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Democracy Dies in Darkness

Felipe Marañña Marcos

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Opinion

Ukraine remains stronger than you might think

By Michael O'Hanlon

February 21, 2024 at 6:30 a.m. EST

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Michael O'Hanlon is the Philip H. Knight chair in defense and strategy at the Brookings Institution and author of "Military History for the Modern Strategist: America's Major Wars Since 1861." This column is based on data collected by the Brookings Institution.

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Two years since [Russia invaded Ukraine](#) and 10 since Vladimir Putin seized Crimea, the war is at a difficult standstill — not least [because of wavering](#) U.S. support. If Congress cuts off support, Ukraine could well collapse later this year. Yet Ukraine remains strong in many ways. It has continued to stymie the Kremlin's greatest ambitions for taking over the country. While the going is tough today, there is no cause for fatalism.

Much has been made of Ukraine's disappointing 2023 counteroffensive. But given the strength of defenses on both sides, its failure was no huge surprise. Defense is simply stronger than offense at this stage of the war and, because of this, Ukraine might be able to hang on to most or all of the 82 percent of the pre-2014 territory it now holds, even with constrained military supplies. Yet, as the [recent loss of Avdiivka](#) demonstrates, Ukraine might struggle in the event of a complete cutoff of U.S. assistance. The pace of setbacks could accelerate with little warning; like Ernest Hemingway's quip about bankruptcy, defeat could occur gradually, then suddenly.

Ukraine needs more artillery and other key weaponry. According to the [Royal United Services Institute in London](#), it can now fire only about 2,000 artillery rounds each day — compared with 3,000 or more in much of 2022 and as many as 7,000 during last summer's counteroffensive. Russia is currently firing up to 10,000 rounds a day. But, like Russia, Ukraine was probably wasting much of its

firepower on barrage attacks, so scaling back does not necessarily lead to big losses. It does, however, lower the odds of success in a future counteroffensive. And if the shortages worsen, all bets are off.

Consider next the country's demographics. Not counting refugees now living abroad, Ukraine has only one-fourth of Russia's population. This is a serious disadvantage, to be sure. But the country's army will not run out of people anytime soon. About 100,000 Ukrainian soldiers a year are now being killed or wounded. This is a tragic human toll. But the military is about 750,000-strong, and approximately 200,000 young men are becoming draft-eligible each year. If Ukraine lowers its conscription age from 27 to 25, as it is considering, almost 400,000 additional men would be eligible in the coming year.

Shipping grain out of Ukraine remains difficult, because Russia controls many of the country's ports on the Black Sea. But Ukraine has dramatically increased its exports via the western Black Sea, including through Romanian ports and territorial waters. This helps explain why its stressed economy has stabilized and even partly recovered over the past year. Europe's new aid package worth 50 billion euros (about \$54 billion) should help Ukraine muddle ahead. Alas, Russia's economy has recovered even more than Ukraine's has.

Foreign assistance to Ukraine has been robust — totaling at least \$100 billion a year since the war began. Europe has been most generous, emphasizing economic and humanitarian assistance, along with more than \$40 billion in security aid. The United States has prioritized security assistance.

Yes, political and military elites in Ukraine are quarreling more now than they were a year or two ago. President Volodymyr Zelensky is has replaced his top general, and he has squabbled with the mayor of Kyiv and with members of the media, among others. But frustration and tough debate are to be expected in a democracy two years into a brutal war. Overall, Ukrainians remain unified.

Zelensky's approval rating is no longer at 90 percent, where it stood a year ago, but it remains high. Seventy-seven percent of Ukrainians surveyed say they trust him.

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Ukraine's defenses against drones and cruise missiles are good. Unfortunately, though, more Russian ballistic missiles are getting through and hitting Ukrainian cities. On some days, no more than 50 percent are intercepted. Yet even here there is a silver lining: Ukraine is making it through another winter with most of its power and heating systems intact.

So there is no reason for fatalistic thinking about Ukraine. It might very well hold on to at least 82 percent of its territory and eventually gain a strong security link with the West, especially if the United States again leads in addressing the Russian threat to Ukraine. At the moment, however, the U.S. Congress is playing with fire in threatening to end U.S. assistance to Kyiv. Ukraine is resolute in this struggle, but so, alas, is Russia, and if Putin winds up winning this war, NATO's own security might soon be at risk, too.

The data is collected and tracked by the Brookings Institution. Special thanks to Alejandra Rocha, Mallika Yadwad, Sophie Roehse and Sophia Winograd.

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