FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 24.02.2026 | Iryna Krasnoshtan

Four lessons from four years of Russia's invasion

The world has become accustomed to terror, believes in ritual negotiations and hopes that time will solve everything. But illusions do not stop war

On 24 February 2026, it will be four years since the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine began – 1462 days. To put this in perspective, Russia's supposedly short 'special operation' has now lasted longer than the Soviet Union's army's fight against Nazi Germany in World War II.

While the human cost of Russian atrocities against Ukraine grows daily, global perception of the war is increasingly characterised by illusions, and those illusions impede political action. Let's unpack some of them.

What was once shocking, the daily life of Ukrainians under bombardments and drone attacks in the middle of Europe, has now become routine, ordinary. Some may be even surprised to find out that the war is still ongoing, as they stopped following it in the news. Even record-breaking attacks on Ukraine are no longer shocking anyone. 20 Russian drones in Polish airspace or unidentified drones hovering over critical infrastructure somewhere in Europe made the headlines. But a record 91 ballistic missiles targeting Ukraine in January 2026, or 24 ballistic missiles and 200 drones on February 12, went largely unnoticed in the European media. Ukrainians often go to bed not knowing if they or their close ones will wake up the next morning. But it is hard for someone on the outside to grasp what 6 000 combat drones, 5 500 guided aerial bombs, and 158 missiles of different types per month feel like, so these numbers become nothing more than statistics.

The current winter has been the harshest of the war: repeated strikes on Ukraine's energy infrastructure have left households without heat or electricity in temperatures as low as minus 20-25 degrees. Indoor temperatures in many homes fell to 7-10 degrees. And yet these outrageous Russian attacks that left millions of Ukrainians in the dark and cold have almost become a background noise outside of Ukraine.

But it is an illusion to believe that Ukrainians will simply get used to this suffering — as if the normalisation of terror is tolerable. Russia pursues a deliberate strategy to kill not only with missiles and drones, but also with the cold.

Mounting pressure

Some observers abroad appear more fatigued by the war than Ukrainians who live through it daily. While human suffering has continuously increased, public support for Ukraine has worryingly declined in some countries. For instance, in Poland, one of Ukraine's original key supporters. Thankfully, there are still moments of solidarity. After heavy strikes on Ukraine's energy infrastructure, millions of euros were raised in urgent aid for Ukraine in Poland, the Czech Republic, and many other countries. But while emotional solidarity fluctuates, the level of strategic threat does not. Russia knows how to quickly exploit and amplify frictions and weak points, employing its toolkit of hybrid measures.

Governments continue to allocate packages of humanitarian and military support. Europeans have stepped up when American support dropped. At the same time, support not been guided by necessities on the ground, but by political compromise and limitations. Despite many discussions, Ukraine did not receive the Tomahawks or Taurus missiles. Moreover, Ukraine's supporters insisted on limitations to the use of long-range capabilities that they provided. There is still no political resolve to establish a SkyShield over Ukraine, and the vessels of the Russian 'shadow fleet' continue to sail with only limited obstruction.

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In short, it is an illusion to believe that solidarity alone can substitute a structural, needs-based approach and real political resolve. Support for Ukraine should not be viewed merely as generosity; it should be perceived as an investment in common European security.

All of last year, the international community expected that the war would be resolved soon. Yet we are in 2026 with no ceasefire in sight. Negotiations have been transformed into a ritual. Progress is periodically reported, and yet no one on the ground in Ukraine feels an inch closer to peace. The elusive 'peace talks' dominated discussions, yet there is still no clear strategy on how to change Russian strategic calculus.

At the same time, the term 'victory' has largely disappeared from discourse when speaking about Ukraine, often together with the word

‘accountability’ when speaking about the aggressor. As the focus of talks is narrowed to the Donbas, Crimea is almost fully taken out of the equation. Yet as long as Crimea is under Russian occupation, there can be no sustainable long-term security for the Black Sea region — regardless of any provisional deal.

Pressure mounts on Ukraine to give up parts of Donetsk region to Russia, as though this would end the war. People conveniently forget that Russia has failed to take these territories militarily not for four years, but for twelve.

With every drone and missile hitting Ukrainians with Russian continuing terror, it is becoming increasingly clear that Russia does not seek peace. Instead, it uses the illusion of negotiations as cover for its escalation of the war and in an attempt to gain diplomatically what it cannot secure militarily.

Time works very differently in a country at war. Some European leaders talk hopefully about Russia's degrading economy and internal exhaustion. But that, too, is an illusion. It is wishful thinking that Russia will eventually reach the breaking point by itself. Pressure does not accumulate automatically — it must be applied continuously. As President Volodymyr Zelensky mentioned at the Munich Security Conference, new technological possibilities for the aggressor are evolving fast, while the political decisions to counter them take too much time. Still worse, US President Donald Trump is even applying time as a pressure tool against Ukraine, insisting that Zelensky act fast, otherwise ‘the window of opportunity’ could close.

While Ukraine needs European support, Europe also needs Ukraine.

Illusions of normalcy, solidarity, diplomacy, or time will not protect Ukrainians; only decisive action matching the scale of the threat can. And while Ukraine needs European support, Europe also needs Ukraine. Through the tragic necessity of fighting against Russia’s aggression, the Ukrainian army has become the only force in Europe – and perhaps globally – with comprehensive battlefield experience in high-intensity modern war. Recent exercises, including publicly shared examples from the Hedgehog NATO exercise in Estonia, have demonstrated how much European armies can learn from Ukrainian expertise. Counter-drone tactics, layered air defence adaptation, and rapid battlefield innovation are not theoretical

concepts for Ukraine, but blood-earned practice.

Europe needs deeper cooperation with Ukraine in the field of defence innovation. It must be prepared to learn from Ukrainians on the ground and in the air, and even to engage jointly. This is not charity, but mutual security.

We must work together to protect Ukraine today and Europe tomorrow.



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