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Nicole Gnesotto,
Vice-President of
the Jacques Delors Institute

BLOG
— **POST**

SERIES:
IN THE FACE OF WAR (3/4)

Victory, but what kind?



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We will support Ukraine until victory is won. This is the only strategy that is right, reasonable and morally responsible. That said, behind this western consensus lie many questions, things left unsaid, nuanced attitudes and perhaps even differences with regard to what a Ukrainian victory actually is. Let us go through them.

1. Victory at what cost? Acceptability of Ukraine's victory is bookended by two extremes, not only for western strategies but also in terms of public opinion: the extreme situation of a direct confrontation between NATO and Russia, and Russia's total destruction of Ukraine. If Ukraine is victorious but shattered, destroyed and bled dry, like 600,000 km² reduced to rubble, this would be no more acceptable than a strategic slippery slope towards world war, possibly nuclear, against Russia. Yet Putin may decide that if he cannot win the war himself, he may as well destroy Ukraine before losing. Similarly, he may conclude that, even though it may well mean losing, he might as well inflict the maximum amount of damage, including to NATO's European armies. Helping Ukraine to win, while successfully avoiding either of these equally unacceptable pitfalls, is no mean feat.
2. What would victory look like? The definition of victory differs greatly among countries and political leaders: is it a recovery of the Ukrainian lands lost since 2014, crushing the Russian armed forces or Putin's fall from power? There only seems to

be consensus on the first of these objectives: the two others are among the things left unsaid, the hopes and hidden ambitions of some Westerners, who are divided on the war's ultimate goals. Only Emmanuel Macron has had the courage to state that Russia's defeat does not mean that the "country has to be crushed". This makes good strategic sense, but completely fails to satisfy some of his allies, for whom unconditional support for Ukraine goes beyond the country's territory. Can common ground be found concerning the objectives of this war?

3. Which territories are at stake? Let's say that our objective is "only" to help Ukraine to recover its lost territory; it is just as difficult to define this geographical goal. Volodymyr Zelensky is clear in his drive to win back all the regions claimed by Moscow since 2014, both Donbass and Crimea, which is perfectly understandable. However, for the West, there should be a debate on this issue, as there are differing points of view, even though we are refusing to spell them out clearly at this stage. A majority of Europeans support Ukraine's president and include the retaking of Crimea in their definition of a Ukrainian victory. Others, however, stress that Crimea raises a series of significant challenges. All of us in the West, Americans and Europeans, stood by when Moscow annexed Crimea in 2014: even though we did not formally recognise Crimea's annexation under international law, in practice, we let Putin take this territory and apply Russian law there. Would taking it back not equate with attacking a territory that Russians have viewed as theirs for the last ten years, due to our own impotence?
4. Lastly, which resources should be allocated to bring about Ukraine's victory? It currently makes no sense to debate weapons supply, because reactions are more emotional than rational. What is our strategy? Does it need fighter aircraft to be a success? Does it involve the option of strikes on Russian territory, with all the ambiguity raised by Crimea? Do we know where to draw the line or will we settle for improvising as we go on, until we reach another option than military escalation?

Some will retort that the West's strategic vagueness is necessary if we are to heighten Russian confusion. Let us hope that it does not above all reflect our short-sightedness. •

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Institut Jacques Delors
Penser l'Europe • Thinking Europe • Europa Denken
18 rue de Londres 75009 Paris, France • www.delorsinstitute.eu
T +33 (0)1 44 58 97 97 • info@delorsinstitute.eu

