

Geography as plunder: why Russia's war on Ukraine is a fight for land and resources, not ideas

Strip away the civilisational rhetoric and an older logic shows through — an empire that wants territory, and what lies beneath it.

There is a comfortable temptation to wrap the Russo-Ukrainian war in the grand vocabulary of a clash of civilisations — democracy against autocracy, light against dark. It is a flattering frame for the West, and it is not untrue. But it is also a distraction. Beneath the ideological layer lies something far older and more brutal: an empire that wants territory and what sits under it. Four years after the full-scale invasion, with Russia occupying roughly a fifth of Ukraine after seizing another 5,000 square kilometres in 2025 alone, the accounting is clear. This is not a seminar in political philosophy. It is a robbery conducted with artillery.

Volodymyr Horbulin and Valentyn Badrak, two of Kyiv's most incisive strategists, capture the essence in their new book, *War of the Future*. Putin's objectives, they write, are twofold: the destruction of Ukrainian statehood and the restoration of Russia as a global political leader — the first operational, the second strategic, but the second impossible without the first. Translated from the language of chancelleries: Moscow needs Ukraine's body to recover its own imperial shadow. Land is not the means. It is the end.

The arithmetic of a hungry empire

The numbers leave little room for poetry. The war has produced nearly 56,000 civilian casualties, displaced 3.7 million people internally and pushed 5.9 million across the border as refugees. ACLED has catalogued almost 5,500 incidents with documented damage to residential buildings, schools, hospitals and energy networks — more than three-quarters of it caused by Russian projectiles. The UN had verified over 14,655 civilian deaths by January 2026, while warning that the true toll is far higher.

But the map says what the statistics whisper. The territories Russia has illegally annexed — Crimea, Luhansk, Donetsk, slices of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia — are not symbolic wastelands. They are the coal seams of the Donbas, some of Europe's most fertile farmland, Black Sea coastline, ports, transit routes. The Azov-Black Sea basin is a geo-economic key. Ukraine's subsoil hides lithium, titanium, manganese and shale gas. To occupy Ukraine

is to confiscate an industrial and mineral inheritance, not to correct a historical error.

Here the myth of “protecting Russian speakers” collapses. A protector does not leave a million people without heat, water and electricity in the depths of winter through systematic strikes on the power grid — what Amnesty International calls a campaign of extreme cruelty against an entire civilian population. A conqueror does. The destruction of infrastructure is not collateral damage; it is a strategy of terror, identified by the UN Commission of Inquiry as a possible crime against humanity.

Two states, two grammars of power

The contrast between the two countries is read not in manifestos but in reflexes. On 24 February 2022, Russia chose war. Ukraine chose to exist. Where Moscow projects power outward to compensate for the void within, Kyiv — even under siege — argues with itself.

The most eloquent testimony came in July 2025. As missiles fell, Ukrainians took to the streets in Kyiv, Lviv, Odesa, Dnipro and Kharkiv — the first anti-government protests since the invasion began — against a law that threatened the independence of the country’s anti-corruption bodies. They won: the government retreated within nine days. In exactly the same period, just a few hundred kilometres away, Russian drones were hunting civilians at bus stops in Kherson in a practice investigators have called a “human safari.” A state whose citizens defeat their own government without being shot; a state that hunts its neighbours for sport. That is the antithesis, reduced to the bone.

No one claims Ukraine is an immaculate democracy — Freedom House rightly notes persistent corruption in its judiciary and administration. But the difference is not the degree of perfection; it is the direction of the arrow and the existence of brakes. Where Russia practises what scholars now call “dark legitimacy” — a power that converts its own cynicism into fuel, draining critique of any effect — Ukraine retains, even under martial law, a legitimacy born of consent rather than resignation. That elections are postponed is no trick, but an explicit constitutional provision barring any vote under martial law. Russia, by contrast, stages showcase elections precisely to manufacture the appearance Ukraine has no need to fake.

The world that is breaking

The stakes far exceed the two belligerents. Horbulin observes that the United Nations can no longer play the role it was created for — to prevent or stop such wars — because the aggressor sits with a veto inside the Security

Council itself. The 1945 architecture was built on the assumption that great powers are guarantors, not predators. Ukraine is where that assumption died.

Badrak recalls the moment the West blinked: at the G7 summit in Japan in May 2023, a proposal was floated to bar all Russian exports save food and medicine. It was announced. It was never enforced. Leaders lacked the resolve to see it through. It was, in retrospect, the choice of a lasting strategic defeat — and the bill was settled in Ukrainian lives. Churchill’s lesson, quoted in the book, applies precisely: it is futile to think that a peace negotiated now would secure better terms than those won by fighting on. Concessions to an aggressor who has not abandoned his aims are not diplomacy — they are the postponement of a greater loss.

There is also a lesson in resilience. Under pressure, Ukraine has turned demographic scarcity into a technological edge: more than 250 domestic manufacturers of ground robotic systems against Russia’s roughly twenty types, with 25,000 platforms contracted in the first half of 2026 alone, already surpassing the previous year’s 15,000. Where Moscow sends waves of men, Kyiv sends machines. This is the asymmetric deterrence Horbulin has preached for a decade: do not match the adversary system for system; exploit his fractures.

Conclusion: the precedent, not the province

The “realist” temptation is to treat the war as a border dispute, solvable with a ruler on a map. It is a category error. As a RUSI commentary noted, what makes this war unacceptable is not that Ukraine is a democracy and Russia is not — it is that a powerful state tried to redraw borders by force, in flagrant breach of the UN Charter. The real stake is not a province. It is the precedent.

If full-scale aggression yields territorial gain and, in time, diplomatic normalisation, then no frontier is safe — from Tallinn to Tbilisi, from Chişinău to Taipei. Horbulin and Badrak foresaw the invasion before it happened, and were called warmongers for it. History vindicated them. Their 2026 verdict stands unmoved: as long as Russia exists in its present form, Ukraine will remain under threat.

To support Ukraine is not sentimentality. It is the cold arithmetic of a world that understands the international order lasts exactly as long as the price paid by those who tear it apart. Ukrainian land is not merely Ukrainian land. It is the last line on which it will be decided whether the world map is still redrawn with tanks.

Sources: Ukrinform (Horbulin & Badrak, War of the Future, 4 June 2026); UN HRMMU; ACLED; Amnesty International; Human Rights Watch; Freedom House; CFR Global Conflict Tracker; RUSI.