



*The negative outlook for the conflict's evolution reinforces the tendency towards pessimism and increases the fear of becoming involved in war among European societies accustomed to living, for generations, in an environment of peace. We want to think that, in the end, all the actors involved in the conflict will eventually adopt a pragmatic approach, assuming that prevention is always better than cure and negotiation than fight. Let us hope that, in a Europe that seems headed for war, sanity will prevail over recklessness.*

*Keywords:*

*War, Ukraine, Stalemate, Attrition, Drones.*

**How to cite this document:**

FUENTE COBO, Ignacio. *The war in Ukraine (October 2024 - September 2025). Wear, resistance and stagnation on the threshold of its fourth winter*. Documento de Analysis Paper IEEE 20/2026. [enlace web IEEE](#) y/o [enlace bie<sup>3</sup>](#) (consultado día/mes/año)

## Introduction

At the end of 2024, the war in Ukraine was coming to the end of its third year since the Russian invasion began in February 2022, with no sign of it ending soon. The Armed Forces of the Russian Federation had remained on the offensive throughout the year, but with limited objectives and a cautious approach to minimise their losses. The Russians seemed to have adapted to the demands of modern warfare and, with the fall of Avdiivka in February, achieved their fifth victory in just two years (after Mariupol, Sievierodonetsk, Lyssytchansk and Bajmut).

The offensive sequence that began with the conquest of Avdiivka in February 2024 had not reached its climax but continued unabated, although the advances of their troops in the Donbas region were marginal due to the growing drone warfare that had become the differentiating factor on the battlefields.

Despite its slow progress, Russia was, at that time, in a favourable military position. Using a 'salami' tactic, with minimal but cumulative advances by its troops, the Russians had been able to maintain their offensive potential, and even increase it as the war progressed, despite the enormous losses suffered. The Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, General Valery Gerasimov, was confident of maintaining the initiative as his troops carried out offensives along the entire front, despite the considerable Western military aid received by Ukraine from more than thirty countries, with the most significant contributions coming from the United States, Great Britain, Germany, France and Denmark (EFE, 2024).

This confidence was based on the fact that the Russian army had been strengthened in terms of troop numbers and weaponry, so that while in March 2022 it had 130,000 soldiers and 1,800 tanks in the area of operations, by early 2025 this number had increased to 650,000 soldiers and 3,400 tanks<sup>1</sup>. In addition, supplies of artillery ammunition, loitering munitions and ballistic missiles from Iran and North Korea were enabling it to reinforce its combat capability, despite human and material losses, thereby accentuating its military advantage.

---

<sup>1</sup> Data provided to the author during his visit to Ukraine in February 2025.

Russian military successes in the Battle of Bakhmut in 2023 and the capture of Avdiivka in March 2024, achieved at a huge cost in human lives, placed Russian President Vladimir Putin Moscow in an advantageous position in any peace negotiations, which meant that Russia was only willing to accept ceasefire terms that were close to capitulation. The military strategy of attrition, which consisted of maximising enemy casualties, even at the cost of even greater losses on its own side, was something that Russia, with its larger population and economic and military resources, could afford, but Ukraine could not.

Similarly, Moscow had adapted its economy to the war effort in previous years, so it could limit the sacrifices demanded of its population. With total military spending accounting for a third of its national budget, GDP growth of 4.1% in 2024 and inflation contained at less than 10%, Russia seemed capable of meeting the needs of its population while simultaneously supplying its armed forces with personnel and equipment. Under these conditions, Moscow understood that it could rely on its greater human and material potential to bleed Ukraine dry until it surrendered. The Russian president did not seem to be in any hurry to negotiate, at least as long as he could maintain the pace of operations and survive the embargo and Western support for Kiev.

This position of 'strategic comfort' was evident in the peace negotiations in Istanbul in May 2025, when Russian negotiator Vladimir Medinski addressed his Ukrainian counterparts in a manner as pragmatic as it was cynical, saying: 'We do not want war, but we are ready to fight for one, two, three years, as long as necessary. , we fought Sweden for twenty-one years between 1700 and 1721, under Peter the Great. How long are you prepared to fight?' (Dupont, 2025).

### **Ukraine in a difficult but not tragic situation**

But not everything was favourable to Moscow. Russian optimism about rapid progress, especially in the central sector of the broad front stretching over 1,200 kilometres from the Belarusian border to the Black Sea, was exaggerated. Ukraine was tenaciously resisting military pressure and, although its armed forces had serious mobilisation difficulties and, consequently, few reserves, it had been able to minimise the Russian advance with Western military aid and an exponential increase in advanced weapons such as drones. Despite the difficulty, Ukraine remained committed to total resistance

and sought opportunities to shift the balance through surprise incursions that would allow it to maximise international support.

The most significant of these Ukrainian incursions took place in the Russian oblast of Kursk in early August 2024. The capture of territory in a Russian region introduced a new dynamic to the conflict, as, for the first time, the war had moved into territory internationally recognised as Russian. Although the Ukrainian authorities claimed that the operation in Kursk was launched primarily to prevent a Russian incursion into the Sumy Oblast, the reason was more political than military and was more likely to be the need to give Kiev leverage to negotiate with Moscow during future diplomatic talks.

However, taking advantage of the situation in Kursk proved much more complicated for Ukraine than it had initially thought. Despite efforts to prevent it, by the end of 2024, Russia had been able to recover almost half of the territory taken by the Ukrainians, and everything suggested that the rest of the Kursk territory would soon fall into Russian hands. In addition, in order to carry out this operation, the Ukrainian army had to withdraw a considerable number of troops from Donetsk, where Russian forces were advancing, leading to a deterioration of the situation in this sector in the weeks and months following the start of the Ukrainian operation in Kursk (Martínez, 2025).

Thus, by the end of 2024, the Ukrainian territory occupied by Russia was approximately 18.14% of the country's total area, equivalent to some 109,000 km<sup>2</sup>. This meant that, despite the fierce fighting that had taken place that year, Russia had conquered 3,200 km<sup>2</sup> of Ukrainian territory, a negligible increase of only 0.54% compared to the beginning of 2024, with the pace of advance slowing to a near standstill in December. This control was mainly concentrated in the eastern regions of Ukraine, such as Donetsk and Luhansk, as well as parts of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia (Le Grand Continent, 2025a). At this rate, it would take Russia more than two years (around 26 months) to completely occupy the rest of the territory still controlled by Ukraine in this region (Le Grand Continent, 2025b).

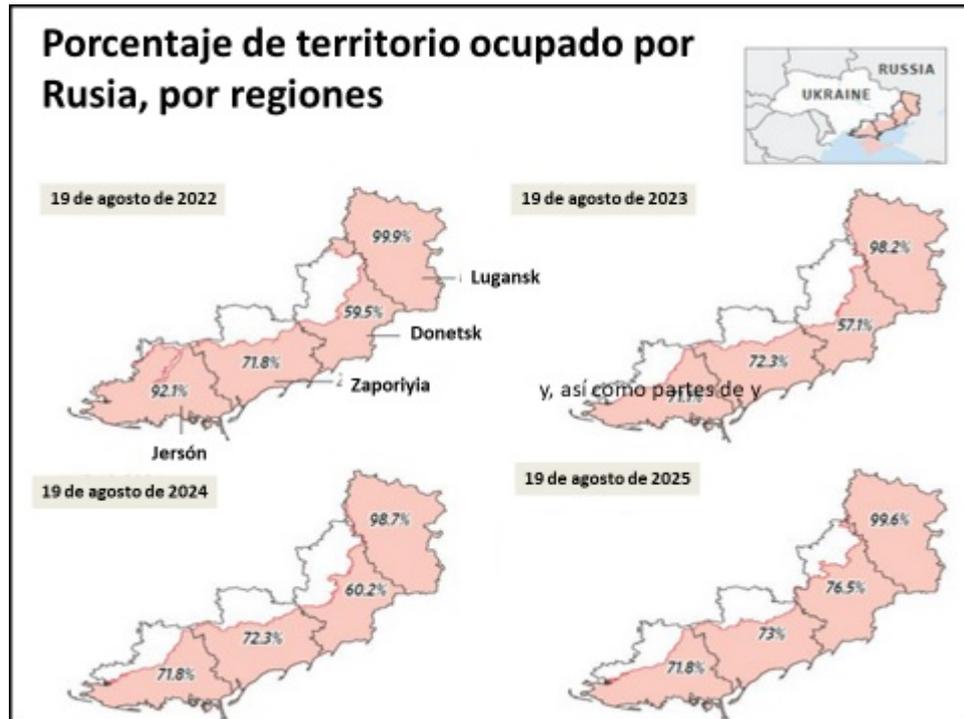


Figure 1. Source: Prepared by the author based on Le Grand Continent. (January 9, 2025)

But Ukraine's biggest problem lay in the difficulties in recruiting, retaining and rotating its troops, as well as in the poor coordination between the General Staff and the operational army. If it wanted to recover the territory in Russian hands, Ukraine needed more soldiers, better training for its troops and a more realistic expectation of its operational capabilities on the part of its General Staff. The most credible estimates indicated that Kiev needed to recruit 160,000 soldiers to staff its approximately 110 brigades, organised into 18 army corps, in order to achieve an 85% personnel coverage rate (Independent, 2025).

Although the United States had tried to convince Zelensky to lower the recruitment age from twenty-five to eighteen, the Ukrainian president resisted this measure in the hope of preserving future generations in a country undergoing a tragic demographic decline. But beyond political considerations, the reality was more complicated. Conditions at the front had become extremely difficult, with soldiers fighting for years without rotation, having to endure a slow but steady advance by Russian forces and suffering enormous losses, which acted as a significant disincentive to enlist.

Weariness with the war and the population's despair at the lack of positive results on the battlefronts had made military recruiters very unpopular figures. Videos on social media,

showing men screaming as they were dragged through the streets by officers who had raided restaurants and bars in search of those who had not enlisted, only made the situation worse. Even Ukraine's former military commander-in-chief, the popular General Valery Zaluzhnyi, had publicly denounced this in December 2023, which led to his resignation under suspicious circumstances (El Mundo, 2024).

### **The new American presidency. A change in the rules of the game?**

At the beginning of the year, European foreign ministries pinned their hopes for ending the war on the new US president, Republican Donald Trump, who had just won the November elections by a landslide and had repeatedly promised in 2023 and 2024 a new diplomatic effort that would end the war in Ukraine in 'a matter of 24 hours'. (BBC Mundo, 2025).

The arrival of President Trump's new administration meant that the United States faced several major challenges in relation to Ukraine, which, according to Michael Kofman of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, could be summarised as follows. "First, they will inherit a war with a very negative trajectory, without much time to stabilise the situation." "Second, they will inherit it without a clear theory of success" (Kofman and Evans, 2024).

Without a clear vision of how the United States could force an end to the war, US President Trump's attitude towards Russia and his position on the war in Ukraine has always been controversial. Although he has always been critical of it and has even stated that, if he had been president, this war would never have happened, Trump has shown an ambivalent view of the Russian president. During the presidential campaign, he repeatedly praised Putin, even calling him a "genius" when he was preparing to invade Ukraine in 2022, for positioning himself militarily in a situation where Russia could seize large swathes of territory by taking a hard line (Travis and Sexton, 2025).

American ambiguity about the continuation of the war and the support that the United States should provide to Ukraine favoured Russian positions on what the final outcome of the war should be. These had been set out in a speech delivered on 14 June 2024 (Seddon and Schwartz, 2025) by Russian President Vladimir Putin, when he expressed

his willingness to consider a ceasefire, but only if a series of tough conditions for Ukraine were met. These were basically: first, the recognition of Russian sovereignty over Crimea and the regions of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhia – in addition to Crimea – which included the total withdrawal of Ukrainian troops from these territories annexed by Russia after 2022. Moscow demanded that Ukraine accept the 'new territorial realities', i.e. the annexation of these regions by Russia.

Secondly, Moscow demanded Ukraine's permanent neutrality, with an explicit renunciation of NATO membership, which was to be accompanied by guarantees that Ukraine would never join the Western political-military alliance. Thirdly, an end to foreign military aid and a significant reduction in the Ukrainian army. In addition, Russia rejected any European military deployment on Ukrainian territory, even under the label of "peacekeeping forces". Finally, the lifting of economic sanctions imposed since 2022, many of them from Europe, before considering any possibility of achieving a lasting peace.

As for the provinces of Kharkiv and Odessa, also the object of Russian aspirations, President Putin suggested that their status should be decided in the future by referendum and trusted that their Russian-speaking majority populations would opt for incorporation into Russia. In any case, the immediate core of the conditions for a ceasefire centred on Ukraine's acceptance of the incorporation into Russia of the territories already occupied and annexed (Le Grand Continent, 2024a).

From the outset, both Ukraine and its European allies considered Russia's demands for a possible ceasefire unacceptable, as the formal transfer of sovereignty would imply acceptance of Russia's *de facto* victory, as well as a serious violation of international law and Ukrainian territorial integrity. Kyiv and most Western governments understood that such Russian proposals amounted to an ultimatum—not real negotiations—and perpetuated the logic of force over international law. As Ukrainian presidential adviser Mikhailo Podoliak indicated on his social media account, the Kremlin leader's offer was not a "peace proposal" but "the standard package (of demands) from the aggressor that we have heard many times before" (Huffington Post Spain, 2024).

But the Americans had a different view. The Trump administration's position on the need to negotiate an "early resolution" to the war in Ukraine involved the "incorporation of Donbas into Russia" and "international recognition of Crimea as Russian territory"

(Castaño, 2025), very much in line with the approaches advocated by Putin, who did not hesitate to support the Republican's election campaign using all the resources at his disposal. More than personal or ideological affinity, the Russian leader's attitude was simply pragmatic, as Putin saw Trump as pursuing a US policy more favourable to Russian interests (Le Grand Continent, 2024b).

### **Zelensky, an uncomfortable president for the Trump administration**

Trump had always been very critical of the aid granted by the Biden administration to Ukraine, and ironically described Ukrainian President Volodimir Zelensky as "a great businessman" to whom " , we have given hundreds of billions of dollars; every time he comes to Washington, he takes money" (Newtral.es, 2025). This critical attitude of the new administration towards the Ukrainian leadership resulted in the temporary suspension of all military aid to Ukraine until the Kiev government "demonstrates a commitment to peace in good faith". The blockade affected US military equipment outside Ukraine, including weapons being transported by plane and ship, or waiting in transit zones in Poland, which, for Ukraine, was equivalent to the collapse of a vital artery for keeping its army alive (BBC News, 2025b).

But the climax of the disagreement between Trump and Ukrainian President Zelensky took place during a tense conversation between the two leaders at the White House in February 2025, when the US president reproached the Ukrainian for "playing with the lives of millions of people right now. You are playing with World War III. What you are doing is disrespectful to this country, the country that has supported you much more than many said it should." On this occasion, Trump reminded the Ukrainian that "if you didn't have our weapons, this war would have been over in two weeks" (Davies, 2025).

After this harsh encounter, it seemed that relations between the two sides were broken. However, the US administration's position changed as its inability to stop the war became apparent. In a post on his social media platform, *Truth Social*, Trump said that Putin has "love" for the Russian people and claimed to have a "good relationship" with him, before issuing a serious warning: "Stop this ridiculous war! It's only going to get worse. If we don't reach an 'agreement', and soon, I have no choice but to impose high taxes, tariffs

and sanctions on anything sold by Russia to the United States and several other participating countries" (BBC News, 2025a).

This threat was primarily aimed at public opinion and the foreign ministries of his Western allies to convince them that the United States was taking action. But these were rhetorical statements with little chance of becoming effective measures. In reality, it was unclear what further restrictions Trump could impose on Russia, already the most sanctioned country in the world with very few key entities or sectors not subject to US and European restrictions. Furthermore, there were serious doubts about the effectiveness of the sanctions regime and the need to tighten it or complement it with other measures. Russia had managed to sustain its economy by relying on oil and gas sales in international markets, while Russian banks and military industry companies had adapted quite well to existing sanctions and developed ingenious solutions to circumvent them (Semple, 2025).

This was understood by the Russian authorities, and it was Russia's deputy ambassador to the UN, Dimitri Polyanskiy, who responded to the US president by saying that the Kremlin would need to know what agreement Trump would want to end the war before Moscow could accept it. For Russia,

"it is not simply a question of ending the war. First and foremost, it is a question of addressing the root causes of the Ukrainian crisis. We have to see what 'agreement' means in President Trump's reasoning. He is not responsible for what the United States has been doing in Ukraine since 2014, turning it into an anti-Russian country and arming it for war with us, but it is now in his power to stop this perverse policy" (Reuters, 2025).

The ambassador was referring to the billions of dollars in economic and military aid that the United States had been providing to Volodymyr Zelensky's government.

The lack of practical results from the US's verbal pressure led the White House to announce what appeared to be a strategic shift in the war in Ukraine. On 14 July 2025, Trump hardened his stance with the threat of new economic sanctions and a package of advanced weapons for Kiev if Moscow did not agree to negotiate within 50 days. This \$10 billion military aid package included Patriot missiles, air defence systems and artillery.

The delivery would be made through sales to NATO member countries, which would in turn transfer the military equipment to Kiev.

The package could also include authorisation for Ukraine to use its eighteen ATACMS missiles with a range of 300 kilometres against targets inside Russia. The possibility of sending Tomahawk cruise missiles capable of reaching Moscow and St Petersburg was also considered, which, if it were to happen, would definitively settle the political and military debate on the supply of advanced weaponry to Ukraine in previous years. Until then, every time the permitted range of these missiles was extended, Russian forces moved their aircraft and equipment beyond Ukraine's range, limiting the effectiveness of the attacks. With the possible authorisation to use ATACMS at their maximum range, this evasion strategy by Russia would be limited, allowing Ukraine to carry out deeper strikes into Russian territory (Defence News, 2024).

This highlighted the growing American frustration with the Russian president, a result of the US president's illness, who initially thought it would be easy to convince Putin to end the war. The conclusion reached was that the only way to achieve peace was to significantly increase the cost to Russia of continuing the conflict. As Ignatius stated in the *Washington Post*, "Trump is playing hardball with Putin. He is angry" (Ignatius, 2025).

But beyond emotional issues, this change in the US position was based on a clear strategic logic based on the principle of "escalate to de-escalate", which consisted of increasing military and economic pressure on Russia to force a negotiation. According to this logic, Trump's decision to intensify pressure on Russia sought to address three main issues: first, to force Putin to take him seriously by ceasing to feign his willingness to negotiate peace while ignoring Washington's calls for a ceasefire. Secondly, Trump had become convinced of the usefulness of force as a deterrent after the experience in Iran, where the effectiveness of US military power and military was demonstrated with the use of B-2 bombers and Tomahawk missiles against its territory. Finally, there was the conviction that Putin would only agree to negotiate if he faced a credible threat of having to confront greater military force (Infobae, 2025).

This new high-risk strategy by the Trump administration was initially successful in August 2025, bringing Russia to the negotiating table in Alaska, but it also highlighted the possibility of further escalation in the conflict. Proof of the risks taken by the US

administration is the fact that Dmitry Medvedev, the bellicose deputy chairman of the Security Council and former president of Russia, warned of an escalation towards nuclear war with the United States in response to President Trump's ultimatum to "end the war in 50 days" or face severe sanctions. Medvedev's description of this threat as a "step towards war" seemed to refer, within a dangerous "dialectical game of ultimatums", to Russia's semi-automatic nuclear retaliation system "Dead Hand", which guarantees Russia the ability to launch a nuclear retaliatory strike if its submarines and other strategic centres — including its political and military leadership — were to be destroyed (Lowther and McGiffin, 2024).

The risks of escalation of this strategy based on incremental tension management became apparent when Trump ordered the deployment of two nuclear submarines in areas close to Russia on 1 August 2025 as a preventive measure against what he considered to be Medvedev's "reckless and inflammatory statements" (El País, 2025). In short, tensions between Russia and the United States materialised in a series of tit-for-tat responses, with the United States deploying strategic nuclear forces and Russia warning of the gravity of the nuclear situation, raising the risk of nuclear war if the confrontation continued to escalate. When Trump was asked at a meeting in the Oval Office how far he would be willing to go if Putin decided to intensify the confrontation, his response was, "Don't ask me a question like that, 'how far?' I just want the war to be resolved" (Infobae, 2025).

### **Is peace possible? A political decision**

Clausewitz said that politics is the guiding intelligence and war is only its instrument. Any solution to the Ukrainian conflict will always be at the political level, so that the more intense the war, the more intense the negotiations for its conclusion will be. On 15 August 2025, Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump met at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson in Alaska, a former US military surveillance facility from the Cold War. It was the first face-to-face meeting between the two leaders since Trump's return to the US presidency.

The main purpose of the meeting was to discuss the war in Ukraine and seek progress towards peace. But the two leaders differed on how to achieve this. While Trump aspired to achieve a ceasefire, Putin sought to break Russia's diplomatic isolation and bring

Moscow and Washington closer together on trade issues. The meeting, described as "cordial but distant" (Segura, 2025), reflected the structural mistrust between Moscow and Washington and ended in complete failure. No concrete agreement or significant progress was achieved, nor was any ceasefire in Ukraine announced.

But for Putin, it was a clear political and diplomatic victory, as he not only regained lost legitimacy, but also controlled the agenda, set the timing and limits of the discussion, and resisted pressure from an American president whom the press described as "frustrated," "less dominant" and "bewildered" by his behaviour during the meeting (Bilazi, 2025). By refusing to give ground on sensitive issues such as Ukraine (Latorre, 2025), Russia reappeared on the international stage as a major power, which was exactly what it wanted.

In short, the summit was symbolic and media-oriented and ended without a substantial agreement on Ukraine, beyond a declaration of goodwill to continue talks in the future. It is not surprising that Ukrainian sources claimed that Russia had used the Alaska Summit on 15 August to, among other things, 'play for time' before a potential Russian offensive ' ' in the autumn of 2025, which would allow them to take control of the rest of the Donetsk province that they did not control before 31 December 2025 (Slattery *et al.*, 2025).

On the Monday following the Alaska summit, an urgent and unusual meeting took place at the White House between Donald Trump, Volodymyr Zelensky, and European leaders—Keir Starmer (United Kingdom), Emmanuel Macron (France), Friedrich Merz (Germany), Giorgia Meloni (Italy), and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, as well as NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte.

Although many European leaders publicly praised Trump to encourage his involvement, they all wanted to ensure that no peace agreement would jeopardise Europe's future or Ukraine's security (Gómez, 2025). Accompanying Zelensky at the meeting with Trump, they sought to present a united front of support for Ukraine with which to directly influence negotiations on the future of the conflict and the achievement of security guarantees similar to NATO's Article 5, as well as to try to contain possible territorial concessions demanded by Moscow (RTVE, 2025). The Europeans' fear was that the peace process would be limited to an agreement between the United States and Russia, without taking into account Ukraine's demands and security or European interests. It was therefore

essential to make it clear that Ukraine was not negotiating in isolation and that European stability depended on the guarantees given to Kyiv.

Beyond appearances, the tour was a lifeline for Kyiv at a particularly difficult time in the military operations, when, amid heavy Ukrainian casualties and a scenario marked by war fatigue with winter just around the corner, Ukraine's resilience could be seriously compromised (Scarpellini, 2025). Sensitive issues such as Russia's territorial demands (Donbas) and Ukraine's non-membership of NATO, which was the fundamental objective of Russia's claims, were addressed.

But before addressing this thorny issue, other aspects had to be resolved, such as security guarantees for Ukraine, progress towards a possible trilateral meeting with Putin, and the conditions for an eventual ceasefire or peace agreement. Trump expressed his intention to organise a meeting between Putin and Zelensky in the near future to discuss these issues, followed by a possible trilateral summit, which would also be attended by Zelensky. The Ukrainian president expressed his willingness to participate in these talks, while European leaders emphasised the need to guarantee security and stability for Ukraine and the region (Colas, 2025).

For Kiev, the visit to Washington came as a relief amid an increasingly unfavourable military and politically hopeless situation, in which Putin had made it clear that he did not intend to back down from his strategic objectives, even if the conflict dragged on for years (Knight, 2025). However, although the meeting raised certain expectations in the search for a negotiated solution that seemed to involve 'territory for peace with guarantees', numerous questions remained unresolved.

### **The 'Coalition of Volunteers'. A solution for Ukraine?**

The negotiations between the United States and Russia were not the only political and diplomatic response to the war in the face of possible peace negotiations between Ukraine and Russia. To prevent Ukraine from being left alone, on 17 February 2025, following an initial meeting, French President Emmanuel Macron took the initiative to create the so-called "Coalition of Volunteers for Ukraine". Shortly afterwards, on 2 March 2025, a second meeting was held in London, organised by British Prime Minister Keir

Starmer, where the formation of this coalition was publicly announced. The Coalition of Volunteers for Ukraine was finally established as a flexible and operational international alliance of some 35 countries, mainly European, but also including nations such as Canada, Australia, Japan and Turkey.

The aim was to prevent Ukraine from being excluded from a possible peace process or ceasefire with Russia, which prompted several European countries to join forces to provide concrete security guarantees to Ukraine, in a manner that was independent of NATO and the European Union (Huffington Post Spain, 2025). Its objective was therefore both political and military, as it involved an explicit commitment by some 26 countries to provide support beyond the usual military aid, including the deployment of troops and assistance on land, sea and air to secure peace and prevent future Russian aggression.

This deployment would not involve direct confrontation with Russia, but was intended to act as a deterrent to ensure Ukraine's lasting security and strengthen its army with more troops, training and weaponry. The initiative also seeks to respond to the perception of a certain distancing of the United States from Europe in the conflict, acting as a mechanism independent of NATO and other bodies to take an active role in the defence of Ukraine.

Once consolidated, on 18 August 2025, the thirty members of the 'coalition of the willing', mostly European, under the supervision of the NATO Secretary General, addressed by videoconference the issue of security guarantees for Ukraine in the context of a possible peace agreement with Russia. The aim was to see how NATO's 'Article 5' protection (the quasi-automatic mutual assistance clause between allied countries) could be extended to Ukraine. This clause could even be more precise than Article 5, which does not constitute an obligation to intervene militarily.

Protection inspired by NATO, but without NATO, would somehow overcome Russia's reluctance, as it has always opposed the Alliance's involvement in the conflict in Ukraine. In reality, this proposal for a substitute "for NATO, but without NATO" was highly ambiguous, since the presence of European Alliance troops in Ukraine through a clause similar to Article 5 and with the protection, albeit indirect, of the United States, was too similar to the Atlantic Alliance. In the end, "a NATO without NATO is NATO" (Ricard and Vallet, 2025). In the case of Russia, it seems unlikely, as Jamie Shea, former Deputy Secretary General of NATO, believes, that "Putin will accept security guarantees similar

to Article 5 from , as this would be equivalent to NATO membership or, at least, would inevitably lead to it" (Rzheutska and Vlasenko, 2025).

In any case, the big question for Europeans was, above all, to what extent the United States would be willing to get involved if European or Ukrainian forces were attacked by the Russians. A positive response could overcome the reluctance of many European states to participate in a coalition of willing countries, knowing that, if things got tough, they would have the Americans' backing.

Since then, Europeans have been trying to find the most appropriate form for a commitment with the Americans, which should take the form of the concerted deployment of a credible military *'reassurance force'*, estimated by the military high command to require a minimum of 15,000 to 20,000 troops. This force would be constituted on the basis of individual commitments from the countries forming the *'Coalition of Volunteers'*, which would be deployed far from the front line – to avoid direct confrontation with the Russians – and would do so once hostilities had ended (Le Monde, 2025).

Given that it seems unlikely that the Americans will be willing to become overly involved in Ukraine, the final deployment of forces in Ukraine, in the event of a ceasefire, could be similar to the following: Ukrainian troops would defend behind a demilitarised zone patrolled by neutral peacekeeping troops (the composition of which remains to be seen, but it is unlikely to be European if we are to believe Russian statements). European countries, for their part, would deploy "tens of thousands" of soldiers who would act as a "deterrent force" and operate deeper into Ukraine as a "third line of defence", with US forces operating further behind the lines.

What seems certain is that, under no circumstances, will the United States send troops to Ukrainian soil, although it would be willing to provide "strategic enablers" such as intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR); command and c r control (C2). It could also provide air defence capabilities to support a future European-led deployment on the ground in post-war Ukraine as part of security guarantees (Olmsted, Harward *et al.*, 2025). Ultimately, with its strategic concerns increasingly focused on China, the United States' main interest would be to sell military equipment to the Europeans, who would then transfer it to Ukraine (Le Monde, 2025).

The Gordian knot of the Ukrainian question in reaching a ceasefire or peace agreement would lie in security guarantees, where the Russian, American and European missions differ significantly. Perhaps the greatest advantage of these discrepancies is that they force all the forces involved to reveal their true intentions. In this regard, Moscow would probably reject a proposal for security guarantees for Ukraine such as the one being discussed by US and European officials, based on the presence of NATO troops in Ukraine as part of such guarantees (Mappes *et al.*, 2025). The Russian Foreign Ministry (MFA) spokesperson, Maria Zakharova, stated on 18 August that Russia rejected "any scenario that envisages the appearance in Ukraine of a military contingent with the participation of NATO countries" (Sobieski *et al.*, 2025).

Sergey Lavrov, Russia's all-powerful Foreign Minister, has also warned that its "security interests" must be taken into account in the negotiations (Le Grand Continent, 2025c) and that, if this is not the case, Russia will achieve its war aims by force, which consist of eliminating threats to its security "arising from Ukrainian territory", protecting the rights of "Russian-speaking people who believe they belong to Russian culture and Russian history", and Ukrainian neutrality (Mappes *et al.*, 2025).

What Lavrov acknowledges is that Russia continues to believe that the supposed "root causes" of the war are NATO's eastward expansion and Ukraine's discrimination against Russian speakers (Gibson *et al.*, 2025). This narrative is based on the ideological and geographical conception of Ukraine as part of the Russian world ("*Ruskiy Mir*"). NATO's eastward expansion was the "root cause" that broke this historical continuity and gave rise to the war. Until this root cause is resolved, Russia's objectives will not change (Olmsted, Gibson *et al.*, 2025) and the war will continue. Ultimately, the Kremlin's ultimate goal in Ukraine would be to control the whole of Ukraine politically, rather than simply seizing certain Ukrainian territories such as the Donetsk Oblast (Harward *et al.*, 2025).

Convinced that he could win the war of attrition by prolonging the conflict while waiting for Western support to weaken, Putin rejected, during the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit on 4 July 2025, any Russian participation in meaningful negotiations for a ceasefire agreement, and instead demanded that Ukraine accept "irreversible demilitarisation" as a precondition for any ceasefire. This implies Ukraine's surrender before any agreement can be reached (Daily Sabah, 2025).

### **On the threshold of the fourth winter. Attrition, resistance and stalemate**

At the time of writing, the war in Ukraine is politically and militarily at a standstill. From a military point of view, during 2025, especially since August, the morphology of the front line has changed significantly. This is due, firstly, to the use of drones, which has profoundly changed the way reconnaissance, surveillance, defence and even troop supply are conceived, hindering the freedom of action essential for decisive offensive operations. Secondly, it is due to the Ukrainians' human resource problems, which mean that many positions are not physically defended but are covered by drones. They can therefore be occupied without the Ukrainians having enough time to react, or simply be overrun to establish positions behind what is considered the front line.

This means that surprise is still possible, even on a partially transparent battlefield where the adversary can observe concentrations of forces but cannot reliably discern the intention behind those concentrations (Kagan *et al.*, 2024). Surprise is the result of exploiting the temporary advantages provided by technological innovations incorporated at key moments in successive battles and coordinated with ground operations. The result has been the emergence of certain particularly mobile parts of the front, especially in its central sector, with positions that are not permanently defended, giving rise to the creation of a large grey area where it is difficult to discern who has territorial control and even more difficult to predict in which direction operations will evolve.

In general, given the difficulty of taking major cities, the Russian strategy seems to be geared more towards weakening Ukrainian defences, wearing down its forces and expanding the front line through encirclement operations that seek to cut supply lines and cause collapses in Ukrainian areas under continuous pressure, rather than directly assaulting cities. The centre of gravity of the Russian military effort, rather than territory, would be the Ukrainian army, in line with the logic of the war of attrition that Ukraine has become.

For its part, Ukraine's strategy would focus primarily on exploiting the opportunities arising from its superior technological and doctrinal innovation cycle to achieve surprise. It can also benefit from the fact that Russian forces have been attacking almost the entire front line for months, rather than building extensive fortifications in depth. Supported by its

defences, Ukraine would be carrying out limited offensive manoeuvres, given the resources available to its armed forces, planning and executing small-scale counterattacks in response to Russian advances, with the aim of regaining lost ground and stabilising the front line as far forward as possible. It remains to be seen in the coming months which of these strategies will ultimately prevail and produce decisive results, or whether, on the contrary, they will only serve to exhaust the combatants.

For Ukraine, the military challenge is enormous, and the big question is whether its echeloned defences and reserves will be able to contain the Russian offensive in the autumn without losing the urban belt of fortified cities stretching from Pokrovsk to Slovyansk. The critical factor is not the concentration of Russian troops, but Ukraine's ability to halt the advance. If the defences hold, at least until the arrival of the 'rasputitsa' — and Ukraine has proven itself capable of doing so in the past — the narrative of inevitable Russian victory would be undermined, the front would stabilise, and the confidence of Western donors and the Ukrainian population itself would be restored that a more favourable outcome than the simple capitulation demanded by Putin could be achieved. Ukraine could continue to sustain the war effort.

If, on the other hand, the breakthrough occurs and Russian forces manage to overcome the belt of Ukrainian defensive cities, Russia would have achieved its first operational breakthrough since 2022, forcing Kyiv to use reserves prematurely and allies to accelerate the delivery of aid. The western part of Donetsk, still under Ukrainian control, would be exposed to Russian advances, making Ukraine's military situation very complicated.

At the time of writing, the military initiative is in Russian hands, which are carrying out the largest concentration of troops on a single axis since 2022, directed mainly against Pokrovsk. Between 100,000 and 112,000 soldiers are reportedly positioning themselves for a decisive push against Ukraine's eastern defences, which the Russian command hopes to have taken by the end of 2025. It will therefore be the outcome of the Russian autumn offensive that will set the pace for the next phase of the conflict and, in light of the results, redefine the risk exposure that all actors involved in the war are willing to take. In the end, the former High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and

Security Policy, Josep Borrell, may be right when he stated in April 2022 that "the war in Ukraine will have to be decided on the battlefield" (El País, 2022).

After almost three and a half years of devastating conflict, hundreds of thousands of dead and wounded, relentless bombing and no hope in the short term of seeing Russian troops pushed out of national soil, the armies continue to fight with no end to the war in sight. While the Ukrainian army continues to reinforce its military positions to prolong the defence and Europeans continue with sanctions to put pressure on Russia, the morale of the Ukrainian population is being severely affected by the war effort. According to a poll published on 7 August by the American polling firm Gallup, support for victory in the war is collapsing among the Ukrainian population (only 24%, compared to 73% in 2022), while the desire for negotiations to end the war as soon as possible is growing strongly (69% from 22% in 2022) (Gagnepain, 2025).

For its part, Russia remains committed to a military solution to the conflict and shows no clear intention of yielding in any peace negotiations. It is also experiencing significant economic and social strain as a result of the impact of sanctions. Although it maintains its offensive momentum, with numerous fronts open, it has not achieved any significant progress to date. If the autumn offensive fails and the Ukrainian army manages to hold its positions, Moscow will surely be more willing to engage in peace talks, offering more favourable terms to Ukraine. Otherwise, if the situation on the ground is favourable, Moscow will have no real desire for peace beyond Ukraine's capitulation.

As long as the military situation remains unresolved and the positions remain irreconcilable, there is little room for political talks to end the war in Ukraine (September 2025). At the time of writing, both sides believe they can achieve better results on the battlefield than at the negotiating table, and there is no willingness for genuine constructive dialogue. Nearing its fifth year, the war in Ukraine is in danger of becoming, contrary to Clausewitz, an end in itself rather than a means to achieve a political objective. Both sides seem to have reached the conclusion of that by making war an end in itself, they are more likely to win than by moderating its nature and allowing the instruments of politics to take effect.

Unfortunately, it is still unclear how the war in Ukraine will end and whether Moscow will achieve its objectives, but there is concern that Europe has not experienced such

dangerous times since the end of the Cold War. The behaviour of a revisionist power such as Russia, which believes that the only adequate level of security is to be dominant in the geographical areas surrounding it, explains its reluctance to engage in a political process leading to peace, at least as long as it believes it can achieve its objectives by force. The negative outlook for the conflict reinforces the natural tendency towards pessimism and fear of war among European societies accustomed to living in peace for several generations. This is undoubtedly due to the fact that human nature is biologically programmed to survive at all costs by imagining the worst in order to avoid it. It is to be hoped that, in the end, all those involved in the conflict will realise that prevention is always better than cure and that negotiation is better than combat, thus keeping alive the hope that, in a Europe that seems headed for war, sanity will prevail over recklessness.

## Bibliography

- BBC Mundo. (2025). Russia's response to Trump's threat to impose sanctions and tariffs if it does not end the war in Ukraine [online]. *BBC*. [Accessed: 2025].
- BBC News. (2025a). Trump warns Russia of sanctions and tariffs if Ukraine war continues [online]. *BBC*. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cjw4q7v7ez1o>
- BBC News. (2025b). Ukraine war: Russian strikes double since Trump's return, BBC Verify finds [online]. *BBC*. [Accessed: 2025].
- Bilazi, M. G. (2025). Putin wins and Trump loses his cool [online]. *The Diplomat in Spain*. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: <https://thediplotainSpain.com/2025/08/19/putin-gana-y-trump-pierde-los-papeles/>
- Castaño, S. (2025). From criticising military aid to claiming he will end the war 'in a day': Trump's stance on Ukraine [online]. *Newtral*. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.newtral.es/postura-trump-ucrania/20250118/>
- Colas, X. (2025). Zelensky postpones the cession of territories and Europe involves Trump in security guarantees [online]. *El Mundo*. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2025/08/18/68a36ea5e9cf4a176a8b457f.html>
- Daily Sabah. (2025). China hosts SCO Summit 2025 as global crises escalate [online]. *Daily Sabah*. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.dailysabah.com/world/asia-pacific/china-hosts-sco-summit-2025-as-global-crises-escalate>
- Davies, C. (2025). This is how the conversation between Trump and Zelensky went in the Oval Office [online]. *El Mundo*. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2025/02/28/67c1fc27e9cf4a6b528b4575.html>
- Defence News. (2024). US allows Ukraine to fire deeper into Russia ahead of Kursk battle [online]. *Defence News*. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.defensenews.com/pentagon/2024/11/18/us-allows-ukraine-to-fire-deeper-into-russia-ahead-of-kursk-battle/>

- Dupont, P. (2025). Russian rhetoric insists on prolonged resistance in the face of the Ukrainian conflict [online]. *Le Monde*. [Accessed: 2025].
- EFE. (2024). Russia claims to have the initiative and advances across the Ukrainian front [online]. *EFE*. [Accessed: 2025]. <https://efe.com/mundo/2024-12-18/guerra-ucrania-avances-rusia-frente/el>
- El Mundo. (2024). Recruitment officers descend on Kiev's nightlife in search of men not registered for military service [online]. *El Mundo*. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2024/10/13/670c00a3e85ece10108b45a8.html>
- El País. (2022). Borrell: "The war will have to be decided on the battlefield" [online]. *El País*. [Accessed: 2025].
- El País. (2025). Trump sends two nuclear submarines to areas near Russia in response to Medvedev's threats [online]. *El País*. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: <https://elpais.com/internacional/2025-08-01/trump-envia-dos-submarinos-nucleares-a-zonas-cercanas-a-rusia.html>
- Gagnepain, T. (2025). War in Ukraine: more than two-thirds of Ukrainians now in favour of peace negotiations [online]. *Le Figaro*. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/guerre-en-ukraine-plus-de-deux-tiers-des-ukrainiens-desormais-favorables-a-des-negociations-de-paix-20250815>
- Gibson, O., Novikov, D., Sobieski, J., Young, J., Olmsted, J., Hird, K., & Kagan, F. W. (2025). Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, 21 August 2025 [online]. Institute for the Study of War. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: <https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-august-21-2025>.
- Gómez, M. V. (2025). EU and NATO leaders to accompany Zelensky to Washington for meeting with Trump [online]. *El País*. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: <https://elpais.com/internacional/2025-08-17/los-lideres-de-la-ue-y-la-otan-acompanaran-a-zelenski-a-washington-para-verse-con-trump.html>
- Harward, C., Olmsted, J., Harvey, A., Young, J., Hird, K., & Stepanenko, K. (2025). Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, 19 August 2025 [online]. Institute for the Study of War. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at:

<https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-august-19-2025>

Huffington Post Spain. (2024). Putin offers Ukraine a peace plan if it yields to these two demands [online]. *Huffington Post*. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.huffingtonpost.es/global/putin-ofrece-plan-paz-ucrania-cede-dos-exigencias.html>

Huffington Post Spain. (2025). The embryonic mission of the Coalition of Volunteers in Ukraine: who, how, with what and for what [online]. *Huffington Post*. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.huffingtonpost.es/global/la-embrionaria-mision-coalicion-voluntarios-ucrania-como-que-que.html>

Ignatius, D. (2025). Trump's pressure on Putin reaches a boiling point [online]. *The Washington Post*. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com>

Independent. (2025). As Trump returns to the White House, and Putin's forces advance – what next for Ukraine in 2025? [online]. *Independent*. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/ukraine-war-russia-2025-putin-trump-b2667274.html>

Infobae. (2025). What Trump's strategic shift means for the war in Ukraine [online]. *Infobae*. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.infobae.com/america/mundo/2025/07/15/que-significa-el-giro-estrategico-de-trump-ante-la-guerra-en-ucrania/>

Kagan, F. W., Kagan, K., Clark, M., Hird, K., Bugayova, N., Stepanenko, K., Bailey, R., & Barros, G. (2024). Ukraine and the Problem of Restoring Maneuver in Contemporary War [online]. Institute for the Study of War. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/ukraine-and-problem-restoring-maneuver-contemporary-war>

Knight, A. (2025). Putin's plan to outlast Ukraine and the U.S. [online]. *The Wall Street Journal*. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.wsj.com/opinion/putins-plan-to-outlast-ukraine-and-the-u-s-russia-europe-war-e0dcb3c8>

- Kofman, M. and Evans, R. (2024). Waiting for a theory of victory in Ukraine [online]. *War on the Rocks*. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: <https://warontherocks.com/2024/12/waiting-for-a-theory-of-victory-in-ukraine/>
- Latorre, J. D. (2025). Putin wins and Trump loses his cool [online]. *The Diplomat in Spain*. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: <https://thediplotainspain.com/2025/08/19/putin-gana-y-trump-pierde-los-papeles/>
- Le Grand Continent. (2024a). Putin sets conditions for a ceasefire in Ukraine: withdrawal from four regions, abandonment of NATO membership bid [online]. *Le Grand Continent*. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: <https://legrandcontinent.eu/es/2024/06/14/retirada-de-cuatro-regiones-abandono-de-su-candidatura-a-la-otan-condiciones-de-putin-para-un-alto-el-fuego/>
- Le Grand Continent. (2024b). Withdrawal of four regions, renunciation of NATO membership: Putin's conditions for a ceasefire [online]. *Le Grand Continent*. [Accessed: 2025].
- Le Grand Continent. (2025a). Russia conquered 3,200 km<sup>2</sup> of Ukrainian territory in 2024, but the pace of its advance slowed in December [online]. *Le Grand Continent*. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: <https://legrandcontinent.eu/es/2025/01/09/rusia-conquisto-3-200-km%C2%B2-de-territorio-ucraniano-en-2024-pero-el-ritmo-de-su-avance-se-ralentizo-en-diciembre/>
- Le Grand Continent. (2025b). The Russian army conquered 556 km<sup>2</sup> of Ukrainian territory in June, 25% more than in May [online]. *Le Grand Continent*. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: <https://legrandcontinent.eu/es/2025/07/03/el-ejercito-ruso-conquisto-556-km%C2%B2-de-territorio-ucraniano-en-junio-un-25-mas-que-en-mayo/>
- Le Grand Continent. (2025c). Lavrov explains Moscow's position: "Russia itself should provide security guarantees to Ukraine" [online]. *Le Grand Continent*. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2025/08/20/lavrov-explicite-la-position-de-moscou-la-russie-elle-meme-devrait-fournir-des-garanties-de-securite-a-lukraine/>

- Le Monde. (2025). Keir Starmer to propose European 'reassurance force' for Ukraine to Donald Trump [online]. *Le Monde*. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: [https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2025/02/21/keir-starmer-va-proposer-a-donald-trump-une-force-d-apaisement-europeenne-pour-l-ukraine\\_6556951\\_3210.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2025/02/21/keir-starmer-va-proposer-a-donald-trump-une-force-d-apaisement-europeenne-pour-l-ukraine_6556951_3210.html)
- Lowther, A. and McGiffin, C. (2024). America needs a dead hand more than ever [online]. *War on the Rocks*. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: <https://warontherocks.com/2024/03/america-needs-a-dead-hand-more-than-ever/>
- Mappes, G., Harward, C., Gibson, O., Sobieski, J., Hird, K. and Trotter, N. (2025). Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, 24 August 2025 [online]. Institute for the Study of War. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: <https://isw.pub/UkrWar082425>
- Martínez, M. (2025). The fourth stage of the war in Ukraine [online]. *Descifrando la Guerra*. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.descifrandolaguerra.es/cuarta-etapa-guerra-de-ucrania/>
- Newtral.es. (2025). From criticising military aid to claiming he will end the war 'in a day': Trump's stance on Ukraine [online]. *Newtral*. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.newtral.es/postura-trump-ucrania/20250118/>
- Olmsted, J., Gibson, O., Sobieski, J., Mappes, G, and Kagan, F. W. (2025). Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, 23 August 2025 [online]. Institute for the Study of War. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-august-23-2025>.
- Olmsted, J., Harward, C., Harvey, A., Young, J., Kagan, F. W., and Trotter, N. (2025). Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, 26 August 2025 [online]. Institute for the Study of War. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-august-26-2025>
- Reuters. (2025). Russia says Trump could end 'malicious' U.S. policy on Ukraine. *Reuters*.

- Ricard, P. and Vallet, C. (2025). War in Ukraine: Europe at a crossroads [online]. *Le Monde*. [Accessed: 2025]. <https://www.lemonde.fr>
- RTVE. (2025). Zelenski returns to the White House accompanied by his European partners [online]. RTVE. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.rtve.es/noticias/20250818/zelenski-casa-blanca-socios-europeos-trump-guerra-ucrania/16699652.shtml>
- Rzheutska, L. and Vlasenko, V. (2025). Security agreements with Ukraine: a bridge to NATO? [online]. *Deutsche Welle* (DW). [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/es/acuerdos-de-seguridad-con-ucrania-un-puente-hacia-la-otan/a-69621979>
- Scarpellini, P. (2025). The dangers of a world at the mercy of a highly volatile Donald Trump [online]. *El Mundo*. [Accessed: 2025].
- Seddon, M. and Schwartz, F. (2025). Vladimir Putin imposes harsh conditions for ceasefire in Ukraine [online]. *Financial Times* (translated by Expansión). [Accessed: 2025].  
Available at: <https://www.expansion.com/economia/financial-times/2025/03/14/67d3f775468aeb755d8b456d.html>
- Segura, C. (2025). Trump's hospitality fails to soften Putin [online]. *El País*. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: <https://elpais.com/internacional/2025-08-16/los-agasajos-de-trump-no-ablandan-a-putin.html>
- Semple, K. (2025). How effective are the sanctions against Russia? [online]. *The New York Times*. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/es/2025/01/03/espanol/mundo/rusia-putin-trump-sanciones.html>
- Slattery, G., Landay, J. and Rinke, A. (2025). The 'land swap' that wasn't: Inside Trump's frantic dash for Ukraine peace [online]. *Reuters*. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/land-swap-that-wasnt-inside-trumps-frantic-dash-ukraine-peace-2025-08-28/>

Sobieski, J., Olmsted, J., Mappes, G., Young, J., Trotter, N., & Barros, G. (2025). Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, 18 August 2025 [online]. Institute for the Study of War. Available at: <https://isw.pub/UkrWar081825>

Travis, C. and Sexton, B. (Interviewers). (2025). Interview with Donald Trump at Mar-a-Lago [Audio interview]. *Clay and Buck*. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.clayandbuck.com/president-trump-with-cb-from-mar-a-lago>

*Ignacio Fuente Cobo\**

Coronel del Ejército de Tierra  
Analista del Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos