



## Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

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FROM THE SOVIET-AFGHAN WAR TO THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR

  
Fondation Pierre du Bois  
pour l'histoire du temps présent

Dr. Vassily, Klimentov SNSF Postdoctoral Fellow/Lecturer, History Department/Center for Eastern European Studies, University of Zurich \*

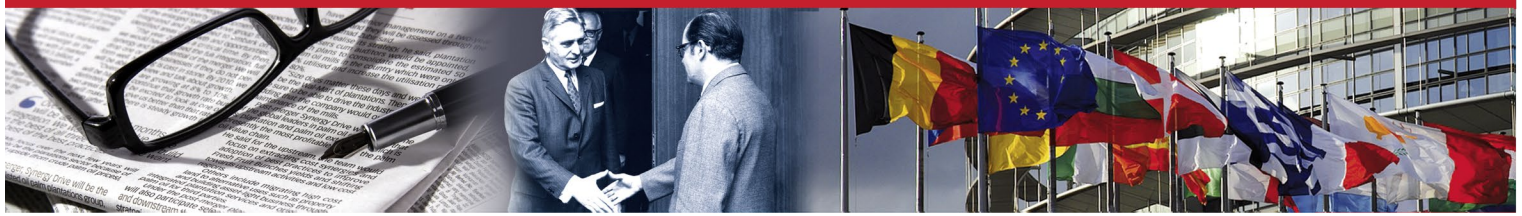
### FROM THE SOVIET-AFGHAN WAR TO THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR

As of February 2024, the war in Ukraine has been going on for two years. While a stalemate has emerged on the front with neither Russian, nor Ukrainian forces gaining significant ground since fall 2022, the war shows no sign of abating. The conflict has instead become a contest of trenches and artillery in which the two sides have settled in for the long haul. Following an assessment of the situation on the ground, it is therefore worth reflecting on future scenarios for the conflict. This essay does so by considering the Soviet-Afghan War (1979-89) as a source of insight. The latter conflict has received renewed attention, including my recent book, following the opening of new archives and the emergence of original eyewitness accounts.<sup>i</sup>

#### Moscow and Kyiv's Hope for a Military Solution

Russia and Ukraine still hope to improve their positions by force of arms. On the Ukrainian side, there is the hope that, pressured by Western economic sanctions and the horrifyingly high casualties its military sustains in Ukraine, Vladimir Putin's regime would crumble at home. Kyiv then hopes to not only retake the areas in Eastern Ukraine occupied since February 2022, but also the Donbass and Crimea lost in 2014. For this matter, Ukraine expects continuing military and economic support from the West and contemplates mobilising hundreds of thousands of additional troops to the front. This maximalist territorial objective remains central to the peace plan proposed by Volodymyr Zelensky in fall 2022. The Ukrainian President most recently tried to gather international support for it at the World Economic Forum's annual meeting in Davos, Switzerland, in January 2024.

On the Russian side, policymakers' intentions are more difficult to gauge. Hoping for a quick victory in 2022 that would see its annexation of Eastern Ukraine and the emergence of a client regime in the rest of Ukraine, Russia has had to settle for minimal territorial gains. It was able to stop the fall 2022 Ukrainian counter-offensive only thanks to a politically and economically costly 'partial mobilization' of its population. Although officials have recently



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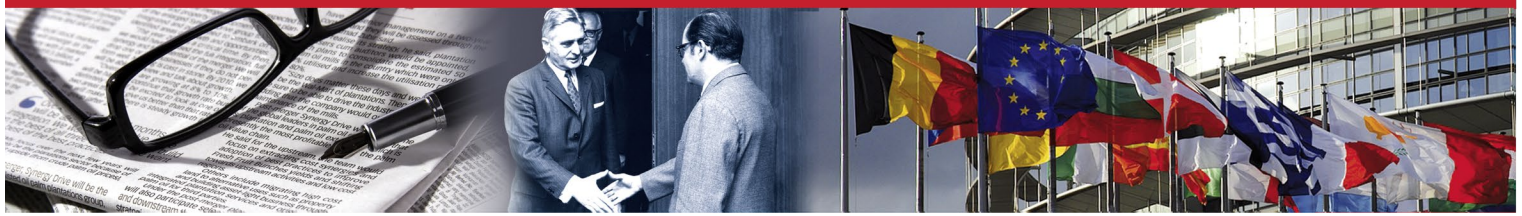
announced that there would be no rotation for mobilised Russians, the Russian society continues to live in fear of a new mobilisation.<sup>ii</sup>

Still, three factors have led to renewed optimism in Moscow in 2023 despite the shock of Yevgeny Prigozhin's coup attempt in June. First, Russia's economy has resisted better than expected to the economic sanctions. Its military sector has been able to increase production rates, allowing Russia to increase its battlefield dominance in artillery and missiles. Daily, the Russian artillery is reportedly firing five times as many shells as the Ukrainian one in parts of the front.<sup>iii</sup>

Second, Russia has successfully resisted the West's strategy to isolate it internationally. Moscow has strengthened its ties with Iran and North Korea who supply it with drones, missiles, and artillery shells. The non-Western world, including powers such as China, India, South Africa, Brazil, and Saudi Arabia, has remained on the fence regarding the war in Ukraine.<sup>iv</sup> While some have condemned Russia, they have not actively supported Ukraine. The rift between the West and 'the rest' has further increased following the start of the war between Hamas and Israel. As shown by the vote at the United Nations calling for a ceasefire in Gaza, most countries oppose the US unequivocal support to Israel.<sup>v</sup> Some have gradually adhered to Russia's argument about 'double standards', i.e., the idea that the West promotes international rules that it itself feels free to break.

Third, there is fatigue with Ukraine in the West. In the United States, the \$60 billion military aid package for Ukraine has troubles passing Congress as Republicans use the blockage to extract concessions from Joe Biden on immigration and US border security. Beyond this, as the United States moves toward an unpredictable presidential election between Biden and Donald Trump, there is uncertainty about what US foreign policy would look like if Trump was to prevail. In the European Union, while Hungary has relinquished and allowed the 50 billion euros aid package for Ukraine to pass, calls to limit entanglement in the war in Ukraine are rising in a context of high inflation and economic crisis. The far-right, which is traditionally more sympathetic to Moscow, has meanwhile consolidated its position across the continent.

The Kremlin thus hopes that it could wait out the West on Ukraine. Moscow believes that it could get a better peace deal on Ukraine in a couple of years than now. Against this background, the rumours of Russia's openness to a freezing of the war in Ukraine without a proper peace deal, if true, could be part of a strategy to further fragment the West's support to Ukraine.<sup>vi</sup> It would lower the importance of Ukraine on the West's agenda and make the allocation of long-term military aid politically more challenging because seemingly less urgent. A pause would moreover give the Kremlin time to stabilise the situation at home before the upcoming presidential elections in spring 2024 and rebuild its army.



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### Lessons from the Soviet-Afghan War

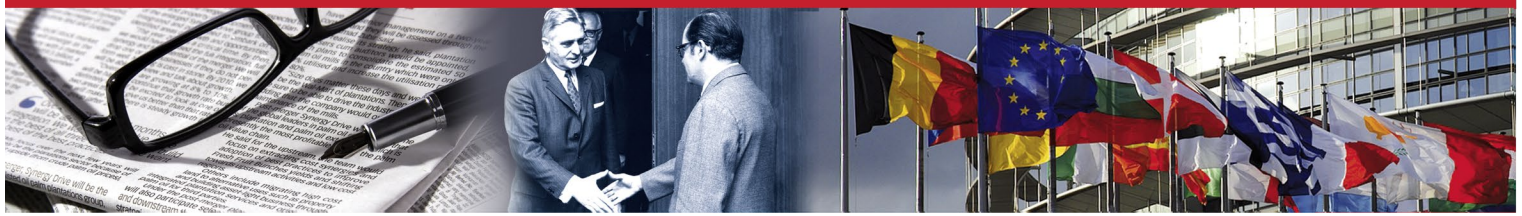
Last war of the Soviet Union and largest one for Moscow between the Second World War and the war in Ukraine, the Soviet-Afghan War lasted from December 1979 to February 1989. It pitted the Soviets backed by Afghan communist forces against the Mujahideen – the anti-communist Islamic guerrilla. While the Soviet-Afghan War was in many ways different from the Russian-Ukrainian war, it provides insights that may help imagine how the Russian-Ukrainian War may unfold in the future.

### The Decision to Go the War

The Soviet politburo saw its military intervention in Afghanistan as a defensive move. The Kremlin feared that Afghanistan would become pro-American either due to a victory of the Mujahideen, or because the embattled communist regime would break with the Soviets and strike a deal with the United States. The Soviets had no expansionist plan beyond Afghanistan. Beyond that, a second factor that led to the decision to intervene was ideology. The Soviets believed that they should help their 'Afghan communist brothers' and that they could remodel the country into a socialist utopia. Communist Afghanistan was to become a showcase for the Soviet development project propelled by industrialisation, the collectivisation of agriculture after a land reform, and education.

Without access to archives, it is impossible to know what was discussed in the Kremlin before the attack on Ukraine. Nonetheless, parallels between Afghanistan and Ukraine exist. First, similar reasons seem to have dominated decision-making in the Kremlin. The invasion of Ukraine has been born from Russia's insecurity reinforced by Ukraine's drift toward the West and possibility that it would join the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. Second, ideology, albeit in a different form, was also present. There is a debate about how central is the 'Russian civilisational idea' in Vladimir Putin's thinking, but some people in his circle believe in the messianic narrative about a 'Russian world' that would regroup the lands of the former Russian/ Soviet empire. In this context, if the war in Ukraine is not about imposing a development model, it is about imposing a historical path connected to Russia. In both cases, it is about deciding for another country of what is best, in Moscow's view, for its future.

A crucial difference lies in the decision-making leading to the wars. Yuri Andropov, Andrei Gromyko, and Dmitry Ustinov influenced the ailing Leonid Brezhnev and pushed for the Afghan war in 1979. Several other policymakers played a role around this triumvirate and backed the war for their own reasons. By contrast to this collegiality, Putin totally dominates decision-making in present-day Russia. It is unclear to which extent he integrates other decisionmakers' opinions. This personalisation of power makes Russia's foreign policy unpredictable and subject to sudden changes.



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### Improvisation & Groupthink in Moscow

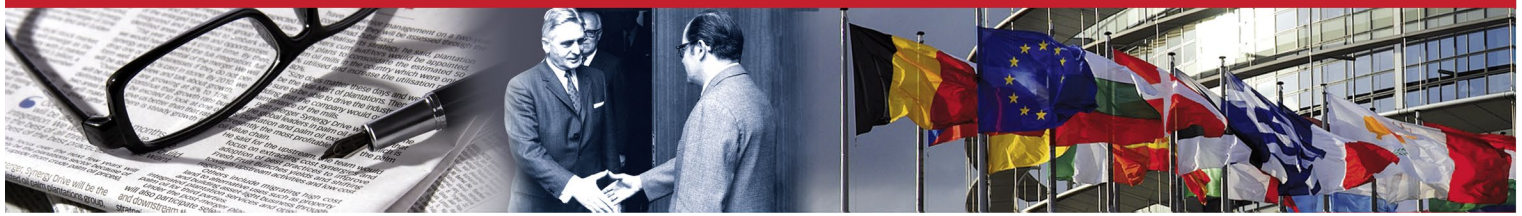
The Soviets had been utterly unprepared to fight in Afghanistan. When arriving, they had no maps, few Dari and Pashto speakers to act as translators, little idea of the politics within the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan – the Afghan communist party, and no understanding of the Afghan context, the traditions of the local ethnic groups, and the role Islam played in society. To preserve the secrecy of the operation, the Politburo even side-lined the existing Soviet Afghanistan experts in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Moscow Oriental Studies Institute, not consulting them, for example, about how to build support among the Afghan population. The Soviet intervention was about military operations and the building of socialism in Afghanistan. The latter, as communist dogma postulated, could happen anywhere in the world following roughly the same playbook.

The Kremlin similarly went into Ukraine without an idea of the opposition it would encounter and reliable intelligence about support to Russia in the east of the country. Like Afghanistan, the invasion of Ukraine was marred by improvisations. It was as a military operation with limited political activities to build support within the local population. The decisionmakers in Moscow thought that Ukrainians, like the Afghans in the 1980s, would, almost magically, support a foreign invading force. In Afghanistan, it took the Soviets years to acknowledge that they had been unable to garner popular support and that the war had been lost.

The latter aspect is telling of the groupthink that has plagued both the Brezhnev-era politburo and, to even a greater extent, Putin's circle. It does appear that in today's Kremlin, inconvenient information, for example, about Russia's defeats in Ukraine, the scale of Russia's casualties, the lack of popular support, and the corruption in the army is filtered out before even reaching the top leadership. Junior policymakers and military leaders seem eager to devise the mood of Putin in advance to not contradict him. Such decision-making processes are dangerous as opinions reinforcing each other in a small group could rapidly lead to escalatory rhetoric and action. Putin could thus feel emboldened to double down on the war.

### The Military Situation

The Soviets were surprised by the intensity of the fighting in Afghanistan and the ineffectiveness of the Afghan communist forces. While they came in as a support force, they had to take over the bulk of the fighting a few months after their arrival. In this context, the Soviet force – originally made of conscripts and rapidly mobilised units, notably from nearby Central Asia – had to be re-assembled after it became clear that an actual war was going on. The war itself went poorly for the Soviet Union. While Soviet forces learned to fight in the mountainous terrain, they never managed to control more than 20% of Afghanistan – the provincial capitals and the main roads – and remained continuously harassed by the Mujahideen. Fighting for nine years, the Soviets hoped to outlast the Mujahideen and their Western and Muslim supporters, but they ended up understanding that the opposite was more likely to happen, especially as external factors remained constant in the 1980s. In fine, the Soviet Union was unwilling to increase its military commitment in Afghanistan while the Mujahideen enjoyed growing foreign backing, popular support in



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Afghanistan, and sanctuaries in Pakistan and Iran. To paraphrase an Afghan proverb: the Soviets had the watches, but the Mujahideen had the time.

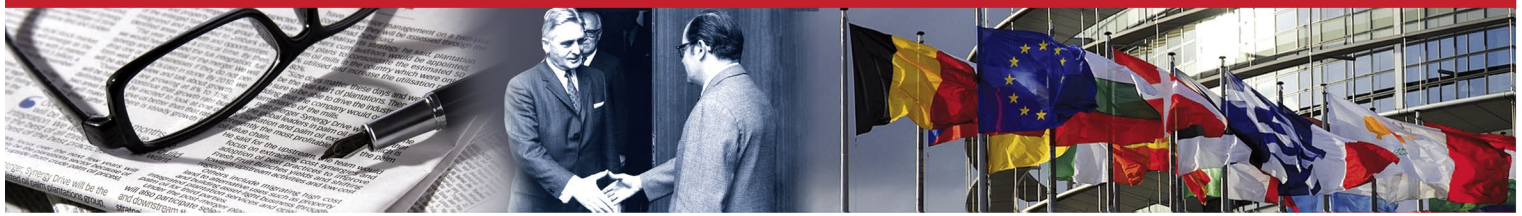
In Ukraine too, Moscow's forces began adapting to the terrain and improving their tactics after the failures of 2022. As in Afghanistan, this may though not cardinaly change the situation on the ground because Ukrainian forces are also improving, because both sides create better and better defences, and because the gap between the two military forces is not that significant. While unlike the asymmetric Soviet-Afghan War, the Russian-Ukrainian War is a conventional engagement, it appears that, here too, time is not on Moscow's side if external factors remain constant. A steady Western military and economic backing to Ukraine is likely to exhaust Moscow's forces over time.

### The Domestic Impact

The Soviet-Afghan War lasted for almost ten years. Yet, like the invasion of Ukraine, Moscow initially planned for it to be over in months. Against this background, Soviet policymakers were little worried about the conflict's domestic impact. The latter, nevertheless, grew as more Soviets were sent to and killed in Afghanistan. By 1989, casualties amounted to 15,000 Soviets dead – an official number that underestimates the real death toll. As conscripts came back in zinc coffins, the Soviet leadership tried to conduct burials privately, refused to have graves with headstones acknowledging that the deaths had happened in Afghanistan, and incentivised families to keep quiet about killed loved ones. The Kremlin also controlled information about Afghanistan. The newspapers and television refused to even acknowledge that the Soviets were involved in the fighting.

Hostility to the Soviet-Afghan War, however, rose over time as more soldiers came back home. By 1988, the Soviet Ambassador in Kabul had to acknowledge that a paramount issue was that the Afghan War was 'misunderstood by Soviet soldiers' and 'hidden from the Soviet people'.<sup>vii</sup> Secrecy and the vague motivations for the conflict impacted on soldiers' morale and led to distrust of the authorities at home. After he came to power, Mikhail Gorbachev rapidly made ending the war a key objective of perestroika. As he explained in 1986, the war had become a 'bleeding wound' for the Soviet Union. Moscow was haemorrhaging not only because of human losses but also because the war had grown into a massive military and economic commitment. While the Soviet-Afghan War did not bring the Soviet collapse, it contributed to Soviet economic and political difficulties in the 1980s.

Like Afghanistan, the invasion of Ukraine is creating tension at home for Moscow, even though Russian society has proved relatively resilient so far. The social impact of the conflict in Ukraine is already more important than the impact of the Soviet-Afghan War because 315,000 Russian soldiers have been killed and severely wounded in Ukraine according to US sources,<sup>viii</sup> and because the war has led to high inflation, a brewing economic crisis, and the vanishing of Western products from stores. Thanks to new technologies, information is also more easily available compared to Soviet times. Over time, anxiety over the war in Ukraine, whose reasons remain misunderstood by swathes of the Russian society that supports it based on their loyalty to the authorities, is likely to build. This will be especially so if the war again erupts into the daily routine of Russians through another mobilisation or attacks by Ukraine far away from the frontline. This is well understood by the Kremlin that has made considerable efforts to uphold an illusion of



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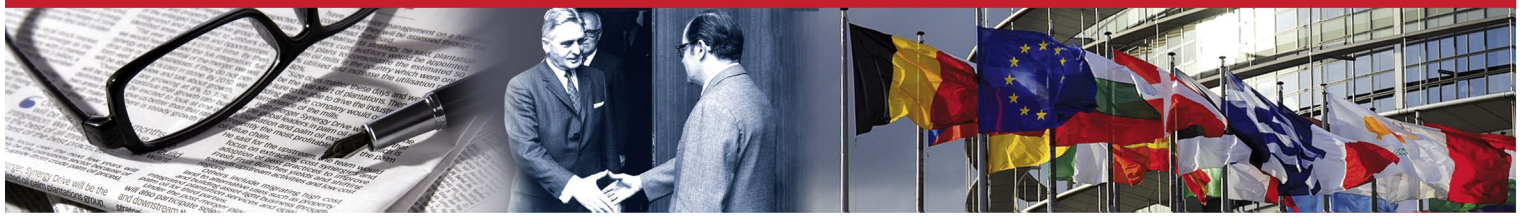
normal life in Russia even while the economy is being increasingly subordinated to war aims. This strategy has been rather successful so far, but it is unclear how long it will work if the war continues with the same intensity. As Ukraine, Russia will need more soldiers and more resources to keep the war going. This may in turn, as the Soviet-Afghan War eventually did, lead to more anti-governmental attitudes.

### 'Honourable Retreat' and Peace Negotiations

Last, but not least, it is worth considering how the Soviet-Afghan War ended. In 1980, some Soviets realised that the war was not going as planned and floated the possibility of an immediate withdrawal. The Kremlin, amidst limited information about the real situation and ideological blindness, believed that the conflict could still turn around. Although a stalemate prevailed from 1980 to 1985, the Soviets hoped to outlast the Mujahideen and intensified military operations, devising new tactics. No Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan was acceptable without it integrating Soviet demands for the survival of the Afghan communist regime and the end of international support to the Mujahideen. Accepting less, Soviet leaders believed, would be admitting their initial mistake in intervening and that all the destruction brought to Afghanistan had been for nothing. The Soviet Union had to have an 'honourable withdrawal'.

A key change that made a Soviet withdrawal possible was the passing of the decisionmakers who had started the conflict. Brezhnev, Andropov, Ustinov, and Konstantin Chernenko died between 1982 and 1985, leaving the sole Gromyko amidst the key people responsible for the intervention. This made it much easier for Gorbachev, now in charge, to blame the war on his predecessors and begin discussing a withdrawal. Interestingly, the ending of the war came then amidst a broader change in foreign policy as Gorbachev rebuilt ties with the West and in domestic policy as perestroika began. The Soviet-Afghan War increasingly then seemed as the remnant from another era.

There is, perhaps, here too a lesson for the Russian-Ukrainian War. Often, for a long-term solution to a conflict to emerge, the leadership needs to change. While a freezing of the conflict in Ukraine may be possible, it is difficult to imagine that Putin could willingly relinquish even part of the territories that Russia has annexed in Ukraine. This would mean him admitting his mistake in starting the war. By contrast, a future Russian leadership, which will eventually succeed Putin, could enter more meaningful peace negotiations with Ukraine. While this does not mean that it would be ready to give away all the areas captured by Russia since 2014, it would likely have more flexibility toward that. It could also rebuild bridges with the West as part of a settlement in Ukraine. The latter appears again unimaginable if Putin is Russia's President.



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### **A Tenuous Way Forward**

Several aspects are worth highlighting. As the Soviets in Afghanistan in 1979, the Russians have badly miscalculated when invading Ukraine in 2022. The two conflicts were ironically born from a perception of insecurity and an ideological drive in the Kremlin. This policymaking schizophrenia that is trying to both defend something and remake the world is what makes predicting Moscow's policy so difficult.

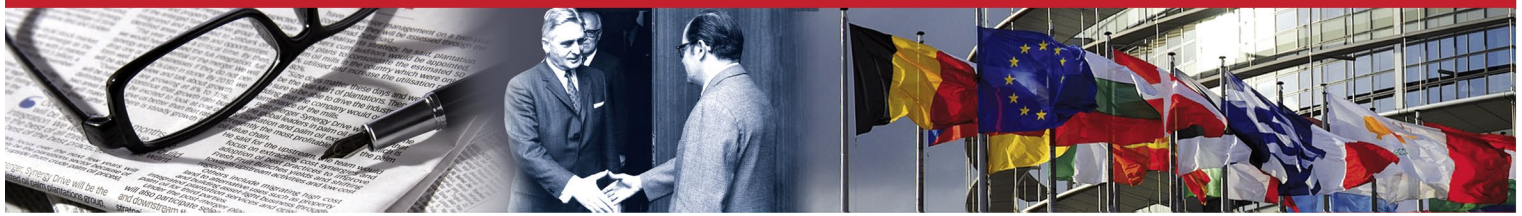
Second, both of Russia's motivations for invading Ukraine are subjective and reinforced by groupthink in the Kremlin. In authoritarian regimes, dissenting opinions are expurgated and only advisers who agree with the leader remain. This is even truer for today's Russia than for the Soviet politburo. This groupthink makes decisionmakers unable to objectively assess the information on the conflict and leads subordinates to provide only information that matches the leaders' pre-existing opinions and assessments.

Third, as the Soviets in Afghanistan, the Russian forces are at a long-term disadvantage in Ukraine. If external conditions remain stable – especially the Western support to Ukraine, Russia will likely lose the will to fight first. Russia is conducting a war in a foreign country where the population is overwhelmingly hostile to it. This is never a good set-up as has been shown in the many wars of the Cold War and post-Cold War eras.

Fourth, the adverse domestic impact of a foreign war builds over time. It had been so for the Soviet-Afghan War, and it will likely be the case for the Russian-Ukrainian War if it continues at current high levels. It is, however, unclear how much time it will take for discontent to reach a boiling point in Russia. This is nonetheless a major concern for the Kremlin as it reflects on the need for a new mobilisation and tries to emphasise, ahead of presidential elections, that Russia's future is not solely about being involved in a forever war with Ukraine.

Finally, despite recent discussions over a possible ceasefire, a comprehensive settlement of the war in Ukraine remains unlikely. Peace will likely have to wait for after the Putin era, however long it may last. Because the conflict has been such a disaster for Russia (and obviously for Ukraine), only a new leader could re-orient Russia on another path, blaming the failures on Putin. Thus, the conflict's resolution is bound to operate according to different periods. A first step, such as the freezing of the conflict, could happen when both sides acknowledge that they are unlikely to make progress militarily. The peace deal would have to wait for a major shift in Russian domestic politics, akin to Gorbachev's ascendancy in 1985.

\* Dr. Vassily Klimentov, SNSF Postdoctoral Fellow/Lecturer, History Department/Center for Eastern European Studies, University of Zurich



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- <sup>i</sup> Vassily Klimentov, *A Slow Reckoning: The USSR, the Afghan Communists, and Islam* (Cornell University Press/ North Illinois University Press: 2024). The Pierre du Bois Foundation has supported the book's publication.
- <sup>ii</sup> [“We're tired of being good girls’: Russia’s military wives and mothers protest against Putin”](#), *The Guardian*, 25 December 2023.
- <sup>iii</sup> [“They Come in Waves’: Ukraine Goes on Defense Against a Relentless Foe”](#), *The New York Times*, 4 February 2024.
- <sup>iv</sup> Vassily Klimentov, [“A World on the Fence. The International Community and the War in Ukraine”](#), *Current Affairs in Perspective/ Pierre du Bois Foundation*, September 2022.
- <sup>v</sup> [“UN General Assembly votes by large majority for immediate humanitarian ceasefire during emergency session”](#), *United Nations News*, 12 December 2023.
- <sup>vi</sup> [“Putin Quietly Signals He Is Open to a Cease-Fire in Ukraine”](#), *The New York Times*, 23 December 2023. See also Tucker Carlson’s interview with Vladimir Putin’s on 8 February 2024. [“Tucker Carlson’s Putin interview: 9 takeaways”](#), *Politico*, 9 February 2024.
- <sup>vii</sup> Klimentov, *Slow Reckoning*, 9, 70; Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Sotsial’no-Politicheskoi Istorii (RGASPI), November 1988, fond 797, opis’ 1, delo 33, list 1.
- <sup>viii</sup> [“U.S. intelligence assesses Ukraine war has cost Russia 315,000 casualties”](#), *Reuters*, 13 December 2023.