

By [Invitation](#) | Cowardice, Putinism or realism?

A Ukrainian scholar says her country must think in terms of human, not territorial, victory

That means reassessing the ugly trade-off between land and life, argues Anastasia Piliavsky

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
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“ENOUGH BLOOD has been shed,” declared Donald Trump after his latest call with Vladimir Putin and subsequent meeting with Volodymyr Zelensky, “with property lines being defined by War and Guts. They should stop where they are. Let both claim Victory, let History decide!”

To many who have stood with Ukraine since Russia’s full-scale invasion in 2022—the families that took in its refugees, the governments that sent weapons, the citizens who waved blue-and-yellow flags—those words sound like a slap. To Ukrainians themselves, they feel like a betrayal. The outrage is visceral, and justified. I feel it too. Yet once the shock subsides, a harsher truth holds steady: one we have known for years, but have not dared to face.

The blunt fact is that NATO, steered by America, was never willing to arm Ukraine for a territorial victory, no more under Joe Biden than under Mr Trump. For years Ukrainians hoped this would change; we believed it must. We lobbied and pleaded, explaining again and again that the stakes of this war are strategic and civilisational, that its outcome would shape Europe's security and the global order. Ukrainian courage seemed to prove the point. The world watched us improvise miracles, down ballistic missiles with Western hand-me-downs and take on a vast fleet. But courage is not a strategy.

Mr Trump has held fast to his predecessor's doctrine of conflict management—a strategy of containment meant to avoid escalation while keeping the war on a slow, controllable burn. Arms have been drip-fed. Mr Trump dangled and withdrew the prospect of Tomahawk missiles that could help Ukraine target positions deep behind the front. Ukraine has been left in the boxing ring, broken and bleeding, fighting with its hands tied behind its back.

Across Europe, military budgets, though increasing, remain anaemic. For all the moral fervour of speeches and hashtags, no ally has committed troops to the frontline. Meanwhile, Ukraine's manpower, infrastructure and economy are in ruins. Hundreds of thousands have lost lives or limbs, been captured or vanished; millions have been driven into exile or demoralised by the prospect of a war without end. Forced mobilisation has pushed the country to breaking point, with hundreds of thousands deserting what's become a perpetual front.

To keep fighting for territories we cannot retake, or indeed hold, is to risk losing the country itself—not only its borders but its living substance. The choice before Ukraine is cruel and simple: endless carnage in pursuit of land it cannot now reclaim or defend, or preserving what's left of Ukraine. This is a grim zero-sum trade-off between land and life.

In 2022, on the brink of obliteration, Ukrainians had no choice but to shield their homes with their own bodies. Today Ukraine needs a human, not a territorial, victory—measured not in square metres but in saved lives.

Call this cowardice, panic or Putinism. But for someone whose home is the ground we fight for, this is a patriot's plea. It is also unflinching realism. No officer I know in Ukraine now believes we can retake Crimea or the Donbas.

In 1944 Finland faced the same choice, between land and life. Having surrendered a tenth of its country to the Soviets, it held on to its independence and the machinery of a free society; then, within a couple of generations, built the happiest polity in the world. Russia took the bogs; Finland got the future. That was not a mapmaker's triumph but a civilisational one.

For Ukraine a human victory would mean the preservation of a society still capable of rebuilding itself. It would be seen in planes flying, towns functioning, universities alive, the constitution intact and civic life thriving. This is the outcome that will have been worth fighting for.

Let's remember: Ukraine has already won. It held the line for nearly four years against a monster of a nuclear state. The task now is to win the final victory by proving that Ukraine can not only survive, but that it can prosper as the free, plural, European state that Russia never became. The final victory will not appear on a map, but in human hearts.

To pursue that ultimate, human victory we must imagine victory in different terms. It is not a capitulation to turn a hopeless counteroffensive into a line of defence, to care for veterans, protect homes, return refugees and rekindle faith in democracy. This is moral triage: preserving the nation's body so that one day it can heal and reclaim what it lost.

None of this absolves the aggressor. Any armistice must be provisional; every atrocity recorded; every claim for restitution kept alive. What must end is not the will to justice, but the waste of human potential.

If Ukrainians must swallow the de facto loss of blood-soaked towns and villages, Europeans must shoulder that victory's cost. Because Ukraine's victory—and its defeat—will not be Ukraine's alone. Mr Putin is already testing Europe: not only its military, but its civilisational will. If Ukraine is the guarantor of Europe's security—which it has been for years—military assistance cannot be treated as “aid”. Nor can Ukrainian bodies alone continue to offer that guarantee. Europe must offer more than sanctions and sympathy. Its defence budgets must reflect a continent at war. Ukraine needs real guarantees, not paper ones like those made in Budapest three decades ago by Russia, America and Britain. Europe, as much as Ukraine, needs a ceasefire force on Ukrainian ground and a lasting commitment to reconstruction. Because if Ukraine falls, it will not be the war's end—just the end of its beginning. ■

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