

## Year three of the war: Russia's hopes for victory and a crisis in transatlantic relations

Wojciech Konończuk

Despite advances by Russian forces, the third year of full-scale war has not seen a fundamental shift in the military situation. However, it has brought a significant political shift with Donald Trump assuming the US presidency on 20 January 2025 and initiating direct negotiations with Russia. Consequently, the Kremlin has become increasingly confident that victory over Ukraine – interpreted as stripping it of sovereignty – is only a matter of time and determination. Additionally, there is now hope in Moscow that, due to the crisis in US-European relations, Russia may achieve at least some of its objectives in reshaping the European security system.

### Russia's advances on the front

Over the past year, Ukrainian forces have continued defensive operations along the entire front line, with the Donbas remaining the area of the most intense fighting. Despite suffering significant, albeit difficult to precisely assess, human losses, the aggressor has systematically expanded its troop formations, increasing its numbers from 400,000 soldiers in 2023 to 600,000 in 2024. This build-up has enabled Russia to gain an advantage over Ukrainian defenders in key areas, leading to intensified offensive activity and the gradual but steady withdrawal of Ukrainian forces from additional towns in the Donbas, as well as in Kharkiv and Zaporizhzhia Oblasts. Over the past year, Russia has captured approximately 4,000 km<sup>2</sup> of Ukrainian land, bringing the total area under occupation to nearly 20% of Ukraine's territory.

The defenders found themselves in the most difficult situation west of Donetsk. In early October 2024, after battles that had lasted since March 2022, the enemy captured the strategically important town of Vuhledar. By December, Pokrovsk had been encircled, causing it to lose its significance as the main logistical hub for the Ukrainian army in the Donbas. Consequently, economically vital coking coal mines near Pokrovsk were forced to cease operations, as they risk falling into the hands of the aggressor in the coming months. Although, in February 2025, Ukrainian forces launched successful counterattacks, reclaiming some lost positions and alleviating pressure on the city, they did not halt Russia's advance along its flanks. In January 2025, Russian troops took control of Kurakhove, which had been a key base for Ukrainian defences west of Donetsk, and subsequently captured Velyka Novosilka, the last significant stronghold at the junction of the Donetsk, Dnipropetrovsk, and Zaporizhzhia Oblasts.



The Russians are persistently striving to flank and capture Kupiansk, where fighting has been ongoing since late 2022. In spring 2024, fighting intensified along the border of Kharkiv and Luhansk Oblasts, and the aggressor also opened a new front north of Kharkiv. The objective was to pin down Ukrainian troops and compel the redeployment of some units from the Donbas front. However, Ukrainian forces succeeded in halting the enemy's advance and effectively blocking further Russian progress towards Kharkiv.

On 6 August 2024, Ukrainian forces unexpectedly advanced into Kursk Oblast, and in the following weeks, they seized approximately 1,000–1,200 km<sup>2</sup> of Russian territory.

**” Conducting operations in Kursk Oblast requires Kyiv to maintain a force of at least 15,000 troops, whose absence is being felt by defenders in the Donbas.**

More than six months later, Ukraine still controls an area of approximately 400 km<sup>2</sup>. This is not only a blow to the Kremlin's prestige but, in Kyiv's view, also serves as a bargaining chip for future peace negotiations. Despite deploying additional units, including North Korean soldiers since October 2024, Russian forces have thus far failed to dislodge the Ukrainians. However, conducting operations in Kursk Oblast requires Kyiv to maintain a force of at least 15,000 troops, whose absence is increasingly affecting defenders in the Donbas.

### Defence is increasingly difficult

The mobilisation and adequate training of new recruits to offset losses remain a persistent challenge for Ukraine's defenders. Since 2023, the total strength of the Armed Forces of Ukraine has remained below 1.05 million soldiers. In 2024, 200,000 individuals were mobilised, though the actual requirements remain significantly higher due to casualties (killed and wounded), the need for regular troop rotations, and mass desertions (between January and October 2024, at least 60,000 soldiers abandoned their units). However, the authorities are reluctant to introduce significant changes to mobilisation policies due to fears of negative public reactions. In April 2024, Kyiv lowered the minimum conscription age from 27 to 25. Despite pressure from the West (particularly Washington), Ukraine has resisted imposing mandatory military service for men aged 18 to 24. Instead, on 11 February 2025, a voluntary, contract-based enlistment process was introduced for this age group.

The problem of insufficient troop numbers also affects Russia, where the first and so far only 'partial mobilisation' (300,000 reservists) was announced in September 2022. The Kremlin has yet to order another round of mobilisation, fearing public unrest. For now, voluntary enlistment remains sufficient to sustain the war at its current scale, as recruits receive exceptionally high salaries by Russian standards. The participation of foreign mercenaries and the 12,000 North Korean soldiers mentioned earlier holds largely symbolic significance and does not materially impact the pace of operations on the front lines.

The third year of the war has clearly shown that, thanks to the heroism of its soldiers and Western support, Ukraine remains capable of defending itself effectively. However, this is becoming increasingly costly due to the lack of troop rotations, a shortage of soldiers, and difficulties in fully staffing military units. Under these circumstances, the absence of major Russian breakthroughs is the best outcome Kyiv can realistically expect, as Ukraine currently lacks the strength to regain the initiative and mount a new offensive. Nevertheless, Ukrainian forces have become increasingly effective in using UAVs, which can strike deep inside Russian territory, primarily targeting refineries and fuel depots. While this represents a significant challenge for Moscow, the past year has shown that drone attacks alone will not change the course of the war.

Russian missile strikes on Ukrainian infrastructure, particularly the energy sector, have increasingly relied on large-scale drone attacks in recent months, resulting in significantly greater damage. Despite this, one of Ukraine's greatest achievements over the past year has been its ability to keep the energy and heating systems operational, despite almost daily attacks. The Russian objective of permanently depriving millions of Ukrainian homes of electricity and heating has not been achieved.

On 23 April 2024, after many months of disputes, the US Congress approved a long-awaited new aid package for Kyiv worth

**” Western aid remains significantly below the requirements of the Ukrainian military and frequently arrives later than agreed.**

\$61 billion. Without these funds, it would have been challenging for the Ukrainian army to continue its defence. According to Bob Woodward's bestselling book *War, Republicans*, who had been obstructing the passage of these funds in Congress, shifted their stance partly due to a two-and-a-half-hour conversation between Trump and Polish President Andrzej Duda, held on 17 April in New York. Shortly after this meeting, Trump posted on social media: "Ukrainian survival and strength should be much more important to Europe than to us, but it is also important to us!".

In the third year of the war, Western military deliveries to Ukraine did not accelerate; in fact, shipments of heavy weapons declined. According to data compiled by the Kiel Institute for the World Economy (IfW), in 2024 total military support from the United States and Europe amounted to €46.2 billion and €43.3 billion, respectively, maintaining a level similar to that of the first two years of the conflict. Western aid remains significantly below the requirements of the Ukrainian military and frequently arrives later than agreed. Only a few brigades are sufficiently equipped to function as fully operational tactical units, while most are struggling with a growing shortage of equipment.

The first ten F-16 fighter jets, donated by Denmark and the Netherlands, only arrived in Ukraine in late July and early August 2024. In Germany, endless debates persisted over the advisability of supplying Kyiv with Taurus cruise missiles, which were consistently blocked by Chancellor Olaf Scholz. Meanwhile, the Biden administration approved the use of ATACMS ballistic missiles against targets in Russia only after losing the presidential election. Before this, the US had supplied Ukraine with a newer version of these missiles, with a range of 305 km, making it the longest-range weapon Ukrainian forces had received from their partners.

## The unbearable absence of a vision

Western leaders continued to send messages of encouragement to Ukraine, frequently emphasising the war's immense stakes for Europe. However, these accurate assessments did not translate into increased aid for the embattled country. In February 2024, President Emmanuel Macron did not rule out deploying Western troops to Ukraine, sparking an important debate that gained momentum after Trump's election victory. At the same time, France's total support since the start of the war amounted to only €3.5 billion, less than what Poland, Sweden, or Denmark provided, despite France's economy being nearly twice the size of those three countries combined.

The West also failed to apply sufficient sanctions pressure on Russia, leaving many of its available tools underutilised. In 2024, EU-Russia trade amounted to €65.4 billion, with imports from Russia alone reaching €33.5 billion, according to Eurostat data. Russian LNG continued to flow into the European market, and some countries still imported Russian oil. The EU has not learned how to implement secondary sanctions effectively, consequently making its sanctions policy against Russia inconsistent and full of loopholes.

Europe also refrained from seizing frozen Russian state assets worth approximately €210 billion, despite such a move potentially alleviating growing financial challenges and disputes over funding continued support for Kyiv. It was only in May 2024 that the Council of the European Union approved a plan to allocate interest generated from these assets to aid the Ukrainian state. While this was a step in the right direction, it remained far from sufficient.

After three years of war, it is evident that the West has not done enough to bring it to an end on terms acceptable to both Kyiv and itself. The key criticism directed at both the Biden administration and Europe (particularly Germany under Chancellor Scholz) involves the absence of a strategy for ending the conflict.

” **The EU has not learned how to implement secondary sanctions effectively, consequently making its sanctions policy against Russia inconsistent and full of loopholes.**

On the one hand, the former US president and numerous Western European politicians repeatedly stated that their goal was to create conditions in which Kyiv could negotiate with Moscow from a position of strength. On the other hand, however, not enough was done to provide Ukraine with the necessary tools for that scenario to materialise. Ukraine received military aid too late and in inadequate quantities, with some weapons subject to restrictions on their use. Sanctions were imposed in a selective and cautious manner. All of this stemmed from concerns about an uncontrolled escalation of the war – at worst, reaching the level of a nuclear conflict, which Moscow regularly invoked as a threat to blackmail the West – as well as fears of potential internal destabilisation in Russia.

One might ask what exactly the West was hoping to achieve by pursuing such a strategy. The United States and Europe clearly lacked strategic foresight. Given the unwavering determination of Putin’s regime, for which this war is existential, Kyiv’s Western allies should have recognised that action needed to be swift, bold, consistent, and unencumbered by restrictions – both on Ukraine and on themselves. Instead, they opted for a cautious, long-term approach that entailed higher costs (particularly in human losses on the Ukrainian side), required greater resources, and was susceptible to reversal by a change of government in a key Western country. That is precisely what happened when Trump came to power in the United States.

### **The Kremlin: peace can only be achieved on our terms**

Trump’s re-election has opened a new chapter in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. The new US administration swiftly ended the isolation of Putin’s regime following a phone call between the two leaders on 12 February (although Chancellor Scholz had already broken this taboo by calling Putin in November 2024). This conversation led to the decision to initiate bilateral negotiations. On 18 February, an unprecedented meeting took place in Riyadh between delegations from both countries, led by US Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. Although these talks are only at an early stage and are expected to be lengthy and complex, their impact on the situation surrounding Ukraine is already apparent.

First, Russia hopes that in its talks with the United States, including direct meetings between Putin and Trump, it can persuade Washington to make concessions on Ukraine and ease sanctions. The triumphalist tone of Russian propaganda, along with the Kremlin’s markedly deferential narrative towards the American president, suggest that Moscow is relying on his mistakes and concessions.

Second, a sense of near ‘betrayal’ by the US has emerged in Ukraine and Europe. This sentiment has been fuelled by Kyiv’s exclusion from US-Russian negotiations, Washington’s pressure to hold a presidential election (despite Ukrainian martial law prohibiting it and over 60% of Ukrainians opposing

the idea), and an attempt to compel Ukraine into an unfavourable agreement on the extraction of mineral resources. Adding to the tensions is Trump's open criticism of Volodymyr Zelensky, contrasted with his conciliatory, or even friendly, tone towards Putin. All this has resulted in an unprecedentedly strained atmosphere between Washington, Kyiv, and Europe.

Third, the emergence of transatlantic and domestic US divisions is an immediate consequence of Trump's policy, which already represents a victory for the Kremlin. Russia has long sought to exploit these divisions and continues to do everything possible to deepen them, as this remains a fundamental objective of its foreign policy.

On the eve of the third anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, forecasting the future course of events is more challenging than ever. Trump's presidency could prove an undeserved 'gift' to Moscow, and there is no doubt that the Kremlin will seek to leverage it to pursue its objectives in both Kyiv and Europe. However, despite these developments, a swift end to the war remains unlikely.

### Slim chances of ending the war

Trump, who lacks an understanding of the nature of Russia's policy, seemingly believes that achieving what he terms a lasting end to the conflict merely requires ceding the currently occupied Ukrainian territories to Russia, guaranteeing Kyiv's neutrality, lifting or easing sanctions, and perhaps offering further concessions. However, it must be remembered that this war is not about land – it is about Russia's dominance over Ukraine and the reshaping of Europe's security architecture. Given this reality, the negotiating positions of both sides remain fundamentally opposed. At the same time, Kyiv has repeatedly signalled that in a future peace agreement, it might – *de facto*, though not *de jure* – accept Russian control over the currently occupied territories.

It appears that, from Russia's perspective, talks with the US serve as a means in advancing its long-term goal of achieving its maximalist demands. Since military success remains elusive, Moscow hopes that diplomatic manoeuvring will achieve what it has failed to secure on the battlefield. The Kremlin fully intends to take advantage of the US administration's stated desire for a swift end to the war. Russia understands that, as an old Russian proverb puts it, "if you hurry, you will make people laugh".

From Moscow's perspective, as its officials have explicitly stated, the key objective is to have Western sanctions lifted or at least eased. While the Russian regime

**” While the Russian regime has adapted to wartime conditions and maintains control of society through extensive propaganda, its economic situation is deteriorating.**

has adapted to wartime conditions and maintains control of society through extensive propaganda, its economic situation is deteriorating. In 2025, more than half of the state budget revenue will be directed towards the war effort, leading to significant cuts in social spending. No country, not even Putin's Russia, which is evolving into a totalitarian state, can sustain such conditions indefinitely without economic – and, ultimately, political – consequences.

Trump's policy has caused shock and disbelief in Europe, destabilising transatlantic relations. At the same time, however, Europeans appear to have finally recognised that they have done too little to support Kyiv, hasten an end to the war, and, most importantly, safeguard their own security. Discussions have begun on how Europe should respond. While this debate is still ongoing, it may ultimately bring an end to Europe's strategic 'carefreeness'.

The issue extends far beyond the approach to the war and Russia. There is no doubt that without US support for Kyiv, Europe – if it wishes to prevent a Ukrainian defeat – will need to considerably increase

its involvement. Although the renewed discussions about deploying a European stabilisation mission to Ukraine are significant, such an initiative cannot materialise without an effective ceasefire, which remains a distant prospect. This highlights the growing gap between Washington's expectations, as it calls for greater European military involvement, and Moscow's stance, which unequivocally rejects such a possibility.

The decades-long practice of effectively 'outsourcing' European security to the United States is coming to an end. Without American military capabilities, maintaining defence and deterrence within NATO is increasingly challenging. Given Moscow's revisionism, which targets not only Ukraine but also other regions, coupled with the deepening crisis in US-European relations, Europe now faces a daunting and long-term challenge. It must increase defence spending, expand its arms industry, and, ultimately, assume responsibility for its own security.

\*\*\*

With US-Russian negotiations currently underway, predicting what the coming months will bring is an extremely difficult task. However, among experts and in the media, a distinctly pessimistic tone prevails, as the extent of potential US concessions to the Kremlin remains uncertain. It must also be noted that these talks may not necessarily lead to a fundamental shift in the situation.

Regardless of the outcome of the negotiations, a lasting agreement with Putin's regime that is acceptable to both Kyiv and Europe remains impossible. Even if Russia were to secure a favourable deal with the US, negotiated without the involvement of Ukraine and European countries, it would not necessarily mean that they would accept its terms. President Zelensky has made it clear that even if an unfavourable US-Russia agreement were signed, Kyiv would not recognise its terms and, with European support, would continue its defensive war. This would be extremely challenging but not impossible, provided that Europe maintains political unity and significantly increases its military assistance.

It also remains possible that Washington and Moscow will fail to reach an agreement due to their vastly differing expectations. Regardless of how events unfold, the author of this text believes that 2025 will not bring a lasting end to the war.

What is certain, however, is that the outcome of the Russian-Ukrainian war will shape European security for decades and influence the global balance of power. It will also determine what actions can be carried out with impunity and what remains unacceptable in international relations, the true value of law, Europe's ability to defend its eastern flank, and the extent to which the United States retains its status as a defender of principles and values.

The outcome of Russia's invasion of Ukraine will also determine whether Moscow embarks on another war in Europe. Given the potentially pivotal phase of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and the profound shifts in transatlantic relations, Europe stands at the threshold of a new political era, with consequences extending far beyond the continent itself. The nature of this new era remains uncertain, as it largely depends on what Europeans choose to do – or fail to do – in the coming months and years.