



The Ukrainian government is now trapped by its own uncompromising—and increasingly indefensible—policy writes Dr Anatol Lieven.

Clear differences are emerging within the Ukrainian government as to whether Ukraine should make the reconquest of Crimea a nonnegotiable goal of its war effort or be prepared to trade at least provisional Russian control of the peninsula for Russian concessions elsewhere. This issue also has the potential to create a deep split between Kyiv and Western governments, which fear that Crimea and control of the strategically vital military base of Sevastopol might be the point on which Moscow would be willing to escalate toward nuclear war. The question is becoming more urgent as Ukraine prepares for an offensive that could potentially allow it to cut the land route between Russia and Crimea.

My own research in Ukraine last month suggests that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky would have very great domestic difficulty in supporting a cease-fire leaving Crimea in Russian hands. Not only would this face strong opposition from hard-line nationalists and the Ukrainian military, but the Ukrainian government has helped foster a general public mood that Crimea must be recovered at all costs.

In a departure from the previous government line, Andriy Sybiha, the deputy head of the presidential staff and a veteran Ukrainian diplomat, told the Financial Times last week: "If we succeed in achieving our strategic goals on the battlefield, and when we are on the administrative border of Crimea, we are ready to open a diplomatic page to discuss this issue ... [though] this doesn't mean that we exclude the way of liberation [of Crimea] by our army."

In a recent interview rebroadcast by Radio Liberty, another advisor to Zelensky, former

journalist and hard-line nationalist politician Mykhailo Podolyak, took a very different line from Sybiha, ruling out any compromise with Russia:

"Could there be talks about a diplomatic way out of Crimea? ... Yes, of course, if [Moscow] starts withdrawing those troops today, then we can wait a day, two or three, while those troops leave together with the [Russian] inhabitants."

Podolyak said that after Russia leaves all Ukrainian territory, negotiations should be about Russian compensation to Ukraine and punishment for war crimes, together with the creation of a 100-kilometer (62-mile) demilitarized zone on the Russian side of the border. He also raised another issue of crucial importance to the issue of Ukraine's recovery of the territories controlled by Russia since 2014: that of the fate of their populations, much of which have historically identified with Russia. Referring to pro-Russian Crimeans as mankurts (roughly, "brain-dead slaves"), he said:

"We have to completely close everything related to the Russian cultural space there. We have to eradicate everything Russian. There should be only Ukrainian cultural space or global cultural space. We should not have a dialogue about whether a person has the right to use the Russian language or not. ... There shouldn't be this line: 'Maybe these are our people, maybe we need to talk about something with them.' I was constantly surprised by this concept of reintegration in 2014-2015 and [the argument that] let's reintegrate the occupied territories with a smile. Gangsters live there, criminals live there, occupying armies and administrations live there, but let's reintegrate them with a smile. ... They should be expelled, and some should be imprisoned."

This vision (which many in the world would likely see as tantamount to ethnic cleansing) was not shared by most of the Ukrainians with whom I spoke during three weeks in the country last month. A clear majority said Crimea should be returned to Ukraine—but with some (usually unspecified) measures for the peaceful reintegration of its population.

A substantial minority, however, said Ukraine should be prepared to give up Crimea in return for peace and the return of the territory taken by Russia since last February. The reasons they gave differed, but the three principal ones were that "otherwise this war will go on forever"; that Crimea (which was transferred from the Russian to the Ukrainian Soviet republics in 1954 by Soviet decree) "was never really part of Ukraine"; and that the pro-Russian population of Crimea would be a perpetual internal problem for Ukraine. According to an opinion survey

conducted last July, 58 percent of the Ukrainians who responded said Crimea must return to Ukraine – a majority but not a huge one.

There was one striking difference between the two positions on Crimea and a negotiated peace with Russia. The people with whom I spoke who stated that the return of Crimea to Ukraine was essential and nonnegotiable mostly spoke on the record. Not one of the advocates of compromise was willing to do so.

As a former dissident from the Soviet days (and leading supporter of the 2004 Orange Revolution) told me:

"Certainly, a great many people do believe that we have to fight on indefinitely to reconquer Crimea, irrespective of losses; but at heart, most sensible people know that it is not possible. The problem is that it has become almost impossible to say this in public without losing your job and perhaps worse. You know that under the Soviet Union people were afraid to say what they thought. Well, I have to say that a similar situation exists in Ukraine today. This is due to the anger and hatred in the population caused by the Russian invasion but also to repression by the state. Anyone who advocates compromise with Russia is immediately publicly branded a traitor and targeted by the SBU [the Ukrainian security service], no matter if they have always supported Ukrainian freedom and independence."

As in most recent wars, this public atmosphere is greatly reinforced by state control of television, which since the suppression of allegedly pro-Russian channels has become almost absolute as far as news and analysis are concerned. Voices on television now speak overwhelmingly in support of the government line (or perhaps, the previous government line) that the return of Crimea and the eastern Donbas is nonnegotiable. This is backed up by pressure on the print media. As a journalist in the city of Dnipro told me, "The biggest problem is the atmosphere of censorship. Nobody gives a direct order, but everyone knows that if you write certain things, you will have bad problems, from your employers and the security services. So discussion now takes place only within very narrow limits."

As Ukrainian analyst Volodymyr Ishchenko has stated, the result is a "spiral of silence" in which views held by many in private are wholly absent in public.

Whether the planned Ukrainian offensive succeeds and brings Ukrainian forces to the border of Crimea or fails and leads to an ongoing stalemate, Ukraine is likely to face increasing calls from Western governments for some form of provisional territorial compromise with Russia, coupled with the threat of a reduction of Western aid” and Sybiha's statement suggests that some Ukrainian officials at least understand this very well.

But as in so many wars, state propaganda aimed at motivating the population to fight has helped create what one Ukrainian analyst called a "Frankenstein's monster" for itself when it comes to compromise with Russia, a public mood that it helped create but now cannot control. Oleksiy Danilov, the secretary of the Ukrainian National Security and Defense Council, has stated: "If Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky proposes peace talks between Kyiv and Moscow, he will commit political suicide"” which is no doubt why Zelensky himself has not yet said anything about Sybiha's remarks. All the Ukrainian analysts with whom I spoke agreed that only intense public pressure from Washington could allow Zelensky to agree to a territorial compromise” even if Zelensky himself felt compelled to respond to the pressure in public with bitter protest.

Dr Anatol Lieven,  
Director, Eurasia Program,  
Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft

Reproduced by kind permission of the author.

First published by Foreign Policy magazine 11th April 2023

entitled "Crimea Has Become a Frankenstein's Monster"

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/04/11/crimea-has-become-a-frankensteins-monster/>

Ã,Ã

Ã,Â