war would condemn millions of lives. So the international Left needs to think of some other way to show solidarity.

In doing so, the Left should not adopt the perspectives of states (although they are important to consider in analyzing the problem), but the perspective of all humanity and, especially, the people most affected by the conflict on both sides of the front line and state borders: residents of the frontline zone, displaced persons, etc.

We should also bear in mind that the circumstances have changed significantly since 2014. At that time, internal and external factors in the conflict were closely intertwined: the Russian intervention took place in the context of an unfolding civil conflict, provoking an escalation of violence and deepening the chasm between the parties of the conflict. A new war would no longer be a combination of intervention and civil war, but an act of pure imperialist aggression.

One should also remember that the majority of residents of those regions that suffer the most from the war or would suffer the most in the event of a new intervention are much more inclined to compromise with Russia, including on the issue of non-accession with NATO. The voices of these people are marginalized in Ukraine today, but it shouldn't be that way. The opinion of the people directly affected by conflicts must be taken into account in resolving those conflicts.

The future of Ukraine should not be decided by Moscow and Washington as Putin wants. In the discussions about possible compromises, the term *finlandization* is sometimes mentioned. However, initially it did not mean that the US refused to take Finland into NATO (which never happened), but rather that the Finns themselves decided to consider the interests of the USSR, reaching a bilateral agreement with it (which the US did not like).

If the Kremlin really wants a neutral Ukraine, it should start by offering security guarantees to Ukraine, not NATO. Russia should be prepared for the issue of concessions in the Donbas and, at the very least, demilitarization of Crimea.

Stable peace in the Donbas is unlikely to be achieved without an international assistance program to rebuild the war-torn region. This could be one of the proverbial “carrots” that incline the parties to compromise. In general, as I stated in my [other article](#), the Minsk agreements should not be fetishized despite their importance. They were signed seven years ago under different circumstances. The order of implementation of most points of the agreements was not specified, and the wording of the treaty allows for different interpretations. An implementation of the Minsk agreements as insisted upon by the Kremlin could provoke an escalation of violence, a parliamentary crisis, and a new civil conflict in Ukraine.

It should be borne in mind that attitudes towards the Minsk agreements differ not only in the society, but also within the current government, which has already lost much of its public trust. In the first year of Zelensky's presidency, Ukraine's willingness to make concessions suffered the [biggest blow](#) not from the street protests by the hawks, but from a riot inside the pro-presidential parliamentary faction in March 2020, when plans to create an Advisory Council under the Trilateral Contact Group with the participation of LPR and DPR representatives became known.

A broader discussion is needed to answer the question of what the position of the international Left should be on most issues related to conflict resolution. There are radically different positions on the war among the Ukrainian Left, and I have only presented one. But there is a very important thing

that cannot be delayed: we need to prevent possible provocations in the Donbas. There is one simple, yet precise demand that can unite people of good will on different sides of the barricades, borders, and front lines and really help solve the problem: *introduce UN peacekeepers to the Donbas*. This step would only contradict the interests of those who seek to preserve the possibility of using military force. Thus, that is where we should start.

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