

UKRAINE: IN SEARCH OF AN ELUSIVE PEACE

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Abstract: *After more than four years of bloody clashes, several failed attempts to peacefully resolve the dispute such as the Minsk Agreements, Ukraine is still stuck in a military stalemate. In 2024, presidential candidate Donald Trump promised to end the Russo-Ukrainian war within 24 hours. A year later, US Vice President Owens admitted that ending the war in Ukraine was “much more difficult” than Trump had previously believed. On the occasion of the fourth anniversary of the Russian invasion, Ukrainian President Zelensky stressed that Russia had failed to seize Ukrainian territory or change the country’s geopolitical course, and declared a “victory” for Kiev. On the other hand, President Putin, in his speech on May 9, 2026, said that the war would soon end in victory. Will the next February 24, 2027, be marked by peace, guaranteed security and stability for Ukraine? Will the greatest geopolitical challenge since World War II be resolved? This military conflict, without delving into the epistemological debate “what is war”, realizes Brzezinski’s dangerous thesis “that the most unfavorable bad news for the United States is the possible Alliance between China and Russia”. Europe is excluded from this global trilogy of great powers. In Kiev and Europe, they hope that time is working against Putin. However, after the crisis in Iran, sanctions against Russia disappeared. Moreover, Xi Jinping emphasized that “Russia must not lose this war”. Several scenarios are circulating in this direction, from the most optimal for one or the other side to the most catastrophic. And is it even possible for a nuclear power to lose a war today? Honestly, it seems that D. Trump shares this opinion. The stakes for all leaders are significant. Xi and Putin dream of a new world order. Trump dreams of the exploitation of Ukrainian rare earth and energy resources. Discreetly, the EU also hopes for the Ukrainian cake.*

Keywords: *Ukraine; Russia; peace negotiations; possible scenarios*

INTRODUCTION

Is a peace agreement between Russia and Ukraine possible in conditions when both sides are acting with maximalist positions? Russia seeks to annex the entire Donbas and to make Ukraine’s membership in NATO impossible. (Galeotti, 2024) Ukraine has no intention of giving up even a single inch of Donbas, and at the same time it demands solid security guarantees, regardless of the fact that the Russian army controls 90% of the territory of Donbas. The US believes that a peaceful solution is possible, but the European troika led by Macron, Merz and Stammer do not accept such a scenario. The war has entered its fifth year and several possible scenarios for a peaceful epilogue are circulating among experts. I believe that this war cannot be treated as an ordinary bilateral conflict between Russia and Ukraine, but as the beginning of new restructurings of the international order. (Duclos, 2023, pp. 4–9) Therefore, the epilogue of this conflict is not only a question of concluding peace between Moscow and Kiev, but also implies determining the positions of the other

actors who are directly or indirectly involved in this conflict. Xi Jinping's meetings with Trump and Putin in Beijing (May 2026) indicate a new design of international relations in which the EU is completely marginalized. After the events of Euromaidan (February 2014), the expulsion of pro-Russian President Yanukovich (February 22, 2014), Russia annexed Crimea (March 2014) and a month later the war in Donbas began (April 2014), between the Ukrainian army and separatists supported by Moscow. This dynamic turn was followed by several attempts to peacefully resolve the dispute, which did not result in success. In the fall of 2014, the Minsk I Agreement was signed between Russia and Ukraine, along with the "Package of Implementation Measures" (Minsk II). This agreement was very similar to the Ohrid Agreement of 2001, which overcame interethnic tensions in North Macedonia. (Marolov, 2013, pp. 134–154) When everyone was convinced that the situation would calm down, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom Boris Johnson, assessed the text as a "masquerade". Then, during the peace talks in Istanbul (April 2022), he convinced President Zelensky to block the negotiations. Despite the military truces, Belarus and Israel alternately tried to organize peace meetings between Putin and Zelensky, but without success. After Donald Trump was elected president of the United States, the question arose about the fulfillment of the campaign promise that he would "pacify Russia and Ukraine in 24 hours". From the very beginning of his term, Donald Trump put pressure on both sides. In August 2025, he met with President Putin in Alaska, and later prepared a 28-point peace plan. Donald Trump initiated peace talks between Russia and Ukraine in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, and in Geneva. All attempts ended in failure, and the war in Iran marginalized the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. At this point, it is difficult to predict when peace will prevail? What the epilogue will be is not yet known, but several scenarios are in circulation. One scenario in which Putin would be the big loser is "Europe, together with the US, unites against Russia and, similarly to the fall of 2022, the Russian army withdraws. Donbas would grow into a frozen conflict with possible guerrilla actions by Russophones". The second scenario is: "Putin and Trump manage to force Zelensky to make concessions. Russia keeps Donbas and Crimea." Putin fulfills his plans. However, Ukraine switches to partisan warfare in Donbas. The third scenario is a war of attrition, which is practically happening now. Trump withdraws from peacekeeping missions. Drones and ballistic missiles on both sides attack sensitive targets without control. The war could degenerate in another direction if one of the Baltic states, due to its geographical proximity to Russia, allows Ukraine to bomb from its territory. That would mean a direct clash between NATO and Russia, and possibly the activation of Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. Finally, the question of the depletion of resources and human capacities is out of place, given that their allies do not deviate from military and financial assistance. The Iranian crisis has shown that the West and China, despite sanctions, have increased imports of energy from Russia. Although this idea is realistic, Paris, Berlin and London, under the pretext that Russia will attack Europe and faced with the "so-called Thucydides Trap", are financing the war in Ukraine, dreaming of the geopolitical space and rare earth and energy resources of Ukraine.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The methodological approach to this geopolitical analysis relies on a multidisciplinary approach, through which a combined analysis of the significance of the territory around which the war is being fought, an analysis of the main actors Russia, Ukraine, Europe, the USA and their interests is carried out. It generally includes three different phases: document analysis, remote investigation and legal or peacebuilding assessment. The main steps of this methodology are: Data collection and triangulation, Desk research, Analysis of secondary sources, Field work. This is followed by Contextual and strategic analysis and System analysis as well as Legal and ethical assessment.

FOUR YEARS OF THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR – GEOPOLITICAL STAKES

In February 2026, the four-year anniversary of the war was marked, which entered a new phase of increased brutality and mutual exhaustion. Ukraine's military losses reach between 500,000 and a million killed/wounded. Over 20% of the territory in eastern Ukraine (Donbas) is under Russian occupation, with two new separatist states, the Luhansk People's Republic and the Donetsk People's Republic. According to estimates by The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS- <https://www.csis.org/topics/ukraine-war>), approximately 1.2 million people have been killed, wounded, or missing on both sides. Russian forces, despite their slow progress and territorial acquisitions, are on a constant offensive thanks to their powerful ballistic missiles and the size of their army. Ukraine, initially supported by the US and the EU, with large financial, military, intelligence, satellite, and digital technology, has built an efficient army. After four years of military conflict, Ukraine is facing exhaustion and a large human deficit. Zelensky says he is ready to compromise and meet with Putin, but that greater pressure from the United States and Europe on Moscow is necessary to end the conflict. (2026) In 2026, the balance of power between Ukraine and Russia has changed, but remains favorable to Russia, which has potentially greater reserves. In April 2026, Russia controls approximately 20% of Ukrainian territory. These acquisitions were won in the first phase of the war. In 2024 and 2025, Russia won only about 1% of the territory. The war in Ukraine led to a decline in Russia's power. The country has proven incapable of defending its partners around the world, whether it be Venezuela, Syria or Iran. At the same time, Moscow is unable to challenge the unilateral and interventionist policies of Donald Trump, which Putin so fiercely opposed. With the favorable peace with Ukraine, Putin seeks to revive Russia's imperial ambitions that in The 1990s were underestimated and marginalized by the West. Russia and Ukraine have more or less relied on their allies in the past four years. China's contribution to Russia, despite its alleged neutrality, has been fundamental. Its partnership is permanent and ideological, and is based on confrontation with the West. North Korea and, to a lesser extent, Iran played a significant role in the critical periods of the war. Ukraine, for its part, is completely dependent on Europe. European governments have done much to com-

pensate for the absence of American military assistance. I believe that the interest of Russia's allies stems primarily from their anti-Americanism, the BRICS stance on dedollarization and the establishment of a new world order. Claude Meyer in his latest monograph emphasizes that Xi dreams of establishing a new world order dominated by China (Claude Meyer, 2025, p. 25) Europe, in its desire to strengthen its geopolitical position and resource handicap, sees Ukraine as a future member of the EU and an important raw material partner. Enlargement has acquired a geopolitical perfume, while the principle of enlargement through the Copenhagen criteria is reserved for the Western Balkans.

PEACE INITIATIVES: FROM MINSK VIA ALASKA TO GENEVA

Since the worsening spiral of the war between the separatist forces of Donbas supported by the Russian army and the regular forces of Ukraine in 2014, no more attempts have been initiated to calm the situation. In September 2014, at the initiative of the Trilateral Contact Group for Ukraine (Russia, Ukraine and the OSCE), under the auspices of the OSCE, the Minsk I and Minsk II Agreements were signed. The agreements were also signed by representatives of the self-proclaimed "People's Republics" of Donetsk and Lugansk. Practically, these agreements are a partial copy of the Ohrid Agreement of 2001, which resolved the interethnic conflict in North Macedonia. It was about the right to use the Albanian language at universities and in the majority Albanian-speaking municipalities with greater decentralization. The demands of the Russophones from Donbas were similar. However, despite good intentions, the Minsk Agreements failed because the West sought to gain time to stabilize the front line in order to prevent the collapse of Ukraine, and at the same time to provide Kiev with funds for armament, Angela Merkel noted. (Merkel, 2024) For the Russian side, this was interpreted as evidence that the West never intended to implement the agreements, but was preparing Ukraine for war. On February 21, 2022, Russia recognized the independence of Donetsk and Lugansk, which practically destroyed the Minsk Agreements. (Tervé, 2022). After Russia's invasion on February 22, 2022, Belarus and Israel (March 2022) alternately tried to organize peace meetings between Putin and Zelensky, but all attempts were unsuccessful. In March 2022, the international community convinced the warring parties to negotiate in Istanbul from March 2022. This meeting resulted in a draft framework agreement on the neutrality and security guarantees of Ukraine. (Charap, Radchenko, 2024). Zelensky accepted the process of "denazification", "demilitarization and giving up the dream of NATO membership", as well as the recognition of Crimea as Russian territory. However, this attempt to peacefully resolve the dispute will also fail due to the sabotage of the negotiations, primarily by Boris Johnson. (Ashford, 2024) Other analysts believe that the Russian demands were maximalist, although the Kremlin did not re-claim the secession of Donbas from Ukraine as it is today. Others pointed out that after the successful counter-offensive, Ukraine, encouraged by Western leaders, hoped for victory. Minsk I and II have gone down in history, and both Ukraine and the EU probably regret these agreements. (Hynek, Šenk, 2025)

The first optimistic peace visions were initiated by US presidential candidate Donald Trump. On July 17, 2024, at the Republican Party Convention in Milwaukee, he promised that he would “bring peace to the world and reconcile Russia and Ukraine in 24 hours”. Two days later, in a telephone conversation with Volodymyr Zelensky, he confirmed that he would end the war in Ukraine. After his inauguration in the White House, Donald Trump tried to force Ukraine, Europe and Russia to conclude a peace agreement. However, his illusions did not work because he underestimated the resilience of Ukraine, the unity of the EU and Russia’s intentions. In March 2025, Donald Trump admitted that “his promise was sarcastic that he would end the war in 24 hours”. For the Kremlin, Trump’s election was an unexpected blessing. Putin hoped that Trump would cut off military aid to Ukraine and conclude an economic agreement with Russia. He did indeed cut off the massive military aid but maintained sanctions on Russia. In February 2025, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Riyadh. This was the first diplomatic dialogue between the US and Russia since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. In August 2025, Trump and Putin met in Alaska, which marked a symbolic collapse of Putin’s isolationism by the West. On November 21, 2025, the 28-point Russian-American plan for ending the war in Ukraine was revealed. (Chance, Walsh, 2025) This plan was assessed as unbalanced and in favor of Russia. Therefore, at the meeting in Geneva between representatives of the United States, Ukraine and Europe, it was revised into 20 points. (Verdo, 2025) Finally, after the talks in Abu Dhabi and the United Arab Emirates between Russia and Ukraine, they continued on February 18, 2026 in Geneva with the mediation of the United States but without visible results. The territory of Donbas remained the main obstacle to greater progress in the peace process. Meanwhile, Russia, having learned from the experience of the ceasefire during the first peace talks in Istanbul in 2022, did not accept Europe’s proposals for a ceasefire. “For us, these are parallel processes.” The most difficult obstacle in the negotiations is Russia’s claim to the entire territory of Donbas, given that 10% is under Ukrainian control and security guarantees.

POSSIBLE SCENARIOS

At the Geneva talks, the delegations of Russia and Ukraine confronted their strategic interests in order to find compromise solutions. In terms of Kiev’s territorial concessions, the “demilitarization” of the Donbas regions from which the Ukrainians would withdraw was proposed. However, no consensus has been reached on this issue. Russia’s annexation of 20% of Ukrainian territory would be recognized “de facto” by the United States, which, according to international law, would have little meaning if Ukraine did not accept these provisions. At the same time, a paradox is evident. However unfavorable it may be for Ukraine’s interests and sovereignty, this “plan” still contains elements that should logically make it difficult for the Kremlin to accept it. For example, the lifting of sanctions would be gradual. Russia cannot return its assets abroad (100 billion dollars have been allocated to a US-Ukrainian investment fund, 50% of which goes to the US). At the same time,

the upper limit for the Ukrainian armed forces would remain in accordance with the Kremlin's demands (85,000), while Ukraine is demanding 250,000 soldiers. From a European perspective, a kind of paradox of the Vitkoff-Dmitriev plan is that a large number of provisions refer to European countries, although they were not consulted during the preparation. Europe has certain arguments. Most of the frozen Russian assets are kept in Europe, and a large part of the sanctions also depend on the decisions of Brussels and London. If a ceasefire is achieved, Ukraine will have to make territorial concessions and give up its membership in NATO. Therefore, it is the Europeans who should guarantee its security. The Americans took into account the Ukrainian and European proposals, and the plan for which negotiations are currently underway now contains only 19 points. (Tallès, 2026). What epilogue is possible if these negotiations fail? In this context, three possible scenarios arise: First scenario: if the Europeans and Ukrainians manage to establish a more or less united front with the United States against Russia, which is unlikely in the Trump era, Russia will find itself in a defensive role. But is this alliance strong enough to collapse the Moscow-China axis, which has become even more stable after the war in Iran? And can a nuclear power be defeated in general, especially since D. Trump has shown great respect for V. Putin? Second scenario, which is more likely, is that Putin will have the last word in this war. In this sense, a parallel can be drawn with the American plan for Gaza. It is worth recalling that on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly (September 2025), Trump met with the leaders of a group of Arab and Muslim countries. They were able to redirect the initial plan conceived by the White House, until the American president met with Netanyahu. By including Netanyahu's demands, Trump has largely destroyed the concessions he made to the Arab states just days earlier. Following this precedent, it is quite realistic for Putin and Xi, together with Trump, to toughen their relationship with Zelensky and find a common position for the United States and Russia on peace in Ukraine. The third scenario: if the Moscow-Washington agreement, for one reason or another, collapses. D. Trump decides to completely exclude the United States from the conflict. Trump has often said, "If they want to continue the war, let them do it without us." This scenario would be the most dangerous for Ukraine, which desperately needs a ceasefire in the near future, as well as for Europe, which is forced to bear the burden of the conflict alone. It should be added that, regardless of which scenario ultimately prevails, the "Witkoff plan" will represent a turning point not only for Ukraine, but also for transatlantic relations. In fact, point 4 of the "plan" indicates that the discussions will be conducted "between NATO and Russia, with the mediation of the United States." It could not be clearer that the current US administration no longer sees itself as a pillar of European security alongside the Allies, but at best as a "trusted third party" between Europeans and Russians. (Sabriu Bexheti, 2026, pp. 159–164) How does Russia view the final outcome of this war? According to Russia's UN Ambassador Nebenzia, "European support for Kiev only prolongs the war. Zelensky does not need peace as he stated in Munich 2025. For Zelensky, war is a matter of politics and survival of power." Russia is against temporary solutions.

“Any agreement must be comprehensive, take into account our concerns about the root causes of the conflict.”

CONCLUSION

All elements indicate that the negotiations to end the war in Ukraine are at a standstill. Since the time of the Minsk I and II peace negotiations (2014/5), it has become clear that Ukraine and the West have avoided establishing a peace solution according to the model of the Ohrid Framework Agreement of 2001, which accepted the demands of the Albanian minority in North Macedonia. Bilingualism was introduced, the use of the Albanian language in higher education institutions, greater decentralization. Let us recall that the Russophones in Donbas demanded autonomous status, the use of the Russian language, which was previously banned, without demanding secession from Ukraine. In parallel with the military actions, several peace initiatives for the war in Ukraine were noted, but without much success. One of the key dilemmas is: what could be the epilogue of this war? Several scenarios are considered in this direction. One scenario is the unification of the entire West together with the USA against Russia, which would weaken Russian military power. But the strengthening of the Beijing-Moscow axis and the closeness of Putin, Xi and Trump make such a scenario impossible. The second scenario is Putin's victory, the fall of the entire Donbas under Russian control, as well as a moderate acceptance of the remaining demands, which Zelensky considers a capitulation that no Ukrainian will sign. The third scenario is a “continuation of the war” that could degenerate into a loss of control of the so-called “Thucydides Trap”, which could also involve a military conflict between NATO and Russia. What characterizes this conflict is the great rapprochement of the two great powers from the “Heartland” China and Russia, according to Mackinder's classic theory. This danger to American interests is also pointed out by geo-politician Zbigniew Brzezinski in his major work *The Grand Chessboard* (1997). The dilemma remains whether behind this conflict lies the great project of China, Russia and the BRICS to establish a new world order from which the USA and the EU would step aside in favor of China?

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УКРАИНА: В ТЪРСЕНЕ НА НЕУЛОВИМ МИР

Резюме: След повече от четири години кървави сблъсъци, няколко неуспешни опита за мирно разрешаване на спора, като например Минските споразумения, Украйна все още е заседнала във военна патова ситуация. През 2024 г. кандидатът за президент Доналд Тръмп обеща да сложи край на руско-украинската война в рамките на 24 часа. Година по-късно вицепрезидентът на САЩ Оуенс призна, че прекратяването на войната в Украйна е „много по-трудно“, отколкото Тръмп е смятал преди. По повод четвъртата годишнина от руската инвазия украинският президент Зеленски подчерта, че Русия не е успяла да завземе украинска територия или да промени геополитическия курс на страната и обяви „победа“ за Киев. От друга страна, президентът Путин в речта си на 9 май 2026 г. заяви, че войната скоро ще завърши с победа. Ще бъде ли следващият 24 февруари 2027 г. белязан от мир, гарантирана сигурност и стабилност за Украйна? Ще бъде ли разрешено най-голямото геополитическо предизвикателство след Втората световна война? Този военен конфликт, без да се задълбочава в епистемологичния дебат „какво е война“, реализира опасната теза на Бжежински „че най-неблагоприятната лоша новина за Съединените щати е евентуалният съюз между Китай и Русия“. Европа е изключена от тази глобална триангулация на Великите сили. В Киев и Европа се надяват, че времето работи срещу Путин. След кризата в Иран обаче санкциите срещу Русия изчезнаха. Нещо повече, Си Дзинпин подчерта, че „Русия не трябва да губи тази война“. Няколко сценария циркулират в тази посока, от най-оптималния за едната или другата страна до най-катастрофалния. И възможно ли е изобищо ядрена сила да загуби война днес? Честно казано, изглежда, че Д. Тръмп споделя това мнение. Залозите за всички лидери са значителни. Си и Путин мечтаят за нов световен ред. Тръмп мечтае за експлоатацията на украински редкоземни ресурси и енергийни ресурси. Дискретно ЕС също се надява на парче от украинската баница.

Ключови думи: Украйна; Русия; мирни преговори; възможни сценарии

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