World Europe Russia-Ukraine war

'Putin senses weakness': Two years in, Russia is on the march

Ukraine – with an infantry whose average age is in the 40s, lacking firepower, and seldom able to rotate soldiers – is in no position to retake territory. It needs help.

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Ukraine-born Kateryna Argyrou has been in Australia for more than a decade, having come here for love. But a huge part of her heart lies with her family on the other side of the world. Not just her parents, siblings, aunts and uncles and grandparents, but her half-dozen relatives serving on the front line.

From them, and from the brigades that her Australian Federation of Ukrainian Organisations is supporting through its Defend Ukraine Appeal, she hears the sobering, and for her often distressing, stories from the two-year-old war's front line.

"Morale, as always, is as good as it can be," she says. "But I can't say that it's high. There is definitely a shortage of weapons, there is a shortage of people to actually conduct military missions."

This tallies with other first-hand reports, some of which relate to times when Ukrainian troops can see Russian forces massing for an attack, but have no artillery spare to deter or degrade it.

Alongside the shortage of manpower and materiel lurks “the immense burden of the emotional and psychological trauma of losing people”. Ukraine doesn’t release casualty figures, but the toll is growing.

“As my cousins say, ‘I was just sitting eating dinner with this person last night. And now he’s not here anymore. We slept, you know, foot to foot, shoulder to shoulder for almost two years now. And now this person is gone.’”

Away from the battlefront, life goes on. But not as it used to. “Since the beginning of the year, Russia has only increased its missile strikes. It’s everything and anything that flies and explodes – it’s drones, it’s ballistic missiles, it’s hypersonic missiles, it’s mass destruction,” she says.

Many people spend many a night in crude bomb shelters, without heating, running water or toilets. “Two years of that is very hard. But as it has intensified since the beginning of the year, it’s even harder,” she says.

“People are trying to cope in any way that they can. But I can see that it has definitely changed, where people are just saying, ‘Make it stop, we’ll do anything. We can’t go on like this, it’s not life.’”

It all sounds a far cry from the war’s early days. It is exactly two years since Russian President Vladimir Putin surprised most of the world by ordering his forces into Ukraine, hoping to occupy the country and overthrow the regime headed by the liberal, Western-oriented Volodymyr Zelensky.

The invasion’s shambolic early phase set back the Russian attack, as did a fierce Western response involving sanctions on Russia and weapons for Ukraine. Despite massive Russian aerial bombardment, a buoyant and motivated Ukrainian population kept the Kremlin’s forces on the defensive.

Kateryna Argyrou, co-chair of the Australian Federation of Ukrainian Organisations. **Louie Douvis**

But in the second year, with hindsight, Ukraine over-reached and Russia regrouped. The Ukrainians have successfully repelled Russia from the air and sea, but its ground forces foundered during a mid-2023 counter-offensive.

In a land battle spread over a thousand-kilometre front, Ukraine’s forces were spread too thinly, armed too lightly, and faced an entrenched enemy in far greater numbers, and with a seemingly limitless capacity to sacrifice soldiers.

The two sides have collectively lost more than half a million troops, and perhaps 10,000 civilians have died. More than 6 million Ukrainians remain refugees abroad, not even counting the displacement inside the country.

At the two-year mark, Ukraine – with an infantry whose average age is in the 40s, lacking firepower, and seldom able to rotate away from the cold

and bitter fighting – is in no position to retake territory.

Russia has almost half a million men in Ukraine, who are increasingly well armed and able to be rotated. Its military tactics have improved. Putin's confidence is visibly growing, to the point where he appears to have felt empowered to dispatch one of his fiercest critics [https://www.afr.com/link/follow-20180101-p5f67p], the incarcerated dissident Alexei Navalny.

"Putin senses weakness, as he so often has done in the past, and he is absolutely right," James Nixey, director of the Russia and Eurasia program at the British think tank Chatham House, said this week.

"Whether his confidence is justified remains to be seen. But he at least knows what [military resources] he has at his disposal this summer, next year, and so on. And Ukraine can't say the same thing."

The US military aid that could make a difference to Zelensky's forces is locked up in a Congressional stalemate. And the Europeans simply don't have the capacity to fill the gap.

Pessimism about Ukraine's prospects [https://www.afr.com/link/follow-20180101-p5f5yy] is becoming infectious. Polling released by the European Council on Foreign Relations think tank this week found that just 10 per cent of Europeans now expect Ukraine to win, while 20 per cent think Russia will prevail.

Most expect a "compromise settlement" will end the war, and many now support that option. But Nixey can't see it happening voluntarily, or in good faith.

“Compromise, if it comes, will be a forced one, something beaten out of the opponent,” he says.

Alex Vynokur, the Sydney based co-founder of finance firm BetaShares and the war charity the United Ukraine Appeal, says Ukrainians, tired though they are, won’t have a compromise beaten out of them easily.

“Very few are seriously considering a settlement, or concessions,” he says. “And I would say that neither Zelensky nor any other politician has any mandate from the public to cut any deals with anyone.”

The plan: grind, grind, grind

So if Ukraine is going to keep fighting, what’s the plan? Many military analysts reckon Ukraine’s prospects for the third year of war are, at best, to hold the line, and to fight a war of attrition – the kind of war which, history suggests, a home side is best placed to win.

But the Russian conquest this week of Avdiivka [https://www.afr.com/link/follow-20180101-p5f6k0], a town in the Donbas region that Putin covets above all else, was an ominous sign that Russia, too, might be up for a long, draining war – and might be equally well placed to win, inch by bloodied inch.

Two analysts from the British military think tank RUSI, Jack Watling and Nick Reynolds, recently sketched out what they see as Russia's strategy.

On the ground, Russia's larger force will put pressure on Ukraine at various points along the long front line. Abroad, the Kremlin's political and propaganda operation will look to further drain the already depleted reservoir of Western resolve and military support. Once aid dries up, Russian troops can go on the offensive.

"These gains are then intended to be used as leverage against Kyiv to force capitulation on Russian terms," the two RUSI analysts say. "The planning horizon for the implementation of these objectives, which is providing the baseline for Russian force generation and industrial outputs, is that victory should be achieved by 2026."

The only way to fight a strategy that relies on falling Western support and dwindling arms supplies, the RUSI pair say, is to ensure that those two things don’t happen. It’s hard to find a single analyst who doesn’t say the same: Western military aid must increase, and soon.

“If we hypothesise that US lethal aid may stop, then it’s a question for Ukraine of whether it has got something to go into battle with, or nothing,” Nixey says.

“Ukrainians are quite capable of, and have proven themselves very adept at, doing more with less. Doing more with nothing is a much harder task.”

The Ukrainians are trying to become more self-reliant: building up their own defence industrial base, despite the vulnerability it will have to Russian air attack; and mobilising and training more soldiers, although Zelensky still baulks at a conscription-based drive.

They are also skilfully probing the chinks in Russia's armour, trying to sap the morale or confidence of either the Moscow elite or the wider Russian public.

One such Ukrainian tactic is the stepped-up drone attacks on Russian territory. Another is to keep harassing the physically vulnerable Crimean Peninsula, which Putin annexed from Ukraine in 2014.

"If Ukraine can make Crimea untenable for Russia, regardless of the position ... along the 1000-kilometre front, then that is going to be a major setback for Russia, with major ramifications for the war," said Russian military expert Keir Giles at a Chatham House forum this week.

Shopping list or begging bowl?

These tactics can soften the enemy, but probably not defeat him. Yet a more punchy blow is probably beyond Ukraine's capacity this year, warn another pair of analysts, Franz-Stefan Gady and Michael Kofman, writing for the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

“Conditions are not propitious for another major ground offensive in 2024,” they write. Instead, the Ukrainians are counselled to concentrate on the unrewarding, unglamorous business of attrition, and the West is urged to back this up with kit.

“The West should focus on resourcing Ukraine’s ability to establish a decisive advantage in fires – meaning, typically, tube and rocket artillery, battlefield strike drones, long-range precision-strike systems and support by tactical aviation.”

But the days of Zelensky turning up to Western summits with a shopping list are long gone. Nowadays, it’s more of a begging bowl. And even that isn’t helping to release that $US61 billion ($93 billion) from Congress.

Giles expresses frustration that, outside the Baltics and other countries on NATO’s eastern front, there is so little appreciation of the consequences of letting Ukraine slide towards defeat.

"If the situation in Ukraine is resolved to Vladimir Putin's satisfaction, he will move on to the next target, whether or not it is in NATO," he says. "If action comes too late to avoid disaster, it will have been because of criminal complacency at the highest political level."

Argyrou, for one, is determined not to let that happen. "We do have to work harder to explain why Ukraine ... matters, why a rules-based order matters, why fighting for democracy matters," she says.

"And also just purely wanting to end human suffering. I want my cousins to come home to their wives and children, and to be able to see their children grow up and take their first steps and say their first words ... I don't want Ukraine to be the forgotten war."

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