

## Foreign Affairs

### Putin's Ukraine: The End of War and the Price of Russian Occupation

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February 12, 2025

From afar, the situation Ukraine faces after three years of full-scale war with Russia seems clear. Over the past 12 months, Moscow has intensified its assault on civilian populations, sending drones, missiles, and bombs in almost daily attacks on cities across the country. Infrastructure and power stations have been relentlessly targeted. Millions of people have been displaced, and millions more who fled the country after 2022 have been unable to return. Even as Ukraine has struggled to hold the frontlines, its soldiers continue to be injured and killed.

Given these mounting costs, and that [Ukraine](#) has, against all odds, managed to defend 80 percent of its territory, one might expect its citizens to support any effort to end the war. That would be sensible in the eyes of many Western analysts. Just as Russia seems unlikely to make major new advances, it will also be very difficult for Ukrainian forces, contending with an enemy that is prepared to burn through huge quantities of ammunition and manpower, to recapture all the territory now controlled by Russia. In this view, securing a cease-fire and bringing relief to the bulk of the country should be a top priority.

Yet that is not how Ukrainians see it. With U.S. President Donald Trump's vow to quickly end the war—and even before that, the threat from the United States and its allies that they might reduce military aid in the future—Ukraine's government and population have had to take seriously the discussion of a cease-fire. But such a scenario diverges sharply from the victory plan that Ukrainian President [Volodymyr Zelensky](#) outlined in the fall of 2024. And many Ukrainians themselves are deeply skeptical of a settlement, saying that no deal is better than a bad deal. Indeed, in Western eyes, Kyiv's determination to keep fighting—sometimes in grueling months-long battles to defend ruined towns and villages—may seem irrational.

In part, Ukrainians' continued support for the war can be explained by the country's resilience. Despite intense pressure on civilian areas, Ukraine has managed to preserve and even rebuild a degree of normalcy in everyday life. Following the economic shock of the initial invasion, Western budgetary support, which now makes up 20 percent of Ukraine's GDP, has allowed the economy to grow by an average of 4.4 percent over the past two years; there has been real household income growth, and inflation remains fairly low. Since the middle of 2023, when Ukrainian drones had effectively neutralized Russia's Black Sea Fleet, maritime routes have been open again, with Ukrainian exports up by 15 percent over the past year. And according to the government in Kyiv, some 40 percent of the weapons Ukraine is using on the frontlines are now produced domestically, compared with hardly

any in 2022. None of these changes take away from the extraordinary hardships of war, but they have helped give Ukrainian society a kind of adaptability and endurance that may not be fully visible to outsiders.

But even more central to Ukrainian thinking about the war are the powerful and complex effects of the Russian occupation. For Ukrainians, the occupation did not begin with the full-scale invasion in 2022 but has been an ongoing reality for more than a decade—ever since Moscow seized Crimea and parts of the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine in 2014. The horror of Russian military rule has been felt not only in areas of the south and east, where much of the war has been fought, but also near Kyiv in the opening weeks of the 2022 invasion, when Russian forces committed widespread atrocities in the capital's suburbs. Just as important, Ukrainians understand that the threat goes well beyond the occupied areas themselves. In addition to the six million who are caught in these areas, it has affected millions of displaced people who had to move farther west, and many more, including members of the Ukrainian cabinet, who have relatives living under Russian domination.

As many Ukrainians recognize, what observers in the West have characterized as brutal excesses in occupied areas—human rights abuses, political repression, and war crimes—are in fact a central part of Russia's war strategy. The issue is not merely what happens to those under Russian rule but how Moscow has used its control of significant numbers of Ukrainians to undermine the stability of the whole country, even without taking more territory. Nor is this a hypothetical threat: as Ukrainians know too well, the Kremlin, while pretending to negotiate, used the eight years of so-called frozen conflict with Ukraine after 2014 to create a launch pad for the larger invasion. Put simply, Russian control over any part of Ukraine subverts and corrodes Ukrainian sovereignty everywhere.

The Trump administration's calls for a cease-fire have stoked speculation about negotiations to freeze the conflict along or near the current frontlines. Such a plan, of course, will need Russia's participation—and as of early 2025, there was little sign that Russian President [Vladimir Putin](#) was prepared to enter such talks. But whether or not a deal is reached, the assumption that a cease-fire will end Russia's primary threat to Ukrainians misunderstands the nature of the conflict. In the three years since the full-scale invasion, Ukrainians have overwhelmingly supported the Ukrainian army. They have done so out of a strong sense of patriotism but also because they know there is little chance of survival under Moscow's rule. Even now, most Ukrainians see continuing to fight as incomparably better than the terror of Russian occupation. For the West, failure to recognize how Russia is using Ukrainian territory to undermine and destabilize the whole country risks making a cease-fire even more costly than war.

## **THE HORRORS TO COME**

With its seizures of land in 2014, Russia gained around seven percent of Ukrainian territory, containing some three million people. Since 2022, [Russia](#) has nearly tripled the Ukrainian land in its control. At the start of 2025, this included about 80 percent of the Donbas and nearly 75 percent of the Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions. There are no reliable statistics, but it is estimated that around six million people—more than one-tenth of Ukraine’s total population—are now living under Russian rule, among them 1.5 million children. And this is despite the fact that many more from these areas who were able have fled.

Within this large occupied territory are a variety of local situations. Areas of eastern Donbas that were occupied a decade ago have long been run by Moscow-controlled separatist militias and have been neglected and isolated. At the start of the 2022 invasion, local men from these areas were among the first to be mobilized by Russia, and they have suffered some of the highest casualty rates. Other areas close to the Russian border or to the southern coast, such as the Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia regions, were taken during the first weeks of the invasion almost without a fight, and Moscow was able to quickly establish military rule. People in these areas suffered less from bombings and mass destruction, but many of them have been physically and psychologically coerced. The Russian government also targeted these regions for large-scale resettlement by Russians, especially members of the military, their families, and construction workers, who have been brought to showcase Russian conquest. In turn, communities close to the frontlines have weathered the full brunt of the war. When Russian forces are unable to capture or occupy a town or village, they destroy it, forcing residents to flee and Ukrainian troops to withdraw, sometimes after months of brutal fighting. Thus, places such as Avdiivka and Bakhmut, which were the sites of devastating battles, are today under Russian rule, but they are ghost towns that have been largely reduced to rubble.

For Ukrainians, however, the main problem is not the amount of territory in Russian hands. Indeed, although Russia has made modest gains around the frontlines over the past year, the overall area under its domination has not changed much since late 2022. Instead, the threat comes from the way Russian forces and Russian authorities have imposed control over local populations and how they are using it to further Moscow’s war aims. From the outset, Russia has imposed a reign of terror on the towns and villages it has captured. In the aftermath of the initial invasion, in the south, in the east, and on the outskirts of Kyiv, residents in Russian-controlled areas were not allowed to leave their homes, and many of those who tried to flee were shot dead in their vehicles. Where there was active fighting, Russian forces often used Ukrainians as human shields, forcing civilians to stay in place so that the Ukrainian army wouldn’t shoot back.

Once Russian forces established control, many local populations struggled to survive. Searching for medicine, water, and food or simply trying to avoid bombs, few could think about rebellion. The occupiers cut off Ukrainian Internet and cellular networks and replaced them with Russian ones; it is one of the fastest ways to prevent people in

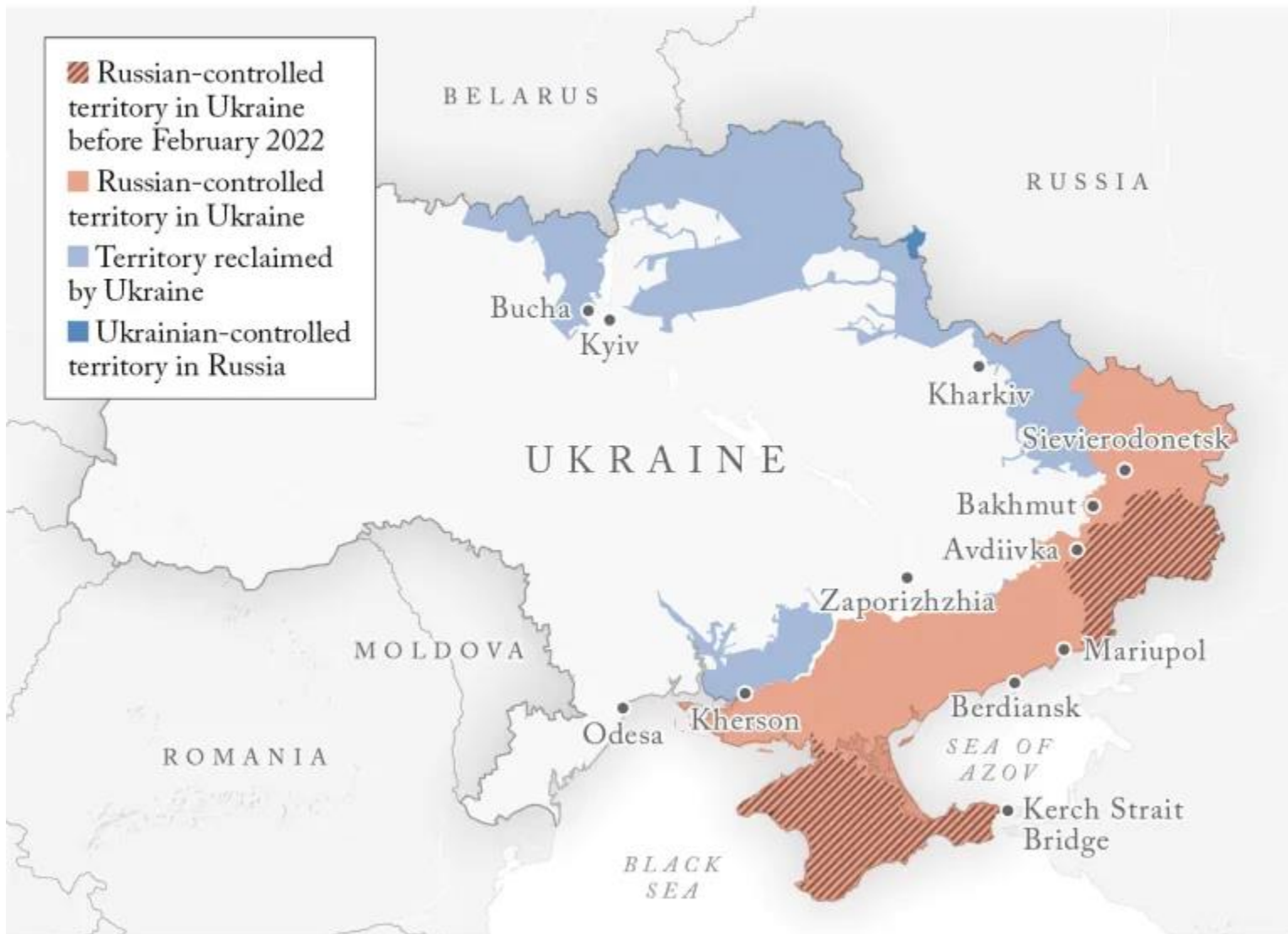
occupied territory from contacting and getting information from the rest of Ukraine. They also set up a so-called filtration process to “register” Ukrainians—a practice Russia had introduced in the first Chechen war 30 years ago. Officially, the purpose was to check documents, but in practice, Russian forces used the process to identify and detain, often in extremely harsh circumstances, potentially “disloyal” people—especially men of military age who had tried to flee. For much of the war, Russian forces have continued to use filtration in occupied towns and regions and along the Russian border. In many cases, they have detained Ukrainians based on nothing more than flimsy allegations about their allegiances or political views, their posts on social media, or a lack of data on their cellphones, accusing them of having deleted compromising information.

In areas whose population centers have remained more intact, residents have faced a different kind of coercion. In the early weeks of the invasion, Ukrainians heard reports that Russian officials had compiled lists of people who were to be detained and executed; Russian actions soon proved that the lists were real. Particularly targeted are Ukrainians who have served in the military and members of their families, as well as civil servants, volunteers, activists, patriotic businesspeople, and local journalists. Also at risk are mayors or community leaders, whom the occupiers see as key sources of local information. When mayors do not collaborate, which is often the case, the Russians have turned to possible collaborators or simply created a regime of fear. Take the village of Sofiivka and its surrounding area, an administrative district near the Sea of Azov that the Russians controlled for the first year and a half after the invasion. About 40 of its residents have been detained by the Russian occupying authorities; one was allegedly tortured to death, and three are still being held: two since November 2022 and the third since June 2023. The mayor of the district spent 34 days in a nearby Russian detention center before managing to flee.

But virtually any person suspected of having pro-Ukrainian views or even just past connections to Ukrainian institutions may be fair game. As of the beginning of 2025, the Prosecutor General’s Office of Ukraine has registered more than 150,000 violations of the Geneva Conventions by Russian forces since 2022. The Reckoning Project, an initiative I co-founded that researches war crimes in Ukraine, has gathered more than 500 testimonies of such crimes since the war began, many of them describing the systematic practice of abduction, arbitrary detention, and torture, including beating and electrocution. These forms of violence have been documented in all areas seized by Russian troops from the initial phases of the war up to the past year. The consistent pattern suggests these are not a result of excesses by particular Russian units but rather Russian state policy. In one detention center in Berdyansk, a city of some 100,000 people in the Zaporizhzhia region that was taken in the opening weeks of the war, Russian forces held a handyman, farmers, a retired police officer, the owner of a travel agency, teachers, and local councilors—all but a few were over 50, and half were women. Even the slightest past affiliation with the Ukrainian state can have extreme consequences.

# LAND GRAB

## Russia's strategy of occupation in Ukraine



Sources: Institute for the Study of War and American Enterprise Institute's Critical Threats Project; OpenStreetMap.  
Note: Location data as of January 21, 2025.

These accumulating horrors are not just a problem for those who have fallen under Russian rule. They stand as a warning to the populations of the Ukrainian cities of Odesa and Kharkiv, Chernihiv and Sumy, Dnipro and Kyiv: it could happen to them, too. Although most of Ukraine's largest cities did not fall under Russian control, Russian forces were extremely close to the capital at the start of the war, and almost everyone has relatives, colleagues, or

friends who were caught up in the occupation. Even in western Ukraine, after three years of fighting, during which more than 4.6 million people have been internally displaced, it is hard to find someone who does not have relatives or friends who experienced filtration or fled Russian-controlled areas. Given how visceral the experience of occupation is for the general population, it is unsurprising that many Ukrainians feel that fighting is still better than the kind of peace likely on offer in any negotiation with Russia.

## **THE CRIMEAN METHOD**

Ukrainians also know that Russia's current war was in crucial ways enabled by its annexation of Crimea and occupation of eastern Ukraine in 2014. Reporting on life in Crimea after the Russian takeover, I observed how Moscow employed policies, rules, and laws to further much larger military and strategic aims. Ukrainians who refused to take a Russian passport were denied medical aid, and Russian authorities would not recognize their ownership of private property. To remain on the peninsula, residents needed to demonstrate a particular level of income, and they had to have authorized jobs, which often required Russian citizenship. People faced numerous penalties for minor infractions, such as failing to renew an identification document, parking in a prohibited spot, offending a public official, or drinking in the wrong place. In Russia, such administrative violations can be designated as criminal offenses and can lead to the revocation of residency permits. The overall effect was to make anyone in Crimea who retained a Ukrainian passport suspicious, and many were forced to leave.

Meanwhile, a region that had for decades served as a subtropical tourist resort was, year by year, slowly transformed into a vast military base. Russia poured huge investments into "civilian" infrastructure but clearly had other purposes in mind. The highway from the administrative capital of Crimea, Simferopol, to the seashore was built without exits: it didn't help the residents from nearby towns get to the beach, but it was well suited for moving military vehicles. The lavish, 12-mile Kerch Strait bridge, on which Moscow spent nearly \$4 billion, was ostensibly designed for civilians traveling between the newly annexed peninsula and Russia, but it was even more important as a way to send tanks, military units, and war materiel into Crimea. (It was for this reason that Ukraine's attacks on the bridge since 2022 have been a crucial part of the war effort.)

Systematic efforts were also made to militarize the Crimean population. Education became increasingly controlled, and any references to the Ukrainian past were erased. Established in 2016, the All-Russian Military Patriotic Social Movement, known as "the Young Army," became a way to indoctrinate Crimean youth and prepare them for military service. (Later, the movement was used to "reeducate" Ukrainian children who had been abducted and transferred to Russia after 2022—a process that led the International Criminal Court to issue an arrest warrant for Putin and a member of his government in 2023.) Although the Geneva Conventions forbid drafting an occupied population for military service, Russia



mobilized the residents of Crimea, just as it did those of Donbas territories, at the time of the 2022 invasion. Crimean Tatars—members of an indigenous Muslim minority known for its resistance to Russian rule—were targeted disproportionately for obligatory military service.

Local people who spoke against this process were silenced. In Crimea, more than 220 people have been detained for political reasons since 2014, of which at least 130 were Crimean Tatars, who were charged with extremism following Moscow's crackdown on Islamic fundamentalism. Among them is Nariman Dzhelyal, the deputy chairman of the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People, a representative body for Crimean Tatars that was officially outlawed by Moscow in 2016. Dzhelyal is known as a careful and law-abiding intellectual, but six months before Russia's full-scale invasion, he was arrested on trumped-up charges of being involved in a conspiracy to blow up a gas pipeline in a village near Simferopol. By February 2022, hardly anyone left in Crimea could oppose Russia's preparations for military invasion. Citizen activists, journalists, human rights defenders, and other independent members of civil society were all behind bars.

For years after 2014, the Russian government was equally adept at manipulating the outside world. By participating in the Minsk agreements, the negotiations that were supposedly aimed at a peace settlement for the Donbas after 2014, Russian officials could distract from Moscow's activities in [Crimea](#) and eastern Ukraine. Pavlo Klimkin, Ukraine's foreign minister at the time, who from 2014 to 2019 led the negotiations with Russia, recalls a meeting in which Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, in the presence of French and German diplomats, said that, despite what was written in the agreement and what they were ostensibly negotiating, "Moscow would never allow having really open elections in the occupied territories, as Ukrainians would choose whom they want, and that's not what the Kremlin wants." In retrospect, Klimkin says, there was never a point when Putin truly wanted a peace deal. The diplomatic process was a trap.

## **RUSSIANS IN THE RUINS**

Since the 2022 invasion, Russia has rapidly imposed the occupation strategies it perfected in Crimea, but this time, its rule is far more severe. In areas such as the Zaporizhzhia region, the Kremlin quickly drew on its Crimean toolkit, imposing rules governing access to health care and jobs and regulating taxes, private property, and education. Russia has even imposed Moscow time, despite the area's location in the Eastern European Time zone. By requiring occupied populations to accept Russian passports, the Kremlin has also exerted a form of psychological coercion: if they try to go back to Ukraine, residents are falsely warned, they may face criminal charges for working for Russian companies, studying in Russian schools, and getting Russian passports. (In fact, Ukraine may prosecute its citizens for serving an occupying administration or Russian militia but not for receiving services from occupation authorities. But the Kremlin has used disinformation to spread the fear of

punishment.)

In 2014, the Kremlin promised new prosperity for occupied lands: better wages and pensions and free health care and higher education. And Crimea at least, as the new jewel in Putin's crown, received billions of dollars of Russian subsidies to showcase the annexation. (In reality, much of the funding went to vast state projects and to people who were dispatched from Russia. Local businesses fared less well, and some were seized.) Since 2022, the Kremlin is no longer promising any wealth. If you are a Ukrainian under occupation, simply avoiding arrest or having your property expropriated is now considered lucky. In a situation in which the economy has been destroyed, banning the use of Ukrainian currency (and hence often cutting people off from the bulk of their savings) is another form of pressure. For many, the only thing they have left are their houses, and they may feel compelled to remain under occupation to keep them. In 2024, in the occupied Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia regions, Russian authorities seized numerous apartments and houses of people who had fled.

Moscow has also sent tens of thousands of Russians to settle in occupied cities and towns, once again following the Crimean template. According to the Ukrainian government, between 2014 and the 2022 invasion, as many as 800,000 Russians were relocated to Crimea, and these settlers now constitute a full third of the population there. Since 2022, this kind of relocation has been happening in numerous other areas, providing a glimpse of the future. As in Crimea, the purpose of sending in these settlers is not merely to provide resources for Russia's war effort but also to integrate these towns into Russia and erase any traces of Ukrainian identity.

Consider Sievierodonetsk, a city in the Luhansk region that was seized by Russian forces in the summer of 2022. A major twentieth-century industrial center, it was founded in 1958 around one of the largest chemical plants in Europe and had a population of around 100,000 when the war began. In the weeks after Russia took control, just a few thousand residents remained. According to the Sievierodonetsk Media Crisis Center, however, the current population has risen again, to 30,000 or 40,000, although only about half the people are locals. Destroyed buildings have been demolished, but those that were less damaged have been repainted in bright colors. The energy grid, water supply, and sewer system have been partially rebuilt; the fixed-up areas are now home mainly to Russian workers and members of the Russian military and their families. The city's privately owned real estate has been re-registered, and if no owners come forward, it is handed to Russian citizens.

Unlike the Crimean Peninsula, with its pleasant climate and attractive landscape, partially destroyed towns such as Sievierodonetsk offer comparatively few attractions. Local services are limited: the Russian authorities offer free Russian satellite TV, but after two and a half years of occupation, the Internet and cellular networks have not yet been



restored, requiring residents to use street pay phones. The local hospital lacks doctors, and in the summer of 2024, the pinewoods surrounding the town burned down in a wildfire because of a shortage of firefighters. Although the authorities have talked about reopening the town's chemical plant, much of its equipment has been stripped and taken as scrap material or transferred to Russia. (The practice of harvesting metal from Ukrainian factories and equipment became common across the entire Donbas region after 2014.)

Even more bleak is the case of Mariupol, the once thriving port city on the Sea of Azov that until the invasion began boasted a population of 540,000. From February to May 2022, Russian forces unleashed an exceptionally brutal siege on the city, surrounding it by land and sea, laying waste to apartment complexes, schools, hospitals, theaters, and other buildings, driving out anyone who could escape, and forcing all who remained into basements, often with almost no access to heat, food, or water. By the end of the ordeal, some 95 percent of the city had been destroyed and, according to an investigation by Human Rights Watch, more than 10,000 civilians killed. Ukrainian officials estimate that as few as 90,000 of the city's residents remained.

Yet over the past year, Moscow has heavily promoted the destroyed city to Russian settlers, claiming that the population has risen again to 240,000. In January 2024, clips from a Russian state television documentary about Mariupol's new real estate market went viral. Designed as a PR film to promote the Russian reconstruction of the city, the documentary shows a Russian journalist casually walking through a residential unit in a bombed-out building—what the documentary refers to as a *razrushka*, “little wrecked apartment”—and talking with local real estate agents, who offer her the chance to invest in the abandoned ruins. The film crew walks through the debris, stepping over the belongings left behind by fleeing Ukrainians, while a cheerful voice speaks about a marvelous view from the balcony.

VIP apartments that have already been repaired, the film announces, are being sold for up to \$50,000, and only people coming from “Greater Russia” can afford them. One agent complains that “there are not many survivors per square meter,” and those locals who have survived can't afford new housing, even with a mortgage. The compensation paid by Russia to a Mariupol resident for the destruction is \$350 per square meter. But people who lived downtown and whose houses were demolished won't have a chance to move back, even if a new building is being constructed on the same site.

As Ibrahim Olabi, a British international human rights lawyer who has testified before the UN Security Council on abuses in Syria and who serves as chief legal counsel for The Reckoning Project, has argued, Russian occupation practices follow a deliberate strategy. Russian rule is designed to instill fear among local residents, compelling them to either flee or support Moscow. In addition to indoctrination, the occupiers enforce policies that are aimed at altering the demographic and societal fabric of these regions, paving the way for more land grabs in the future. They also push forward Putin's larger project of progressively

eroding the foundations of Ukraine itself: not only by damaging the economy and blocking crucial supply chains but also by separating families, creating new social fractures, and continually destabilizing the rest of the country with the threat of new invasion.

## **WAR BY OTHER MEANS**

In comments and social media posts during his campaign and in the run-up to his inauguration, Trump called for a rapid agreement between Russia and Ukraine to end the war. Western experts have also argued that Kyiv should agree to freeze the frontline and accept the loss of the territories and people now under Russian control. Ukraine's government and military leadership respond that if they were simply given more sophisticated weapons, including ones that would allow strikes against Russian command-and-control centers, Ukraine might not be able to restore its full territorial integrity, but it could push Russian forces farther away. Still, even many of those who view Ukraine's ambition to restore its full territorial integrity as a matter of upholding international law and principle see the goal as out of touch with reality.

Putin doesn't care about Mariupol, Sievierodonetsk, or the villages his forces have occupied in the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions. He doesn't see why the United States should care who controls such places; in his view, Russia is bigger and stronger than Ukraine, and that settles the matter. But just as annexing Crimea and invading eastern Ukraine in 2014 didn't prevent a further Russian invasion, nor will granting Moscow formal control of the territories it has gained since 2022. After the Soviet victory in [World War II](#), Joseph Stalin made a speech hailing the "screws of the immense machine of the government." The screws were the Soviet people, which in Stalin's eyes were replaceable material at the state's disposal. For Putin, controlling the land, erasing the slightest traces of Ukrainian statehood, and indoctrinating the people through propaganda and terror are ways to create more "screws" for his permanent war.

Yet people are not things, empires are not invincible, and no one can control everything. In Crimea before 2022, almost any form of resistance was impossible because of the pervasive presence of agents of the FSB, Russia's internal security service. It seemed as if the local population had completely embraced annexation. Today, by contrast, activists regularly spread yellow ribbons, symbols of Ukrainian resistance, in Yalta and Sevastopol. These remarkable acts of defiance show that the opposition is conditioned not only on the strength of Russia's security apparatus—in fact, the Russian state has become even more oppressive since the war began—but also on the extent to which people themselves believe that the current state of affairs is not permanent and that things might change. Although Russian forces occupied the Ukrainian city of Kherson for nine months, they were eventually forced to retreat, and it became clear that the occupying institutions they had set up had utterly failed to Russify the local population.

But many more Ukrainian areas remain firmly in Russian hands, and Ukraine has few positive messages to deliver to the people in these areas beyond hoping for the best. Ukraine, as well as its allies, must understand that allowing Russia to occupy and rule over a huge area of Ukraine that it has taken by force is not just a violation of every international norm but also dangerous to global stability. Allowing Moscow to make its occupation permanent as the price for stopping the current fighting would simply make the war even more violent in the future.

Polling by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology found that between early October and December of last year, the share of Ukrainians who said they were ready to make some territorial concessions to end the war has increased from 32 to 38 percent. But 51 percent still opposed any such concessions, despite the relentless pressure of war. In fact, focusing on this question misses the point that for most Ukrainians, the amount of land that Putin controls matters less than the way Russia has turned the occupation into a weapon of war. The crucial issue is about the security guarantees that will be required to neutralize this weapon and preserve Ukrainian sovereignty.

Ukraine might be able to consider a deal to end the war if, for example, it were offered membership in [NATO](#), given enough sophisticated weapons to defend itself in the future, joined the European Union, and received from the West all the financing it needed for reconstruction. But until Washington and its European allies provide those kinds of guarantees, and until the West recognizes that Russia's occupation is really aimed at the rest of Ukraine, Ukrainians are likely to stay committed to the war, however high the costs. And if a cease-fire is reached that does not address this continuing Russian threat, lasting peace and stability will remain elusive.

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