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# Can Europe save Ukraine – and itself – from Putin and Trump?

By Ian Bond





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- ★ The official accounts of the meeting between Donald Trump, Volodymyr Zelenskyy and European leaders on August 18<sup>th</sup> portrayed an attractive fantasy. The latest meeting of the 'Coalition of the Willing' (a group of mostly European countries supporting Ukraine) reflects the same illusions. Europeans need to face up to four key facts:
  - ★ Trump favours Putin over Zelenskyy. The US is now doing relatively little to help Ukraine.
  - ★ The Russians will not agree to Ukraine having any effective protection against future attacks. The security guarantee for Ukraine allegedly accepted by Putin in his meeting with Trump's envoy Steve Witkoff is a mirage, and the US is reluctant to provide an insurance policy for European forces in Ukraine.
  - ★ Putin remains determined to win, not compromise. His peace terms would reduce Ukraine to vassal status.
  - ★ Trump has so far not been willing to put pressure on Putin by imposing further sanctions. Instead, he is offering Putin incentives to make any kind of deal that can be portrayed as peace.
- ★ Most European leaders have not begun to explain to their populations what is at stake if Ukraine is defeated. They are probably going to need to deploy forces in Ukraine, or at least in the air over it, without waiting for a ceasefire, if they are to prevent Russia making further advances. They need to pursue two challenging objectives:
  - ★ **Stabilising the front and ideally pushing Russia back.** Ukraine needs help to stop Russia's advance and make current Russian positions untenable. Europe should help Ukraine capitalise on its campaign of hitting critical targets in the Russian rear, including oil refineries.
  - ★ **Providing credible, effective and sustainable security guarantees.** Ukraine will not be safe as long as Russian leaders see Ukraine as an artificial creation of Russia's enemies. The country will need effective security guarantees. The Coalition of the Willing should aim to form an alliance with Ukraine to provide mutual defence in the face of a growing Russian threat to Europe. Ukrainian forces would be at the heart of the new alliance, with France and the UK providing a nuclear deterrent.
- ★ If they can achieve those two objectives, they will then need to fund Ukraine's economic recovery, including with Russia's frozen central bank assets. And they will need to accelerate Ukraine's EU accession, or at least give it access to some benefits of membership even before accession. Like many other Central and Eastern European countries, Ukraine is more likely to be a success story inside the EU than out of it.

- ★ European leaders will keep supporting Trump's dialogue with Putin and try to avoid annoying him, knowing the harm he could cause Ukraine if he chose to. But it is a fantasy to think that Trump can deliver peace on acceptable terms or that Putin will stop fighting unless forced to. If European leaders do not want to confront Russian forces on NATO territory, they will have to do so in Ukraine, even without US backing.

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The public message from European leaders who attended the August 18<sup>th</sup> White House meeting between US President Donald Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy was that it had all been a great success – Trump had persuaded Russian President Vladimir Putin to hold a bilateral meeting with Zelenskyy, the US had agreed to provide security guarantees for Ukraine and the West had shown its unity. Peace was within reach.

The meeting of leaders of the 'Coalition of the Willing' – the group of about 30 NATO, EU and other Western supporters of Ukraine – in Paris on September 4<sup>th</sup> reflected similar illusions. After the discussions, French President Emmanuel Macron spoke of 26 countries being ready to provide forces to "maintain the ceasefire once it's implemented, and maintain and guarantee peace". UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer said in a statement: "the group had an unbreakable pledge to Ukraine, with President Trump's backing, and it was clear they now

needed to go even further to apply pressure on Putin to secure a cessation of hostilities".

Hopefully, the participants in Washington and Paris were not taken in by their own propaganda: it is already clear that the real situation is very different. This policy brief argues that even if they feel that they need to play along with Trump's fantasy that he can get Putin and Zelenskyy to make peace, European leaders now need to face up to four key facts and achieve two challenging objectives.

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## The facts

First, although the atmosphere between Trump and Zelenskyy in Washington was a lot better than at their disastrous meeting in February, which ended with Zelenskyy being thrown out of the White House, Trump's comments afterwards made clear that his favourable view of Putin and Russia and his unfavourable view of Zelenskyy and Ukraine have not changed. It is unclear what drives Trump's relationship with Putin. It may be admiration for and a desire to emulate Putin's absolute power domestically; a preference, shared with Putin, for great powers dividing the world into spheres of influence, rather than having a rules-based international order; or a belief (almost certainly false) that Russia can be peeled away from China. In any event, Trump consistently shows deference to Putin, as he did in Alaska, from applauding him on arrival to allowing him to make the first statement to the media after their meeting. Zelenskyy does not get the same treatment.

In an interview with Fox News on August 19<sup>th</sup>, Trump spoke of his good relationship with Putin ("a warmth there... a decent feeling") and repeatedly endorsed the Russian argument that Ukraine should not be allowed to join NATO ("they said, 'Put us in NATO', and everybody knew you ... just can't do that").<sup>1</sup> By contrast, Trump criticised Ukraine for wanting to get Crimea back ("They

shouldn't have asked for it, 'cause it was, you know, a very insulting thing") and blamed Ukraine for resisting Russia's attack in terms that suggested that he thought Ukraine had started the war ("you don't take on a nation that's 10 times your size and, you know, military experts"). Trump wrote to Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán that he was "very angry" that a Ukrainian attack on August 13<sup>th</sup> had (temporarily) cut off the flow of oil through Russia's 'Druzhba' pipeline to Hungary and Slovakia – even though the two countries' purchases of Russian oil (and gas) help to fund Russia's war effort.<sup>2</sup>

On the military front, as for much of Joe Biden's presidency, the US has been seeking to prevent Ukraine from striking Russia with Western weapons. That did not change, even after Trump posted on his social media channel, 'Truth Social': "It is very hard, if not impossible, to win a war without attacking an invaders [sic] country. It's like a great team in sports that has a fantastic defense, but is not allowed to play offense' There is no chance of winning! It is like that with Ukraine and Russia".<sup>3</sup> The Pentagon has also put in place rules allowing it to prevent weapons and munitions earmarked for Ukraine being delivered if the US defence secretary considers that American stocks are too low.<sup>4</sup>

1: 'Interview: Donald Trump calls in for an interview on Fox and Friends - August 19<sup>th</sup> 2025', Roll Call Factbase website, August 19<sup>th</sup> 2025.

2: Photograph of Trump's handwritten message, posted on 'Fidesz' party's Facebook page, August 22<sup>nd</sup> 2025.

3: Volodymyr Ivanyshyn, 'Pentagon has quietly barred Ukrainian long-range strikes in Russia with US missiles, WSJ reports', *The Kyiv Independent*, August 24<sup>th</sup> 2025; Donald Trump post on 'Truth Social', August 21<sup>st</sup> 2025.

4: Natasha Bertrand and Zachary Cohen, 'New Pentagon policy could divert weapons built for Ukraine back into US stockpiles', CNN.com, August 8<sup>th</sup> 2025.

Second, Russia will not agree to Ukraine having any effective security guarantee and the US is reluctant to protect its Western partners if they try to provide one. Claims by Trump's envoy Steve Witkoff after the Alaska summit with Putin that the Russians had agreed that the US and Europe could "effectively offer Article 5-like language to cover a security guarantee" have since been contradicted by the Russian foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov.<sup>5</sup> Russia continues to insist that no forces from NATO countries can be deployed in Ukraine as part of a peace settlement, and that Russia itself, along with China, should be among the countries guaranteeing Ukraine's future security.

*“Putin still seems determined to fight, not negotiate – unless the negotiation is over the terms of Ukrainian capitulation.”*

On the US side, the White House has made clear that there would be no US boots on the ground, while talking vaguely of “other military support options”. A senior US defence official, Elbridge Colby, reportedly told senior military representatives from the ‘Coalition of the Willing’ (around 30 countries, mostly European members of NATO including non-EU countries like Turkey and the UK, but also including Australia and Canada) on August 19<sup>th</sup> that the US would play a minimal role in security guarantees for Ukraine,<sup>6</sup> though later reporting from the *Financial Times* suggested that the US might be willing to provide more support than Colby had indicated, including intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR), command and control and air defence assets.<sup>7</sup> Trump himself has also hinted at providing US air power. But the US contribution would be based outside Ukraine, might have rules of engagement designed to avoid direct confrontation with Russian forces, even if they were attacking US allies, and would be provided conditional on the Europeans deploying tens of thousands of troops to Ukraine.

Europeans are (justifiably) nervous that even if they can come up with enough troops (over which there are significant question marks), Trump will change his mind again about the scale and nature of US support. There are divided views in his own administration, and the Russians have in the past been able to play on Trump's fear that Ukraine could drag the US into a nuclear war. A US ‘backstop’ with no commitment to responding if Russia

attacked European forces in Ukraine would be worse than useless, creating an almost irresistible temptation for Putin to test transatlantic solidarity.

Third, Putin still seems determined to fight, not negotiate – unless the negotiation is over the terms of Ukrainian capitulation. He has shown no interest in bilateral or trilateral negotiations with Zelenskyy of the sort that Trump wants to engineer, in which the outcome would not be pre-cooked but would emerge in leader-level talks. Lavrov told the US TV network NBC “Putin is ready to meet with Zelensky when the agenda is ready for a summit, and this agenda is not ready at all.”<sup>8</sup> Lavrov also claimed that Zelenskyy was not the legitimate leader of Ukraine but only “the de facto head of the regime”, with whom Russia could not sign a peace deal.

Russia's demands – that Ukraine give up parts of the Donetsk region that Russia has never occupied including key military-strategic points, make Russian an official language in Ukraine, agree never to join NATO and to be permanently neutral, and not allow any forces from NATO countries on its territory – have not changed as a result of Putin's meeting with Trump, and are as unacceptable to Ukraine as they ever were (though seemingly acceptable to key members of the Trump administration).<sup>9</sup>

Fourth, though Trump has repeatedly suggested that he is getting frustrated with Putin and will impose new sanctions, so far he has not been willing to put direct economic pressure on Russia to make concessions in the interests of peace. Before the Alaska summit he warned that if Putin did not agree to stop the war he would face “very severe consequences”; afterwards, not only did he not announce any new measures against Russia, but he dropped his call for a ceasefire, suggesting that negotiations on a final peace settlement could continue in parallel with the fighting.<sup>10</sup> The main step Trump has taken, supposedly to put pressure on Russia, is to impose an additional 25 per cent tariff on Indian exports to the US to punish it for importing Russian crude oil; that has had no impact on Russia's willingness to continue the war. Secretary of State Marco Rubio told NBC television “the minute you issue new sanctions ... our ability to get [the Russians] to the table will be severely diminished” – a strange inversion of the logic of sanctions, which is to increase the pressure on Russia to make concessions.<sup>11</sup> Reportedly, in the run-up to the Alaska summit the US even dangled the prospect of renewed US investment in

5: Asya Robins and George Wright, ‘Putin agreed to ‘robust’ security guarantees for Ukraine, US envoy says’, BBC.co.uk, August 17<sup>th</sup> 2025; Ivor Bennett, ‘Promise of NATO-style security guarantees for Ukraine may be too good to be true’, Sky News, August 21<sup>st</sup> 2025.

6: Paul McLeary, Jack Detsch, Jacopo Barigazzi and Chris Lunday, ‘Pentagon says US will play a minimal role in Ukraine's security guarantee’, *Politico*, August 20<sup>th</sup> 2025.

7: Henry Foy, Christopher Miller and Steff Chávez, ‘US offers air and intelligence support to postwar force in Ukraine’, *Financial Times*, August 26<sup>th</sup> 2025.

8: Elizabeth Crisp, ‘Russia says Putin-Zelensky meeting agenda ‘not ready at all’’, *The Hill*, August 22<sup>nd</sup> 2025.

9: ‘Russia rules out summit, demands Donbas and NATO neutrality’, *Helsinki Times*, August 22<sup>nd</sup> 2025.

10: Patrick Wintour, ‘Putin faces ‘very severe consequences’ if no Ukraine truce agreed, Trump says’, *The Guardian*, August 13<sup>th</sup> 2025.

11: ‘Secretary of State Marco Rubio with Kristen Welker of NBC Meet the Press’, US Department of State, August 17<sup>th</sup> 2025.

Russia's energy sector (currently under sanctions) and the purchase of Russian nuclear-powered icebreakers.<sup>12</sup> Putin

must be pretty certain that whatever he does in Ukraine, Trump will not impose significant costs on Russia.

## The two objectives

Against this background, Zelenskyy and his European partners must decide what to do, not based on what they think will be most acceptable to Trump, but on their own security needs. Then they must work out how to provide the resources needed, even if the US is no longer helping them.

The war is existential for Ukrainians: they can see what happens in the territories occupied by Russia, and know that their survival as a nation depends on fighting Russia to standstill (at a minimum). Most European leaders are still behaving as though they can live with the consequences of Ukraine's defeat, though they are willing to help delay that outcome. Most have not begun to face up to what is at stake if Ukraine loses, or to explain the potential impacts to their populations.<sup>13</sup>

*“Most European leaders are still behaving as though they can live with the consequences of Ukraine's defeat.”*

German chancellor Friedrich Merz is one of the exceptions: in an interview with the German TV channel ZDF on August 31<sup>st</sup>, he said: “The war could be ended tomorrow, if Ukraine capitulated... but then the day after tomorrow it will be the next country's turn, and then the day after that it will be our turn. That's not an option”.<sup>14</sup> Merz needs to convince his colleagues that the threat is real; then they should draw the conclusion that it is imperative to take greater risks than they have done so far in order to ensure that Ukraine survives as a secure, independent state, without losing significantly

more territory. That probably means deploying forces in Ukraine (or at the very least over it), even in the absence of a ceasefire or peace deal, if the alternative is that Russia's progress accelerates. That is something which even Merz currently does not want to do.

Governments urgently need to plan and invest to achieve two objectives now:

### ★ **Stabilising the front and ideally pushing Russia back.**

Since the failure of Ukraine's summer 2023 offensive in the south, Russia has generally been advancing on a broad front. Though progress remains slow and losses high, Russian forces have taken more than twice as much territory between January and July this year as they did in the same period last year.<sup>15</sup> The Centre for Defence Strategies, a Kyiv think-tank headed by former Ukrainian defence minister Andriy Zagorodnyuk, assessed on August 26<sup>th</sup>: “Provided current dynamics of combat operations are maintained, the enemy will be able to capture Pokrovsk by autumn, Kostyantynivka and Kupyansk by the end of the year, and reach the close approaches to Zaporizhzhia and the Sloviansk-Kramatorsk agglomeration by early winter.”<sup>16</sup> Pokrovsk, Kostyantynivka, Sloviansk and Kramatorsk (see map) are some of the last significant towns in Ukrainian hands in the Donetsk region, and the main obstacles to a much deeper Russian thrust into territory east of the River Dnipro that Russia has been unable to penetrate since the full-scale invasion began. While that would still leave Russia a long way from defeating Ukraine, it would mark significant progress from where Russian forces are today. Ukraine and its allies need to stop Russia's progress before it can achieve a major breakthrough.

12: Khrystyna Bondarieva, ‘Reuters: US offered Russia energy deals as incentive to push Kremlin towards peace in Ukraine’, *Ukrainska Pravda*, August 26<sup>th</sup> 2025.

13: Ian Bond, ‘Does it matter if Ukraine loses?’, CER policy brief, April 24<sup>th</sup> 2024.

14: Dominik Rzepka, ‘Merz schließt Steuererhöhungen aus’ (Merz rules out tax increases), *ZDFheute* (in German), August 3<sup>rd</sup> 2025.

15: Oleg Ignatov and Lucian Kim, ‘Beyond the Ukraine summits: Five realities after three years of war’, Crisis Group, August 22<sup>nd</sup> 2025.

16: ‘Russia's war on Ukraine. 26.08.25’, Centre for Defence Strategies, August 26<sup>th</sup> 2025.



As well as pressing Ukrainian forces at the front, Russia has increased its drone and missile attacks on Ukrainian cities and civilian infrastructure this year, including with the attack on Kyiv on the night of August 27<sup>th</sup>-28<sup>th</sup> that killed at least 23 people and damaged the EU delegation's offices. Attacks on civilian targets are not strategic, in the sense of directly affecting Ukraine's ability to keep fighting – a point made recently by Phillips O'Brien, professor of strategic studies at the University of St Andrews.<sup>17</sup> They do, however, have an effect on Ukrainian civilian morale, and on the confidence of Ukraine's partners in its ability to sustain the war. The scale of the recent Russian attacks reflects in particular mass production of the 'Geran' drone, an improved Russian version of the Iranian 'Shahed' drone that Tehran supplied

earlier in the war. Without more US Patriot launchers and interceptors, Ukraine will be vulnerable to ballistic missiles, but on the whole Russia has used those more sparingly (perhaps reflecting production constraints). Europeans should be willing to provide more air defence to help the hard-pressed Ukrainian air force and to give a boost to civilians, including by basing aircraft in Poland and Romania to provide air cover over cities and critical infrastructure in western and central Ukraine. The UK and France helped Israel to shoot down Iranian drones in April 2024; they should similarly help Ukraine now. The need is urgent: Russia is already stepping up its attacks on energy infrastructure, aiming to inflict another cold and dark winter on Ukrainian civilians.<sup>18</sup>

17: Phillips O'Brien, 'Weekend update #149: Breakthrough? What breakthrough? Collapse? What collapse?', Phillips's Newsletter Substack, August 31<sup>st</sup> 2025.

18: 'Russia hits Ukrainian energy facilities across six regions, officials say', Reuters, August 27<sup>th</sup> 2025.



Though its forces are still far larger than those of any other European country, Ukraine has faced growing manpower problems, and there is probably scope for countries with effective training and mobilisation systems (such as Finland) to help Ukraine devise better ways of using the human resources it has. Ukraine will always be at a numerical disadvantage to Russia, however, so the focus should be on compensating with munitions and technology. To put it crudely, to succeed in the current war of attrition, Ukraine needs to cause about five times as many casualties as it suffers (the ratio since the start of the full-scale war is no more than 2:1); or it needs to find a different way to fight.<sup>19</sup>

One step that European governments could take to help Ukraine increase the cost of Russian advances still further (as Finland, Poland and the Baltic states already have) is to withdraw from the two international agreements prohibiting the manufacture, transfer and use of anti-personnel landmines and cluster munitions, restart production and help Ukraine to deploy more effective barriers to Russian assaults. Russia has never been a party to either convention, and the deep minefields it laid in occupied territory were a major reason for Ukraine's inability to make significant advances in 2023.

*“Ukraine will remain at risk as long as Putin or a Putin-like successor is in power in Moscow.”*

Strengthening Ukraine's defences can at best freeze the conflict, however. Ukraine needs to be able to regain the initiative and put pressure on Russian occupying forces. The use of drones has already made it hard for both sides to move troops and supplies to and from the front line. Ukraine and Russia are constantly trying to make the 'kill zone' behind the enemy's forward positions deeper.<sup>20</sup> Kyiv and its partners need to come up with realistic ways to make Russian positions in occupied territory even more untenable. Even with a 'land bridge' linking it to Russia via occupied territory in south-eastern Ukraine, Crimea is particularly vulnerable to supply disruptions. European countries should help Ukraine re-establish its lead in drone technology and production, countering Russian advantages in manufacturing scale. According to Oleksandr Kamyshin, an adviser to Zelenskyy, Ukraine could triple defence production if it had more money

to do so.<sup>21</sup> Europeans could help increase supplies still further by putting surplus manufacturing capacity elsewhere in Europe to work, as suggested by Sander Tordoir in March 2025.<sup>22</sup>

One area in which Ukraine has had some recent success is in mounting attacks deep inside Russia, using long-range drones and innovative sabotage tactics to strike Russia's oil and gas infrastructure, military bases and defence industrial sites. Phillips O'Brien has argued recently that this is the smart way for Ukraine to fight, rather than focusing on the tactical battle at the front line.<sup>23</sup> Reuters has estimated that Ukrainian attacks shut down 17 per cent of Russian oil refining capacity in August. European countries could do more to support Ukraine's efforts to build long-range drones, and missiles such as the new 'Fleming' (with a claimed range of 3,000 kilometres and a 1,000 kilogram warhead) and Long-Range Neptune (a development of a coastal defence missile, with the range extended from 300 to a claimed 1,000 kilometres). By striking refineries, pipelines and transport infrastructure, Ukraine can simultaneously damage Russia's main source of export revenues, disrupt its domestic economy and limit its ability to maintain large forces in occupied Ukraine.

★ **Providing credible, effective and sustainable security guarantees.** Even if the front line is frozen (or moved back towards the Russian border), Ukraine will remain at risk as long as Putin or a Putin-like successor is in power in Moscow. The country will not be safe from further Russian aggression unless and until Russia disavows Putin's notion that Ukrainians and Russians are one people and that independent Ukraine is an artificial creation of Russia's enemies.<sup>24</sup> For the foreseeable future, Putin's history of violating legally binding international agreements means that it would be very unwise for Ukraine to rely on a peace deal with him; it also needs to have in place pledges from its partners to respond militarily if Ukraine is attacked again.

What these security guarantees should look like is still under debate, however. The best guarantee of security for a European country (up till now) has been NATO membership. Despite NATO's 2008 Bucharest summit pledge that Ukraine (and Georgia) "will become members", however, opposition – initially from France and Germany, and latterly from Hungary, the US and

19: The 'Ukrainian Losses' website gives a figure of over 150,000 confirmed dead or missing since February 24<sup>th</sup> 2022; the BBC Russian Service has recently estimated Russian deaths (including troops recruited (voluntarily or by coercion) in occupied Ukraine) at 213,049 – 300,904 – Sergei Goryashko and others, '11 тысяч погибших за время переговоров о мире: что мы знаем о потерях России в Украине к концу августа' (11,000 dead in the time of peace negotiations: What we know about Russian losses in Ukraine up to the end of August), BBC News Russian Service, August 22<sup>nd</sup> 2025. Figures for both countries are likely to be significant under-estimates.

20: 'On Ukraine's front lines the kill zone is getting deeper', *The Economist*, August 4<sup>th</sup> 2025.

21: Alya Shandra, 'Kamyshin built Ukraine's arsenal sixfold – now he says Europe must pay to unlock it', *Euromaidan Press*, August 22<sup>nd</sup> 2025.

22: Matt Oliver, 'Volkswagen open to building military equipment for German army', *The Telegraph*, March 11<sup>th</sup> 2025.

23: Phillips O'Brien, 'A strategic air campaign for Ukraine: Crushing Russian mobility through oil and rail attacks', Phillips's Newsletter Substack, August 30<sup>th</sup> 2025.

24: Vladimir Putin, 'Article by Vladimir Putin "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians"', Kremlin website, July 12<sup>th</sup> 2021.

others – means that Ukraine is as far as ever from coming under the protection of NATO's Article 5 mutual defence commitment.

There has been talk since 2023 of turning Ukraine into a 'porcupine' – on a similar model to Israel, with strong domestic forces and almost unlimited access to Western weapons, but no Western forces stationed in the country and no binding security guarantee.<sup>25</sup> Superficially, this sounds like a practical and less risky option for Ukraine's partners than offering NATO-style guarantees. After meeting Zelenskyy in Brussels on August 18<sup>th</sup>, von der Leyen said: "There can be no limitations on Ukrainian armed forces, be it co-operation with other third countries or assistance from other third countries."

*“Security guarantees will only be offered once Ukraine's immediate need for them has passed.”*

Ukraine is a very different country from Israel, however, and faces very different problems. Even including the occupied Palestinian territories, the area Israel's population of about 10 million has to defend is less than 30,000 km<sup>2</sup>, and it does not share a border with its most significant adversary, Iran. In Ukraine's case, if the front lines were frozen near to their current position a population of about 30 million would have to defend almost 500,000 km<sup>2</sup>, including a line of contact with Russia stretching about 2,000 kilometres. Though the US has not given Israel a security guarantee, since 2008 the US government has been legally obliged to maintain Israel's "qualitative military edge" – to ensure that it can "defeat any credible conventional military threat from any individual state or possible coalition of states or from non-state actors, while sustaining minimal damage and casualties." Russia is far from invincible, as the war has shown, but it is hard to see how the collective West could make a similar pledge to Ukraine, given the scale of Russian military forces and its military industrial establishment. And above all, Israel is a nuclear-armed state facing potential adversaries who do not (yet) have such weapons; Ukraine is a non-nuclear state facing a nuclear-armed superpower.

Finland's President Alexander Stubb has argued that Ukraine could emulate the example of Finland when it was invaded by the Soviet Union in 1940, accepting some limits on its foreign policy, giving up some territory, but building a prosperous and democratic society on the rest.<sup>26</sup>

But Soviet leader Josef Stalin did not claim of Finland, as Putin has said of Ukraine since at least 2008, that it was "not even a country".<sup>27</sup> When Putin talks about eliminating the root causes of the Ukrainian crisis, as he did at the Alaska summit, he means removing Ukraine from the map of Europe as a sovereign entity; his aim is not limited to 'Finlandising' the country.

When the 'Coalition of the Willing' first formed, in the wake of Trump's Oval Office ambush of Zelenskyy, the concept was that a large European force would deploy to Ukraine – in March, there were media reports suggesting that 30,000 troops would be stationed in Ukraine to preserve a peace deal and deter renewed Russian aggression. Over time, however, the members of the coalition have got cold feet. What is now contemplated is a presence that could not defend itself, let alone Ukraine.

The UK defence secretary, John Healey, reported to Parliament in July that the coalition's planners had agreed on the mission of the future 'Multinational Force Ukraine', which would be to "regenerate [Ukraine's] land forces by providing logistics, armament and training experts"; "secure Ukraine's skies by using aircraft to deliver levels of support similar to that for NATO's Air Policing mission" – a peacetime mission involving small numbers of aircraft providing reassurance, but not designed to engage in combat; and "support safer seas by bolstering the Black Sea Task Force [a mine-clearing operation involving Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey] with additional specialist teams".<sup>28</sup> None of these activities would come close to providing Ukraine with a security guarantee or deterring Russian attacks.

Healey's statement also highlighted the biggest problem with security guarantees as so far conceived. He spoke of being ready "when peace comes". In other words, security guarantees will only be offered once Ukraine's immediate need for them has passed: the proposals under discussion so far rely on there being at least a ceasefire, if not a peace settlement, before any Western forces are deployed. That gives Putin every incentive to keep the fighting going, thereby exercising a de facto veto on the presence of a Western 'reassurance force' in Ukraine. Moreover, by insisting that a US security guarantee must accompany any Western deployment on the ground in Ukraine, European leaders have also given Trump a de facto veto on European action. The UK is not the only country reluctant to commit forces to Ukraine when, as Keir Giles of Chatham House wrote in March 2025, "Europe is now acutely vulnerable to the possibility of withdrawal of US co-operation".<sup>29</sup>

25: Mike Eckel, 'Consider the porcupine: Western officials struggle to find a new security model for Ukraine', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 26<sup>th</sup> 2023.

26: 'What Finland could teach Ukraine about war and peace', *The Economist*, September 1<sup>st</sup> 2025.

27: Angela Stent, 'Putin's Ukrainian endgame and why the West may have a hard time stopping him', CNN, March 4<sup>th</sup> 2014.

28: 'Defence Secretary statement on war in Ukraine - 17 July 2025', gov.uk, July 17<sup>th</sup> 2025.

29: Keir Giles, 'Europe's pathway to ending Russia's war on Ukraine', Baltic Defence College policy brief, March 2025.



With Ukraine on the back foot on the battlefield, however, European leaders now face uncomfortable choices: they can stick to their insistence that they will only deploy forces in the event of a ceasefire, and watch Putin continue to advance; or they can put troops in harm's way as part of an effort to re-establish deterrence and thereby bring fighting to an end, but with a high likelihood that Putin will attack them and that US forces may well not intervene. So far, most seem to prefer the first option. In doing so, they are underpricing the likely impact of eventual Ukrainian defeat. As Macron said in a recent interview, Putin is "a predator who, for his own survival, needs to keep eating".<sup>30</sup> If he succeeds in devouring Ukraine, he will move on to different prey – perhaps the Baltic states or Poland – also parts of Europe that Putin or those around him regard as 'historically Russian lands' to be returned to Russian control.<sup>31</sup>

*“A force of Ukrainian and other allied troops could be powerful enough to make Putin think twice.”*

No European leader will feel comfortable committing ground, air or naval forces to an on-going war – especially without an American security blanket in case things go wrong. They may be able to delay the decision if they can step up the flow of weapons and munitions to Ukraine, including longer-range missiles to enable Ukraine to continue and increase its strikes on military industrial sites, oil refineries and other facilities critical to Russia's ability to maintain the tempo of the war. If they conclude that they have no choice but to play a more direct part in the fighting, they may be able to concentrate their contributions on capabilities that the Ukrainians are particularly short of, such as air defence or long-range fires, rather than exposing infantry to drone warfare that NATO armies are only beginning to train for. But in the end, by whatever means, they need to find a way to stop Putin's expansionist wars. When von der Leyen said in February 2022 that Ukraine was "one of us", it was meant as a political declaration of support for Ukraine's eventual EU membership. But it also expresses a truth for much of Central and Northern Europe: if the costs imposed on Putin for invading Ukraine are tolerable, from his perspective, why would he stop there?

The solution is for European leaders in the Coalition of the Willing to stop thinking in terms of offering Ukraine security guarantees once the war is over, and reframe

the task as forming an alliance with Ukraine to provide mutual security guarantees as soon as possible, in the face of a Russian threat that stretches far beyond the borders of Ukraine and shows no sign of receding. The new alliance could be modelled on the Western European Union – a defence pact originally formed in 1948, largely superseded after 1949 by NATO and ultimately absorbed into the EU in 2011.<sup>32</sup> The WEU's Brussels treaty included a more binding security guarantee than NATO's (members promised to aid a country under attack with "all the military and other aid and assistance in their power", while a NATO ally only promises to take "such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force"). Although Europe still lacks many capabilities that for the time being only the US can offer, Trump's unreliability as an ally and his positive view of Putin make it unwise to count on the US providing combat troops in the event of a Russian attack on NATO territory, at least as long as he is president.

Ukraine now has by far the largest and most battle-hardened army in Europe, and an innovative defence industrial sector with much to teach European firms. The overall capacity of Ukraine's defence sector at the time of Russia's full-scale invasion was \$1 billion; this year it is expected to reach \$35 billion.<sup>33</sup> Collectively, the European members of the Coalition of the Willing also have a lot to contribute, even if they have not yet worked out how to turn numbers of personnel and growing defence budgets into effective fighting forces. Importantly, France and the UK are nuclear powers, able (though not so far willing) to provide a strategic deterrent that would cover other members of a European alliance. It would be possible to put together a force of Ukrainian and other allied troops powerful enough to make Putin think twice about taking it on.

Once the front line is frozen – ideally along Ukraine's internationally recognised borders – and security guarantees are in place robust enough to deter Putin or any successor from attacking again, Europe will need to turn its attention to helping Ukraine create a dynamic economy to ensure its future sustainability, for which investment will be needed. Using the income from immobilised Russian central bank assets in Europe to help Ukraine to repair the damage done would be a useful first step, but European governments should go further, and seize the assets themselves (which amount to more than €200 billion).<sup>34</sup> They could be used to fund the initial stages of Ukraine's reconstruction, with a focus on critical infrastructure and the military industrial complex.

30: 'Macron calls Putin a 'predator' while backing new push for Ukraine peace talks', RFI, August 19<sup>th</sup> 2025.

31: Ksenia Kirillova, 'Kremlin increases anti-Poland propaganda', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, The Jamestown Foundation, June 9<sup>th</sup> 2025; Andrew Roth, 'Putin compares himself to Peter the Great in quest to take back Russian lands', *The Guardian*, June 10<sup>th</sup> 2022.

32: Ian Bond, 'NATO Summit 2025: Time to build a proper European pillar?', CER insight, June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2025.

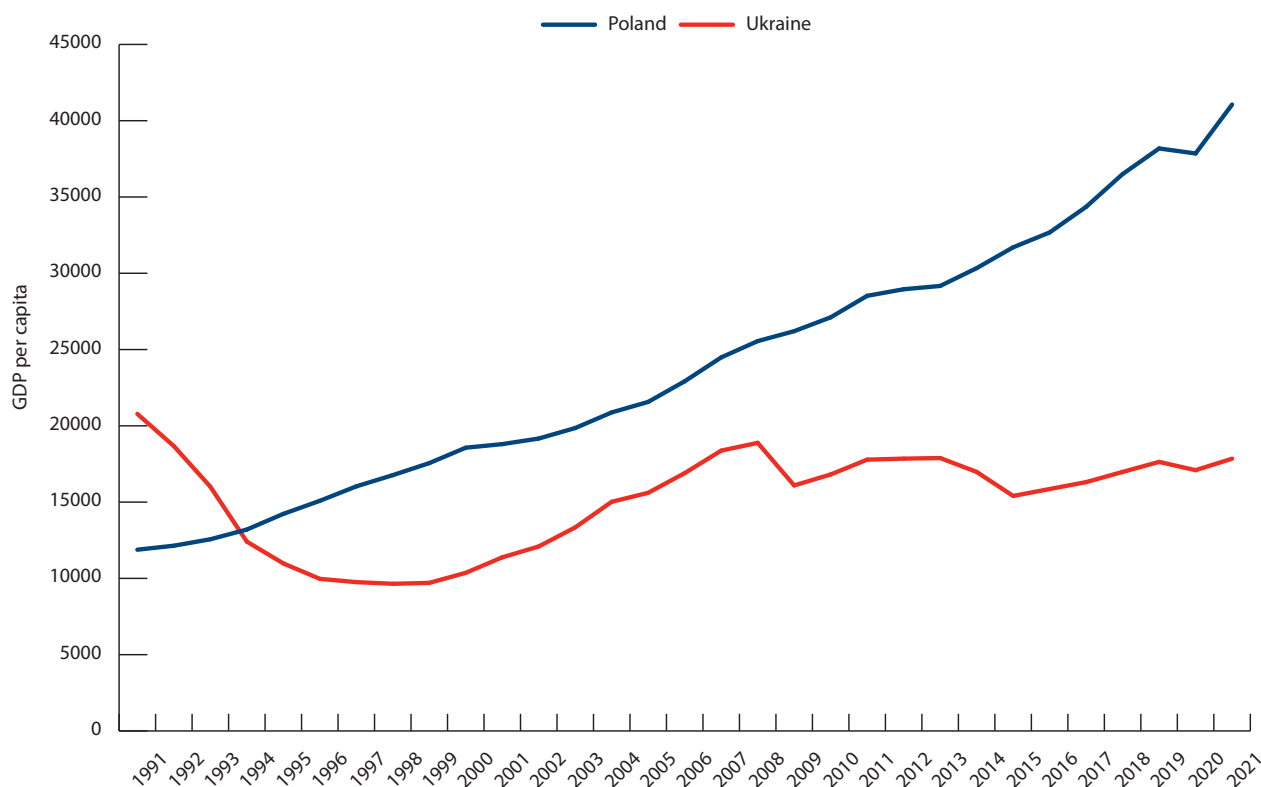
33: Serhii Kuzan, 'Ukraine's growing military strength is an underrated factor in peace talks', Atlantic Council, March 25<sup>th</sup> 2025.

34: Gregorio Sorgi and Nicholas Vinocur, 'EU moves closer to using Russian assets to rebuild Ukraine', *Politico*, August 29<sup>th</sup> 2025.

The EU should also speed up Ukraine's EU accession process, or at least give it early access to EU membership benefits, though it must also maintain the pressure on Ukraine to fight corruption and strengthen the rule of law.<sup>35</sup> One vital step is to provide Ukraine with ways to align with the single market pre-accession, so as to deepen its integration into European value chains. The EU has said it would be willing to open strategic partnerships in industrial ecosystems of mutual interest (such as raw materials, batteries, machinery) even before accession.

Ukraine is more likely to be a long-term success story, economically and politically, inside the EU than out of it. Though the scale of EU pre-accession aid to Poland and the subsequent benefits of single market membership do not completely explain the differing economic trajectories of Polish and Ukrainian GDP per capita after 1991 (Chart 1), Poland, which has had one of the fastest growing economies in the world the past few decades, has certainly done better as a member than Ukraine has as a non-member.

**Chart 1: Ukrainian GDP per capita was almost twice that of Poland in 1991; by 2021, Polish GDP per capita was more than twice Ukraine's**



Sources: World Bank, GDP per capita on a PPP basis in constant 2021 international dollars.

To the extent possible, the Commission should make use of the scope for 'gradual integration', a concept endorsed by the European Council in June 2022 and again in June 2024. One avenue would be for the Commission to propose amendments to the EU-Ukraine Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement. This would allow Ukraine to become part of the EU's internal market sector-

by-sector, as it aligned fully with EU rules in areas such as transport, telecommunications or battery production (though without getting a voice in EU decision-making). For economic and psychological reasons, Ukrainians should be able to see that getting closer to the EU is having a tangible positive effect on their lives, even if the final destination of membership remains some way off.

35: Henrik Larsen, 'Tough love: How the EU should tackle corruption and the rule of law in Ukraine', CER insight, September 9<sup>th</sup> 2025.

## Conclusion

At present, the objectives of stabilising the front line and providing effective security guarantees for Ukraine even if Russia does not stop fighting will look like political fantasy to European decision-makers. They want to see this war ended without further bloodshed, on terms that all sides accept. In pursuit of that aim, as the meeting of the Coalition of the Willing on September 4<sup>th</sup> showed, European leaders will feel that they have no choice but to keep engaging with Trump and supporting his dialogue with Putin, while doing nothing to annoy him. A pessimistic justification is that although Trump is not helping Ukraine much at present, he could do it much more harm, as he did after the February row with Zelenskyy, when he cut off both military supplies and intelligence sharing. A more optimistic view is that constant engagement with Trump may nudge him in the right direction, and ensure that those in the administration who are more hostile to Ukraine, including Vice President J D Vance, are kept in check. For now, Europe needs at a minimum to maintain the flow of US intelligence to Kyiv, and to keep open the possibility of buying American weapons and munitions to pass on to Ukraine (accepting the risk that the Pentagon could still block their export). But European and Ukrainian leaders should seek over time to reduce their dependency on the US, and view any additional help Ukraine gets from the US as a bonus.

The real fantasy is to believe that Trump's erratic peace overtures to Russia can end the war on minimally acceptable terms, or that Putin will stop fighting unless

forced to do so. Winston Churchill said of the appeasers of the 1930s: "Each one hopes that if he feeds the crocodile enough, the crocodile will eat him last." A Russia that could use Ukrainians as cannon fodder (as it has done with those forcibly conscripted in occupied Crimea, Donetsk and Luhansk)<sup>36</sup> and had access to Ukraine's defence industrial knowhow and natural resources would be a much more formidable threat to the rest of Europe.

European governments must stop hoping that the war will be resolved with minimal effort from them – either because the US will deliver a peace deal, or because Ukraine will make big enough concessions to buy Putin off, or because Putin himself will conclude that the costs of the war are too high. Trump cannot successfully mediate because he does not understand that Putin's desires and Ukraine's needs are fundamentally incompatible; Ukraine cannot make big enough concessions to satisfy Putin without fatally undermining its own security; and Putin is indifferent to the human and financial costs of fighting and has spent years shaping Russian society for war. If European leaders want to avoid confronting Russian forces on NATO territory, they will have to confront them in Ukraine, and give up the illusion that the capricious Trump will save them from the rapacious Putin.

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36: 'Statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the illegal conscription of Ukrainian citizens into the armed forces of the Russian Federation in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine', Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, March 31<sup>st</sup> 2025.