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Ukraine and the West's 'Victory Culture.'

Some facts to consider side by side as the war in Ukraine continues toward its fourth year and anything remotely close to an agreement to end it remains well beyond reach.

On Friday, 19 December, Vladimir Putin sat for his annual press conference, wherein he fields questions from journalists and ordinary Russians. This one, per usual, went on for hours—four and a half in this case. I have long considered these occasions impressive as displays of the Russian Federation president's command of policy, history, and what I will call for the sake of brevity Russian realities. The remark that stands out in my mind came to a single sentence. "The strategic initiative," Putin said of the Ukraine conflict, "is completely in the hands of the Russian forces."

Over the following weekend there were more talks in search of a peace agreement—nominally in search of a peace agreement, I should say. The Americans met in Miami with Europeans and representatives of the Kiev regime, and then they, the Americans, convened with a Russian delegation headed by Kirill Dmitriev, the Kremlin's special envoy. As one would expect at this point, the Americans and Ukrainians described the talks as, "productive and constructive," while Yuri Ushakov, President Putin's foreign policy adviser, said they were "rather unconstructive."

This past Monday, a day after the Florida talks ended, a senior Russian general was assassinated in Moscow when a bomb placed under his car detonated. Lieutenant-General Fanil Sarvarov had previously served in Chechnya and Syria and was, at

the time of his murder, the head of the General Staff's operational training directorate. In this capacity he was responsible for the combat readiness of the Russian forces deployed in Ukraine. There is no evidential certainty as to who is responsible for Sarvarov's assassination, but I will mark this down as a mere formality. Sarvarov is the latest of several senior Russian officers active in Ukraine to be killed in targeted assassinations on Russian soil, and Kiev's special services have claimed responsibility for these others.

These events may seem disparate, and it may seem there is little to read into them. But when considered together they give a clear enough picture not only of the war on the ground in Ukraine—this is easily enough read—but of how dim or bright the prospects of an enduring settlement may prove in the year to come.

To put my conclusion first, I suggest *Global Bridge's* readers keep their hopes for a peace accord that ends this senseless war well under control. If there is cause for optimism, in my view it lies in the possibility—and I think this plausible enough—that Russian forces will at last bring the Kiev regime to its knees, so forcing it via the battlefield to negotiate an accord that has some chance of lasting.

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Vladimir Putin's assessment of the front-line dynamic in Ukraine seems to me a sheer statement of the obvious, nothing more. If anything, in my read, stating that the military initiative lies with the Russians is a generous appraisal: I have argued that the Ukrainians lost the war at some point in 2024 and all that has followed has been profligate waste on the part of Kiev and its Western backers—a waste of life, of infrastructure and economic assets, of a generation's chances to live productive lives. No, Putin's brief remark at his press conference is remarkable in only one respect: This is the extent to which various Western officials and the media that

serve them have found it bold or hyperbolic or mere propaganda or otherwise to be dismissed.

What will happen when the Western powers lose a war they cannot afford to lose? I have wondered this since the spring of 2022, a few months after the Russians began their “special military operation.” It is partly a matter of the West’s long presumption of superiority over the non–West, partly a matter of the Russophobia that has never been far from the surface since the mid–19th century, partly a craven lack of imagination among the second-rate bureaucrats who shape and execute policy, especially in Europe, and partly a matter of the interests of the trans–Atlantic military-industrial complex.

What will the West do when faced with the reality of defeat? This question now presses itself upon us. And the answer could not be grimmer. They will indulge in a binge of denial whose costs will have no limit. It is only a matter of time before the Ukrainians’ lines of defense are decisively broken. Their cemeteries are full to overflowing and draft-dodging and desertions are rampant. The Zelensky regime is bankrupt and drowning in a sea of corruption whose waves now lap at the walls of the presidential palace. And those purporting to lead Europe now determine to burden their own societies with new debt and regimes of austerity so as to prop up Kiev—this decided just as Putin spoke last Friday—with a never-to-be-repaid “loan” of €90 billion.

This is the price of ideology—of “victory culture,” to borrow a phrase an American writer used to explain the United States’ presumption of its fated invincibility after the 1945 victories. And as the American experience demonstrates, victory culture is very slow to surrender to reality. Like ideologues of any stripe, it does not respond to reason.



You would think the Europeans and Volodymyr Zelensky's emissaries would at some point tire of talking among themselves as if this counts as genuine diplomacy, when Moscow has made it clear on countless occasions that the 20-point plan they advance as the basis of a settlement has absolutely no chance of winning Russian acceptance. This is why we hear from the Europeans and their client of "productive and constructive talks" while from the Russians we hear of "rather unconstructive" talks.

The bearers of reality in this around-in-circles exercise are President Trump's special envoys, Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner. They are an unlikely pair: Both are New York landlords with no experience in statecraft; the latter's primary qualification is that he is Trump's son-in-law. But it is they, primarily Witkoff, who fashioned the 28-point peace plan that, so far as one can discern, remains the sole document on the basis of which the Russians are willing to negotiate. As many commentators have remarked (critically in most cases), this plan acknowledges as legitimate Moscow's interests not only in Ukraine but altogether in its relations with the West. [And as I have written elsewhere](#), this is the Witkoff proposal's great virtue. Addressing the "root causes" of the Ukraine crisis, as Putin, Sergei Lavrov, his FM, Yuri Ushakov, and other senior officials term Russia's concerns, is the only possible road to an enduring settlement between the Russian Federation and the West.

But there is a reason Trump commissions two Manhattan property men to represent him, and we should consider it briefly. Both are well outside the "Beltway," that ring road that demarcates the confines of the Washington bureaucracy. Their service to Trump lies in their willingness to pursue a comprehensive peace with Russia—which I am certain Trump genuinely desires

without interference from the national-security state. They do not partake of “victory culture,” preferring, as I say, discernible realities.

The national-security state, to elaborate briefly, is a sprawl for which Ray McGovern, the dissident commentator who long served within it, created the acronym “MICIMATT.” What is known as the Deep State in some quarters consists of the military-industrial, Congressional, intelligence, mainstream media, academia, and think-tank nexus. And by any honest estimation the national-security state has effectively defined American policy for many decades. In my view, it announced its primacy and power with the Kennedy assassination on 22 November 1963.

The question arises: Whatever Trump’s real-estate friends may succeed in negotiating with Russia and getting the Europeans to accept—and I assume the Zelensky regime simply does what it is told—will the permanent state in the United States abide by a comprehensive new security architecture that fundamentally alters established geopolitical dynamics? I see no reason to dwell overly on this: The answer is “No, not a chance.” All the interests represented in Ray McGovern’s clever acronym would stand against it. We know this because they already do. They stood, indeed, against every similar initiative Trump took—on North Korea, on Syria, on Iraq—during his first term.

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It is the timing of Fanil Sarvarov’s assassination that interests me. Following the Miami talks by a matter of hours, it suggests three things.

One, those constituencies in the U.S. national-security state that stand most forcibly against the Trump peace plan are actively committed to destroying any chance of its success. Let us not forget, The S.B.U., Kiev’s intelligence service,

would not be capable of any such operation without the assistance of American operatives.

Two, the Zelensky regime, its backers in Europe, and those constituencies in the U.S. national-security state, can carry on all they like about their determination to resist Russia's demands. But they only look stupid: They know well enough that there is no winning the war against Russia—and certainly no chance of it by conventional means.

Finally, and this follows from my second observation, as Ukraine's front line continues to deteriorate in the face of that initiative Putin mentioned during his annual press conference, Kiev will commit ever more fully to all manner of "hybrid" operations, many of them covert, as in the case of Fanil Sarvarov's murder. The Russians, of course, will respond "appropriately," to borrow one of Putin's warnings.

I read a Russian commentator's remark the other day to the effect that the war will continue for an additional 12 to 18 months. I do not know at this moment whether to count this an optimistic or pessimistic prediction. I suppose for now I simply count it a certainty.

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