

Is this the Beginning of the End of the War in Ukraine?

The Western media is suddenly teeming with signs of fatigue and even diplomacy?

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"I don't think that [the war] is a stalemate," Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky [told NBC News' Meet the Press on Sunday](#).

"They thought they would checkmate us, but," he insisted, "this didn't happen." According to recent interviews, his military leadership disagrees. His political inner circle thinks his insistence is delusional.

Zelensky is facing pressure both from within Ukraine and from without. Growing pressure from within is coming from both the political and military leadership; growing pressure from without is coming from Ukraine's key partners.

The battle is largely being played out in the Western media. Most intimately, Zelensky has faced criticism from his political inner circle. TIME magazine [reports](#) that some of the president's advisors have become worried that his "belief in Ukraine's ultimate victory over Russia . . . "verg[es] on the messianic." One of Zelensky's "closest aides" said that Zelensky "deludes himself." The aide complained, "We're out of options. We're not winning. But try telling him that."

Some Zelensky aides say his intransigence hampers Ukraine's ability to adapt to the changed reality on the battlefield and worry that negotiating a settlement with Russia remains "taboo."

Domestic criticism is also coming from the top levels of the military. Zelensky is [reportedly](#) in conflict with his generals over the conduct of the counteroffensive and over his demands to defend Bakhmut and Avdiivka at any cost, which the military leadership sees as a strategic mistake that is already hurting Ukraine dearly in soldiers and equipment.

A senior Ukrainian military officer [said](#) that orders from the president's office are, at times, disconnected from the battlefield reality and defended some front-line commanders who have begun second-guessing and refusing "orders from the top."

Zelensky's struggle with his generals intensified on November 3 when Zelensky fired General Viktor Khorenko, the commander of Ukraine's special operations forces. The commander-in-chief of the Ukrainian army, General Valery Zaluzhny, [did not request his dismissal](#). The New York Times [reports](#) that "It was unclear whether General Zaluzhny, the overall commander of Ukraine's forces, knew in advance of the planned dismissal" and that "[t]he firing appeared to undercut General Zaluzhny's authority."

The firing took U.S. military officers, who "described a close and effective working relationship with" Khorenko, by surprise. Khorenko's special operations forces had had some success with long-range strikes and sabotage operations behind Russian lines. But the NYT reports that there had been tension over what the military had "perceived as politically guided decisions on strategy" that had been ineffective and costly.

Zelensky's tensions with his generals reached a peak with Zaluzhny's November 1 [interview](#) with The Economist. He asserted that the war had reached a "stalemate." He conceded that "There will most likely be no deep and beautiful breakthrough."

What's worse is that Zaluzhny implied that the stalemate would evolve into defeat for Ukraine. A stalemate entails a long war of attrition. In a companion [essay](#) published simultaneously by The Economist, he explained that a long war "as a rule, in most cases, is beneficial to one of the parties to the conflict. In our particular case, it is the Russian [sic] federation, as it gives it the opportunity to reconstitute and build up its military power."

Zaluzhny said that in a prolonged war, Ukraine will run out of the "required volume" of missiles and ammunition while Russia, despite sanctions, is increasing its production capabilities. And even if it didn't run out of weapons, he added, it will run out of men: a war of attrition "leads to the lack of Ukraine's ability to achieve superiority over the enemy in reserves by increasing their number." A close Zelensky aide told TIME that, even if the United States gave Ukraine all the weapons it needed, Kyiv doesn't "have the men to use them."

Zelensky's office censured Zaluzhny, saying it "eases the work" of Russia and stirs "panic" among Ukraine's Western partners. The New York Times [calls](#) the censure "a striking public rebuke that signaled an emerging rift between the military and civilian leadership."

In addition to the pressure coming from within Zelensky's inner political and military circle, diplomatic pressure is also coming from Zelensky's international partners.

A November 3 NBC News article reported that "U.S. and European officials have begun quietly talking to the Ukrainian government about what possible peace negotiations with Russia might entail to end the war." The article went on to say, citing one current and one former senior U.S. official familiar with the discussions, that "the conversations have included very broad outlines of what Ukraine might need to give up to reach a deal."

The quiet talks suggest agreement by the U.S. and its European allies with Zaluzhny that Ukraine may not achieve its goals on the battlefield, that the realization of their aspirations may continue to dim with prolonged battle, and that some concessions may need to be

made.

There is a remarkable convergence in the language used by the U.S. and European officials and the language used by Zaluzhny and Zelensky's aides. NBC reports that the conversations "began amid concerns among U.S. and European officials that the war has reached a stalemate." NBC reports that, like Zaluzhny, "[s]ome U.S. military officials have privately begun using the term 'stalemate' to describe the current battle in Ukraine."

Like Zaluzhny and Zelensky's aides, "Biden administration officials also are worried that Ukraine is running out of forces." According to "people familiar with the matter," NBC reported, "President Joe Biden has been intensely focused on Ukraine's depleting military forces." "Manpower," one of those sources is quoted as saying, "is at the top of the administration's concerns right now."

Echoing the "close Zelensky aide" quoted in TIME, the same source said, "The U.S. and its allies can provide Ukraine with weaponry, but if they don't have competent forces to use them it doesn't do a lot of good."

These concerns, NBC reported, have led U.S. officials to concede privately that "Ukraine likely only has until the end of the year or shortly thereafter before more urgent discussions about peace negotiations should begin."

That leaves only a couple of months. With the battlefield turning against Ukraine despite Zelensky's intransigent "belief in Ukraine's ultimate victory over Russia," the pressure targeted at Zelensky seems to be building, from both within and without,, to turn to the diplomatic front and face the beginning of the end of the war.

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Featured image: Ukrainian snipers attend shooting training near the front line amid Russia-Ukraine war in Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine, on February 18, 2023. [Source: businessinsider.com]

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