

FATIGUE IN UKRAINE REGARDING THE WAR

Rosendo Fraga

Director of CARI's Foreign Relations and Armed Forces Committee

On November 3, the commander of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, General Valeri Zaluzhni, maintained that the war “is in a stalemate” as in the First World War, after 617 days of the conflict. He also did so five months after the start of the counteroffensive. It should be noted that exactly one year ago, on November 10, 2022, the then Head of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley - who ended his four-year term at the end of October - said that a quarter of a million casualties between both parties and that neither of them was able to impose themselves militarily, which is why it was necessary to bring the conflict to the diplomatic negotiating table. A year later, the highest Ukrainian military authority - a military man who is not very talkative, but of great prestige - seems to reach a similar conclusion. He chose *The Economist* to make his thoughts public. He said that the war “is becoming a war of positions” and that “this, which began to manifest last summer, leads to the prolongation of the conflict and entails significant risks for both our Armed Forces and the State as a whole.” ”. He added that “in addition, it is beneficial for the enemy, who is trying by all means to reconstitute and increase its power.” Regarding the prior planning of the Ukrainian counteroffensive that began in June, General Zaluzhni had then indicated that more time was needed to carry it out successfully. The Ukrainian commanders has the impression that the operation had been accelerated due to the political needs of President Biden, who was seeking a military victory before the 2024 US presidential election.

Skepticism about the success of the Ukrainian counteroffensive was also made publicly explicit by Milley at the time. The Head of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff said in mid-2023 that he did not believe the counteroffensive could decide the war. The reality is that it was not as successful expected by the political authorities. Almost six months after its start, progress has been minimal and the Russian defenses, organized in solid lines of trenches, have remained almost intact. The offensive with tanks provided by the United States, Great Britain and Germany has also been ineffective and has suffered many losses. But the most significant fact is that winter is approaching and rain and mud will interrupt operations for several months. The Ukrainian goal of reaching the Black Sea coast to disrupt communication between Crimea and Russia has not been met, and it will be more difficult to achieve in the future. This means that the war

will last at least another year. Time is now in favor of Russia, whose possibility of recruiting new troops is much greater than that of Ukraine, with a population that is four times smaller. The words “tiredness” and “exhaustion” are beginning to be expressed publicly by the Ukrainian political and military authorities. There are those who maintain that the turning point in favor of Moscow took place in October. Not only because of what happened in the theater of operations, but because of what happened globally with the Hamas attack on Israel and this country's controversial offensive on the Gaza Strip, which took the attention away from Ukraine.

The day after General Zaluzhni's remarks, Zelensky agreed, saying that Ukraine “is tired” after five months of counteroffensive, but insisted on his country's victory and demanding more support. The president acknowledged that “time has passed and people are tired. Everyone gets tired. "It's understandable." But he added: “We are not in a desperate situation.” He acknowledged that “Russia controls the airspace,” but that is something for which there are “quick solutions,” such as increasing air defense and the delivery of American F-16 aircraft that began this week. He insisted on the need to have the cooperation of the West to obtain such air defense and thus unblock the sky to “allow our guys to advance” in the counteroffensive. Meanwhile, on the battle front, in the first week of November, Russian forces persist in their attempts to surround the city of Avdivka, in the Donbass region, without considering the lives claimed and material costs. Ukrainian military spokesmen recognize the persistence of Russian will and their decision to regroup forces with a view to a massive attack, in which forty thousand men are participating, of which they say they have “annihilated” five thousand and two hundred armored vehicles. Zelensky made these statements on the occasion of the visit of the President of the European Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen, who raised encouraging perspectives regarding the process of Ukraine's incorporation into the European Union.

On Sunday, November 5, Zelensky made new statements about the difficulties his country faces in the field of war. First of all, he recognized that the Gaza conflict is diverting attention and that this benefits Russia. It should be noted that President Biden has sent a request for a budget expansion to Congress for one hundred and six billion dollars, which includes sixty thousand for Ukraine. It was a response to Zelensky's urgent request for more support. But the position

of the new speaker of the House of Representatives, Mike Johnson - a Trump stalwart - will not make approval easy. Zelensky corrected his top military chief, who had told *The Economist* that the war had entered a stalemate, by maintaining that “everyone is getting tired and there are different opinions, but this is not a stalemate.” For its part, Russia at the end of October once again warned about its nuclear capacity, by carrying out a joint exercise on land, sea and air with nuclear projectiles. Also, at the beginning of November, it carried out a test of launching an intercontinental ballistic missile to carry nuclear warheads from a new atomic-powered submarine. It was launched from the White Sea in the north of the country and hit a target in the Kamchatka region of eastern Russia. But without a doubt the war in Gaza is the fact that is most influencing the weakening of the Ukrainian will to fight and the course that the war is beginning to take, unfavorable for Kiev. The Ukrainian president has just suspended the presidential election scheduled for the end of March 2024, citing the situation created by the war. But it should be noted that General Zaluzhni is the only personality with the possibility of politically challenging the president, despite his popularity. Zelensky tried to close the divergence by calling for “national unity” after disagreements with his main military leader. It should be added that American General Mark Milley said about the Ukrainian general that “Valeri has become the military spirit that his country needed,” ensuring that “he will go down in history” and that “his leadership allowed the Ukrainian Armed Forces to adapt quickly.” with initiative on the battlefield against the Russians.”

In conclusion: after 20 months of the war in Ukraine and 5 of its counteroffensive, the head of its military forces recognized the fatigue of his men, adding that the war is at a “stalemate”. Skepticism about the effectiveness of the counteroffensive in defining the war was also raised six months ago by the Director of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley. The day after General Zaluzhni's statements, Zelensky refuted him, saying that the war could be won and that there were several strategies to restart operations, although he acknowledged fatigue. Finally, the Ukrainian president, the next day, announced the suspension of the presidential election scheduled for the end of March 2024, with the Ukrainian general being the only figure who can compete with him politically.