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Ukraine – no peace in sight

Text: Walter Feichtinger

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is increasingly becoming part of our daily political reality; the war is turning into a deadlock. While Ukraine fights valiantly for its existence, Putin is betting on his two most important weapons – oil and gas, and military and propaganda. A peaceful solution seems out of reach.

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The battle rages

For months now, fighting has been concentrated in the east of Ukraine. Russian troops are conquering municipality after municipality with great difficulty and heavy losses and now control almost 25% of Ukrainian territory. They terrify the country's population with surprise missile attacks. Weaknesses of the Russian military personnel are compensated by devastating artillery fire, leading to numerous civilian casualties.

The Ukrainian side is fighting bravely but continues to give up territory in order to avoid greater losses. Through the increased use of modern weapons from the USA and UK, but also from Germany and Turkey, the Ukrainian army has managed to slow down the attack and inflict heavy losses on the enemy. So far, however, it has not been able to carry out extensive counterattacks and recapture larger areas.

At the end of July, Russia's foreign minister Lavrov announced that the Kremlin wants to overthrow the government in Kyiv and conquer additional territory. Whether this is the Russian government's true intention, mere propaganda or part of its psychological warfare campaign remains to be seen. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is all the more insistent on the full sovereignty and territorial integrity of his country. He has announced a major offensive to recapture all occupied territories while demanding the complete withdrawal of Russian troops – including from Crimea. Both sides want to create military realities on the ground but are currently unable to do so.

A decisive turning point in the war has not yet been reached. Neither side has so-called "escalation dominance" right now that would put the opponent in a critical position. This could be brought about by the use of nuclear weapons but is still considered very unlikely. For Russia, the war is merely 'instrumental' in nature, while for Ukraine it is a matter of survival.

In this phase, where the two warring parties hold completely contrary positions, there is no room for talks or negotiations and a negotiated solution therefore remains out of sight.

No broad alliance against Russia

The West soon settled on a dual strategy: full support for Ukraine (though without direct military involvement) and tough sanctions against Russia. However, it failed to forge a global alliance to isolate Russia.

The condemnation of Russia's war of aggression by 140 countries at the UN General Assembly can be deceptive, for Moscow's aggression is being perceived differently across the world. Many countries aren't afraid of contact with Putin. China, for example, opted not to impose sanctions on its most important strategic partner. At a mid-June 2022 meeting of the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), a decision was made against sanctions. India and Indonesia have spontaneously announced that they would buy Russian oil that is no longer going to the EU. And the meeting between the Iranian, Russian and Turkish presidents in mid-July shows that a group is forming to oppose the West.

Beijing is avoiding open support of Moscow but continues to reinforce its narrative. It claims that the Russian invasion is a reaction against NATO expansion, which is denounced as a provocation. This view is also shared by many African and Asian countries. Russia thus seems to have gained a monopoly on the interpretation of its "special military operation" in many parts of the world.

Firm reaction from the EU

This leaves only the "Western world" to oppose Putin. The biggest economic burden is borne by the member states of the EU, which are also hosting around 5,000,000 Ukrainian refugees – first and foremost, Poland, which, like Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania considers itself threatened militarily. The USA, being Ukraine's most important arms supplier, is increasingly betting on Ukraine's defence capabilities, which are also wearing down Russia's own capacities.

A total of seven sanctions packages by the EU could not get Putin to end the war. He appeared more determined than ever to continue to wage it. After the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia learned how to work with and its way around sanctions. Moreover, such punitive measures usually have a more medium- and long-term effect.

The energy sector has proven to be a double-edged sword, for many EU countries are highly dependent on Russian oil and gas. A total loss of supply could throw the whole of Europe into turmoil. People are therefore feverishly looking for alternative suppliers and pushing for the expansion of alternative energy sources.

Still, there is no alternative to sanctions if one does not want to quietly accept the invasion and try to put a stop to it instead. So far, the EU's cohesion has generally speaking not yet come under pressure, even if critical voices are increasingly being raised in view of expected complications.

Hunger as "collateral damage"

Disrupted supply chains, exorbitant energy costs and soaring food prices are weakening the global economy and creating uncertainty. Russia, being the biggest exporter of wheat, now also partially controls Ukraine's stockpiles and thus the world market. Shortages are already being seen in the Middle East and some African countries.

Mediation efforts by the UN and Turkey to allow the export of wheat from Ukraine led to a first agreement. Despite the Russian missile attack on Odessa the next day, this could be a sign of real progress. This is because global pressure is mounting on Russia to allow the export of vital grains from Ukrainian ports.

A functioning export of wheat would be a humanitarian and political ray of hope. For the first time in this war, an agreement has been reached under international mediation with the participation of the UN. Furthermore, Odessa could be expected to move out of the focus of Russian missiles.

Moscow not likely to give in any time soon

Putin addressed the painful effects of the sanctions on Russia's economy in July 2022. Russian economists and foreign observers expect the real impact to hit next autumn and winter when stocks will be depleted, and high-quality technology goods will no longer be available.

Another possibility is that global oil and gas prices will fall and put Russia's state budget under pressure. Moreover, Moscow will not be able to make up for falling gas exports to Europe within the span of just a few months. Economic data from mid-2022 have shown that the Russian GDP could shrink by up 8%, while inflation is around 15%. In the medium term, moreover, the exodus of tens of thousands of IT experts could prove highly detrimental.

But that alone will not force Putin to end the war. For that, economic pressure and suffering in Russia are still too low and support for Putin too big.

What does this mean for Europe?

It is obvious that Putin is using his most important weapons – the military, oil and gas – for his geopolitical goals. Europe must therefore develop appropriate ideas and strategies. In doing so, Russia's President will interpret any form of concession as weakness and abuse it for his own purposes. Any disagreement within the EU, any departure from the sanctions policy or reduced support for Ukraine would only support the Russian (and Chinese) Presidents' thesis of a weak and defenceless West. As difficult as it may be, Russia's advance must be stopped if Europe wants to avoid worse in the future. For this, we may even have to accept a cold winter.

Working trip of President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to the Kharkiv region on May 29, 2022.

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