



A Plan for Escalation: Zelenskyy’s “Victory Plan” and Peace in Ukraine

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Volodymyr Zelenskyy finally announced his Victory Plan in the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine on October 16, 2024, and a day later, he presented it to the European Parliament. The plan itself does not contain major surprises for those closely following Kyiv's communications and President Zelenskyy's statements. There is, however, increasing behind-the-scenes pressure on Ukraine to persuade Kyiv to reach a peace deal with Russia, as the Ukrainian Armed Forces have struggled to achieve significant success on the battlefield, and this seems unlikely to change in the months to come.

Some experts believe that Ukraine's recent incursion into the Kursk region was a desperate attempt to prevent negotiations. Kyiv may have aimed to make negotiations impossible for the Kremlin by attacking Russian territory. At the same time, this move in the Ukrainian reading demonstrates to the skeptical camp of the Western allies that the Ukrainian Armed Forces are still capable of advancing and posing significant challenges to Russia. Yet the official communication claimed that Ukraine would gain a stronger negotiating position by the incursion. Some experts and politicians close to the Bankova hinted that a possible land swap might be a solution to regain those territories that Ukraine could not liberate by military force.

However, the plan did not work as intended. Initially, it was supposed to persuade the Russian military leadership to redirect forces from the Donbas to Kursk, which would have given the Ukrainian Army an advantage. Instead, Russian invasion forces remained in the Donbas and advanced rapidly, exploiting Ukraine's weakened defenses. Another expectation within the Ukrainian leadership was that transferring the war to Russian soil would make Vladimir Putin and his regime appear weak and incompetent, potentially fueling negative sentiments toward the Kremlin and leading to internal destabilization. This, too, proved to be a miscalculation. Russian society largely paid little attention to the incursion, and those who were affected by it are now calling for stronger actions from the Kremlin against Ukraine.

The modest results of the Kursk incursion, along with limited progress in garnering international support for Ukraine's use of long-range missiles against Russian core territories, prompted Volodymyr Zelenskyy to announce his Victory Plan. This plan was intended to provide a clear strategy to secure Ukraine's victory and achieve a sustainable and just peace in Europe. According to the communication of Zelenskyy, the schedule of the demonstration of the Victory Plan was as follows: first it needed to be presented to the U.S. partners, and once approved, it would be shared with the Ukrainian public. However, despite that the plan was not fully accepted nor approved as a viable solution to end the war in favorable terms for Ukraine, there was significant demand from the Ukrainian public to know its content, which led Zelenskyy to announce it anyway. Despite its

promising rhetoric, however, the vision of the Victory Plan fell short. Western partners not only sent the document back for further revision but also, in some media comments, referred to it more as a “shopping list” than a comprehensive victory plan.

The Victory Plan itself contains five points and three secret addendums. The five public points tackle five issues, four of which are related to war, basically aiming to end it in a just and sustainable way, and one related to the afterwar period. These issues are listed as:

- Geopolitical: The invitation of Ukraine to NATO even if it doesn't have to mean that the integration into the alliance will happen overnight. The fact of the invitation itself is a strong signal to Russia;
- Military: Support of the Ukrainian armed forces not only by weaponry but also real-time satellite data, training, and helping to secure the Ukrainian sky from Russian missiles and drones; the ban on the usage of long-range weaponry against Russian core territories must also be lifted;
- Deterrence: Deployment of a significant package of nonnuclear deterrence assets on Ukrainian soil, that would signal Putin the consequences of further invasion;
- Strategic and economic potential: Joint foreign investments in Ukrainian raw materials that would improve the strategic autonomy of Europe in terms of rare minerals etc., strengthening the sanctions on Russia
- Security: Integration of the Ukrainian army into the European security architecture, as it will be the most trained and capable army of the continent once the war is over; this would in theory also mean the replacement of U.S. forces stationed in Europe.

A brief review of the Victory Plan gives the impression that it aims to escalate the conflict and even seeks to involve NATO in the war. Ukraine's potential membership in NATO is, of course, a major redline for Russia. While the official stance is that NATO keeps its doors open and Ukraine has the right to join, in that case, Russia can easily escalate the war to prevent Ukraine's accession to the Alliance. This escalation can reach levels where it can be a risk not only to Ukraine but also to its security guarantors.

In the second point of the plan, Zelenskyy outlines a list of weapons he wishes to gain approval to use against Russia. Transferring the war onto Russian soil remains a key element of Kyiv's strategy, as it believes that the more Russia suffers from the war, the less stable the Kremlin's ruling position will become. This notion frequently surfaces in Ukrainian discourse, with some experts suggesting from the beginning of the war that if Russia cannot be defeated militarily, it must be destabilized internally to bring about the regime's collapse. The risks of escalation associated with this strategy seem to be overlooked, however.

Regarding the deterrence package, Zelenskyy informed the leaders of the United States, Great Britain, France and Italy. Kyiv proposes that its partners deploy “a comprehensive non-nuclear

strategic deterrence package” in Ukraine, which would be sufficient to protect the country from any military threat posed by Russia. Zelenskyy believes this would narrow Russia’s options to either participating in a diplomatic settlement of the conflict—one that favors Ukraine—or facing the consequences of continued aggression. The details about the conditions of the deployment of that very deterrence package are secret. Still, they were already presented to the Western partners, which they are well aware of according to Zelenskyy. There is no clear vision yet of whether Kyiv would like to have NATO infrastructure and military personnel deployed in Ukraine, or it would be enough to deploy long-range ballistic missiles, fighter jets, and other equipment to Ukraine. Some experts suggest that even the production of Western weapons could be organized in Ukraine while the allies can support the domestic developments of such weaponry.

The economic section of the plan besides the call for strengthening the sanctions against Russia is likely a gesture of courtesy toward Republican Party hawks like Lindsey Graham, who has often stated that Ukraine possesses enormous reserves of raw minerals that should be mined and processed jointly through the investments of the Western partners. This could be a plausible scenario for the postwar period, especially as Ukraine’s national debt has already exceeded its total GDP.

The above-mentioned points prove that Ukraine for now is more interested in the escalation and the involvement of its partners in the conflict than ever before. No wonder the promised Peace Summit that should have been held in November 2024 has been postponed. Instead, expert conferences will be organized to finalize the points of the peace that will be included in the declaration of the Summit and later presented to Russia’s representative to accept it. No direct negotiations with Russia are planned. Zelenskyy on the other hand also has an exit plan. “This plan can be implemented. It depends on the partners,” he said in his speech at the Verkhovna Rada. A comfortable and safe position one could say, as in case Ukraine will not receive the requested support, Russia will not back off from the proposed deterrence tools and Kyiv will be forced to negotiate or even give up the territories if won’t be its fault. It’s the partners who failed to provide support.

Ukraine, or at least its leadership, is not ready for peace, so it is not even interested in it. The war provided an easily interpretable, defensible explanatory framework for interactions and cooperation with society. For Zelenskyy and his team, the war is a factor of system stability, which to a certain extent can still maintain the otherwise very fragile social cohesion, in which old fractures can be expanded by new ones and lead to a serious social explosion. During the war, nearly eight million people left the country and many are just waiting for the borders to be passable again and to leave the country. The huge labor shortage is planned to be filled with immigrants, according to estimates, this could mean up to three hundred thousand people a year. Social contradictions are coming to the surface, traditional political competition is returning and war will no longer be the universal response to acute social deprivation. The reelection of Zelenskyy and the survival of his clientele are becoming very questionable, and according to experts, the oligarchy, which lost its position during the war, will try to regain its lost position. Compared to this, the domestic political and social situation in wartime conditions is relatively easy to manage.

In Kyiv, there is no elaborated plan for the proper handling of the postwar situation, and there are no concrete ideas in this regard among Ukraine's Western partners either. Therefore, in Ukraine, which is one of the main scenes of the turbulent and stormy transformation of the world order, war is the only point of certainty in its unstable present and bleak future.