



# UKRAINE

YEARS OF HEROISM

FACTS vs. PROPAGANDA

XHABIR DERALLA

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# **Ukraine – Years of Heroism**

**(Facts vs. Propaganda)**

CIVIL – Center for Freedom

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Ukraine – Years of Heroism (Facts vs. Propaganda)

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# Instead of a Foreword: Kyiv - A City, A Symbol, and Beyond

*Skopje, Sunday, December 17, 2023*

Here, I am proud to present the condensed edition of the book tentatively titled 'Decoding Russian War Propaganda: Ukraine's Defiant Stand and the Global Response.' This abbreviated version is released on the second anniversary of Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine, which commenced on February 24, 2022. This war shows no signs of conclusion, with optimism stretching any resolution well into the end of 2023. Notably, just four days before this anniversary, we commemorated the 10th year since the initiation of the Russian invasion of Crimea and eastern parts of the country on February 20, 2014, following the Euromaidan or the Revolution of Dignity.

I commenced writing this book amid an escalated threat from Russian attacks, employing upgraded drones with thermobaric warheads against Ukraine in December 2023. It has been a week since my return from the second visit to Kyiv, where I participated in two international events, on December 7 and 8, 2023 – the 'Freedom or Fear'<sup>1</sup> conference dedicated to the 75th anniversary of the

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<sup>1</sup> UNDP, Recovery of Ukraine anchored in human rights values (<https://www.undp.org/ukraine/press-releases/recovery-ukraine-anchored-human-rights-values>)

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the inaugural meeting of the #BringKidsBackUA<sup>2</sup> International Task Force. Both occasions brought forth heartbreaking testimonies of human suffering under the Russian genocidal aggression, including the abduction of nearly 20,000 children from Ukraine. They also echoed strong messages and demands for decisive international action to counter the menace, destruction, and genocide perpetrated by Russia against democratic and peaceful Ukraine.

Both events were attended by over 60 foreign delegations, consisting of top diplomats, state representatives, media, civil society, and arts and culture figures. On both days, the Kremlin ordered murderous aerial attacks on Ukraine's capital and many other civilian targets across the country.

The Deputy Ombudsman of North Macedonia, Mr. Jovan Andonovski, and I represented our country at both events. We were warmly welcomed and hosted by the National Ecology and Nature Center's director, Dr. Volodymyr Valentinovych Verbitskiy, to whom and his team we owe an ocean of warmth and kindness.

In the early morning of December 7, the air raid alert signaled the beginning of yet another episode of

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<sup>2</sup> Under the initiative of the President of Ukraine, the Bring Kids Back UA action plan unites the efforts of Ukrainian government agencies, partner countries, international organizations to bring the genocidal policies of the Russian Federation to an end, and make sure similar tragedies do not happen in the future (<https://www.bringkidsback.org.ua/>)

what is known as the Russian missile terror. One person was killed, and several were injured - the Russian 'profit' on that day. The Kremlin didn't care if there was an international human rights event in Kyiv that day. Moreover, I believe it was a cynical message delivered that morning, highlighting how little Russians care about human rights.

\*

In the face of relentless air raid alerts and the constant threat of Russian missiles, drones, and shells, the people of Kyiv exhibit an extraordinary resilience that defies the grim reality they confront daily. For nearly two years, the city has been under the shadow of relentless missile terror, prompting citizens to seek refuge in metro stations when the alarms sound. However, amidst the chaos and danger, there is an unexpected display of strength, pride, and a commitment to living life to the fullest.

Violeta, a 23-year-old graduate student at Taras Shevchenko University, embodies an extraordinary resilience. When the piercing wail of the air raid alarm disrupts the tranquility, she, alongside many others, exhibits a response that might appear paradoxical to a foreign observer. "When the air raid alarm goes off, we dress up in our best clothes, put on lipstick, do our hair, and go into hiding," she shares with a composed demeanor. This seemingly nonchalant approach to life-threatening situations may perplex outsiders, yet for her and countless fellow citizens, it symbolizes a deliberate choice to confront fear with a semblance of normalcy—an

unwavering stance that transcends fear, opting instead to embrace life in the face of adversity. Somehow, it felt natural to me; I didn't seek refuge in the bomb shelter during my second visit to Kyiv in December 2023.

The people of Kyiv, facing the constant specter of total destruction, suffering, and death, choose not to succumb to fear and panic. Whether labeled as courage or fatalism, what emerges is a collective strength that defines them as strong and proud individuals. In the midst of adversity, these citizens remain devoted to life, beauty, culture, and art.

While air raid warnings may be overlooked by some, Kyiv's advantage lies in its resilient army, successfully intercepting and neutralizing the majority of incoming threats. Beyond the military front, the civilian population contributes to this collective resilience, refusing to let the perpetual threat dictate their lives.

In the limited time spent during two visits to Kyiv, the author observed the city's vibrant life. The city's theaters and opera houses continue to flourish with a rich repertoire, attracting audiences undeterred by the surrounding turmoil. Numerous flower shops dot the streets, and flowers are sold in supermarkets and smaller shops, adding a touch of color and vibrancy to the urban landscape. Even in the face of adversity, Kyiv boasts wonderful restaurants and cafes reminiscent of Europe's most beautiful cities.

Remarkably, despite the challenges, the citizens take pride in maintaining the cleanliness of their city. The absence of litter on the streets, even in heavy snow, reflects a commitment to normalcy amidst abnormal circumstances.

The courage and sacrifice of Ukrainian defenders are well-documented, but the everyday courage of civilians is equally striking. Their boundless stoicism, infectious smiles, and calm acceptance of the aggressor's brutality paint a vivid portrait of a city refusing to be defined by the challenges it faces. In Kyiv, life goes on, and its people are determined to face each day with resilience, strength, and an unwavering love for life.

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Thinking back to the beginning of the Russian full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine, I recall the days and hours before the initial attack. It seemed like the world didn't want to believe in what was evidently an imminent aggression.

Somehow, the world chose to believe Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who assured the British Foreign Minister Truss<sup>3</sup> that his country had no intention of attacking Ukraine. Meanwhile, between 100,000 and 190,000 troops were amassed at Ukraine's border in March 2021. This was a

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<sup>3</sup> iNews, Russia's Sergei Lavrov describes Liz Truss talks as 'speaking to a deaf person' as Ukraine tensions escalate, February 10, 2022 (<https://inews.co.uk/news/world/russias-sergei-lavrov-describes-liz-truss-talks-as-speaking-to-a-deaf-person-amid-ukraine-tensions-1452975>)

blatant lie, yet the world has a tendency to embrace falsehoods. In essence, everything about Putin's rule is ONE BIG LIE and a sickeningly inhumane and bloodthirsty ambition.

Certainly, there were those who refused to succumb to Kremlin lies. I was proud to be one of them, asserting that Putin was waging a fierce hybrid war against democracy long before, and that he would attempt to finish what he started in Ukraine in 2014. As fate would have it, the "special military operation" did commence in the dawn of February 24, 2022.

People have perished while the world sought reasons for optimism. President Zelensky and his ragtag army defended Kyiv with bare hands and the strength of their will, fueled by their yearning for freedom. While Brussels slowly stirred, crafting 'very dangerous and frightening' tweets, Ukraine bled. It has bled for two years now. It bleeds for us too – for our freedom, our way of life, for all those things we can't even appreciate anymore, as they've become mere commodities.

# Casting a Bloody Shadow: Inside Moscow's Propaganda Theater

Is the world growing weary of the incessantly repeated performance at the Russian propaganda theater? It appears so, as many opt to turn a blind eye to what unfolds behind the curtain. This article unveils a repetitive act – decoding key elements of Russian propaganda machinery.

A mere six months ago, Putin found himself visibly perturbed by the insubordination of the leader of the criminal private army known as "Wagner." In the face of Prigozhin's looming influence, Putin<sup>4</sup>, appeared before the public on June 24, displaying a mix of anger and panic. In a brief five-minute address, he claimed that the Russian state teetered on the brink of civil war.

In essence, he implored for internal disputes to be set aside to allow the continuation of the "special military operation." It's worth noting that this euphemism is used to describe the brutal aggression initially envisioned as a three-day stroll through Ukraine, which morphed into a protracted, shameful, genocidal war spanning nearly two years.

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<sup>4</sup> As noted by political analyst Ljubomir Kostovski in his article for CIVIL MEDIA: Пригожин ante portas (June 27, 2023, <https://civilmedia.mk/prigozhin-ante-portas/>)

The relationship between Putin and Prihozhin, his former chef and a war criminal, can be succinctly summarized into: **A LONGLASTING LOVE STORY, A BRIEF REBELLION, AND AN EXPECTED DEATH.**

Caught in the intricate web woven by military setbacks, Western sanctions, the incompetence of generals, and the rebellion of his chef leading a criminal mercenary army deemed a terrorist organization, Putin found himself with no recourse but to retreat into the darkest recesses of the Kremlin.

Six months later, Putin's propaganda attempted to resurrect the image of a powerful state and leader.

On December 14, 2023, Putin conducted a four-hour press conference<sup>5</sup> in an effort to restore the familiar narrative of a formidable state and leader, echoing a practice he had maintained for the past two decades. Notably, 2022 marked an exception to the 20-year tradition of organizing expansive press conferences before year-end. During this time, even Putin's aggressive propaganda machinery struggled to conceal the humiliating defeats across the 1,000-kilometer front in Ukraine. His propaganda war also suffered significant setbacks, with success limited only to certain countries of the Western Balkans and

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<sup>5</sup> Website of the President of the Russian Federation: Results of the Year with Vladimir Putin (<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/72994>)

a few others, primarily former members of the Warsaw Pact.

For nearly two years, Putin refrained from press conferences, and his sporadic media appearances were tightly orchestrated solo performances. Undoubtedly, these press conferences were meticulously controlled theatrical displays, preceded by thorough preparations. Putin lacked the courage for such a performance for almost two years.

Enterprising to "refresh" the boss, propaganda strategists sought a change in the narrative, moving away from the persistent bitterness, militancy, hatred, and simplicity embodied most prominently by figures like Vladimir Solovyov. However, Solovyov is just one of the many, sharing similar characteristics and visibility. Three factors contributed to this transformation – one originating from within, and the other two emerging (somewhat) as gifts from the West.

**First:** The military-propaganda architects, or strategists, recognized the need to inject "freshness" into the prevailing bitterness, militancy, hatred, and simplicity, epitomized most prominently by figures like Solovyov on TV screens. Solovyov, however visible, is just one among many with similar characteristics. A change of narrative and appearance was deemed necessary.

**Second:** Putin found a reason to lighten up following a renewed wave of skepticism and hesitancy regarding Western aid to Ukraine. Specifically,

Russian criminal soldiers, as per Dmitry Medvedev<sup>6</sup>, bolstered by 280,000 new recruits (cannon fodder) for the fronts in Ukraine, had ample time to solidify their positions in the remaining occupied territories. Amid inconsistent military aid from the West, as well as shortcomings within its own tactics, Ukraine fell short of its ambitious expectations for a liberation offensive initiated belatedly in late summer 2023. Putin's military machinery had entrenched itself in defensive positions, occupying significant territory since 2014.

It's crucial to note that both Ukraine and the West harbored unwarranted optimism and had excessive expectations from the offensive. Simultaneously, the Ukrainians themselves downplayed and dismissed the not-so-small successes on the front out of modesty. In reality, they achieved considerable success by liberating almost half of the previously occupied territory of their country.

This modesty, bordering with naivety, contributed to renewed public skepticism in many Western countries, fueled by Russian propaganda and ultra-right groups and political parties that lean Eurosceptic and pro-Russian, with some even sponsored by the Kremlin.

**Third:** Putin's renewed vigor toward the end of the year, portrayed by his propaganda machinery as that

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<sup>6</sup> The Moscow Times, September 3, 2023: Russian Army Has Recruited 280,000 Soldiers Since January — Medvedev (<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/09/03/russian-army-has-recruited-280000-soldiers-since-january-medvedev-a82343>)

of a successful leader on the brink of victory on all fronts, can be attributed to the partial success or failure of the sanctions imposed by the West against Russia.

Combined with renewed and sometimes deepened friendships and partnerships established by the Kremlin with power centers in Asia, South America, and Africa, and partly with troubled EU member states, the Russian economy has sort of withstood the sanctions and not completely collapsed.

However, the sustainability of Russian economic measures is a subject to debate.

### **Putin-sponsored Crises**

This analysis should, naturally, enumerate various other crises and instances of hybrid warfare where Russian involvement, particularly in terms of sponsorship, is apparent. Among them is the renewed crisis in Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023. After the 44-day war between Azerbaijan and Armenia in 2020, Putin sent 2,000 "peacekeepers," deciding to leave the Armenians at the mercy of Azerbaijan, which enjoys military and political support from Erdogan's Turkey.

**ARMENIANS LET AWAY:** In exchange for the Turkish leader's favor, Putin turns a blind eye to Azerbaijan's express invasion of Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023. It was another relatively good move with which Putin managed to buy some time but also to redistribute the pieces on the chessboard

of geostrategic operations outside his most important battlefield – Ukraine.

**KOSOVO:** The terrorist attack in Banjska, situated in the northern part of the Republic of Kosovo, though inglorious and bloody for the attackers led by the extremist Milan Radoicic, was a pivotal component of Putin's sinister geostrategic games aimed at destabilizing the countries of the Western Balkans. The attack itself exhibited distinct characteristics associated with mercenary groups, including one such as Wagner. The one-day "little war" in Banjska triggered a wave of disinformation and polarizing narratives throughout the region. Dismay, instability, and violence remain Putin's steadfast companions. Regardless of the outcomes, such events invariably prove advantageous for the Kremlin.

**ISRAEL-GAZA:** Putin was greatly assisted by the terrorist attack carried out by Hamas, resulting in more than 1,200 deaths and at least 240 kidnappings in Israel. This incident triggered Israel's fierce military intervention in the Gaza Strip, leading to an unprecedented number of civilian casualties among Palestinians.

After two and a half months of intense and indiscriminate bombing of the world's largest open-air prison, over 28,000 Palestinians were killed, with two-thirds of them being women and children. This tragic and extremely violent war unleashed avalanches of disinformation and polarization worldwide, threatening to overshadow the Russian

aggression, dispersing and antagonizing public opinion.

Additionally, it provided a platform for opponents to economic and military aid to Ukraine.

### **The success of Putin's grand deception**

All these crises are either instigated or, if not directly sponsored, indirectly contribute to Putin's agenda, each in its unique way.

Putin's propaganda transforms shameful defeats into tales of success

After a series of diplomatic and military defeats, economic and political isolation from the West, mutiny by his chef, the criminal Prigozhin, and facing charges by the International Court of Justice for war crimes, Putin was in desperate need of a new propaganda narrative. This brings us back to December 14, which marks a turning point for his propaganda machinery.

Working tirelessly, his war propaganda attempts to reshape setbacks into triumphs.

Putin faces a challenging task: employing an extensive and costly propaganda apparatus to conceal the grim repercussions of his rule and the blatant military aggression against neighboring Ukraine. Projecting an image of cheerfulness and triumph, he endeavors to appear as a victor.

The success of his grand deception not only impacts his own fate but also the fate of the monstrous regime he has constructed and leads.

## **Expensive propaganda: The false glitter of Moscow**

Simultaneous with the aforementioned theatric spectacle labeled as a press conference, spin masters and propaganda managers ensured to illuminate the center of Russia's capital and various cultural institutions, notably the Bolshoi Theater, introducing a program designed to boost the patriotic spirit of the audience. They also orchestrated a techno party featuring DJs from Spain and Eastern European EU countries. Television stations, firmly under the Kremlin's control, broadcasted polls from "happy and satisfied" passers-by who "coincidentally" found themselves in front of the cameras.

However, this entire scenario is a deceptive gloss. Muscovites are immersed in the propaganda lie that the country is thriving. In essence, the central area of the capital is engulfed in a well-staged wave of festive cheer, with no visible signs of the bloody war raging less than 1,000 km south of Moscow. It is evident that the state has allocated substantial sums of money to create an impression of splendor and prosperity. The apparent good mood is noticeable, particularly to outsiders, even more so within the palaces and citadels of the Kremlin.

## **Endless repetition of Putin's big lies**

"I am sure that victory will be ours," Putin said at the press conference, the first in two years, since the February 2022 invasion.

During the press conference, Putin did his best to look confident and used his answers for propaganda tirades in which he called on Russian citizens to mobilize. He tried to show that he was cheerful and in a good mood, and joked with the journalists and "random" citizens present. He confidently claimed that the Russian economy was growing and had recovered from Western sanctions.

"There will be peace when we achieve our goals. Back to these goals: they haven't changed. I will remind you what we discussed then: the denazification of Ukraine, its demilitarization, its neutral status" - said Putin, repeating the false propaganda narratives that, with some modifications, he has been promoting since 2014 and with which he justifies his genocidal war against the Ukrainian nation.

It was especially important for him to sound convincing when he claimed that "our armed forces are improving their position almost along the entire front line."

"Almost all are in the active stage of engagement. The situation of our soldiers is improving during the whole period" - said the Russian despot, without blinking.

### **Expensive eggs and leaking roofs: Putin solves problems, again!**

Putin also answered numerous, by all accounts, framed questions from local journalists and even from "random" citizens.

The "favorite president" was also approached by a "random" citizen from the village of Akishevo in the western part of Russia with a "critical question". At the press conference, she asked him the question about the high price of eggs. The "favorite president" solved that too! He said that it was a "failure in the work of the government" and that he would make sure to correct that mistake.

He also promised that the roofs of the schools in the illegally annexed Crimea will be repaired. This and many other expensively and painstakingly prepared propaganda theater plays, however, is just another cheap show that only the naive can believe.

However, Putin can be satisfied by what he did not lose, and he could. He has plenty to be happy about. Indeed, his ambitions and plans were shattered into a thousand pieces at the outset of his all-out genocidal invasion against Ukraine, but he can be, at least somewhat, satisfied by what he didn't lose it, and he could. Why?

Western aid to Ukraine is at a worrying standstill. The standoff is justified in such a way that the responsibility is shifted to Kyiv, in the first place, due to the insufficiently successful offensive to liberate the occupied territories.

## Facts versus Propaganda

It is true that the front lines have hardly moved much in 2023. That fact fueled skepticism against efforts to continue aid to Ukraine. Those under influence of Russian propaganda, who have power (in Brussels and Washington), blocked that aid, under the pretext that Ukrainian offensive "failed". Even in Ukraine, some members of political and military establishment expressed disappointment and skepticism (or political ambition!) in the capacities and possibilities of victory, which has a potential of damaging the morale of the nation. However, polls show high level of the nation's unity.

### **Pointing the finger**

Additionally, various European and American politicians and CSO experts pointed the finger at the ways of spending of the state funds and demanded reforms and fight against corruption. The country is gripped by a brutal and devastating aggression by a world superpower, which is in coalition with large and militarily powerful states such as Belarus, Iran, North Korea and others.

Yet, seems that propaganda that triggers skepticism and apathy can have equally destructive effect on the country, as the Russian missile terror. Narratives of "rationalism" and "anti-corruption measures" are super welcome for Putin and support his military propaganda operations.

Putin is boosting his already (relatively) successful propaganda and hybrid attacks against the West in the run-up to an election year in the EU and the US. To him, elections in the countries that are united behind Ukraine's fight for freedom is an excellent opportunity to turn the tide of support for Ukraine.

### **Facts are good for Ukraine**

Both the world and the Ukrainians must **remember the facts** – they are good for Ukraine!

Critics and skeptics seem to forget the numbers. Here they are:

Since 2014, with the first invasion, Russia has occupied 42,000 square kilometers of Ukrainian territory (Crimea and parts of Donetsk and Lugansk). After the full invasion on February 24, 2022, Russia occupied an additional 119,000 square kilometers of the territory of sovereign Ukraine. That is a total of 161,000 square kilometers or 27% of the territory of Ukraine. Ukrainian forces have liberated 74,443 square kilometers, reducing the territory under Russian occupation from 27% to 18%.

**IN SHORT:** Russians occupied 27% of Ukraine in 2022, it occupies 18% at the end of 2023<sup>7</sup>.

This simple "math" alone should be enough to burst the propaganda narratives like a soap bubble. But

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<sup>7</sup> Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 13, Institute for the Study of War  
(<https://www.understandingwar.org/background/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-november-13>)

persistent Russian masters of spin and propaganda continue staging theatrical performances in which Putin and his puppets speak with a triumphant note in their voice.

### **Desperate Putin**

At the end of the second anniversary of the full-scale war, it is obvious that Putin desperately needs “a win”, which launched a new phase of his propaganda war. Creators of propaganda decided to change the narrative and give a different tone to the public performance of the Russian dictator who is remembered by the world for his tense, dry and cold performances.

The dress rehearsal for this new way of creating Putin's public appearances could be sensed earlier, during his appearance at the Valdai Club's annual conference in Sochi in October 2023<sup>8</sup>. And then, in a tightly controlled setting, he presented himself to the public with the new image. And it seems to work.

This new image of Putin and his clique is in stark contrast to the humiliating defeats on the battlefield in Ukraine. Completely retouched, Putin now shows no trace of the anger and panic that was evident in his extremely rare public appearances, such as the one when he reacted to the revolt of Prigozhin's mercenaries. Who, two months after the uprising,

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<sup>8</sup> Vladimir Putin took part in the plenary session of the 20th anniversary meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club (Oct. 5, 2023, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/72444>)

disappeared from the face of the earth - died "accidentally" in a plane crash, the last in a series of more than 20 unsolved murders and "accidents" that affected Putin's critics and opponents<sup>9</sup>.

**THEATRICAL PLAY VERSUS REALITY:**

"Russia has not occupied a single Ukrainian village this year" (Zelensky)

**Reality of death and the Bolshoi Theater**

It is not only the Bolshoi Theater where plays about Russian patriots were presented. Putin's media propaganda is the main theatrical performance.

Putin has put his own country through immense hardships, despite all the masterfully directed propaganda shows. The bloody shadow of the sadistic regime in the Kremlin hangs over the false glow of triumphalism.

The Russian tyrant has no reason to celebrate. Regardless of the partial advantage, his war is a total debacle, amid the geostrategic games he plays.

Russian casualties in Ukraine are estimated at more than 300,000 dead and wounded. The number of dead Russian soldiers is more than 120,000, while 280,000 are wounded, which raises the number with which the world media usually operates to

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<sup>9</sup> Kyiv Independent: Prigozhin's death latest in a series of unsolved murders in Putin's Russia. What's next?  
(<https://kyivindependent.com/prigozhins-death-latest-in-a-series-of-unsolved-murders-in-putins-russia-whats-next/>)

400,000<sup>10</sup>. The number of dead and wounded Russian soldiers is increasing literally every hour, every day. Militarily, since the aggression, Russian forces are now only entrenched in what is left of the occupied territories and conducting defensive operations.

"Russia has not occupied a single village, not a single Ukrainian village during this year," said Ukrainian President Zelensky in an interview with Fox News TV<sup>11</sup>.

### **The economic situation between propaganda and reality**

Sanctions against Russia did not have the desired effect, especially because official Moscow, with the help of its hidden and unhidden allies, managed to find countless loopholes in the measures introduced by the West against it.

On the other hand, the Russian economy has never been a strong point of that country. What's more, in the face of (partially successful) economic sanctions and massive military spending, the Russian economy will continue to sink. The narrative that the Russian economy is coming back is false. It is true that it has recovered from the waves of economic

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<sup>10</sup> Financial Times: Ukraine's counteroffensive against Russia in maps: latest updates (<https://www.ft.com/content/4351d5b0-0888-4b47-9368-6bc4dfbccbf5>)

<sup>11</sup> Fox News: Exclusive: Zelenskyy tells Bret Baier funding Ukraine is about 'morality,' not economics (<https://www.foxnews.com/world/exclusive-zelenskyy-tells-bret-baier-funding-ukraine-about-morality-not-economics>)

and financial shocks it suffered in 2022, but it is far from being a sustainable, much less a successful economy.

As in war, so in the economy, Putin is just buying time. One of the many examples is the attempt to "bribe" the population with billions of dollars in cheap housing loans, with which even an average Russian family can afford to secure a new apartment.

The population, tired of war, regardless of the propaganda "sedatives", needed some measure that would give them a sense of certainty in their lives. Large number of Russians flocked to the banks to secure a home through cheap loans. It is an operation worth billions of dollars. But this step will soon cause big headaches, mostly for loan users, but also for banks and investors.

### **Putin's false economic optimism**

Putin's false optimism and the repertoire of the Bolshoi Theater cannot hide the inflation of 7.5% and the daily increase in the prices of products and services. The National Bank cannot remedy the situation and maintain the ruble exchange rate indefinitely. The state budget is extremely uncertain and relies on oil prices. And oil prices have fallen dramatically. All the more so that Putin is forced to sell energy to his old and new friends in Asia at far lower, often and extremely unprofitable prices. This buys some time, but soon the cracks that are visible already now – will turn into an abyss.

According to Financial Times analysis<sup>12</sup>, Moscow spends more than \$100 billion on defense, which is almost a third of the total planned expenditures in 2023. The huge spending comes at a time when the Kremlin has been forced to halt planned public sector wage increases, and inflation of 7.5% is well above the Russian central bank's 4% projections.

### **Less and less time to buy time**

In other words, Putin has less and less time to buy time and less and less money to buy social peace. Once again, war and dictatorship are proving to be an unsuccessful and inglorious, and certainly too expensive way to maintain a regime like Putin's.

Russia is short on labor, especially skilled ones, after 1.2 million young and skilled Russians fled the country, according to estimates by Britain's Ministry of Defence<sup>13</sup>. Russian sources state that that number is between 600 thousand and one million in 2022 alone. This figure also includes about 100,000 computer scientists.

Several tens of thousands of Russians returned to the country in 2023, but the reasons for this are far from patriotic. It is a special and disturbing story that further speaks of the difficult situation in which the Russian nation finds itself.

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<sup>12</sup> Financial Times (<https://www.ft.com/content/5e62c011-0c94-4a8d-8dae-29f8072e2a64>)

<sup>13</sup> BBC: Why are people leaving Russia, who are they, and where are they going? (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-65790759>)

**PROPAGANDA LIES ARE DEFENDED WITH EXTREME REPRESSION:** Over 20,000 people have been targeted by the repressive apparatus since the beginning of the full invasion against Ukraine. Russian police have a free hand to use brutality against those who think differently from Kremlin narratives.

### **Dark testimonies from the front and fierce repression**

On the front, however, against the false glow of Moscow's propaganda, there are countless testimonies of soldiers, described in Telegram, even by pro-Putin military bloggers. Hospitals are overflowing with wounded Russian soldiers who are succumbing to their wounds due to lack of medicine and medical personnel. Russian bloggers are already openly accusing that neither the Russian army leadership, nor Putin, show any concern for the terrible military losses on the fronts in Ukraine.

"They will send as much cannon fodder as they need," Mikhail Nake, a Russian journalist who defected to Latvia, said on his radio show in mid-December.

The smiles and composure on the face of Putin and his propagandists are increasingly difficult to hide the fact that Russia's FSB (Federalnaya služba bezoposnosti – an extension of the infamous KGB) has imprisoned at least 20,000 people. In Russia, you can get a stiff prison sentence for uttering the

wrong word in a bar, not to mention participating in anti-war protests.

### **Political and social cannibalism**

However, against the repression of the brutal state apparatus that Putin has unquestionably ruled for a quarter of a century, the social actors in Russia, starting with the intellectuals and the media, ending with its citizens, also have a great responsibility.

Apart from the fear and delusion of tireless propaganda, it is more than obvious that Russian society, especially intellectuals and journalists, simply enjoy the conformism of passivity, the opportunism offered by state populist measures, as well as the complete moral erosion and absence of humanity and solidarity.

Their country is waging a genocidal war against a neighboring country with which they have countless cultural and even family ties. But they choose to close their eyes and - with their silence - be complicit in the horrific war in which the state stole 20,000 Ukrainian children, razed entire towns and villages to the ground, killed civilians, including women and children, and robbery and sexual violence are common and everyday methods of their soldiers.

But Russian citizens, their intellectuals and media choose to listen to Putin's lies and remain silent, with their eyes closed, and thus participate in massive political and social cannibalism.

# Bloody Geostrategic Games: Putin's Dark Talent on the Global Chessboard from the Middle East to Ukraine

The Putin clique orchestrates global geostrategic games, establishing a complex connection between conflicts in the Middle East and the repercussions on Russian military aggression against Ukraine. In essence, Ukraine emerges as a critical chapter in the global narrative—a story marked by bloodshed and tragedy—controlled by the Russian despot.

Chaos, uncertainty, conflict, and war are always advantageous for Putin, particularly now, as his armies find themselves entrenched in humiliating defensive positions in Crimea and the remaining occupied territories in eastern Ukraine. Even with no direct link to the Hamas<sup>14</sup> terrorist attack triggering Israel's military retaliation, Putin can breathe a sigh of relief.

Intelligence indicates that Hamas enjoys the blessings of Tehran and Moscow<sup>15</sup>, receiving

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<sup>14</sup> The organization Hamas is considered a terrorist organization by several countries and entities, including the United States, the European Union, Israel, Canada, and others (<https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-hamas>)

<sup>15</sup> Essential questions about the Russia-Hamas link: The evidence and its implications (<https://www.mei.edu/publications/essential-questions-about-russia-hamas-link-evidence-and-its-implications>)

political support, weapons delivery, as well as various technical and military assistance and training for members of one of the world's largest terrorist organizations.

As of October 2023, Putin's dark talent for instigating or at least exacerbating a crisis that polarizes the world must be acknowledged. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, lasting over seven decades, has always been polarizing, capable of rearranging the pieces on the global political chessboard.

The conflict that erupted on October 7, the 50th anniversary of the Yom Kippur War, had precisely the effects Putin desired. It terminated the already fragile peace process between Israel and Arab countries. Furthermore, the war on Gaza polarized public opinion in the West and increased tensions between the Arab world and the United States.

Even more delicate and threatening is the emerging disagreements within NATO, observable through the renewed anti-Israel sentiments in Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Turkey, while Hungary and Slovakia increased opposition to economic and military aid to Ukraine. The Israeli war on Gaza contributed to the distraction of attention from the war in Ukraine and enhanced the hesitation regarding the scale of military and economic aid to official Kyiv.

Beyond these complexities, the operation to support ultra-right and extremist entities, along with the reinforcement of illiberal and authoritarian tendencies in Western countries, persists.

Putin and his allies, particularly Iran, are well-acquainted with the Israeli state's operations and its military police apparatus in the territories it has held under brutal occupation for more than five decades. Following a massive terrorist attack with horrifying crimes against civilians, as perpetrated by Hamas, the reaction of the Israeli state, while reprehensible, is unfortunately not surprising.

Consequently, for decades, Putin and his like-minded followers in Tehran have contributed to escalating the potential for conflict, rather than aiding the resolution of the Palestinian issue, an ongoing concern addressed by generations of political leaders from the region and around the world.

By the end of 2023, Hamas, Hezbollah<sup>16</sup>, and other extremist and terrorist organizations, supported by their larger and more powerful backers in Moscow<sup>17</sup>, Tehran<sup>18</sup>, and various other global power centers, have ultimately achieved their objective – halting all peace processes. The bloody conflict in Gaza, escalating tensions in the West Bank, and the border skirmishes with Hezbollah in Lebanon all hold the potential to intensify into a conflict of enormous proportions, both regionally and globally.

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<sup>16</sup> Hezbollah (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hezbollah>)

<sup>17</sup> Russia's Relationship with Hamas and Putin's Global Calculations (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/russias-relationship-hamas-and-putins-global-calculations>)

<sup>18</sup> Iran and state-sponsored terrorism ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iran\\_and\\_state-sponsored\\_terrorism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iran_and_state-sponsored_terrorism))

This provided Putin with a strategic window at the end of 2023, on the eve of winter, to launch an attack on Ukraine with all available forces. This move aims to force Ukraine and the West into negotiations with a more favorable bargaining position for Putin, aiming to maintain the status quo and evade or delay responsibility for war crimes committed in the genocidal war against Ukraine.

Putin needed time to secure his political survival and gather strength to perpetuate his dark war against Ukraine, initiated in 2014. While the Russian military machinery faces disgrace, the propaganda and intelligence operations have proven successful.

Renewed hesitation and skepticism regarding military, political, and economic support for Ukraine's struggle to break free from the Russian brutal military aggression are more than welcome for Putin.

Despite the Russian imperialist clique having a vast arsenal of rockets and artillery, along with the military might of a second global superpower, it has been on the shameful defensive for months.

However, Putin's propaganda machine and the covert espionage and criminal networks under his control have brought him far more success than the democratic world might be willing to acknowledge.

Earlier in 2023, the security incident in Kosovo<sup>19</sup>, tensions between Serbia and Kosovo in general<sup>20</sup>, war "games" in Nagorno-Karabakh<sup>21</sup>, and the bloody war on Gaza<sup>22</sup> are supported, if not directly "sponsored," by the Kremlin. For the Kremlin's figurehead, whose fingerprints are also evident in the conflict caused by Hamas, the present moment is exceptionally opportune to divert global public attention.

Hamas indirectly provided Putin with extremely significant military support, presenting him an opportunity to diminish military and political backing for Ukraine. Simultaneously, Hamas furnished Putin with "arguments" in the fierce propaganda and hybrid war against the West.

As absurd and grotesque as it may seem, Russia now appears as a peacemaker.

At the UN, it proposes and supports appeals for a cease-fire in Gaza, even though it was Russia that (at least, indirectly) initiated the conflict. Russia, however, does not adhere to any resolution or

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<sup>19</sup> Kosovo police kill at least 3 armed attackers during hours-long standoff (<https://edition.cnn.com/2023/09/24/europe/kosovo-shootout-police-officer-dead-intl/index.html>)

<sup>20</sup> What is behind renewed tensions between Serbia and Kosovo? (<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/what-is-behind-renewed-tensions-between-serbia-and-kosovo>)

<sup>21</sup> Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict (<https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/nagorno-karabakh-conflict>)

<sup>22</sup> Israel-Gaza Crisis (<https://www.un.org/en/situation-in-occupied-palestine-and-israel>)

initiative from the UN, EU, European Parliament, G20, and other international forums.

Putin has dedicated his entire life and all the resources of the country under his iron police clutches to reshape the world order according to the model of the state he has led for more than two decades. He envisions a world where he rules as an emperor, akin to the aspirations of dictators who instigated the start of World War II. Aware that to realize this dream, he must first weaken and disunite the West, potentially setting the entire world ablaze.

Skeptics in political and intellectual circles of the West, primarily those with a right-wing orientation, either fail to see or refuse to accept reality, (at least) inadvertently becoming pawns in his long game.

To preserve peace and democracy globally, the West must learn from its past mistakes and mobilize all its forces to counter Putinism. The initial realization that the democratic world must confront is that Ukraine is a crucial – though not the sole – chapter in the global, bloody, and tragic game orchestrated by the Russian despot.

# Information Warfare: Behind the Success of Russian Propaganda

The outcomes of electoral, political, economic, social, and other processes depend significantly on the quality, speed, and reliability of information. It's not a groundbreaking revelation to say that war, too, hinges on factors beyond the sheer quantity of bullets, bombs, and rockets hitting their targets. Throughout history, the one who knows how to (mis)use information gains a strategic advantage on the battlefield.

In the digital age, information holds unparalleled value, influencing endeavors in both peacetime and military contexts. Whether accurate or not, information possesses the potential to shape the course and fate of entire nations. Disinformation, in particular, acts as a destructive weapon, poisoning societal dynamics when allowed to take root.

Both traditional media and the plethora of emerging communication platforms, including social networks, play a crucial role in shaping perceptions of the past and present, as well as influencing expectations for the future. How does this intricate interplay impact the current global landscape?

During the full-scale invasion against Ukraine, the Kremlin significantly enhanced its propaganda

machinery. Utilizing hundreds of thousands of fake online profiles and establishing a well-coordinated network of smaller centers for influence, espionage, corruption, and coercion, Russia has achieved considerable success in disseminating falsehoods about the war in Ukraine, its military capabilities (limited as they may be), and anything that could bring them an advantage.

Despite facing embarrassing defeats on the battlefield and falling short of achieving the goals of military aggression, the Russian propaganda machinery not only persisted but also intensified its operations, targeting Ukrainian citizens (albeit unsuccessfully) and, more successfully, the West.

Countless analyses and media reports have emerged from every corner of the planet, tirelessly examining all facets of this global information-intelligence affair. Universities, think-tank organizations, military analysts, journalistic and research teams worldwide contribute daily with detailed analyses of the propaganda and hybrid war conducted by Russia in parallel with its military actions in Ukraine. Regrettably, though many findings have been published, there are too few suggestions for solutions. The world grapples with an inadequate response to the Russian hybrid threat.

Russia has significantly enhanced its proficiency in creating and disseminating disinformation and propaganda since 2016, when it orchestrated a sophisticated operation combining electronic bots,

real propagandists, and hackers to influence the outcome of the US presidential election. The state controlled think-tanks and tech companies in Russia have been working on developing new platforms and tactics to deceive the voters in the US and Europe, and to polarize the societies.

Another tactic extensively employed by Russian propaganda architects involves leveraging existing propaganda 'infrastructure' in different countries. Numerous examples substantiate this approach. Notably, during the 2016 United States elections, the Macedonian town of Veles<sup>23</sup> emerged as a hub for spreading disinformation, where Russian operatives played a role in influencing Donald Trump's election victory. Their efforts contributed to the polarization of American society, evident in the years that ensued, culminating in the January 6, 2021 attack on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC. This serves as just a glimpse into the expansive propaganda machinery under Putin's command.

The internet, including online media, social networks, and communication platforms, has emerged as the primary arena for wielding influence globally. Internet platforms play a critical role in shaping attitudes, public awareness, and narratives—spanning cultural and entertainment realms, as well as current events, politics, and global affairs. Among the world's most closely guarded

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<sup>23</sup> The Secret Players Behind Macedonia's Fake News Sites  
(<https://www.occrp.org/en/spooksandspin/the-secret-players-behind-macedonias-fake-news-sites>)

secrets are the algorithms crafted by major tech giants. These algorithms are wielded by marketing companies, governments, and other centers of political, financial, and military power.

The effectiveness of Russian disinformation and propaganda poses a significant threat, not only to Ukraine's fight for freedom but also to the broader principles of democracy, peace, and global stability.

# Ukraine, the West, and Putin: Not a Romantic Story

In this chapter, the attempt is made to concisely yet effectively communicate the central themes and contrasts in international politics within the context of Putin's expansionism, revisionism, and aggression, incorporating both hybrid and military tactics.

It becomes evident that the relationships among Ukraine, the West, and Putin cannot be depicted in a romanticized or idealized manner—quite the opposite. This chapter, and the book as a whole, adopts a journalistic perspective, steering away from the intricacies of academic discourse.

Its purpose is to capture attention, fostering interest, and guiding readers toward critical analysis and potentially challenging viewpoints. These are times that demand more than vanity and academic conformism; they call for serious and decisive action!

## **A Long History of Hesitancy**

The West, and Europe in particular, have a long history of hesitancy in international relations. Especially during critical periods, the leaders and diplomats of major European states have often displayed indecisiveness and insufficient understanding of the development of events, which later proved to be fatal mistakes. One such historical

"mistake" is the period of the rise of fascism in Italy and the subsequent expansion of Nazi Germany.

History will judge the expansion of ruscism<sup>24</sup>, led by Putin, first through relatively minor military operations and wars of aggression, followed by the partial invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and full military aggression in 2022. Understanding Europe's indecisiveness is crucial, considering other conflicts and war hotspots in Europe, Asia, and Africa that have further disrupted world security, with Russian fingerprints clearly visible.

Simultaneous to military actions, Putin has waged an aggressive hybrid war against the West. This escalated significantly after the first invasion of Ukraine ten years ago, during which the Kremlin initiated massive and complex disinformation and propaganda operations on both sides of the Atlantic, influencing politics and electoral processes in democratic countries.

Putin has taken control of narratives and military security situations globally. An incomplete historical overview of key events that enabled Putin to take the initiative can be traced back to the early years of his rule over the Russian Federation. However, the NATO summit in Bucharest in 2008 should have raised clear alarms about the direction in which this

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<sup>24</sup> Russian fascism: the six principles of Putin's nationalist ideology (<https://theconversation.com/russian-fascism-the-six-principles-of-putins-nationalist-ideology-218182>)

rogue state, led by a former KGB agent, was heading.

Initially, the world hesitated to incorporate Ukraine into Euro-Atlantic structures, despite the promise made at the NATO summit in Bucharest in 2008. There was a reluctance to provide any assistance to Ukraine both before and after that Alliance summit, and the political consequences of this hesitation are felt to this day.

It was the same year that Macedonia did not gain membership in the Alliance. Putin himself participated in that NATO summit, as his country was part of the now well-known bogus Partnership for Peace<sup>25</sup>. This partnership, false because Putin used it to buy time to prepare his dark plans, allowed him to participate in the summit.

### **Partnership for Peace!?**

As Ukraine struggled for democratic stability in the first half of the 2010s, under the influence of puppets installed by the Kremlin, European political and business leaders seemed to appease the dark dictator and eagerly engaged with his businesses and cheap energy. Even during this time, he was waging a (largely) invisible hybrid war against the democratic West, but politicians and institutions either failed to see it or chose to ignore it.

The Russian bear supplied cheap energy and raw materials, while the Asian tiger churned out

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<sup>25</sup> Partnership for Peace  
(<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Partnership-for-Peace>)

inexpensive products. However, despite the signs of an ongoing hybrid war, politicians, intellectuals, and the media hesitated to acknowledge the threat.

During this period, there was a growing tendency to question the significance of NATO's existence. Applauding and voting for defense budget cuts, politicians, intellectuals, and the media often credited themselves with fostering lasting peace in Europe and the world—a sentiment that now appears to be more romanticized than realistic.

The romantic affair between the West and Russia, initiated in 1994 with the Partnership for Peace, was believed by many to be enduring. However, those who held such beliefs were gravely mistaken.

### **Under the Radar**

What transpired during this period, concealed under the romantic veil of "partnership"? Putin skillfully wove a global network of spy installations, media satellites, professional propagandists, clerics, and oligarchs.

Collectively, they launched daily assaults on the democratic world with misinformation and false narratives, corrupting institutions and eroding the democratic fabric of societies. These narratives undermined trust in institutions, fostering psychosis and polarization.

Under the colorful umbrella of democracy and freedom of speech, Putin cooperated with and assisted ultra-nationalists, Eurosceptics, and various far-right groups and politicians across Europe and

beyond. This all occurred while ostensibly promoting democratic values. Remarkably, he managed to turn the West's greatest asset—democracy—into a tool for dealing heavy blows to his perceived enemy, the West, with whom he never intended to form a genuine partnership, let alone a partnership for peace.

Putin's military interventions in Asia often went unnoticed by the West, preoccupied as it was with the ongoing "War on Terror," the "Arab Spring," and various other security challenges.

This allowed Putin to remain under the radar of the public, security agencies, and financial institutions long enough to make a decisive move onto European soil.

### **Eyebrows Raised, Finally**

In 2014, as the first invasion against Ukraine unfolded, some Western leaders and NATO raised their eyebrows. Within two months of Russia's illegitimate and violent annexation of Crimea, NATO took a stance by suspending cooperation with Russia.

However, despite this initial response, a sense of "business as usual" prevailed. Western governments displayed an unwillingness to take decisive steps to curb Putin's aggressive policies. Despite the clear warnings from experts in security, media, and non-governmental organizations, politicians and business circles either failed to recognize or chose to ignore the ominous threat

posed by the imperialist ambitions of the Kremlin dictator.

### **Coordinated Tweets, Dubious Sanctions, and Delayed Military Aid**

The symptoms were evident: smaller and larger military interventions in the Asian neighborhood, an accelerated pace of armament, economic and military-political penetration into Africa, and the strengthening of ties with anti-Western, especially anti-American authoritarian regimes in South America, Asia, and Africa. Additionally, there was an extreme militarization of society, coupled with the ruthless killing and persecution of the opposition, including the assassination of political opponents even within European states.

Regrettably, the West continued with its day-to-day affairs, seemingly oblivious to the hybrid operations orchestrated by Putin's clique against the democratic world. So it was until the full-scale Russian invasion against Ukraine, when some level of awareness dawned. However, the initial response fell short. Coordinated tweets of strong condemnation were swiftly assembled, followed by sanctions, at a level of effectiveness that, as Brussels often admits, remains to be discussed and thoroughly evaluated.

However, these sanctions proved to be far from sufficient to aid the almost defenseless Ukrainian people during the initial months of the Russian genocidal onslaught. It took many months before

direct military assistance to Ukraine began. The hesitancy of German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, who refused to send tanks and weapons to Ukraine, will be etched in memory. He wasn't the only Western leader to hesitate, as others found countless political or legal excuses to delay or limit military aid to Ukraine.

### **People across the world: More articulate than their political leaders**

The defense of Ukraine commenced with woefully under-armed rag-tag formations of soldiers, volunteers, and inexperienced civilians who responded to the call to safeguard their homeland, already in the first hour of the horrendous attack from land (Russia and Belarus), air and sea. Despite the initial hesitancy of the West, in a matter of days, the Ukrainian defense and President Zelensky earned global acclaim, propelled by the heroism, perseverance, and self-sacrificing fight for freedom. People across Europe and the world, more articulate than politicians, flooded the streets, demanding freedom for Ukraine. The world came to understand that the fate of Ukraine was intertwined with the destiny of the free world.

Confronted with tenacious resistance from the Ukrainian side, the Russian military machine, initially confident of a swift campaign, resorted to the well-known strategy of scorched earth, inflicting immeasurable and unspeakable suffering on civilians. Thanks to Internet technology, the world is witnessing, in real-time, a brutal destruction not

witnessed since World War II (with the exception of the devastation in Aleppo, Syria, and a few other recent military "undertakings" by the Russian military machine).

The torture, rape, and execution of civilians—men, women, and children, even infants—coupled with indiscriminate and fierce bombings of residential buildings, civilian facilities, including hospitals, maternity wards, kindergartens, schools, religious and cultural centers, and the deliberate destruction of civilian infrastructure aimed at causing freezing and starvation among the population characterize the "special military operation," as termed by the Russian political and military leadership, in this genocidal war.

### **Hesitation. Again!**

Two years later... The Aggressor was pushed back and was forced to take defensive positions in the remaining occupied territories as much as possible. Russian forces succeeded (so far) to entrench behind impenetrable lines of "dragon's teeth" and dense minefields.

And... The West finds itself wavering once again. The few minor successes of Putin's army of aggression in 2023 and early 2024 have only amplified the skepticism and pro-Russian voices. At the beginning of 2024, as the full-scale war approached its third year, the prevailing assessment in the West suggested that the Ukrainian counter-offensive in 2023 failed.

This statement is not entirely accurate. **Why?**

Russia has remained trapped within its own steel cage for an entire year. Despite its massive army and weaponry, it has only managed to advance a few hundred meters beyond its fortified "defensive" lines. Meanwhile, Russia's underground criminal, propaganda, and espionage machinery continue their offensive operations, showcasing once more that while the Kremlin may lack prowess on the battlefield, it excels in intrigues, double games, and invisible global terror.

After Ukraine endured months of bleeding, offering Russia ample time to solidify its positions in Crimea and Donbass, some Western politicians insist that the Ukrainian struggle for freedom has not yielded the expected results. "Experts" and politicians frequently appear in the media, expressing concerns about the high cost of the war and advocating for limited military and financial aid to Ukraine.

Indeed, it is true that Ukraine did not achieve the anticipated success. Yet, it is crucial to remember that Ukraine's primary goal is success in its struggle to rid itself of the dark aggression, which, as must be reiterated, began in 2014 and even earlier with the installation of Yanukovich's puppet regime.

■ ■ ■ **interviews**



# Oleksandr Merezhko, Verkhovna Rada: Ukraine's EU and NATO Membership - A Matter of Time

*June 5, 2023*

Oleksandr Merezhko is a member of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine ([Верхівна Рада України](#)) and the Chairperson of the Committee on Foreign Policy and Inter-Parliamentary Cooperation. In an exclusive interview for CIVIL Media, he speaks about the fierce challenges of the Ukrainian nation in its quest to end the brutal Russian invasion and liberate occupied territories, and about the genocide carried out by the Russian aggressor.

The Ukrainian MP, also a professor of international law, points to Article 51 of the UN Charter, according to which the country victim of aggression has the right to wage war on the territory of the aggressor.

Merezhko spoke of Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic path, saying that the question is not if, but when Ukraine will become a member of the EU and NATO. According to him, Ukraine will start negotiations for EU membership no later than the end of this year, 2023.

In the interview, Merezhko talks about the true friends, among whom he includes Macedonia, and

those who, at the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion, calculated and provided humanitarian aid, which cannot be used to win a war.

Merezhko and we agreed to meet in fully liberated Ukraine.

**CIVIL MEDIA:** Can you share your most memorable moments as a member of the Verkhovna Rada since the beginning of the Russian brutal aggression against your country?

**MEREZHKO:** First of all, I am really grateful for inviting me, because it's extremely important to share our views, to express the position of Ukraine, and my position as a member of the Parliament, to communicate with the people of Macedonia. It's extremely important. And of course, I am very grateful for your support, we will talk about this later.

As to your question, you know, we expected the full-scale invasion to come, yet it came unexpectedly to us. To my family, to my colleagues, to the whole country, the first weeks of the full-scale invasion were extremely difficult.

Later, when we found out that Putin was planning to take Kyiv, to occupy Kyiv within three days, the first days were extremely difficult. But I decided to stay with my family, I didn't evacuate; even with small children, we stayed in Kyiv. It was important for us to stay in Kyiv, to show that representatives of the [political] power, legislators, stay in the country.

That moment, with my colleagues, members of Parliament, we needed to show to the whole world that we are alive, that we are continuing to work, that we are Verkhovna Rada – the parliament continues to work. And we started from the very moment, from the first hours. For example, when we found out, I woke up to explosions. We live within one-hour walk from the Parliament; it took me 40 minutes to come to my workplace, to the committee.

Within the first hours, we held the first plenary meeting and adopted all necessary laws. For example, we introduced the martial law. And you know, I was pleased to see that most of my colleagues were on the spot, they were in Kyiv. Our committee, the committee of foreign affairs, also started to work very intensively, from the first minutes of the invasion. We held our meeting, we started to work on the appeals, on the resolutions of the parliament, on behalf of the Ukrainian people. We started to appeal to the whole world, to our allies, to our friends, asking them to help us, to introduce sanctions against the aggressor, to provide us with weaponry and to support us diplomatically and politically.

At the same time, we also added a new; I call it informative function, which means there were lots of calls from journalists from all over the world. We were giving many interviews, mostly online, by phone, to different countries, to European countries, to Japan, to New Zealand, to Australian; we were trying to keep the whole world informed of what is

going on in Ukraine. And we were doing this work, we were thinking what should we do next, [and keep] the sense that Ukraine will be victorious.

**CIVIL MEDIA:** Ukrainian legislators, and the government, and the President himself, are making many efforts to push Ukraine forward, towards the European Union integration, as well as to NATO membership. Do you have an assessment of the level of political unity in Ukraine, in the country, in regards to the Euro-Atlantic integration of your country? How was it in the past?

**MEREZHKO:** Well, the truth is that Ukraine, the Ukrainian people, have always been pro-European. We have always considered ourselves part – integral and organic part – of the European family. And our goal has always been towards becoming a member of the European Union. Right now, the support among Ukrainian people, the support for joining NATO and joining the European Union is tremendously high. According to estimates, it's more than 80%. According to some assessments, it's more than 90% in favor of joining NATO and the European Union. It's unprecedented I would say.

Of course, the war changed the situation when it comes to popular support. It made it much higher. But the truth is that even before the war, and by beginning of the war I mean the year 2014, even before that, the majority of the population in Ukraine had been in favor of joining the European Union and NATO. But now, the support is just unprecedented,

just unprecedented. And this goal to join the European Union, we call it Euro-Atlantic integration, this goal is enshrined in our constitution, which is also a sign of tremendous support of European integration processes.

**CIVIL MEDIA:** Do you have some sort of a timeframe on when it will be possible for Ukraine to enter the negotiations and become a European Union member, as well as NATO member. We've recently seen the statement from Mr. Stoltenberg, who said that it is up to Kyiv and to the Ukrainian people to decide if they want to become part of NATO, and not of Moscow, as the Russian Federation dictator Putin is promoting in the last several decades. So, what are the prospects, what is the timeline? Do you have at least some estimates about that?

**MEREZHKO:** Regarding the European Union and NATO membership, first of all, we expect to start accession negotiations with the European Union this year, maybe by the end of this year. Before that, the European Union has issued seven requirements, seven recommendations what Ukraine should do to start negotiations.

We, as members of parliament, we have accomplished what was expected from us. We have adopted the necessary legislation.

And the Venice Commission has expressed some other recommendations regarding our performance.

So, now we are in the process of consultations with the Venice Commission, which is normal. But the truth is that we have already done the major part of our work, our home assignment. And we are hopeful that we will start negotiations by the end of this year. And I always emphasize when I am talking to my Western colleagues that our membership in the EU is not only a matter of prestige or economic development, it's also a matter of our security. Because, by being a member of the European Union, we will have more support, more solidarity of other members of the European Union. And I am sure that it will have deterrent effect on Russia, because Putin, he is a dictator, he is afraid of solidarity between democratic European states.

A good example is Finland. Finland was not a NATO member, but Putin didn't risk to invade Finland. NATO membership, we understand that the only guarantee of our security is NATO membership, to be a full-fledged member state of NATO. And it's not only guarantee of Ukraine's security, it's also guarantee of security and peace in Europe, and in the whole world.

One of the reasons why Putin invaded Ukraine, was because we were not a member state of NATO. If we were a member state of NATO, Putin would never risk to invade us. We understand this, and the whole world understands this. That's why it's so important, it's crucially important for us to join NATO as soon as possible. Of course, I understand that now, the principle political decision that Ukraine sooner or

later will be a member state of NATO, was already taken. The question is only, **not if**, but **when** Ukraine becomes a full-fledged member of NATO. And we are trying to do everything to bring our accession to NATO closer. Of course, some politicians are saying that we should postpone this issue; we should put it off until the end of the war. But the truth is that we don't know when the war will end. The state of war can continue for some time. But my personal position is that we should become a NATO member as soon as possible, like Finland.

To me, and to many politicians in my country, Finland became sort of a role model. It took less than a year to become a member of NATO. And as soon as we become a member of NATO, it will stop Russian aggression and it will give guarantees of our security. That's why it's a crucial question for our survival.

**CIVIL MEDIA: Yes, indeed. I believe that with the level of armament now, and with the level of training and skills of your army, that shouldn't be an obstacle, or a challenge. However, the international community was united in the political support, at least for Ukraine, from the very first day of the large-scale invasion, but rather reluctant to provide weapons and ammunition that was so badly needed for the defense of Ukraine. What is your assessment of the foreign support now, and what more is needed to make Ukraine more capable to liberate the territories occupied by Russia?**

**MEREZHKO:** February 24, 2022, became a moment of truth for us, because we saw very clearly who is our true friend and who is a reluctant partner. Let me put it this way. Those countries that from the very first minutes of the full-scale aggression started to provide us with all the necessary weaponry were the United States, the United Kingdom, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia – the small Estonia – who gave us a lot. So, these countries, they proved to be our reliable friends.

Unfortunately, some other European big countries, which could provide us with the necessary weaponry, they were hesitant, which was very frustrating to me. Some of these countries started to look for arguments not to give us weaponry. They were eager to provide only, for example, 5,000 helmets, a hospital...

But you know, you cannot defend yourself, you cannot win the war with humanitarian aid, or with only having helmets. It's important, but you cannot win a war. You need weaponry, you need heavy weaponry, especially when you are fighting against a huge empire like Russia, which has the second biggest army in the world, which is well-equipped. And as I said in the beginning, it was really frustrating, but we survived. We survived and even more, we managed to defeat Russia next to Kyiv.

We managed to defeat Russia next to Kharkiv, we managed to fight successfully and drive Russian troops off from Kherson. And our other partners

started to believe in us and started to provide more weaponry.

The situation has changed, but again, the policy was not consistent, because later, the policy of some countries was, I call it, a little too late. They were promising to deliver, say, 10 tanks in three months, but we needed these tanks immediately, and we needed more weaponry. We didn't need only symbolic kind of military assistance. It was a problem, but later the situation gradually changed and now we are more satisfied with the provision of weaponry. But, of course, we continue to need more weaponry, because, you know, almost for more than a month we are bombarded and shelled by Russia each night. Each night!

Russia has enough cruise missiles, it has enough drones, which Russia produces, it also buys it from Iran, from other rogue states. So, Russia has lots of weaponry since Soviet times. And we need to respond to this, we need to start a successful counteroffensive. And we need ammunition, we need heavy weaponry, now we need air defense, jet aircrafts like F16.

We also need long-range artillery and long-range missiles, because we need, for example, to destroy Russian military logistics, Russian depots with ammunition. And to do that, we need long-range missiles.

Because, you know, there is one important thing that should be remembered by each country, provide

weapons to Ukraine. **The truth is that Russia is committing genocide against the Ukrainian people**, and when you send weaponry to Ukraine, you help to save lives of people in Ukraine. You help to save lives of not only soldiers, but also of civilians.

Imagine a situation that we don't have right now weaponry for air defense, to intercept Russia's missiles. Can you imagine what would be the situation in Kyiv, in other cities. Now, we manage to intercept dozens of Russian missiles and Russian drones. But if we didn't have it, there would be huge casualties in Kyiv, in other cities. Casualties among civilian people. That's why it's so critically important for us to get weaponry. These weapons help us to survive, and to stop genocide.

**CIVIL MEDIA: Indeed, it's not the first time that Russia is committing genocide against the Ukrainian people. We all remember very well that Russia, in Soviet times, has actually conducted an act of genocide during the times of the Holodomor<sup>26</sup>. And we see now, in the 21 century, in Europe, another attempt to do the same, brutally attacking civilian targets and infrastructure. In that context, I would like to ask you about the prospects of the long-expected offensive of Ukraine to liberate its territories from Russian occupation. What are the perspectives of these operations? Are you ready? Some of your military leaders say that**

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<sup>26</sup> Holodomor, basic facts (<https://holodomor.ca/resource/holodomor-basic-facts/>)

**you are all set and ready to begin as of now, as we speak. I know that you are a politician, not a military leader, but still – do you have some assessments of the strength of the Russian forces that you need to reckon with, during the liberation offensive?**

**OLEKSANDR MEREZHKO:** Well, of course, Russian forces, Russia has accumulated lots of forces. They also are getting ready for our counteroffensive, and they are afraid of a counteroffensive. They have dug in, they have created these trenches and they are prepared. We understand this. But at the same time I am very optimistic and I am hopeful about our counteroffensive. All we need right now, we need more weaponry to have a very successful military operation liberating our territory.

I don't know, maybe we will need not only one counteroffensive operation, but a number of them to liberate the whole territory of Ukraine, including Crimea. Maybe we will need more such operations. I'm not a military person, but I have a feeling, I have intuition, know that our army is very motivated, because we are fighting for our motherland, for our homes, and our families. We are highly motivated. We have a very high spirit and morale of our soldiers.

As for the Russian army, I have this intuition that they are on the brink of collapse, because they understand that they are occupiers, that they don't bring freedom, they bring slavery, they bring war crimes, they bring torture, murder, rape to Ukraine.

And I am sure that if we push enough from all sides, from our military, from the world community, in terms of sanctions, in terms of more support for Ukraine, the Russian army will collapse, it will collapse.

And it might change the situation also within Russia itself, because we know from history that each time when Russia was defeated, it would cause, it would bring about changes within Russia itself. It would lead to, for example, revolution, as it was in 1918. So, I'm very optimistic and I'm hopeful about our counteroffensive, and at the same time, I understand that we might need more such counteroffensive operations to reach our final goal, which is liberation of the whole occupied territories.

**CIVIL MEDIA: As a politician, would you support an act of reckoning with the Russian logistics, military logistics and military installments within the Russian territory? Would you support such a decision to try to disable the Russian assault against Ukraine, within the Russian territory?**

**OLEKSANDR MEREZHKO:** I will give you an answer not only as a politician, but also as a professor of international law.

Under international law, the victim of the aggression has the right to self-defense, to individual and collective self-defense, and this right is enshrined

in Article 51 of the UN Charter<sup>27</sup>. So, as victim of the aggression, we have the right to wage war within the territory of the aggressor. It's our right in terms of self-defense and under international law. I think it's absolutely necessary to target military objects in the territory of Russia. It's our right, it doesn't violate laws and customs of war. It doesn't violate international humanitarian law.

The situation is the same as after Hitler. Nazi Germany invaded, for example, Poland. We understand that the allies have the right to continue their struggle in the territory of the Nazi Germany, on territory of the aggressor. Without this, there would be no victory in the Second World War. So, to me, we have this right and there is no doubt about this.

**CIVIL MEDIA: I would like to ask you about the cooperation between the Ukrainian Parliament and the Macedonian Parliament. We are aware that the President of the Macedonian Parliament, Mr. Xhaferi, has visited Ukraine, he visited the sights of the tremendous, horrible war crimes committed in Bucha and other locations in**

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<sup>27</sup> Article 51, UN Charter: Nothing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent right of individual or collective self-defence if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations, until the Security Council has taken measures necessary to maintain international peace and security. Measures taken by Members in the exercise of this right of self-defence shall be immediately reported to the Security Council and shall not in any way affect the authority and responsibility of the Security Council under the present Charter to take at any time such action as it deems necessary in order to maintain or restore international peace and security. (<https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text>)

**Ukraine. What else is needed from our country, is there any further cooperation after that?**

**OLEKSANDR MEREZHKO:** We consider Macedonia to be our friend. You know we had recently online meetings between committees of foreign affairs of our parliament, the Verkhovna Rada, and the Macedonian Parliament. And you know, to me it was very friendly. We had a very friendly atmosphere, very warm atmosphere, because I understand that people in Macedonia understand what is going on, we have similar historical experience.

That's why we understand each other.

And Macedonia as a state, its government, its people, are very supportive of Ukraine. We are grateful and we value each gesture of support and help provided to us. I am grateful and the Ukrainians are grateful for your military and technical support.

I understand that each country has its own capacities and possibilities in terms of provided help. Some countries have more opportunities, others less. But what we value, is when you are trying to help us. And this is what is going on between Ukraine and Macedonia.

We also see that Macedonia supports us in a very decisive way in the international arena, politically, diplomatically. You are voting for the resolution in support of our territorial integrity and sovereignty, at the General Assembly of the UN. You are participating in sanctions against the aggressor

state. You are taking part in the Crimea Platform, which is also important for us, because the Russian aggression has started from Crimea and it should be finished by liberating Crimea. That's why it's so important. So, I see very warm, very supportive attitude of your people to Ukraine, and I can assure you that we value you that very highly.

# General Skibitsky, Ukraine Military Intelligence: Countering Russia; Propaganda, Nuclear Risks, and Russia's Bleak Future

*August 4, 2023*

Major General Vadym Skibitsky, one of the highest representatives of the Military Intelligence of Ukraine, in the extensive exclusive interview with CIVIL Media, reveals a series of lesser known and unknown details about the Russian aggression and propaganda war.

From the major general's answers, we learn about the dynamics and nature of the military actions, how powerful they are, what happened and what is happening with Prigozhin's Wagners, as well as about the armed rebel group on Russian territory. Furthermore, we learn details about the Russian propaganda and information war and the chances of a nuclear war.

We also learn details about the Russian private armies and Putin's guard. Particularly interesting are the observations of the Ukrainian top intelligence officer in regards to what really is happening and how the situation will develop and the real

possibilities of destabilization, and even the fall of the Russian Federation.

From understandable reasons, not much biographical data can be found on CIVIL Media's exclusive interlocutor.

**CIVIL MEDIA: Thank you Mr. Major General for this interview. Let's start the conversation with the pace of the counteroffensive for liberating Ukraine from the Russian aggressors. The slow progress of Ukraine's defenders has caused much discussion in Western media and in military and expert circles. How do you assess the current situation on the battlefield and what would your response be to critics?**

**SKIBITSKY:** The current situation on the battlefield is difficult, but the Armed Forces of Ukraine have an initiative. Everything is going according to plan. We are responding to changes in the situation on the battlefield and are making necessary adjustments. Ukraine's military intelligence is exposing the enemy's intentions, while the Defense Forces are disrupting them. We are analyzing and striking where the Russian occupiers are suffering significant losses.

Yes, we admit that the enemy has entrenched itself well in the occupied Ukrainian territories: large mine barriers, several lines of fortifications – all this, nonetheless, has its own impact on the pace of our progress.

However, for those who think that Ukraine is too slow in the offensive, I will tell them that the war is not a sports competition. The dynamics of military actions depend on an extremely large number of factors, including the availability of forces and means necessary for carrying out combat tasks.

We need ammunition, we need more assets for air defense, we need demining vehicles and long-range precision fires.

In this context, we are very grateful that North Macedonia, along with all other countries, stands by Ukraine and doesn't stop providing assistance for the protection of the Ukrainian people, our continent and our common values of freedom.

I would like to remind you that the Russian full-scale aggression had the goal of Blitzkrieg – quick occupation and subjugation of the whole of Ukraine. The expert circles you mentioned, before the invasion on February 24, 2022, used to think that Ukraine wouldn't last long. But the aggressor got a hit in the teeth. And we will continue until he spits out the last canine tooth. And the main thing here is not so much speed as is unexpectedness and precision of the strike.

Overall, the philosophy of the current liberation war against the Russians, which is led by the commanders of the Forces of Security and Defense of Ukraine, is that we, unlike our enemy, value our soldiers.

Our actions on the battlefield are aimed at disabling the enemy – cutting off supply routes, destroying weaponsdepots, victory in the counter-battery fire<sup>28</sup>, destroying their assets for intelligence and air defense.

We are operating in all dimensions of the war, and the combination of successes in each of them will bring the desired result.

So, Ukraine is in an offensive, and there will be success.

**CIVIL MEDIA: The 36-hour rebel by Prigozhin’s group of mercenaries on June 24 showed the world the cracks in Putin’s machinery. What really happened?**

**SKIBITSKY:** Yes, Putin’s machinery has cracks and corrosion. These are the “Zhigulis”<sup>29</sup> of the Kremlin, which have no rear view mirrors, and in the trunk have a nuclear warhead.

Prigozhin’s rebellion exposed not only the cracks, but also the incapability of the Russian dictator to hold the reigns.

In 36 hours, the rebellious terrorist group destroyed 8 units of the Russian military aviation, killed several dozen military persons, among which also pilots.

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<sup>28</sup> Counter-battery fire ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Counter-battery\\_fire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Counter-battery_fire))

<sup>29</sup> Zhiguli, a vehicle from the time of the USSR - VAZ-2101 (<https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%92%D0%90%D0%97-2101>)

At the same time, the Wagners almost captured the nuclear weapons site called “Voronezh-45”.

And as a result, Putin, calling the rebellion “treason” and “a knife in the back”, at the end freed the terrorists from “Wagner” in Belarus.

As they say, feel the difference: the Cheka<sup>30</sup> leader, who built an image on the bravado of “drowning terrorists in the toilet”, has turned into a weak paranoid grandfather –afraid, but also revengeful, as evidenced by the purges in the Russian occupying army that started after “Wagner’s” rebellion with the purpose to identify and punish those who support Prigozhin.

And his rebellion was supported not only by individual representatives of the military elite of Russia, but also by the average Russian population, as evidenced by the report of the Ministry of Interior of the RF, intercepted by the military intelligence of Ukraine. The secret document gives closed ratings on the sympathy towards Putin and Prigozhin, and for the Russian dictator they are disappointing.

**CIVIL MEDIA: It seems that Western media are giving Prigozhin too much importance, although, actually, it concerns a war criminal and international trafficker of war crimes and dirty operations?What is left of Prigozhin’s mercenaries is now in Belarus. How dangerous**

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<sup>30</sup> Cheka, that is VCK - Всероссийская чрезвычайная комиссия (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cheka>)

**is this group now? Was it really such an intimidating force before?**

**SKIBICKY:** The “Wagner” terrorist group created more problems on the battlefield in Ukraine than the regular Russian army did. Prigozhin’s mercenaries were indeed more than prepared and combat capable.

Once they were disarmed on the temporary occupied territory of Ukraine and in Russia and sent to Belarus, Ukraine’s military intelligence is carefully monitoring the nature of the further actions of the “Wagner” group on the territory of Belarus. Currently, we don’t see a direct threat from there.

The mercenaries-terrorists are now taking part in the training of Lukashenko’s army, but this action is not of a systematic nature. Prigozhin himself expresses his intention to return to the criminal activities on the territory of Africa.

Nevertheless, we will keep sight of the “Wagners”.

**CIVIL MEDIA:** The Kremlin is accusing the Ukrainian intelligence for the existence and operation of the “Freedom of Russia” Legion and the Russian Volunteer Corps. How authentic are these military formations in Russia and what is the connection between them and the defense of Ukraine? What is their ability to inflict harm on Putin’s regime?

**SKIBITSKY:** The Russian Volunteer Corps and the “Freedom of Russia” Legion consist of fighters with Russian citizenship.

Their actions on Russian territory became just as much an unpleasant surprise for the Kremlin as was Prigozhin's rebellion – Moscow leaders were simply not prepared for such a scenario, which was shown with their helpless and weak reaction to the episodes of armed fighting in the Belgorod, Kursk and Bryansk region in Russia.

These Russian oppositional armed formations have enough autonomy and rights to fight against Putin's criminal regime on the territory of their own country, and any factor that weakens the terrorist fascist regime in Moscow is in the interest of Ukraine.

**CIVIL MEDIA:** What are the most important characteristics of the Russian propaganda in this phase of the war? Do you think that the RF is losing the propaganda war or is it simply transforming?

**SKIBITCKY:** The main tasks of the Russian propaganda in the current phase come down to destroying the internal unity of Ukrainian society, undermining the trust between Ukraine and our partners, stopping military assistance, while in Russia – to encourage the myth that current Russia, the “Zhiguli”, with a nuclear warhead, is capable of some kind of movement and development.

The Russian propaganda is quite static in its set of methods. However, one must admit that in 2014 the enemy was efficient in the information field – Ukraine was not prepared for massive disinformation and information-psychological operations by the RF.

With the start of the full-scale invasion, we are taking a more proactive approach in countering Russian propaganda. And our main weapon in this process is the truth.

Ukraine's military intelligence, for example, has become more open – we publish facts, some intelligence data that expose the intentions of the aggressor, we publish evidence of war crimes committed by Russia.

And this approach proves its efficiency: Russian propaganda cannot reach its main goals and therefore Russia is losing in the information war.

**CIVIL MEDIA: What is next for Putin? Now more than ever, he needs military success in Ukraine, and he is very far from achieving it. In order to compensate for his losses on the battlefield, Putin has increased missile terror. On the day of the mercenary rebellion alone, the RF attacked Ukraine with 50 missiles and drones, of which 20 or more aimed at Kyiv. Doesn't this complicate the situation? Did you expect for Putin to take an "all or nothing" approach? And what about the red button?**

**SKIBITSKY:** Putin needs military success now and has always needed it, because he gave the order for a war to be started against Ukraine.

Certainly, the missile attacks of the enemy complicate the situation, as they cause casualties among the Ukrainians and destruction of infrastructure facilities, of our economy.

We assess the threats by the RF regarding the use of nuclear weapons as a manifestation of blackmail and intimidation. This is irresponsible, but completely characteristic of Moscow's behavior.

I think that the probability of Putin to use the “red button” is small, including also because of the position of official Beijing, which publically expressed itself as against the use of nuclear weapons.

And even if hypothetically such a scenario was allowed, it would not allow the aggressor to win the war, but it would be the last day of the existence of Russia.

**CIVIL MEDIA: How strong is the RF really? It seems that the private armies and some other armed formations, such as Kadyrov's army, are a serious problem in the RF. According to some estimates, there are around 60 different armed formations and private armies in the RF. Is that so? In addition, what is their real power compared to the regular and special armies of the RF? There are some speculations that Putin himself has a loyal security force numbering up to 200,000 well-trained armed military personnel. Is this true or is it another horror story of Putin's propaganda?**

**SKIBITSKY:** Putin's former judo sparring partner by the surname of Zolotov handles his security. He leads the troops of the Russian National Guard. These “guardsmen” are directly subordinated to Putin. They receive huge funding, and their number

isn't 200 thousand, but rather about one and a half time bigger. This guard is suitable for strengthening the police regime in Russia. Though warfare is a bit different than breaking up student rallies.

During the full-scale aggression, the Armed Forces of Ukraine destroyed thousands of “Russian Guardsmen” who were sure to march through captured Kyiv.

As for the other so-called private armies in Russia – there really are dozens of them, their activities are funded by big companies, such as “Gazprom”.

Also, as of recently, in Russia they have decided to create federal paramilitary formations: in each so-called “subject of the federation”, such units are to be created from the local population, armed with light weapons and funded mainly from the local budget.

This means that in each so-called “subject of the federation”, the local Putin feudal lords will have their private military companies.

Given the huge number of contradictions in Russia, such a step could have an unexpected result for Moscow – for example, cause national-liberation movements of the enslaved people or push Russia into a bloody chaos of internal confrontations.

**CIVIL MEDIA: Is General Shoigu another owner of a secret private army? Do you expect him to make an attempt to conquer Putin's throne? More specifically: to what extent is the military-political government of the RF currently divided?**

**SKIBITSKY:** There is information that the Russian so-called private military company called “Patriot” belongs to Minister Shoigu.

Certainly, he might have high ambitions, but it’s doubtful that he will succeed to take the highest position in Russia. One of the main reasons lies in the fact that he is neither charismatic, nor popular. The very Russian occupying army doesn’t support the Minister too much, he is usually laughed at, called “leader of deer”<sup>31</sup>.

Therefore, Soigu’s private military company is not about attempting to take Putin’s throne, but about personal security.

In principle, it’s no secret that in the military-political leadership of the RF there are serious disagreements. They have deepened by the strategic failure of the adventurous war against Ukraine.

Individual representatives of the current so-called Russian elite are already trying to find security guarantees for themselves after the inevitable collapse of Putin’s system.

With every military defeat of the occupying army on the battlefield, with every shipment of military aid for Ukraine, with every package of new sanctioning restrictions against the aggressor, the possibility of

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<sup>31</sup> In the figurative sense of the word: one who leads sheep, shepherd

greater manifestation of these confrontations in Russia grows.

**CIVIL MEDIA: Do you expect a collapse of the RF and what will the consequences be from such events for Ukraine and the region?**

**SKIBITSKY:** We don't expect for Russia to collapse one wonderful day. We are fighting and doing everything we can to defeat Russia, to liberate Ukraine and provide peace for the future generations of our citizens.

If we talk about transformation of the so-called Russian Federation, then that is possible only after a complete defeat in the war it started.

This transformation should benefit all, because today's Russia is a personification of the evil, a source of instability and danger both to the world and the Russians themselves.

It's in the interest of Ukraine and of whole Europe to deprive Russia from the possibility waging new wars and force it to comply with international law.

The transformation of Russia surely has to provide for the punishment of all war criminals and compensation for all the damage caused by the war.

Also, it's worth noting that Russia remains a prison for many other peoples who deserve their own nation states, but here it should be noted that without a fight they will not gain statehood.

**CIVIL MEDIA: What are the prospects regarding Ukraine's offensive? Will the upcoming winter be even more difficult for liberating Ukraine?**

**SKIBITSKY:** It's obvious that in the fall and winter, Russia will again try to destroy our energy system in order to deprive the Ukrainians from light and heat, demoralize our society and cause a new wave of forced emigration.

The enemy is now conducting appropriate intelligence measures for determining the priority facilities of the energy system of Ukraine. We know about these plans of the enemy and have been preparing for winter since summer.

And the Ukrainian offensive, as I already said, continues. Therefore, we will see what will happen before winter. Ukraine's unchanged goal is liberation of all occupied territories, sustainable peace and security guarantees for our country and nation.

## Yevhen Perebyinis, Dep. Head of MFA Ukraine: Support Ukraine, stay on the right side of history

*October 12, 2023*

Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine Yevhen Perebyinis was in a working visit to North Macedonia, on October 10, as part of a diplomatic tour to the countries of the Western Balkans. He met with high government representatives, including the Defense Minister, Slavjanka Petrovska.

Mr. Perebyinis and his Macedonian partners discussed further deepening of the bilateral political dialogue, interaction of the two countries within the international organizations, and participation of North Macedonia in the implementation of international initiatives of our country, such as the Peace Formula of the President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy and the International Crimean Platform.

The deputy head of the foreign affairs ministry of Ukraine also discussed in detail with Macedonian government officials the issue of European integration of the two countries as candidate countries for membership in the European Union, as well as further exchange of experience in this area. Separately, the parties exchanged views on

Ukraine's accession to NATO and further support from North Macedonia on this path.

Mr. Perebyinis expressed his country's gratitude to the Macedonian side for joining the Core Group for the creation of the Special Tribunal on the crime of aggression against our country, as well as for the significant political, humanitarian and military-technical assistance provided to Ukraine.

In this exclusive interview, CIVIL MEDIA discussed key issues with the deputy head of the foreign affairs ministry of Ukraine. Through this interview, the high representative of Ukraine has sent several powerful messages. **“Support Ukraine, stay on the right side of history”** – Mr. Perebyinis said.

Indeed, it's heartening to see diplomatic efforts aimed at deepening bilateral ties and fostering cooperation between these two nations. The discussions on European integration, NATO accession, and support for initiatives like the International Crimean Platform are all significant steps towards a more stable and united global community.

The message “Support Ukraine, stay on the right side of history” is a powerful call to action. It encapsulates the importance of solidarity and standing up for justice and human rights. Every individual and nation can play a role in making a positive impact on the world stage.

It's invigorating to see individuals like Deputy Minister Yevhen Perebyinys who, in cooperation

with government institutions, as well as with civil society and media, actively works towards positive change. By amplifying efforts and continuing to advocate for these important issues, we can collectively contribute to a more just and peaceful world.

Supporting Ukraine and advocating for justice and human rights is the most important stance to take in these times. It's crucial for individuals and nations to stand on the right side of history when it comes to matters of global significance. One must remember – every voice counts, and collective efforts can make a real impact.

**CIVIL MEDIA: How would you assess Ukraine – North Macedonia cooperation during the Russian full-scale military aggression against Ukraine?**

**YEVHEN PEREBYINIS:** Ukraine's cooperation with North Macedonia has seen significant expansion since the onset of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. One notable example of this expansion is North Macedonia's swift and unwavering support for Ukraine. For example, North Macedonia were among the first countries to supply heavy weapons.

North Macedonia has consistently aligned itself with the right side of history, staying firmly committed to democratic values. The Macedonian Government has continued to provide us with crucial military assistance and has co-sponsored resolutions in support of Ukraine within the UN General Assembly

and various international organizations. An important recent development was Ukraine's election to the IAEA Executive Committee, made possible with the support of the Republic of North Macedonia. Начало формы

North Macedonia supported creation of the Special Tribunal for the punishment of the crime of aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine and participates in the activities of the relevant Core Group. I would like to mention that your country supported the decision of the Council of Europe to create an international register of damages to Ukraine as part of a special international compensation mechanism. The joining of the Republic of North Macedonia to the G7 Joint Declaration of support for Ukraine became extremely important.

These actions demonstrate immense support for Ukraine, whose citizens at the cost of their lives defend their own right to live freely and defend the civilizational values. Furthermore, an active political dialogue is ongoing between our two countries, where we're actively working on updating the legal basis of Ukrainian-Macedonian relations. Recent changes to the Free Trade Agreement will also facilitate bilateral trade relations.

In addition, an active political dialogue is taking place between our two countries. We work on updating legal basis of Ukrainian-Macedonian relation. The recently introduced changes to the Free Trade Agreement will also facilitate bilateral trade relations.

To sum up, we deem North Macedonia as a reliable friend and partner. All the help provided to Ukraine is much appreciated. And since both Ukraine and the Republic of North Macedonia strive to join the European Union, our friendship and partnerships will only strengthen.

**CIVIL MEDIA: What are the main achievements of Ukraine in the EU integration process?**

**YEVHEN PEREBYINIS:** Ukraine is consistently moving towards full-fledged membership to the European Union and NATO.

On 22 June 2023, the European Commission made an Oral update on our progress on the implementation of 7 recommendations. The EC notes the significant progress of Ukraine in the reforms.

We accelerated the internal work on implementation of the EU recommendations. Special attention is being paid to judiciary reforms, rights of minorities etc. We are committed to reforms, although their implementation is complicated by the conditions of war.

We hope that positive report of European Commission within the framework of the Enlargement Package 2023 this autumn, as well as political unity of EU Member States will allow making important decision regarding the start of negotiations with Ukraine until the end of 2023.

For Ukraine, it is important to launch the accession negotiations this year in the context of our country's

recovery and the success of the reforms necessary for its reconstruction as these two processes are fully synchronized.

We hope that in the visible future Ukraine and North Macedonia will both become members of the European Union.

**CIVIL MEDIA: What are the perspectives of Ukraine to join NATO?**

**YEVHEN PEREBYINIS:** I would like to stress that Ukraine's accession to NATO is inevitable. According to the polls, majority of Ukrainians believe that Ukraine's membership in NATO is the best way of ensuring stability and security of our country.

At the Vilnius summit last July, the Allies once again confirmed that the future of Ukraine is in NATO. And after the Vilnius summit, Ukraine became closer to NATO than ever.

The timeline depends on many factors. One of them is difference in political views of the member states. Some Allies believe that even a political invitation could lead to the NATO involvement in a direct military conflict with Russia.

We are working closely with NATO countries to reach the consensus on Ukraine's accession. Consolidated supportive voice of the Allies from Western Balkan countries as the newest NNATO members matters a lot. We appreciate the support that North Macedonia renders to Ukraine in this regard.

**CIVIL MEDIA: Can you comment on the role and work of the UN?**

**YEVHEN PEREBYINIS:** We see the United Nations as an integral element of international rules-based order. But believe that it needs a deep structural reform. This was demonstrated by the UN's response to Russian aggression against Ukraine. The UN General Assembly adopted several resolutions and sent a strong political signal of condemnation of Moscow's actions. But the UN Security Council was not able to mitigate this danger or impose tangible punishment on the aggressor state. All that happens because Russia, the aggressor state enjoys a right to veto any decision by this body.

The incompatibility of Russia's actions with the goals and principles of the UN Charter remains one of the main challenges for the UN. I would also like to stress that Russia took over the membership in the UN Security Council in an illegal manner: essentially it occupied the seat of the Soviet Union in violation of the UN Charter. Therefore, we are convinced that the aggressor state should be deprived of its status as a permanent member of the UN Security Council and excluded from the UN as a whole.

This task remains a key priority and is part of a broader set of initiatives aimed at comprehensive overhaul of the UN. These envisage the reform of the veto right for permanent members of the Security Council, expansion of its membership and improved methods of conflict prevention and response.

**CIVIL MEDIA: What are the prospects for justice to be served against war criminals led by Kremlin?**

**YEVHEN PEREBYINIS:** Accountability for core international crimes committed during Russian aggression against Ukraine is one of the priorities of Ukraine under Point 7 “Restoration of Justice” of the Peace Formula of President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

Today war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide committed during Russia’s war against Ukraine are being investigated by Ukraine and other states, as well as by the International Criminal Court (ICC). The investigation in the International Criminal Court has been supported by 43 States, including North Macedonia.

An important milestone in the process of bringing Russia to justice was made by the ICC. On 17 March 2023 ICC issued arrest warrants for a war crime for Vladimir Putin and his children rights commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova. They are charged with the war crime of illegal transfer of Ukrainian children.

We are convinced that accountability for the crime of aggression against Ukraine is the key element of full comprehensive accountability of Russia for all its violations of international law in Ukraine. Perpetrators of the crime of aggression against Ukraine shall not go unpunished.

We are also working on the establishment of a Special Tribunal. A special Core Group on this issue

elaborates legal and technical issues on the establishment of a Special Tribunal. Core Group now includes 38 states. We thank North Macedonia for joining the Group.

In addition, in July 2023 started operating the International Centre for the Prosecution of the Crime of Aggression against Ukraine (ICPA). It is a real historic moment, as it is the first international initiative on investigating the crime of aggression after World War II.

So, we understand that the process of bringing Russia and its leadership to justice is complicated and long lasting. But we are sure that some day the Russian rulers and all those who committed crimes against Ukraine and Ukrainians will be punished.

**CIVIL MEDIA: How would you describe the Russian diplomacy?**

**YEVHEN PEREBYINIS:** Diplomacy in general is the primary tool of statecraft for good reason. Diplomats have averted and ended wars, bolstered human rights, and alleviated human suffering. **But not in the case of Russia!**

The invasion was rooted in Russia's imperial past and the green light came from Putin's desire to reconstitute the Russian empire by destroying Ukrainian identity.

**CIVIL MEDIA: Russian diplomacy became one of his tools to implement these crazy plans.**

**YEVHEN PEREBYINIS:** The task of Russian diplomats today is to justify a full-scale invasion to Ukraine, the Kremlin's violation of numerous international norms and rules, and to prevent the expansion of international assistance to Ukraine, especially full-scaled military supplies. I am sure, it will collapse, just like the Russian army and the Putin regime as a whole.

**CIVIL MEDIA: What is your message to the world?**

**YEVHEN PEREBYINIS:** For Ukraine, the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity are of paramount importance. No territorial acquisition resulting from the threat or use of force should never be recognized as legal. Preserving this principle is essential not just for our nation but for the maintenance of a stable and secure international order. Ukraine stands for the equality of all states before international law, regardless of their size or power. If we accept the aggressive behavior of Russia, international relations shall be dominated by the principle “the might makes right”.

For us, Ukrainians, it is obvious that upholding the international law is a fundamental necessity for normal coexistence of societies. Our victory in the war is a victory for the whole world. The full restoration of the territorial integrity of our country and sovereignty, as well as the creation of conditions for the non-repetition of Russian aggression, will allow not only for Europe, but also for states outside

our continent to concentrate their efforts on other issues of global importance.

Withdrawal of Russian troops and confirmation of the end of the war will create favorable conditions for general development, including in the Balkans. We see prospects for the development of bilateral relations, and I believe that this will be possible. Comprehensive, just, and lasting peace in Ukraine will open a new page of development in Europe.

So, my message to the world is simple – support Ukraine, stay on the right side of history.

## Endnote: Will Putinism win?

Putin is waging unscrupulous, inhumane and brutal war against Ukraine. But he is also waging war against Western democracies, reawakening the contest for the Western Balkans in the process. The fact that he has not pulled the trigger against the whole world does not mean he does not want to. The only reason is that he cannot do that.

There are already many distressing questions about democracy in the world. From our vantage point, we can see that Putin is going to lose the war, and will eventually be deposed. Perhaps, after this, his successors will deliver him to the International Criminal Court to stand trial for war crimes and genocide. However, the question is – will Putinism nevertheless still win? Will Orbanism win, even after it has presented a central anxiety of the EU? In circumstances of the New Cold War, that will not be too difficult, I would suggest.

As civil society actors, we are prepared to do our part, working every day to bring people into the democratic fold, and to raise awareness of anything that blocks their way. But world leaders hold immense power – power that we see operating every day – to shape and expand the paths to democracy that people may reasonably expect to take. In the course of a day, it may only be one person who is affected by the opening or closing of a pathway to democracy, and on another day, it may only be two or three.

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The full edition of this book contains more analysis of the Russian propaganda narratives, and instances of hybrid threats in the Balkans, as well as worldwide.

Further, the book reveals how Russian aggression against Ukraine and the hybrid warfare against the West influences the political processes and elections in North Macedonia, and in general.

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