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Russia's maximalism vs Ukraine's struggle for existence. Why the war will not end anytime soon

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Abstract

Over three years into Russia's full-scale invasion, the war shows no signs of ending. Russia remains committed to its maximalist goals, while Ukraine, viewing the war as existential, refuses to yield. Negotiations pushed by President Trump have so far failed, with Moscow treating talks as a tactical move rather than a genuine peace effort. The conflict reflects broader Russian ambitions to reshape the post-Cold War European order and assert its influence over former Soviet spaces. Trump's policy shift has weakened U.S. pressure on Moscow and placed greater burden on Europe. Yet Europe still lacks a comprehensive strategy to support Ukraine beyond statements. Europe must step up with sustained arms deliveries, sanctions, and strategic clarity. Failure to do so risks emboldening Russia. This war is not just about Ukraine but also about the security order of Europe, which must be defended now, on Ukraine's front line.

Keywords: Russia, Ukraine, war

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Russia's maximalism vs Ukraine's struggle for existence. Why the war will not end anytime soon

After more than three and a half years of full-scale war, Russia remains far from achieving any of its strategic objectives. Ukraine is exhausted but continues to defend itself effectively. Negotiations initiated by President Trump are highly unlikely to bring the war to an end. The Kremlin remains committed to pursuing its maximalist goals. For Ukraine, this is an existential struggle, and Kyiv will not accept Russia's demands.

The determination on both sides – though fundamentally different in nature – combined with the West's (whether the US' or Europe's) inability to bring the war to an end, suggests that the conflict is likely to be prolonged. Its ultimate outcome will depend on Europe's capabilities and political will to support Ukraine with real actions, not just statements, for as long as necessary.

The war is not only about Ukraine

To understand the nature of Russia's ongoing aggression, it is essential to view it within the broader context of Russian foreign policy towards the West and Ukraine's role in Russia's self-perception, its vision of the post-Soviet area, and its strategic ambitions in European politics.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation has consistently resisted accepting its diminished international status, and after a short break, reasserted itself as a revisionist power. Its revanchist agenda not only targets neighbouring former Soviet republics, but also seeks to undermine the post-Cold War security architecture in Europe.

The Kremlin frames the current European order as illegitimate, claiming it was imposed during a period of Russian weakness in the 1990s. In reality, Russia's inability to formulate a new national identity – both domestically and internationally – has prevented it from transitioning into a predictable, rules-based actor. Instead, it continues to pursue a neo-imperial and nationalistic foreign policy that challenges international norms and regional stability. A symbolic turning point may have been Putin's speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, followed by Russia's aggression against Georgia in 2008. It is essential to recognise that the Russian aggression, which escalated in February 2022, is not only directed against Ukraine. Rather, Ukraine serves as the primary battleground in what is de facto a proxy war Russia declared to the West. This strategic framing has been repeatedly and explicitly articulated countless times by senior Russian officials. For example, in March 2022, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated: "This is not about Ukraine at all, but the world order. The current crisis is a critical, epoch-making moment in modern history. It reflects the battle over what the world order will look like."¹ Many similar statements from Vladimir Putin reinforce this narrative. Moreover, Russian state propaganda on a daily basis frames the conflict as a war with the West and provoked by the West, a message aggressively disseminated to domestic audience, being one of the sources of the regime's legitimacy.

It is already clear that the Kremlin's original plan envisioned a swift blitzkrieg. This assumption was rooted in a fundamental misreading of both the domestic dynamics within Ukrainian

¹ Sergei Lavrov, There is hope for compromise at talks with Ukraine. RBC News, 16 March 2022. Available at: https://www.interfax-russia.ru/military/news_eng/377779

society and the anticipated response from the West. Consequently, the operation culminated in a comprehensive failure. Rather than collapsing, Ukraine mounted a vigorous defence and successfully recaptured significant parts of the territory initially lost during the early weeks of the full-scale conflict.

The Russian setback can be attributed primarily to two factors. First, the Kremlin's traditional tendency to underestimate and ignore the Ukrainian people. Second, a flawed assessment of the West's capacity and willingness to respond effectively to what has become the largest conventional war in Europe since 1945. Russia definitely did not anticipate either the scale of Western sanctions or the level of military and other support provided to Ukraine by the US and the EU.

The Kremlin's resolve

All of the above provides the necessary context to capture the current phase of the conflict. The Russian modus operandi can be difficult to understand, as it diverges significantly from Western (and not only) logic grounded in rationality. After three and a half years of war of attrition, with hundreds of thousands killed or wounded, a stagnating economy – quite resilient on sanctions but facing limited prospects for modernisation, and no visible progress toward its strategic goals, the Kremlin remains determined to continue its aggression against Ukraine.

However, there is an important new element in the broader picture: Donald Trump's return to the White House and his attempt to end the war. The US president has mistakenly assumed that the Russia-Ukraine conflict is the easiest international conflict to resolve, and Ukraine has not been a priority for him. Trump has dramatically shifted American policy toward Moscow, initiating peace talks and applying pressure on Kyiv rather than on Moscow.

Everything that has happened since January 2025, represents a significant pivot in the US approach to both parties. For Ukrainians, this came as quite a shock, as they had expected a different Trump. Although tensions between the US and Ukraine – peaking during the Trump-Zelensky Oval Office meeting – have eased for now, Kyiv is adopting a more pragmatic approach toward the US administration and learning to navigate the situation in order to at least mitigate the costs of Trump's policies.

From the Russian perspective, Donald Trump's presidency has opened new opportunities. The past several months have shown that the US president has opened many fronts both with allies (Europe, Canada) and adversaries (China). He has challenged transatlantic relations, though he has not destroyed them. This represents a significant shift, welcomed by and favourable to the Kremlin.

No rapid peace settlement

Russia agreed to enter negotiations with Ukraine, but since then has proved no real willingness to reach an agreement. In fact, Putin has demonstrated the opposite – no readiness for genuine settlement. Moscow's participation in talks is merely a tactical move that does not alter Russia's maximalist goals toward Ukraine and the West. The Kremlin has carefully

invested in maintaining contact with Trump, aiming to keep the dialogue open as long as possible while offering nothing in return. The culmination of this process was the Trump–Putin summit in Alaska in August, which had no effect on the Russian–Ukrainian war but proved to be a valuable diplomatic success for Moscow.

There is no doubt that Russia plays on time, striving in its relations with Trump to separate its aggression against Ukraine from the context of its bilateral relationship with the US. We don't know all the details of the substance of the Moscow-Washington negotiations, as they are being conducted behind a thick curtain. However, we can try to reconstruct both sides' approaches.

For Trump, the sole US decision maker – as the White House administration's role has been unprecedentedly diminished, the primary goal is to end the war and resume business with both sides. His well-known narcissism and disregard for intelligence community assessments have already led to several significant errors in relation to Russia – likely driven by his belief that he can broker a peace deal between Russia and Ukraine. At the same time, he was able to win from Ukraine a so-called mineral agreement – a deal with no immediate benefit for US economic interests, but a quick PR success to celebrate among MAGA supporters.

For Putin, the key objective is to lure Trump into negotiations by downplaying Ukraine's significance and presenting allegedly "attractive business opportunities" for American companies in Russia. The Kremlin is especially focused on courting businessmen with close ties to the current U.S. administration, attempting to use them as informal lobbyists to advance its interests in Washington.

It remains unclear to what extent the Trump–Putin game can produce any concrete results. The Kremlin rightly assumes that the mere existence of ongoing talks and open communication channels already serves Russia's interests. For that reason, it will do everything possible to keep the dialogue alive for as long as it can. This also explains Moscow's cautious reaction to the U.S. strike on Iran in June. Additionally, it only reaffirmed the Moscow-Beijing axis (Putin's four-day long visit to China in August-September is another example).

President Trump appears to believe that Putin can be pragmatic enough to end the war. At the same time, some signs of his impatience and growing frustration are emerging, as Russia continues to reject a ceasefire and maintains its maximalist demands. This raises a key unanswered question: would Trump realise that Putin is deceiving him, and – if he does – what will the US president choose to do?

Congress stands ready to impose serious sanctions on Russia's energy sector, but a green light from the president is still lacking. In late June, Senator Lindsey Graham stated: "For the first time, the president told me, 'It's time to move your bill.'" ² Still, predicting Donald Trump's decisions remains an extremely difficult task. On 14 July, he announced ³ that European allies

² Basmat, D. (2025). 'It's time to move your bill' — Senator says Congress will soon vote on new Russian sanctions after talks with Trump. The Kyiv Independent, 29 June. Available at: <https://kyivindependent.com/its-time-to-move-your-bill-after-discussion-with-trump-senator-says-congress-will-soon-begin-to-vote-on-new-russian-sanctions/>

³ Menkiszak, M. and Kohut, A. (2025). Russia calmly reacts to Trump's ultimatum on the Ukraine war. Analyses,

would be given priority access to purchase military equipment from the American defence industry. Trump also stated that, if a peace agreement with Ukraine was not reached within 50 days, the US would impose secondary tariffs on trade with Russia. Two weeks later, Trump shortened the deadline to 10–12 days⁴, suggesting his growing frustration with the lack of progress in Moscow's position on the war. If the U.S. was to impose new sanctions – particularly targeting potential buyers of Russian oil with 100% tariffs, a crucial source of revenue for the Kremlin – it could be a game changer. However, after the Alaska summit, there are only faint signals that Trump may be ready to radically reconsider his stance toward Russia.

Europe's critical role

Regardless of the outcome of the future Trump-Putin talks, it is highly probable that US military assistance to Ukraine will cease. The minimum that Kyiv hopes to preserve is the continuation of American intelligence support, without which the defensive capabilities of Ukraine's Armed Forces would be severely undermined, and European partners would be unable to compensate for the shortfall. The Trump Administration appears willing to allow commercial arms sales to Ukraine, but beyond that, meaningful support seems unlikely in the foreseeable future.

All of the above suggests that if Ukraine is to withstand the ongoing Russian offensive, Europe must do more than ever before. It is already a key pillar of support, but going forward, that pillar must grow stronger. Even the bravest soldiers and the most determined society cannot withstand aggression indefinitely with half-empty hands.

Any bystanders must understand that, however difficult the situation may be, Ukrainians have no real choice but to continue their defence in this unprovoked war. Every alternative would be much worse. Ukrainian society's attitude toward Russia changed not only after 2014, but even more profoundly after February 2022. The shock of massive Russian war crimes – killings, rapes, and atrocities in Bucha, Mariupol, and countless other places – stripped away the last illusions about Russia. Ukrainians now fully grasp that any potential collapse of the front line would simply mean more suffering, more destruction, and more crimes. They understand that Putin's Russia's "mission" is to erase independent Ukraine from the map.

Wake-up calls for Europe

Since the spring of 2025, Russia's strategy toward Ukraine has shifted. Although the Russian army has not achieved major success on the battlefield, it has intensified daily aerial drone bombardments targeting civilian infrastructure across the country. Moscow wants to degrade Ukraine's air defences⁵, depleting its arsenals, eroding the spirit of national defence and civilian morale, and forcing even more Ukrainians to flee abroad. The Kremlin's underlying

Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW), 15 July. Available at: <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2025-07-15/russia-calmly-reacts-to-trumps-ultimatum-ukraine-war>

⁴ Chance, M. (2025). Trump slashes deadline for peace in Ukraine – but will the Kremlin care? CNN, 28 July. Available at: <https://amp.cnn.com/cnn/2025/07/28/europe/trump-deadline-putin-analysis-latam-intl>

⁵ Wilk, A. and Żochowski, P. (2025). Another massive Russian air attack on Kyiv. Day 1217 of the war. Analyses, Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW), 24 June. Available at: <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2025-06-24/another-massive-russian-air-attack-kyiv-day-1217-war>

objective remains the same: to demonstrate, particularly to the West, that Russian determination outweighs European support, and that no matter what Ukraine's partners do, it will never be enough.

In this context, Russia is also waging a large-scale psychological campaign targeted at Western societies, pushing the narrative that it is impossible to win the war. But history proves otherwise. Numerous past examples demonstrate that Russia's strength often stems not from its own capabilities, but from Western weakness and indecision. Perhaps the most striking example is the weak response to Russia's annexation of Crimea and its provocation of the conflict in Donbas in 2014, which was accompanied just a few months later by Germany's involvement in the Nord Stream 2 project, with the participation of four major European energy companies.

In essence, the future course of the Russian–Ukrainian war will depend on whether European partners can substantially increase their military and financial support for Ukraine, beyond the levels seen over the past three years. This, however, requires a comprehensive strategy that Europe still lacks. Russia must be confronted with Europe's clear determination to support Ukraine for as long as it takes – not through declarations, but through real actions, large-scale military deliveries and strict strategic communication.

The past year or so has shown a positive shift in the narratives of some key Western European allies, particularly President Emmanuel Macron. But what matters more than accurate political diagnoses is the ability to translate them into realistic action. Europe's general goal, ideally backed by the United States, should be to force Russia to halt its aggression and move toward a lasting truce. Stable military supplies for Ukraine and increasing sanctions pressure on the Russian Federation are indispensable in that regard.

The Kremlin must realise that the cost of prolonging the war exceeds that of ending it – only then Kyiv can negotiate with a stronger bargaining position.

At present, however, the Kremlin does not believe that Europe can replace U.S. military assistance, what is based on the traditional Russian assumption of a weak, lazy and divided Old Continent. Expecting a return to American 'splendid isolation' from what is wrongly portrayed as "Ukraine's war," Moscow assumes it will be able to eventually achieve its strategic goals in Ukraine. "Therefore, Europe must convincingly demonstrate — not only through words but through concrete actions — that a stable and independent Ukraine, integrated with the EU, is essential to the European security order. Budgetary constraints and other domestic challenges cannot be used as an excuse for failing to support Ukraine.

Yet this war is far from being just about Ukraine. Should Russia succeed, it would likely move on to the next phase of its confrontation with the West. And Europe, having for decades outsourced much of its security to the US, is unprepared for that scenario. That is why the best place to stop an aggressive Russia is on the current front lines in eastern Ukraine.

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