



during a specially convened meeting of the Russian Security Council on the day of the inauguration (20 January).<sup>1</sup> Statements made to the media on that occasion by the Russian leader, as well as by the Foreign Minister, **Sergei Lavrov**, highlighted the positive aspects of Moscow's attitude towards Trump and his entourage: a willingness to restore direct contacts and engage in talks, a desire to avoid the threat of a third world war, and an intention to accommodate some of the Kremlin's demands regarding Ukraine (such as the inadmissibility of its NATO membership).

On the one hand, Putin praised Trump's 'bravery' in the face of verbal attacks and an assassination attempt, and congratulated him on his election victory. On the

” **Moscow reacted to Trump's inauguration with restraint. It sent declarations of readiness for dialogue while pointing out the uncertainties and risks associated with the new administration's policies.**

other hand, Lavrov highlighted the numerous and complex regional conflicts and emphasised the widespread uncertainty about US policy and its potential impact. Putin also declared the possibility of talks with Washington on Ukraine and reiterated the need to address the 'root causes of the crisis' (an allusion to the security order in Europe and the allegedly aggressive stance of the US and NATO towards Russia). He stressed that the objective of any agreement should be a lasting peace that considers the interests of all nations in the region (including the Russian Federation), as a mere temporary ceasefire is entirely unacceptable.

Other statements by Russian politicians and officials followed a similar vein. The Presidential Advisor on International Affairs **Yuri Ushakov** announced Moscow's readiness for a principled dialogue with Washington and expressed the expectation that the US would present concrete proposals that could form the basis for summit talks, thereby implying that the existing proposals were insufficient. Deputy Foreign Minister **Sergei Ryabkov** stated that Trump's return to power would result in a significant increase in the unpredictability of the international situation and relations with the US. Meanwhile, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman **Maria Zakharova** sharply criticised the US leader's decision to re-designate Cuba as a state sponsor of terrorism but welcomed his abandonment of the US's push for a liberal agenda.

Both the Deputy Head of the Federation Council, **Konstantin Kosachev**, and the Chairman of the State Duma's international affairs committee, **Leonid Slutsky**, pointed to the convergence of Trump's stance with Russia's in the realm of values. Simultaneously, they criticised the ineffectiveness of attempts at dialogue between the US and the Russian Federation from a position of strength. Kosachev countered this with the proposal of talks "from a position of common sense", while Slutsky, responding to Trump's threats of new economic sanctions, asserted that Russia does not intend to make concessions or compromise its national interests, emphasising Moscow's commitment to defending its interests. Additionally, the Deputy Head of the Federation Council noted that Trump's assertive foreign policy announcements (related to Panama and Greenland, among others) are in fact directed against China, and suggested that in addressing the conflict in Ukraine, the new administration does not necessarily need to consider Kyiv's position.

## Propaganda versus Trump: hope and uncertainty

A key theme raised by Russian propaganda is the new US president's relationship with Russia and possible peace talks. In this context, it was stated that Moscow is awaiting an offer from the White House, asserting that the initiative lies with the US administration. It was emphasised that Trump had promised to promptly organise the meeting with Putin, which is already being prepared according

<sup>1</sup> Meeting with permanent members of the Security Council, Administration of the Russian President, 20 January 2025, kremlin.ru.

to the US side. The Kremlin conveyed that it seeks to discuss the situation in Ukraine exclusively with Washington, bypassing Kyiv and European leaders. Furthermore, it was argued that the potential dialogue should focus on reshaping European security, as Ukraine itself holds secondary importance to Moscow. Factors believed to favour Russia in its relationship with Trump were also highlighted. Chief among them was the assessment that Trump does not prioritise Ukraine, which he views as an unnecessary financial burden, and that he ‘dislikes Europe’, which he allegedly perceives as a ‘major competitor’ and ‘problem’ for the United States. It was hoped that this outlook would lead to conflict between the US and Europe, the disintegration of transatlantic relations, weaken institutions such as the EU and NATO, and promote a return to nation-state politics—aligning with Moscow’s strategic goals. Propaganda further claimed that Trump’s promotion of ‘traditional values’ laid the groundwork for an agreement with the Kremlin and the formation of a coalition of values opposing Europe, which staunchly defends ‘liberalism’.

Russian propaganda welcomed Trump’s claims against other states and territories before taking office – declaring that challenging international order and law ben-

efits Russia and creates the conditions for a collective remodelling of the current international order (especially in Europe). The propagandists praised the president in particular for his pragmatism and businesslike approach to politics, which they believed would discourage him from investing in ‘loss-making assets’ (implicitly: Ukraine and Europe) and facilitate the substantive talks Moscow was hoping for.

” **Russian propaganda was happy to proclaim that Trump’s questioning of the international order and law creates the conditions for a collective remodelling of the current world order.**

The Kremlin media also highlighted the risks associated with Trump’s return to the White House. It was emphasised that he is a difficult negotiating partner and a sincere believer in the “mission entrusted to him by God to make America great”, which makes him likely to adopt a rigid negotiating stance and make abrupt, unpredictable and unfavourable decisions for Russia. It was recalled that it was he who had in the past initiated the delivery of ‘lethal’ weapons to Ukraine and – “although not Russophobic himself” – could easily be influenced by elements of his inner circle that are hostile to Moscow in order to exert pressure on the Kremlin.

Finally, it was argued that the US ‘deep state’, which, it was claimed, Trump was trying to uproot, would try to get rid of him, and that his life was at risk. Some commentators considered US policies against Russia, particularly in the defence sphere (e.g., the arms industry, military programmes, and nuclear strategy), as long term, and viewed Trump as a man who, even if he had such ambitions, would not be able to overturn such policies against Russia. Consequently, some propagandists, including Vladimir Solovyov, threatened an escalation of the war and predicted an attack by the Russian Federation on Europe, especially if a peacekeeping mission were deployed in the zone of military action. Others cooled their emotions, pointing out that it would be necessary to wait several months for concrete moves by the new president, and that any forecasting was currently impossible.

### **Context: Moscow raises the stakes for peace in Ukraine**

Reactions to Trump’s inauguration are part of the evolution of Russian attitudes towards Washington after the November presidential election, particularly in the context of potential peace talks. An increase in assertiveness, consisting of both sharper rhetoric and Moscow’s demonstrative aggressive steps, should be seen as a hallmark of this attitude.

For example, on 19 November, the revised text of the document 'Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence' was published.<sup>2</sup> It included provisions on the possible use of nuclear weapons in response to aggression against Belarus or a massive conventional attack against Russia. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov stated that the authorities regard Ukraine's use of missiles with conventional payloads supplied by Western nuclear powers to strike Russian territory as an act that meets the conditions for the use of such weapons.<sup>3</sup> In the same month, Russia attacked Ukraine with new ballistic weapons and threatened retaliatory strikes against military facilities in individual NATO countries.<sup>4</sup>

On 19 December, during his annual teleconference, Putin declared his readiness to hold peace talks with Trump "without preconditions" and to "compromise" on Ukraine.<sup>5</sup>

**Following the US presidential election in November, Russia's assertiveness has increased, consisting of both heightened rhetoric and Moscow's demonstrative aggressive steps.**

However, he stressed that it is impossible to negotiate with Russia from a position of strength, given its significant capabilities and successes on the frontline. He cited, among other things, the inability of Western countries to counterbalance the growth of Russian military potential or for Western anti-missile systems, including those in Poland's Redzikowo, to combat new Russian weapons (such as Oriesznik). The peace agreement, he asserted, must be based on the so-called Istanbul arrangements (of spring 2022) taking into account the 'new realities' (the situation on the frontline and annexations of Ukrainian regions). Putin reiterated his view that the Kyiv executive lacked legitimacy (referring to the 'illegal' extension of Volodymyr Zelensky's term of office) and suggested that an agreement could be signed with the leadership of the Kyiv parliament (the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine) or following presidential elections there. At the same time, he rejected the idea of a ceasefire, arguing that it would only strengthen Ukrainian resistance; instead, he called for peace with security guarantees for the Russian Federation.

On 29 December, Lavrov stated that Russia was dissatisfied with the proposals for settling the war in Ukraine outlined by Trump and his associates, which included postponing the country's NATO membership for 20 years and deploying European and British peacekeepers in the conflict zone (earlier, on 29 November, the second of these ideas had been rejected by a Kremlin spokesman).<sup>6</sup>

On 14 January Nikolai Patrushev, Putin's advisor, former long-serving secretary of the Russian Security Council, and an influential member of the elite, announced in an interview that Ukraine may cease to exist by 2025.<sup>7</sup> He stressed that Moscow would only discuss the country with Washington and not Kyiv or Western states, asserting that the EU is not authorised to represent its members, many of whom – such as Hungary, Slovakia, Austria, and Romania – favour stability and pragmatic relations with Russia. He accused the Baltic states (using the pejorative term 'pribaltica' for them) and Moldova of discriminating against the Russian-speaking population and warned that Chişinău's anti-Russian policies could lead to the dismantling of Moldovan statehood.

On January 17, Putin and Iran's leader Masoud Peshkian (a country considered by the Trump administration to be its main adversary – along with China) signed an interstate treaty in Moscow

<sup>2</sup> Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence approved by the Executive Order of the President of the Russian Federation No.991 of November 19, 2024, 19 November 2024, [mid.ru/en](https://mid.ru/en).

<sup>3</sup> 'Песков раскрыл, на какие удары ВСУ новая доктрина допускает ядерный ответ', РБК, 19 November 2024, [rbc.ru](https://rbc.ru).

<sup>4</sup> M. Menkiszak, 'Kremlin escalates threats against the West', OSW, 22 November 2024, [osw.waw.pl](https://osw.waw.pl).

<sup>5</sup> 'Results of the Year with Vladimir Putin', Administration of the Russian President, 19 December 2024, [kremlin.ru](https://kremlin.ru).

<sup>6</sup> 'Лавров: РФ не устраивают предложения по Украине от команды Трампа', ТАСС, 29 December 2024, [tass.ru](https://tass.ru).

<sup>7</sup> А. Баранов, 'Николай Патрушев: 'Не исключено, что в наступившем году Украина прекратит существование'', Комсомольская правда, 14 January 2025, [kp.ru](https://kp.ru).

“on a comprehensive strategic partnership”, declaring the further strengthening of cooperation, including military ties, as a political demonstration against the US.<sup>8</sup>

## Trump’s arrival – a preliminary balance sheet for the Kremlin

Both the rhetoric and actions taken by Russia reflect a marked increase in its confidence, alongside continued uncertainty about US policy under the Trump administration. Moscow observes a worsening situation on the frontline for the Ukrainian side, a growing reluctance among many Western countries to increase – or even sustain – financial and military support for Kyiv, and an expectation of a quick resolution to the conflict, shared by the new US president and his team. This creates a situation favourable to Russia.

The Kremlin seemingly interprets Washington’s rhetoric about fears of a third world war as evidence of the effectiveness of its policy of intimidation. Signs of tension between the US and Western (particularly European) allies, exacerbated by announcements of an assertive US stance (claims on Greenland and Panama, threats of tariff wars, revisions of energy policy) and anti-liberal ideological declarations, are highly advantageous to Moscow. In Europe, the Kremlin views the growing influence of populist forces positively disposed towards it as a favourable development. Although Trump’s campaign-proclaimed goal of ending the war in Ukraine within 24 hours of his inauguration was unattainable, his statements about his willingness to engage quickly with Putin, combined with his entourage’s suggestions of reaching an agreement within the next 100 days, create time pressure, offering Moscow an opportunity to attempt to dictate the terms of conflict resolution. Trump’s perceived focus on domestic policy objectives and the potential political tensions arising from them also carry potential advantages for Russia.

However, fears persist within the Kremlin that, as part of its policy of pressure on the Russian Federation, the new US administration might introduce additional

” **Announcements of an agreement within 100 days create time pressure, which gives Moscow room to try to dictate the terms of a settlement in Ukraine but also on European security.**

sanctions or tariffs (Trump explicitly threatened this on 22 January, although Peskov downplayed it as nothing new), particularly targeting the Russian energy sector. There is also concern that Trump might increase military support to Ukraine (he admitted that he was considering this) or remove restrictions on the use of supplied weapons. Moscow, however, does not appear to believe that such a course would be sustained over the long term. Also potentially detrimental to Russia’s interests are any far-reaching measures against its de facto allies, particularly Iran (economic or military) and China (economic). The latter situation could, however, be leveraged by the Kremlin to garner additional support from Beijing, unless a US-China agreement is reached in some form.

## Moscow’s tactics vis-a-vis Washington: talks from a position of strength

In this context, the aforementioned increasing aggressiveness of Russia’s rhetoric and actions, as well as the de facto tightening of the terms of possible peace talks (eliminating Ukraine from them or broadening the agenda) can be seen as a response to changes in the situation, interpreted by the Russian Federation as an increase in the West’s weakness and symptoms of a systemic crisis. This is pre-emptive in nature – Moscow’s aim is to deter the US and the West from increasing support for Kyiv and putting pressure on Kyiv.

<sup>8</sup> W. Rodkiewicz, ‘A new Russian-Iranian treaty: closing ranks ahead of Trump’s presidency’, OSW, 20 January 2025, [osw.waw.pl](https://osw.waw.pl).

Russia expects the new US authorities to initiate official, direct talks at the highest level as soon as possible, which holds propaganda significance for Russia. Moreover, it undermines efforts to isolate Putin and triggers a potential bidding war among Western countries for contacts with Moscow. In doing so, the Kremlin sends clear signals that it will not accept a 'compromise' offer dictated by Washington, insisting that negotiations (conducted with the US, not Ukraine or in a multilateral format) must account for Russia's repeated conditions. In this context, Moscow largely adheres to the list of demands presented by its leader on 14 June 2024,<sup>9</sup> which boil down to legalising the violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity, disarming Ukraine and stripping it of sovereignty, creating tools for Russian interference, and the complete lifting of Western sanctions. Such an agreement would amount to a de facto capitulation of the Ukrainian state.

Russia increasingly insists that peace must not only involve Ukraine but also concern European and global security. Indeed, when Putin and his associates speak of

” **Moscow is counting on an ad hoc increase in US pressure but believes it is more determined than the US and the West, unready in its view for a long-term costly confrontation.**

the need to remove the 'root causes of the crisis' and establish security guarantees for the Russian Federation, they are referring to longstanding allegations of 'aggressive and anti-Russian' Western (especially US and NATO) policies. In this context, Moscow references its list of demands from December 2021, presented as draft 'security treaties',<sup>10</sup> (with the US and Alliance member states). These demands centred on a fundamental revision of the continent's current security order, including the recognition of Russia's sphere of influence in the post-Soviet area, the establishment of a buffer zone in Central Europe, the reversal of the practical consequences of NATO's eastward expansion since the 1990s and 2000s, and the reduction of the US presence in Europe. While the Kremlin suggests that these earlier demands are now insufficient, it has not specified the extent of its current expectations. Putin's June 2024 speech, in which he outlined a loose concept of a 'Eurasian security architecture', suggests an intention for the US, Russia, and potentially China to divide influence within Eurasia.<sup>11</sup>

At this point, Moscow does not seem to expect the full realisation of such maximalist claims, which are unacceptable to the US and most Western nations (let alone Ukraine, which it dismisses as a subjective actor). Despite its bullish declarations, the economic situation of the Russian Federation remains difficult,<sup>12</sup> worsened by gradually expanding restrictions, mainly imposed by Washington,<sup>13</sup> which are generating social tensions. Russia is also facing international setbacks, such as the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria. Although Moscow anticipates an increase in US pressure in the short term, it seems to believe it is more determined than the US or the West, whom it perceives as unwilling to sustain a costly, long-term confrontation. In the short term, Moscow sees opportunities for a political breakthrough in its favour.

However, this does not mean that Russia is now ready to freeze the conflict in Ukraine, even in exchange for significant political concessions from Kyiv and Washington. Paradoxically, any indication from the West of a desire for dialogue, compromise, or a quick end to the war will likely lead the Kremlin to harden its position and multiply its demands. Russia therefore intends to continue high-intensity

<sup>9</sup> M. Menkiszak, 'The capitulation of Ukraine and the Finlandisation of Europe: Russia's threats and 'offers'', *OSW Commentary*, no. 606, 18 June 2024, [osw.waw.pl](https://osw.waw.pl).

<sup>10</sup> *Idem*, 'Russia's blackmail of the West', *OSW*, 20 December 2012, [osw.waw.pl](https://osw.waw.pl).

<sup>11</sup> *Idem*, 'The capitulation of Ukraine and the Finlandisation of Europe: Russia's threats and 'offers'', *op. cit.*

<sup>12</sup> *Idem*, *Winning the war with Russia (is still possible. The West's counter-strategy towards Moscow)*, *OSW*, Warsaw 2024, [osw.waw.pl](https://osw.waw.pl).

<sup>13</sup> F. Rudnik, 'Sanctions on Russia: the Biden administration's parting blow', *OSW*, 13 January 2025, [osw.waw.pl](https://osw.waw.pl).

hostilities in Ukraine (as indicated, for example, by the financial decisions of the authorities<sup>14</sup>), seeking to expand the area of occupation (potentially even beyond the administrative boundaries of annexed Ukrainian regions previously outlined in its demands), while simultaneously holding talks with the US on its own terms.

Such tactics are intended to yield multiple benefits for Moscow. Firstly, to weaken and marginalize Ukraine, while fostering distrust between Kyiv and the West. Secondly, they seek to heighten tensions between European states (especially Germany and France, but also the UK and the countries of NATO's north-eastern flank) and Washington. Thirdly, they aim to test Trump's patience and his willingness to pursue a 'grand bargain' with Russia while discouraging him from engaging with the 'eternal conflict' in Ukraine in the long term. In an ideal scenario for the Kremlin, this would result in Ukraine becoming a failed or Russian-controlled state, NATO's de facto disintegration, a weakened EU, reduced US involvement in Europe, and a crisis in transatlantic relations.

These tactics could be disrupted if the new US administration implements its 'peace through strength' policy, including with regard to the war in Ukraine. This would potentially involve, among other things, a significant tightening of US (and ideally European) sanctions, including secondary sanctions, against Russia, especially hitting its energy sector (the basis of its revenues), confiscating Russian central bank reserves and allocating them to support Kyiv, lifting restrictions on the use of Western weapons, and increasing their supply to Kyiv. In practice, only a willingness to escalate and drastically increase costs for Moscow could alter the Kremlin's calculations and force concessions from Moscow. However, before this occurs, it is likely that Russia will test the resolve of its adversaries by escalating aggression towards Ukraine and the West on an ad hoc basis, potentially through hybrid warfare or armed provocations in the latter case.

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<sup>14</sup> I. Wiśniewska, 'Russia's budget for 2025: war above all', OSW, 22 November 2024, [osw.waw.pl](https://osw.waw.pl).