

Mini Simulation

Defining an Acceptable Outcome in Russia's War in Ukraine

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Overview

Ukraine has withstood Russia's initial invasion, but a new phase of the war has begun. How should Ukraine define success as it seeks to repel Russian forces?

Students will understand that Ukraine and its supporters need to articulate what they consider an acceptable outcome in Russia's war in Ukraine.

Students will understand that Ukraine has to consider multiple competing factors as it defines what constitutes an acceptable end to the war.

The Situation

Ukraine has withstood Russia's initial all-out assault, albeit with horrific devastation and loss of life. Russian President Vladimir Putin has, for now, refocused his efforts on securing control in the south and east of the country. Russian control of this swath of territory would form a land bridge from Russia to [Crimea](#), which Putin annexed in 2014. As the conflict continues, Ukraine has some momentum but needs to articulate its goals. Specifically, Kyiv needs to define an acceptable outcome to the conflict. Ukraine could, for instance, negotiate a swift [cease-fire](#) in which Russia keeps some or all of its current territorial gains. Alternatively, Kyiv could attempt to reverse the invasion entirely, reclaiming the territory it has lost since February 2022. More ambitious still, Ukraine could push to expel Russia from all Ukrainian soil, including Crimea, which Russia annexed in 2014. This expulsion could also remove Russian presence in the Donbas region in eastern Ukraine. The Kremlin has exercised control of this territory through [proxy](#) groups since 2014.

Several factors will shape how Ukraine defines success. Foremost, Ukraine's government and citizens must deem a potential outcome acceptable and achievable. Because Ukraine can currently regain some ground, the country could reject the notion of a cease-fire in which it loses territory. Especially after news about Russian atrocities, Ukraine could refuse any settlement that appears to reward Russia for its actions. However, Ukrainian leaders will also need to consider what they can achieve, and at what cost. Reclaiming lost territory could require prolonged fighting. This decision would extend the bloodshed and potentially see the tides of the war turn.

Ukraine is not the only party interested in how the war will end. The United States and its allies in the [North Atlantic Treaty Organization \(NATO\)](#) have provided Ukraine with tens of billions of dollars in military and humanitarian aid. Western powers have a strong interest in ensuring that Putin's invasion fails; an unsuccessful invasion would likely discourage future acts of aggression. However, they also want a swift end to a war that could spread to their doorsteps. Moreover, as the conflict drags on the risk of nuclear escalation persists. Although Ukraine has the final say in how it will fight its war, achieving its goals will depend on Western support. Accordingly, Ukrainian leaders will have to consult with the United States and Europe about what goals they are willing to support. As a result, Kyiv must take Western positions into serious consideration.

Russia too, will influence how Ukraine defines its goals. Whether by negotiating a settlement or by fighting to a

stalemate, ending the conflict will require that Russia decide an ongoing war is no longer in its best interests. This could occur if Ukraine convinces Russia that it will be unable to fulfill its aims without heavy losses and prolonged fighting. Even then, an end to the war in which Russia gains nothing could be unacceptable and even politically threatening to Putin. Losing territory in Crimea or the Donbas could be even more fraught: fearing such a defeat, Putin could face a greater incentive to use weapons of mass destruction. Another option would be offering a compromise that allows Putin to characterize his war as a success. Such a compromise could be territorial, or it could include policy concessions. Specifically, Kyiv could agree to not seek NATO membership in exchange for its territorial integrity. Either way, Ukrainian leaders can ill afford to ignore how Russia will react to Ukraine's stated goals.

Decision Point

A new phase of Russia's war in Ukraine has begun. As Russian forces regroup and refocus on securing control over eastern Ukraine, the country and its Western supporters need to determine and articulate what they are willing to accept as a resolution to this conflict. Accordingly, consultations among Ukraine, the United States, and other NATO members are set to take place. Before those consultations, Ukraine's cabinet has convened to determine Ukraine's position. As they deliberate, cabinet members will need to consider not only their own priorities but also what position will retain support from Western partners. The Ukrainian cabinet must also weigh how likely Russia will be to accept their desired outcome.

Negotiators should consider the following options:

- *Accept a [cease-fire](#) based on the current lines of the conflict.* This option would likely offer the quickest route to ending the bloodshed. However, such an agreement would effectively cede control over a significant portion of eastern and southern Ukraine. Although still a better outcome than many observers initially expected in February, this would represent a substantial loss for Ukraine. Territorial gains would also act as an apparent reward for Russia for Putin's brutal campaign.
- *Push to restore the status quo from before the invasion.* In this option, Ukraine would seek to regain control over all territory lost since February 2022 before accepting any end to hostilities. However, this would leave Russia in control of [Crimea](#). Moreover, the Kremlin would likely continue to exercise de facto control in the Donbas. Pursuing this option would entail continued fighting until Ukraine could either regain its lost territory or weaken Russia's capacity to the point where it was willing to withdraw.
- *Fight to restore Ukraine's pre-2014 borders.* This would entail rolling back all Russian presence in Ukraine, including in Crimea and the Donbas. It would represent a significant victory for Ukraine. This outcome would also uphold international [norms](#) surrounding [sovereignty](#). However, since it would mean a significant defeat for Russia, achieving this option would require a prolonged military campaign during which civilian deaths would continue. Kyiv would also risk the waning of outside support. In the worst-case scenario, Russia could regain the upper hand—or worse, resort to using weapons of mass destruction.

Photo: Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky meets with U.S. officials during a visit in Kyiv, Ukraine on April 30, 2022.

Source: Ukrainian Presidential Press Office/Getty Images

[What Does the West Want in Ukraine?](#)Foreign Affairs

[Ukraine Must Win](#)Atlantic

[The Realist Case for a Ukraine Peace Deal](#)Foreign Policy