

Getting clarity on “winning” vs. “not losing”



by Lev Tsitrin

In her recent [interview with Ukraine's first couple](#), CNN's Christiane Amanpour asked (at 6:32) a question that struck me as odd, “do you feel you have the weapons now to actually win? Do you feel that NATO is here to help you win or just to stop you from losing?”

What exactly was that supposed to mean? Russia, being a nuclear-armed state, cannot be defeated the way Germany was in WW2; the word “victory” is inapplicable and moot. In a war between states of such unequal ability to inflict destruction on one another, the best outcome for Ukraine is to “not lose” – that is, not lose any territory or any aspect of sovereignty. If Ukraine pushes Russia to the 2013 borders by regaining Crimea and Donbas, it will “not lose” – though even that is not really true: her losses in people killed, wounded

and traumatized by displacement and privation are immense; the losses in infrastructure, though huge, can (at least in theory) be replaced, but reconstruction will be both lengthy and expensive. This said, the best outcome for Ukraine is “not losing,” i.e. regaining the territories that it lost to Russia since its 2014 invasion of Crimea, plus being able to use her free nation’s right to join any alliance it wants, EU and NATO including.

On the flip side, it is worth noting that Ukraine’s “not losing” does not mean that Russia loses anything (apart from her own killed and wounded; her international prestige; her business opportunities; and a bit of infrastructure – i.e. the NordStream pipeline that got blown up by we still don’t know who. Ukraine’s “not losing” translates – for Russia – into mere “not winning.” For Russia, it comes down to the status quo ante – in other words, to not gobbling Ukraine. Bruised egos of Putin and his Kremlin buddies aside, not a terribly bad outcome.

A war, being by its very nature a destructive activity, is a net loss to humanity as a whole, simply because human lives, and the material results of labor of prior generations that enriched the ones that follow, are destroyed. Hence, “not losing” in a war is impossible even for a state that wins. This said, we should be clear as to what we are talking about when we talk of the West’s goals for Ukraine. Those goals should be realistic: for the victim – Ukraine – it should be to “not lose.” For Russia – the aggressor – it should be to “not win” (which also means “not lose”).

Ukraine cannot win a war with Russia, and Russia should not be allowed to win a war with Ukraine. Thus, it seems to me, Christiane Amanpour should have asked a less tricky question of “are the Western arms you are getting sufficient to push the Russians to 2013 borders?” This goalpost would ensure Ukraine not losing, and Russia not winning – a double negative that should be the West’s guiding principle in providing arms

to Ukraine.