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Ukraine's unbelievable resistance

A year after the start of the war, Denis Trubetskoy looks at the hardships of the last months and on the hope that motivates Ukrainians to keep going

Something unbelievable has happened in Kyiv in recent weeks – but I don't mean the visit of US President Joe Biden. Biden's trip was tremendously important, and most Ukrainians were probably happy to accept the unfamiliar traffic jams it occasioned. Although he has been to Ukraine many times as vice president, this was the first visit by a US *president* since 2008. In the midst of the war *and* on the day commemorating the victims of the Maidan massacre in February 2014, his visit was a strong signal and morale booster.

In recent weeks, the strength of the Ukrainian resistance has been amazing, with the capital managing to provide its citizens with electricity despite Russia's unrelenting attacks on the infrastructure. Not counting the front line, Ukraine's capital – along with Odesa – is the area most affected by the Russian strikes to the country's energy infrastructure that began on 10 October 2022. These days, they rarely make headlines in the West, but have not at all decreased: an average of 50 to 60 missiles are fired on Ukraine every seven to 14 days. Added to that are the Iranian combat drone attacks.

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It was long assumed that the electricity situation in Ukraine, especially here in Kyiv, would not fundamentally improve before late March. The daily routine of three hours with electricity followed by three without – and no heating, electricity or water for three or four days after a successful Russian strike – was expected to continue for the foreseeable future. But then we had six full hours of electricity at a time followed by three-hour blackouts, and since 12 February, apart from local exceptions, there have been *no* power outages. In Kyiv, for the first time in two months, electric-powered public transport – trams and trolley buses –

have been running. There is also a bit more street lighting.

It's not possible to downplay the horrific damage to Ukraine's energy infrastructure. Yet, despite the attacks, the country – and the state, which many Ukrainians used to underestimate – manages to keep things going. That is a vital glimmer of hope for people who continue to go about their daily lives as best as they can, although they've had hardly any cause to be happy for a year. It's a ray of hope that motivates them to keep up the fight despite knowing that the first 15 missile attacks on the country's energy infrastructure will be followed by a 16th and a 17th. The first anniversary of the major invasion is neither here nor there. On 24 February, Russia will probably stage another massive attack. At the end of the day, it doesn't matter if it happens then or on the 26 – it is inevitable.

The war is going to drag on for a long time

In the last 365 days, one of the hardest things for Ukrainians has been accepting their new reality. But, of course, other things sustain them, especially their army, which Ukrainians had not underestimated as so many foreigners had done. Even so, not everyone had believed it could strike back so hard against Russia during the counteroffensive in the Kharkiv region and the liberation of the key city of Kherson. And not just the army inspired confidence. In addition to the fantastic performances of some energy operators, there was the incredibly reliable (and not necessarily expected) work of state-owned companies such as the Ukrainian Railways and the Ukrainian Postal Service. Other institutions like the National Police have also gained prestige for good reasons.

These positive factors aside, the war is going to drag on for a long, long time. Ukrainians have had to abandon their initial illusions that it could all be over in a few weeks – or months. Russian President Vladimir Putin is ready to go all out to achieve at least some of his goals, with more mobilisation rounds (open, semi-open or covert), a de facto war economy, the deepening militarisation of Russian society and, strangely

enough, still without calling the war a 'war'. There is no end in sight. The Russian side is not even remotely interested in seriously negotiating.

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Everyone in Ukraine knows someone who has been killed or seriously wounded in this Russian war of aggression. With Russia sending more cannon fodder to the front – whether forced recruits from the Donbas, recruited convicts or ordinary Russians who were mobilised – Ukraine also has to call up more people. But Russia can hardly do more than mobilise and equip 200 000 to 300 000 recruits every few months and Ukraine can match that for a very long time. Theoretically, Russia has more human resources, so the longer the war lasts, the more Ukrainian men will be drafted. That will make the war much more real in every home – although it's already incredibly close and is affecting Ukrainians' mental health. There is hardly any adult in the country without psychological problems.

Rejecting the 'Russian world'

So why is there still an absolute, undisputed social consensus in Ukraine? We know that we have to keep fighting to beat back Russia as far as possible on Ukrainian territory and that Ukraine must become so strong that Russia would never ever consider attacking us again. The Western and especially the German debate about peace talks was settled between 2015 and 2021. The Minsk Agreements in February 2015 were a very painful compromise for Ukraine. And still, they were violated just three days later when Russians and pro-Russian separatists captured the city of Debaltseve. In the following years, Moscow made it impossible for Kyiv to fulfil the Minsk Agreement through its mass issuance of Russian passports to residents of Donetsk and Luhansk, as well as the continuous integration of the 'Peoples' Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk' into the political and economic life of the Russian Federation. Ukrainians know from experience what negotiations with Russia are worth. They also know that postponing this conflict is pointless.

But the most important reason to fight on is that everyone knows someone who has been occupied – whether in the Kyivan suburbs like Bucha and Irpin, or in the districts of Chernihiv or Sumy, or in Kherson. These tragedies are personal. Everyone has been witnessing Russia's attacks on the country's civilian infrastructure since last October. They

see Russia targeting major cities like Dnipro and Kremenchuk with inaccurate old missiles that hit department stores and blocks of flats – perhaps not intentionally, but knowing full well that could happen. Ukrainians know what the 'Russian world' on their territory would look like and decisively reject it – with or without electricity. In the second year of Russia's massive invasion, this will not change – however hard it may be to accept the current state of affairs.



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