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Is There a Peace Plan for Ukraine?

By Lena Surzhko-Harned
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On Jan. 16, 2026, the war initiated by Russia against Ukraine on Feb. 24, 2022, approached a grim milestone: it has lasted longer than the Soviet fight against Nazi Germany in World War II.^[1] For more than 1,418 days, and counting, Ukrainian civilians have endured sustained attacks. On Jan. 8, Russia reportedly launched its largest strike on civilian infrastructure since the outset of the war, allegedly employing an intercontinental ballistic missile, *Oreshnik*, in the Lviv region, near the NATO border.^[2] Most of Ukraine, including its capital city, Kyiv, experienced extended power outages and lack of heating in sub-zero January temperatures. A day earlier, during a Kremlin state media broadcast on Orthodox Christmas, Russian President Vladimir Putin addressed what appeared to be schoolchildren, framing Russia's losses—now exceeding one million—as sacrifices for a “holy mission” sanctioned by divine authority.^[3]

When U.S. President Donald Trump assumed office in January 2025 to begin his second, non-consecutive presidential term, he declared ending the war a top priority, frequently asserting during his campaign that he could resolve the conflict within 24 hours. The events of 2025, however, demonstrated the complexity of this challenge. Rather than achieving peace, the year witnessed an escalation in Russian attacks on Ukraine, both in frequency and intensity—a trend that appears to persist into 2026 despite high-profile diplomatic efforts, including Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's meeting with Trump in Miami on Dec. 28, 2025, and subsequent talks in Paris during the first week of January. However, Moscow officials have indicated that none of the points agreed to in Miami or Europe are acceptable to Russia.^[4]

Why Has Peace Remained Elusive?

The difficulty in resolving this conflict can be attributed to flawed assumptions underpinning U.S. policy toward Russia. Trump's humanitarian aspirations for peace are commendable; however, his approach toward Russia has rested on unrealistic premises, resulting in ineffective outcomes. Central to this miscalculation is the belief that Putin seeks peace and prosperity for Ukraine. Russia's objectives remain unchanged: regime change in Kyiv, territorial annexation, occupation, and the dismantling of Ukrainian sovereignty. Therefore, peace in Putin's view is achievable only on Russian terms.

Trump's assumption that Putin is a rational actor amenable to negotiation is not unique; many global leaders have thought the same. The difference with Trump lies within his confidence that a personal rapport with Putin could lead to Putin being willing to "make a deal." This approach not only legitimized Putin's demands but also reframed the war as a personal dispute between two leaders, or to use Trump's own words "children in the park," thereby obscuring its nature as an illegal and unprovoked act of aggression against a sovereign state.^[5]

A related misconception is the notion that Russia is either unbeatable or currently winning, which has fueled suggestions of territorial concessions, an approach widely regarded as untenable. Since the start of the full-scale invasion, Russia failed to achieve the minimum of its strategic objectives and failed to militarily secure the regions of Ukraine it currently claims.

But if faulty assumptions persist, Putin can capitalize on the resulting shift in U.S. foreign policy, consistently displaying strategic duplicity. Putin rejected Trump's initial proposal of "ceasefire first, negotiations later" and instead advanced the notion that diplomatic dialogue could occur concurrently with Russia's ongoing military operation, a tactic that Putin and his advisers have termed the "spirit of Anchorage" following a summit in Anchorage, Alaska, with Trump in August 2025. It was there that the two talked about what peace might look like. It ended with warm words but no formal deal, though Trump suggested that Ukraine may need to cede territory – a core Russian demand, not acceptable to Ukraine. Through leveraging personal channels of communication with Trump, Putin sustained the appearance of meaningful negotiations, primarily to forestall additional sanctions that could further destabilize Russia's already weakened economy.^[6]

Key Questions for 2026

Trump's dependence on personal relationships as a cornerstone of foreign policy has proven ineffective in advancing peace in Ukraine during 2025. A critical question for 2026 is whether Putin has overextended his strategy to forestall any real progress and overplayed his hand with Trump. Recent statements by Trump

suggest a possible shift in perception, or attitude, toward Putin^[7]: He has characterized Russia as a “paper tiger,” voiced frustration with Putin on multiple occasions, and conceded that Putin lied of a Ukrainian strike on his Valdai residence in a phone call to Trump on Dec. 29 after Trump’s meeting with Zelenskyy at Mar- a-Lago.^[8]

Another critical question for 2026 is whether, upon recognizing Putin’s duplicity, Trump will exert pressure on Russia to end the war on Ukraine or abandon his peace initiatives altogether. Trump’s recent military action against Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela and his stated intention to confront the Iranian government have been interpreted as signaling strength to Moscow — a move some view as a decisive attempt to increase pressure on Russia.^[9] However, this demonstration of force carries divergent implications.

On one hand, the swift application of military power against authoritarian regimes may reinforce the credibility of U.S. deterrent threats, signaling a willingness to act decisively. On the other hand, the Venezuela operation can be understood within the framework of a renewed emphasis on “spheres of influence” in international relations. From this perspective, Maduro’s removal serves as a symbolic counterpoint to Russia’s failure to depose Zelenskyy in early 2022. These contrasting interpretations highlight the ambiguity surrounding both the intended and perceived messages of U.S. policy. Trump’s actions assert U.S. military superiority, but the lessons drawn by Russia may not constitute a deterrent warning but rather be perceived as an exercise in political bravado, provoking more decisive action. So far, Putin has refrained from official comments.

There are, of course, other ways in which Trump’s government can put pressure on Moscow, such as targeted strikes on Russia’s shadow oil fleet, the consolidation of U.S. control over Venezuelan oil resources, and the proposed Graham-Blumenthal sanctions package. However, the extent to which these measures will exert meaningful influence remains uncertain, particularly given that the bipartisan sanctions package continues to be an elusive prospect.

The next round of high-level meetings discussions between Ukraine and its allies, including the U.S., are set for the Jan. 19-23 meeting in Davos, but just days before, Trump seems to have broken from the other allies. In an exclusive interview with on Jan. 15, Trump told reporters that it’s Zelenskyy, not Putin, who is holding up a peace deal, suggesting renewed frustration with the Ukrainian leader.^[10] This comes as Zelenskyy and Trump were expected to sign an \$800 billion economic deal aimed at spurring Ukraine's postwar recovery.^[11] Although it’s unclear what exactly will happen now, Trump’s recent statement suggests a recalibration of U.S. involvement. If the U.S. steps back, Europe — who already made substantial commitments to Ukraine — would face the challenge of providing that support independently. This comes amid broader tensions over

NATO burden-sharing and Trump's recent pressure regarding Greenland, creating an unprecedented geopolitical situation in the North Atlantic. The Davos meeting may shed more light on these situations.

- [1] <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-invasion-ukraine-soviet-war-hitler-/33646197.html>
 - [2] <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/russia-oreshnik-hypersonic-ballistic-missile-ukraine-un-b2899252.html>
 - [3] <https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-ato/4077544-putin-says-russian-troops-carry-out-holy-mission-in-ukraine-ccd.html>
 - [4] <https://nypost.com/2026/01/08/us-news/russia-rejects-trumps-20-point-peace-plan-for-ukraine-forming-a-true-axis-of-war/>
 - [5] https://youtu.be/_l7hJ89GAnc?si=TFq81QeKO8qbWq2J
 - [6] <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/clyvd2jpyino>
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 - [8] <https://www.nbcnews.com/world/europe/us-finds-ukraine-not-target-putin-residence-alleged-drone-strike-sourc-rcna251776>
 - [9] <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/67372>
 - [10] <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/trump-says-zelenskiy-not-putin-is-holding-up-ukraine-peace-deal-2026-01-15/>
 - [11] <https://kyivindependent.com/us-and-ukraine-plan-to-sign-800bn-deal-at-davos/>
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