

Media Changes Narrative as the Ukrainian Proxy War is Coming to an End

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The Economist reports that "Russia is slicing through Ukrainian defences" and Ukraine is subsequently "struggling to survive".^[1] Across the Western media, the public is prepared for defeat and painful concessions in future negotiations. The media is changing the narrative as reality can no longer be ignored. Russia's coming victory has been obvious since at least the summer of 2023, yet this was ignored to keep the proxy war going.

We are witnessing an impressive demonstration of narrative control: For more than two years, the political-media elites have been chanting "Ukraine is winning" and denounced any dissent to their narrative as "Kremlin talking points" that aim to reduce support for the war. What was "Russian propaganda" yesterday is now suddenly the consensus of the collective media. Critical self-reflection is as absent as it was after the Russiagate reporting.

Similar narrative control was displayed when the media reassured the public for two decades that NATO was winning, before fleeing in a great rush with dramatic images of people falling off an airplane.

The media deceived the public by presenting the stagnant frontlines as evidence that Russia was not winning. However, in a war of attrition, the direction of the war is measured by attrition rates – the losses on each side. Territorial control comes after the adversary has been exhausted as territorial expansion is very costly in such high-intensity warfare with powerful defensive lines. The attrition rates have throughout the war been extremely unfavourable to Ukraine, and they continuously get worse. The current collapse of the Ukrainian frontlines was very predictable as the manpower and weaponry have been exhausted.

Why has the former narrative expired? The public could be misled by fake attrition rates, yet it is not possible to cover up territorial changes after the eventual breaking point. Furthermore, the proxy war was beneficial to NATO when the Russians and Ukrainians were bleeding each other without any significant territorial changes. Once the

Ukrainians are exhausted and begin to lose strategic territory, it is no longer in the interest of NATO to continue the war.

Narrative Control: Weaponising Empathy

The political-media elites weaponised empathy to get public support for war and disdain for diplomacy. The Western public was convinced to support the proxy war against Russia by appealing to their empathy for the suffering of Ukrainians and the injustice of their loss of sovereignty. Yet, all appeals to empathy are always translated into support for continued warfare and dismissing diplomatic solutions.

Those who disagreed with the NATO's mantra that "weapons are the way to peace" and instead suggested negotiations, were quickly dismissed as puppets of the Kremlin who did not care about Ukrainians. Support for continued fighting in a war that cannot be won has been the only acceptable expression of empathy.

For the postmodernists seeking to socially construct their own reality, great power rivalry is largely a battle of narratives. The weaponisation of empathy enabled the war narrative to become impervious to criticism. War is virtuous and diplomacy is treasonous as Ukraine was allegedly fighting Russia's unprovoked war with the objective to subjugate the entire country. A strong moral framing convinced people to deceive and self-censor in support of the noble cause.

Even criticism of how Ukrainian civilians were dragged into cars by their government and sent to their deaths on the frontlines was portrayed as supporting "Kremlin talking points" as it undermined the NATO war narrative.

Reporting on high Ukrainian casualty rates threatened to undermine support for the war. Reporting on the failure of sanctions threatened to reduce public support for the sanctions. Reporting on the likely US destruction of Nord Stream threatened to create divisions within the military bloc. Reporting on the US and UK sabotage of the Minsk agreement and the Istanbul negotiations threatens the narrative of NATO merely attempting to "help" Ukraine. The public is offered the binary option of adhering either to the pro-Ukraine/NATO narrative or the pro-Russia narrative. Anyone challenging the narrative with inconvenient facts could thus be accused of supporting Moscow's narrative. Reporting that Russia was winning was uncritically interpreted as taking Russia's side.

There are ample facts and statements that demonstrate NATO has been fighting to the last Ukrainian to weaken a strategic rival. Yet, the strict narrative control entails that such evidence have not been permitted to be discussed.

The Objectives of a Proxy War: Bleeding the Adversary

The strict demand for loyalty to the narrative conceals unreported facts that US foreign policy is about restoring global primacy and not an altruistic commitment to liberal

democratic values. The US considers Ukraine to be an important instrument to weaken Russia as a strategic rival.

RAND Corporation, a think tank funded by the US government and renowned for its close ties with the intelligence community, published a report in 2019 on how the US could bleed Russia by pulling it further into Ukraine. RAND recognised that the US could send more military equipment to Ukraine and threaten NATO expansion to provoke Russia to increase its involvement in Ukraine:

“Providing more U.S. military equipment and advice could lead Russia to increase its direct involvement in the conflict and the price it pays for it... While NATO’s requirement for unanimity makes it unlikely that Ukraine could gain membership in the foreseeable future, Washington pushing this possibility could boost Ukrainian resolve while leading Russia to redouble its efforts to forestall such a development”.[\[2\]](#)

However, the same RAND report recognised that the strategy of bleeding Russia had to be carefully “calibrated” as a full-scale war could result in Russia acquiring strategic territories, which is not in the interest of the US. After Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, the strategy was similarly to keep the war going as long as there were not significant territorial changes.

In March 2022, Leon Panetta (former White House Chief of Staff, US Secretary of Defence, and CIA Director) acknowledged: “We are engaged in a conflict here, it’s a proxy war with Russia, whether we say so or not.... The way you get leverage is by, frankly, going in and killing Russians”.[\[3\]](#) Even Zelensky recognised in March 2022 that some Western states wanted to use Ukraine as a proxy against Russia: “There are those in the West who don't mind a long war because it would mean exhausting Russia, even if this means the demise of Ukraine and comes at the cost of Ukrainian lives”.[\[4\]](#)

US Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin outlined the objectives in the Ukraine proxy war to as weakening its strategic adversary:

“We want to see Russia weakened to the degree that it can't do the kinds of things that it has done in invading Ukraine.... So it [Russia] has already lost a lot of military capability. And a lot of its troops, quite frankly. And we want to see them not have the capability to very quickly reproduce that capability”.[\[5\]](#)

There have also been indications of regime change that destruction of Russia as wider goals of the war. Sources in the US and UK governments confirmed in March 2022 that the objective was for “the conflict to be extended and thereby bleed Putin” as “the only end game now is the end of Putin regime”.[\[6\]](#) President Biden suggested that regime change was necessary in Russia: “For God’s sake, this man cannot remain in power”. However, the White House later walked back Biden’s these dangerous remarks.

The spokesperson of Prime Minister Boris Johnson, also made an explicit reference to regime change by arguing “the measures we’re introducing, that large parts of the world are introducing, are to bring down the Putin regime”. James Heapey, the UK Minister for the Armed Forces, similarly wrote in the *Daily Telegraph*:

“His failure must be complete; Ukrainian sovereignty must be restored, and the Russian people empowered to see how little he cares for them. In showing them that, Putin’s days as President will surely be numbered and so too will those of the kleptocratic elite that surround him. He’ll lose power and he won’t get to choose his successor”.^[7]

Fighting to the Last Ukrainian

Chas Freeman, the former US Assistant Secretary of Defence for International Security Affairs and Director for Chinese Affairs at the US State Department, criticised Washington’s decision to “fight to the last Ukrainian”.^[8]

Republican Senator Lindsey Graham outlined the favourable arrangements the US had established with Ukraine: “I like the structural path we’re on here. As long as we help Ukraine with the weapons they need and the economic support, they will fight to the last person”.^[9] The Republican leader, Mitch McConnell, cautioned against conflating idealism the hard reality of US objectives in the proxy war:

“President Zelenskyy is an inspiring leader. But the most basic reasons for continuing to help Ukraine degrade and defeat the Russian invaders are cold, hard, practical American interests. Helping equip our friends in Eastern Europe to win this war is also a direct investment in reducing Vladimir Putin’s future capabilities to menace America, threaten our allies, and contest our core interests.... Finally, we all know that Ukraine’s fight to retake its territory is neither the beginning nor end of the West’s broader strategic competition with Putin’s Russia”.^[10]

Senator Mitt Romney argued that arming Ukraine was “We’re diminishing and devastating the Russian military for a very small amount of money... a weakened Russia is a good thing”, and it comes at a relatively low cost as “we’re losing no lives in Ukraine”. Senator Richard Blumenthal similarly asserted: “we’re getting our money’s worth on our Ukraine investment” because “for less than 3 percent of our nation’s military budget, we’ve enabled Ukraine to degrade Russia’s military strength by half... All without a single American service woman or man injured or lost”.^[11] Congressman Dan Crenshaw agrees that “investing in the destruction of our adversary’s military, without losing a single American troop, strikes me as a good idea”.^[12]

Retired US General Keith Kellogg similarly argued in March 2023 that “if you can defeat a strategic adversary not using any US troops, you are at the acme of professionalism”. Kellogg further explained that using Ukrainians to fight Russia “takes a strategic adversary off the table” and thus enables the US to focus on its “primary adversary which is China”. NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg also argued that defeating Russia

and using Ukraine as a bulwark against Russia “will make it easier” for the US “to focus also on China... if Ukraine wins, then you will have the second biggest army in Europe, the Ukrainian army, battle-hardened, on our side, and we'll have a weakened Russian army, and we have also now Europe really stepping up for defense spending”.[\[13\]](#)

In Search of a New Narrative

A new victory narrative is required as a NATO-backed Ukraine cannot realistically defeat Russia on the battlefield. The strongest narrative is obviously to claim that Russia has failed in its objective to annex all of Ukraine to recreate the Soviet Empire and thereafter conquer Europe. This narrative enables NATO to claim victory. After Ukraine’s disastrous counter-offensive in the summer of 2023, such a new narrative was indicated by Ignatius in the *Washington Post*, where he argued the measurement of success is the weakening of Russia:

“Meanwhile, for the United States and its NATO allies, these 18 months of war have been a strategic windfall, at relatively low cost (other than for the Ukrainians). The West’s most reckless antagonist has been rocked. NATO has grown much stronger with the additions of Sweden and Finland. Germany has weaned itself from dependence on Russian energy and, in many ways, rediscovered its sense of values. NATO squabbles make headlines, but overall, this has been a triumphal summer for the alliance”.[\[14\]](#)

Sean Bell, a former Royal Air Force Air Vice-Marshal and Ministry of Defence staffer, argued in September 2023 that the war had significantly degraded the Russian military to the point it ‘no longer poses a credible threat to Europe’. Bell therefore concluded that “the Western objective of this conflict has been achieved” and “The harsh reality is that Ukraine’s objectives are no longer aligned with their backers”.[\[15\]](#)

The Ukrainian proxy has been exhausted, which ends the proxy war unless NATO is prepared to go to war against Russia. As NATO is preparing to cut its losses, a new narrative is required. As the narrative changes, it will soon be permitted to call for negotiations as a display of empathy for the Ukrainians.

This article includes some excerpts from my book: “The Ukraine War and the Eurasian World Order”

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