



Doubting Ukraine's counter-offensive undermines its heroic resistance: A response to Adam Creighton

[STEFAN ROMANIW](#), The Australian, 18 August 2023

Adam Creighton asks why can't we be honest about Ukraine's counteroffensive, but his analysis shows a very basic and patronising misunderstanding of the reality on the ground in Ukraine.

It has been more than 16 months since Russia launched a full-scale attack on Ukraine and over nine years that Russia illegally annexed the Crimean Peninsula and began its covert war in the Donbas. From a full-scale invasion Vladimir Putin thought would be done and dusted in five days, Russian losses have been significant; there is dissent in the Russian military ranks; and the Russians are facing severe shortages in weapons and manpower. Meanwhile, the morale of the Ukrainian Armed Forces remains high, with the counteroffensive continuing slowly but making incremental and real gains against heavily fortified positions, with additional Western air power soon to arrive. Yet some in the West, such as Creighton, seem to be falling for old tropes and Russian disinformation – the West is to blame. This view ignores that Ukraine has taken a committed position.

As President Volodymyr Zelensky has stated, there can be no discussion about Europe without Ukraine, a country the size of France and with a population of 44 million people prior to Putin's full-scale invasion. They ignore the fact Ukraine has faced Russian imperialism, cultural domination and aggression for over 300 years and is determined to throw off the chains of neo-colonialism.

Ukrainians understand that Putin's dream of reuniting "Russian speakers" into a new version of the Russian Empire is as absurd as England reclaiming any part of the world where English is now spoken.



But even more importantly, having just returned from my fourth visit to Ukraine, the message is clear. Whether speaking to the Minister for Defence, Oleksiy Reznikov, soldiers in the armed forces, or to men, women and young people on the street, people were united. “We have reason to fight. What are Putin and his green men are fighting for? We have a purpose.”

That is the critical issue.

The spirit in Ukraine is high - the nation, supported by its allies, is in for the long haul. Ukrainians are fighting not just for territorial integrity and national identity but, first and foremost, for democratic values, to resist a bully, and to defeat evil.

The way Russia has fought this war has contributed to the deep aversion and rejection of the “Russian world” in Ukraine. Planting of mines, even in children’s playgrounds; kidnapping more than 16,000 children for “re-education”; the bombing of maternity hospitals, kindergartens and apartments, and; the launching of missiles during the day, which has seen children scrambling for shelter. All of these acts are listed as war crimes under the UN Convention and have underscored to Ukrainians there will be no Ukraine if Ukraine does not fight back.

Having been in Kyiv last year with Anthony Albanese, and having had some one-on-one time with him, his words after visiting the destruction of Irpin and Bucha resonate with me often: “How can one person do this to another person?” During one recent visit, I visited shelters repurposed by the Australian Federation of Ukrainian Organisations and Rotary to support some of the millions of displaced people in Ukraine. Speaking to a 92-year-old woman reflecting on her life, having lived through Stalin’s forced famine in Ukraine (the Holodomor), the Second World War and, most recently, having her apartment bombed – she said to me: “We have to win. All will be good.” Or I recall the visit to a shelter housing 330 displaced people from Russian-occupied Luhansk where a young woman told me the children deserve a better life – her parting words were: “The next time we meet, we will be back in reclaimed Luhansk. It has to happen.”

And I was moved to hear John Whitehall, a pediatric surgeon from Sydney who recently visited Ukraine, describe his interaction with a young man this way: “In a final discussion with a young man in the rehabilitation hospital who sat with the stump of one leg propped over the arm of a wheelchair, with that of the other covered by short pyjamas, and who apologised for his poor script because he had also lost the arm with which he used to write, I asked what he would say in an open letter to Australia? His reply was immediate: ‘I would tell them we will fight to the death and request help to do it’.”

I raise these examples to give an insight into what Ukraine is fighting for. In the words of Winston Churchill, Ukraine has said: “Give us the tools and we will do the job.” I urge the international community to not stop now. Otherwise, we accept the lowest common denominator and settle for a world that allows a bully to trample on a rules-based order, justice and meaningful peace.

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Why can't we be honest about Ukraine's counter-offensive?

Adam Creighton, The Australian 14 August 2023

In early June one of the world's foremost military intelligence experts David Petraeus said the Ukrainian counteroffensive would be ["very impressive"](#). But to date it has been a disaster – one that should question the wisdom of providing further military and rhetorical support for the war, which could [ultimately weaken Ukraine's bargaining position](#) in peace negotiations.

In more than two months [Ukraine has retaken little territory](#) at an unknown cost, despite months of Western training and total NATO military and economic aid since January 2022 of €165bn (\$279bn – more than five times Australia's annual defence budget), according to the Kiel Institute. Between 20,000 and 50,000 [Ukrainians have lost one or more limbs](#) since the start of the war, The Wall Street Journal reported earlier this month.

Even before the counteroffensive began, Ukraine had lost some 100,000 soldiers, according to US General Mark Milley. The reality could be even worse given Western media has generally created the impression that Ukraine is "winning", even though more than five million Ukrainians have emigrated, the nation's infrastructure has been crippled and more than 20 per cent of its territory is occupied.

In the Vietnam War the US, which then had a population over 200 million (more than five times that of Ukraine), lost around 60,000 soldiers. It lost 2400 in Afghanistan over 20 years.

Last year Elon Musk was derided for suggesting Russia be allowed to keep Crimea and the UN hold referendums on the status of the four annexed provinces in eastern Ukraine.

"This is highly likely to be the outcome in the end – just a question of how many die before then," he said, prompting accusations the world's richest man was on Vladimir Putin's payroll.

Almost a year on, having instead heeded the wisdom of foreign policy experts, that looks like a best-case scenario.

Russia's military advantage appears insurmountable in troops and artillery without mobilising, and sanctions appear to have failed. Eight in 10 Russians say they haven't personally been affected them, according to a recent survey by the Chicago Council of Global Affairs. Crimea – supposedly under threat from Ukrainian military – is currently overflowing with Russian tourists.

Moreover, by promising to welcome Ukraine into NATO after the war ends (something Russia launched its invasion to prevent), Moscow has an incentive to keep the war going and even seize more of the country to make its ultimate NATO membership less of a problem. The promise of "Ukraine in NATO" created ample opportunities for virtue signalling but may have extended the war for years.

In May, Donald Trump was mocked by foreign policy experts during a CNN Town Hall interview for refusing to say whether he supported Ukraine "winning". "I want everybody to stop dying. They're dying. Russians and Ukrainians. I want them to stop dying," he said. Experts were furious but his opinion may increasingly reflect that of the US public.

A CNN poll last week found 55 per cent of Americans opposed sending further aid – well up from 17 per cent in February 2022 when Russia launched its invasion. Yet the Biden administration asked congress last week for another \$US24bn in aid for Ukraine – fully backed by top Republicans.

“We haven’t lost a single American ... Most of the money that we spend related to Ukraine is actually spent in the US, replenishing weapons ... So it’s actually employing people here and improving our own military for what may lie ahead,” Republican Senate leader Mitch McConnell said, batting away criticism.

However much a boon for the US defence industry the war is, it’s not clear ordinary Ukrainians want it to continue. Opposition parties have been banned in Ukraine. Elections have been suspended. And all media and journalists have been under state control since January.

For months, social media has been awash with videos of young Ukrainian men being dragged into trucks to be sent to the frontline. Last week President Volodymyr Zelensky sacked 24 senior enlistment officers after it emerged wealthy Ukrainians were paying up to \$US10,000 to avoid the draft, according to The New York Times.

Governments and their citizens’ interests diverge sharply during wartime, given the costs of fighting fall mainly on the latter.

In 2008 Putin privately told George W. Bush Ukraine would be dismembered if it sought NATO membership, according to John Mearsheimer’s 2018 book, *The Great Delusion*, which chronicles the disastrous unintended consequences of US foreign policy since 9/11. If I went to a dangerous part of Washington late at night and told a random gang I could do whatever I want and there’s not a damn thing they could legally do about it, I would probably be bashed or killed. That’s not fair or right, but it’s the world as it is, not as it should be.

The sad reality is Moscow’s interests and arguments, whether we agree with them or not, will need to be taken into account in Ukraine, at least as much as Washington’s.

If that means the Russian-speaking parts of Ukraine become part of Russia, or even if Ukraine has to promise not to join NATO, perhaps that’s preferable to another 100,000 young Ukrainians dying or losing their limbs, and Moscow and Beijing becoming even closer allies. It may not be forever: Russia won’t be able to hold on to the territories it has annexed if the people don’t want to be part of Russia. Time will tell.

Israel’s former prime minister, Naftali Bennett, said the US and UK scotched a peace deal between Ukraine and Russia in early 2022, hundreds of thousands of deaths ago.

If another opportunity arises, the terms won’t be as good, but they could well be better than what’s available at the end of this very unimpressive counteroffensive.