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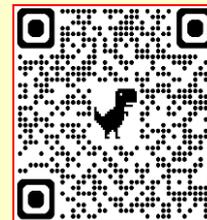
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## EUROPE'S DILEMMA: CONTINUE THE PROXY WAR IN UKRAINE OR START EU REFORM

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### ABSTRACT

*This research article aims to present the European Union's declining position in the world economy and geopolitics and to examine its development options in light of the new American national security strategy and the Russo-Ukrainian war. As for the latter, the author, after presenting the changes in the geopolitical situation, examines the development of the Russo-Ukrainian war, presenting little-known justifications for it, and widely unknown facts about characteristics of the special military operation (SMO), the reasons for its initial failure, its transformation (into a war of attrition and proxy warfare), the results achieved, and possible escalation. Then, he analyzes one of the most important elements of the peace treaty under preparation - security guarantees - with special attention to the planned deployment of European deterrent forces in Ukraine, presenting arguments that this deployment does not serve to establish peace. The author concludes that the decline of the United States' role in Europe should convince the EU that if it wants to remain an influential player in the world, it must urgently introduce reforms to increase organizational and operational efficiency and competitiveness and to build a European military force without US participation. The resources needed for this can be secured, in significant part, by promoting the closure of the Russo-Ukrainian war and normalizing relations with Russia. The conditions for ending the war have been met. There is no point in continuing the fighting for either side. Russian troops are currently advancing slowly but surely, while the Ukrainians are attacking remote Russian oil refineries, 20% of which have been rendered inoperable. In response, the Russians have severely damaged Ukraine's energy infrastructure. The European Union has reached a crossroads: either it continues its military support for Ukraine and imposes further sanctions against Russia (proxy war), or it helps end the war, lifts sanctions, begins Ukraine's accession process to the European Union, and launches internal EU reforms to remain a significant global economic and political player (EU reform). These two options are mutually exclusive. Continuing Western military support for Ukraine and maintaining primary and secondary sanctions against Moscow in the long term could lead to an escalation of the war or trigger an unprecedented process of destabilization in the Russian Federation, with unpredictable consequences for Europe. Europe has already started two world wars; it must not start a third.*

**KEY WORDS:** EU reform, Russian-Ukrainian war, justification, special military operation, proxy war, European deterrent force

## Introduction

According to the new US national security strategy Europe faces economic decline and a civilizational crisis. The document argues that the excessive power and bureaucracy of supranational institutions undermine not only their effectiveness and competitiveness, but also the national sovereignty of member states. Mass migration disrupts social cohesion, and demographic collapse threatens the long-term survival of civilization.

Although the American point of view is debatable, numerous facts prove that Europe's role is declining. 1. The EU's economic performance is decreasing (its share of world GDP was 29.4% in 1979 and 17.8% in 2021). 2. The EU sanctions introduced against Russia are causing great damage to the European Union too. 3. The US imposed a 15% tariff on EU products exported to the US in 2025. 4. NATO members "agreed" to increase their military spending to 5% of GDP. 6. The EU "agreed" to finance US arms shipments to Ukraine. 7. The Russian-Ukrainian peace talks are taking place without the EU's involvement, mediated by the US.

The only way to stop the decline is to implement the reform proposals contained in the so-called Draghi report on the future of the EU. EU reform is costly, but resources could be secured to a significant extent by ending the Russia-Ukraine war, suspending anti-Russia sanctions, and halting arms shipments to Ukraine, without jeopardizing Ukraine's accession to the EU.

The features of the ongoing war and lessons so far prove that the conditions for peace are in place and that continuing the war makes no sense. The only obstacle to peace is the European-Ukrainian policy, which does not recognize the realities on the battlefield and seeks to force Russia into making concessions through secondary sanctions and a constant increase in Western military support for Ukraine.

This policy could easily lead to supporting states' transformation into participants in the conflict, and to the escalation of the war. A clear manifestation of this policy is the proposal to deploy a European deterrent force in Ukraine after a ceasefire takes effect. If Europe abandons this policy and promotes an early end to the war, it could achieve three important results: freeing up resources for EU reform, initiating the accelerated process of Ukraine's accession to the organization, and regaining its negotiating position vis-à-vis the United States and Russia.

## Literature Review

The characteristics of the literature related to the topic of the research article are as follows: 1. Relatively few studies objectively assess the impact of anti-Russian sanctions on the European Union. Russian sources overestimate, while sources from EU member states underestimate the impact of Western anti-Russian sanctions on the European Union. 2. The majority of professional studies does not provide a comprehensive analysis of the Western policy toward Ukraine since they consider it legitimate and correct, as it is in line with the UN Charter and is based on a collective decision. These studies consider the overall support to Ukraine essential to force Russia to negotiate peace, including the provision of long-range military strike capabilities and the authorization of their use, they neglect the possibility of escalation of the war, suggest the increasing number of secondary sanctions against Russia. Russophobia limits their ability to analyze and assess Russia's military offensive intent and capability to launch a conventional war against Europe objectively.

## Research Objectives

- Presentation of new factors influencing the conclusion of the Russian-Ukrainian war (the main characteristics of the new American foreign policy and crisis management, the changed relationship between America and Europe, the demand for a reformed, stronger European Union and an independent from US European Armed Forces, the basic condition for fulfilling this demand - a radical modification of the EU policy related to the Russian-Ukrainian war).
- Presentation of a new approach regarding the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war and the Russian special military operation/SMO (definition, objectives, features of SMO, its difference from other military operations, reasons for its initial failure, its transformation into a war of attrition and a proxy war, the difference between a supporter of a warring party and a participant in the war, the fundamental conditions for ending the SMO/war).
- Presentation on expected European response to the emergence of new factors influencing the conclusion of the war (evaluation of the function and structure of the European deterrent forces to be deployed in Ukraine after the conclusion of peace, and their impact on achieving lasting peace, proposal for resolving the dilemma of "supporting the continuation of the war or reforming the EU").

## Research Questions

- What new political factors can have a positive impact on the conclusion of the war, and why?
- Why did the Russian special military operation turn into a war of attrition and a proxy war, and why can we say that the military conditions for ending the war have been created?
- What is the essence of the dilemma facing Europe (continuing to support Ukraine all-around in the Russo-Ukrainian war and sanction Russia, or to facilitate the conclusion of the war at any cost and begin a comprehensive reform of the EU, including its enlargement), and is there any hope for resolving the dilemma?

## Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology

In this research, both qualitative and quantitative research methods were used.

Presentation of new factors influencing the conclusion of the Russian-Ukrainian war and specifics of the Russian special military operation requested content analysis of studies by renowned authors of opposing schools of international relations, and analysis of various international documents.

Since Hungary, as part of the so-called collective West, represents a specific position, I also highlighted the works of Hungarian political scientists.

For the sake of objectivity, I have tried to avoid using Russian and Ukrainian official sources as much as possible.

Since public opinion on the issues under study is changing extremely rapidly and opinion polls are contradictory, this article does not examine the public perception of the issues under study.

## Textual Analysis

### Changes in world politics create favorable conditions for ending the war

According to the new US National Security Strategy (November 2025), "Major problems facing Europe include national and supranational regulations of the European Union that undermine creativity and diligence; the EU's activities that undermine sovereignty; migration policies that transform the continent; and the loss of national identities and self-confidence". The US wants Europe to remain European, regain its civilizational self-confidence, and abandon the failed practice of over-regulation. (MKI translation, 2025) This assessment clearly indicates the American expectation that the European Union should be an alliance of strong, sovereign states rather than a continuously evolving confederation with a common value system and regulatory framework. But this would return the EU to a very early stage of development, which would be unfavorable for small, sovereign states, as acting alone provides weaker capabilities for asserting national interests than acting in an alliance with other states with similar national interests. Only sovereign, large, and strong countries, especially the United States, are capable of asserting their national interests.

From the American perspective, criticism of the EU became important on January 8, 2026, due to the "demise of international law". On that day, in an interview with The New York Times, Donald Trump was asked whether there were any limits on his power in making decisions affecting countries outside the US. Trump replied: "Yes, there are: my own morality, my own mind." When asked if international law posed such a limit, Trump responded "I don't need international law." Consequently, the US will do everything to force the implementation of the proposed EU transformation.

The American intention to occupy Greenland also reflects another ability of the American administration: decision-making ability for decisive short-term action, especially if armed force is required. However, there is no foreign policy expertise or knowledge of complex circumstances and conditions for long-term action. Only power, will, and the desire for profit exist. (Telkes, 2026)

*If Trump acquires Greenland using military force, it will most likely mean the end of NATO and the transatlantic alliance. The only solution for Europe is to build the strongest possible NATO — perhaps even without the US — and create the strongest possible European Union. If Europe does not want to become a permanent economic and political secondary player in the world and if the European Union wants to avoid disintegration, then reforms and innovations are necessary in the economy, according to Draghi's report. The integration process must be accelerated, common action capability strengthened, and investments made in arms manufacturing. The EU's military potential must be developed to a deterrent level. Before the European Union is destroyed by great powers interested in spheres of influence, it must become independent, and civil democracy must be preserved. (Forgács, 2026)*

*To secure the necessary resources, the European Union must abandon its comprehensive support for Ukraine (including the purchase of American weapons), cease advocating for a peace settlement based on forcing Russia to its knees, and do everything possible to support an alternative end to the Russian-Ukrainian war. Within the framework of a peace settlement, adopting a purely pragmatic stance, sanctions against Russia must be lifted and relations with Moscow normalized, based on the following facts:*

1. *The conditions for ending the Russian-Ukrainian war have been created: The Russians have fundamentally achieved*

*the goals of their military operation (the "liberation" of Donbas will soon be completed, most of the Ukrainian ultranationalist units with Nazi sentiments have been destroyed, Ukrainian military potential has been significantly weakened, Ukraine's NATO membership is off the agenda, and the situation of the Russian minority will be resolved by Ukraine's EU accession). — At the same time, Ukraine has shown how to effectively confront a major military power, earning global recognition, successfully retaining Southern Ukraine (Black Sea ports), and with the potential to become a member of the European Union, which also provides a security guarantee. There is no point in continuing the fighting for either side: currently, Russian troops are advancing slowly but steadily, while Ukrainians are launching deep strikes against Russian oil refining facilities, rendering 20% of them inoperable. In response, the Russians have severely damaged Ukraine's energy infrastructure.*

2. *The continuation of the proxy war could lead to an undesirable escalation (armed conflict between NATO and Russia).*
3. *The continued maintenance of primary and secondary sanctions against Moscow may achieve its goal in the long term, but it could trigger a destabilizing process in the Russian Federation with unforeseeable consequences for Europe.*
4. *The United States wants peace, regardless of the terms, to facilitate business deals with Russia and Ukraine.*
5. *A reformed, competitive European Union - rationally transformed in its leadership, management, and operational structure, detached from the influence-seeking efforts of global transnational economic and financial actors, impartially responding to international crises based on international law, respecting the security needs of non-EU member states, effectively supporting and objectively assessing the fulfillment of accession requirements for Ukraine and other candidate states, firmly acting against EU member states that violate democracy and the rule of law, striving for unity while maintaining diversity, playing a decisive role in world politics and the world economy, and possessing an independent military force, would bring greater benefit to Europe and the world than a European Union that supports Ukraine in every conceivable way in the ultimately hopeless fight against Russia, and at the same time destroys Russia by proxy warfare continuously.*
6. *Suspending military aid to Ukraine and sanctions against Russia would free up significant resources to finance Ukraine's accession to EU.*

*The most important tasks facing the European Union are financing the annual Ukrainian budget, facilitating Ukraine's accession to the EU, and increasing the EU's competitiveness and defense capabilities.*

*Ukraine is heavily dependent on EU support; without it the country would face economic collapse. The country's financing needs for 2026–2027 amount to €135.7 billion, with the EU providing (?) a significant portion through a €90 billion loan package for Ukraine. (Half of the war costs are covered by Western sources; without this support, the Ukrainian defense forces would become unsustainable.) Based on the European Commission's proposal, the 2028-2034 financial plan allocated approximately €200.3 billion in EU funds to support Ukraine. However, this amount is probably insufficient and,*

according to the European Court of Auditors, it also carries serious financial and other risks. Therefore, EU financing of Ukrainian budget expenditures is secured only until 2029.

Even with an accelerated process, Ukraine's accession to the EU would take 5 to 10 years after a ceasefire is reached. (Faster integration offers mutual benefits but also carries serious risks. It would send the wrong message to the Western Balkan countries that have been waiting to join for many years, and could institutionalize a multi-speed Europe.) According to preliminary estimates, the total cost of Ukraine's accession to the EU will be extremely high, amounting to almost €2,500 billion (over five years), which is more than 12.5 times the EU's 2025 budget.

If the war continues, EU expenditure to finance the Ukrainian budget will increase. At the same time, the continuation of the war will delay Ukraine's accession to the EU, thus increasing the costs of accession. These facts, along with the financing of urgent and costly projects to strengthen the EU's competitiveness and defense capabilities (€410 billion between 2028 and 2034) and the damage caused to the EU by anti-Russian sanctions (according to *eulosses.com*, Europe's losses from sanctions against Russia are approximately €2,500 billion over 4 years (2022-2025), or €625 billion/year), force the EU to choose: either to continue the proxy war against Russia by supporting Ukraine or to push for a peace agreement as soon as possible with the prospect of suspending sanctions, thus allowing Ukraine to start the EU accession process. The absence of damage from the sanctions would make it possible to finance Ukraine's accession costs.

The sanctions are intended to weaken Russia, but they have another effect: slowing down the EU's internal dynamics, particularly in structural reforms. Anti-Russian sanctions indirectly slow EU reform by diverting member states' resources, attention, and decision-making capacity to crisis management (sanctions packages) and shifting the focus from internal reforms to security policy measures. The preparation and adoption of sanctions packages needs significant time and energy from EU institutions; thus, these institutions have less capacity for in-depth reforms. The economic difficulties caused by sanctions also make it difficult to maintain EU unity and may push internal structural reforms to the background.

According to the current EU position, sanctions against Russia, imposed due to Russian aggression in Ukraine, will remain in place until a just and lasting peace is established. (This would happen if Ukraine's territorial integrity were restored; that is, if Russian troops withdrew from the occupied territories. Since the probability of this happening is zero, the EU sanctions will remain in place indefinitely.) It is a consistent, but pointless and unconstructive position.

Changing the EU's position on anti-Russian sanctions would not necessarily mean a loss of prestige for the EU. It is well known that the European Union is not an unwavering champion of justice because its actions against violations of international law and the rules-based world order are often selective. If the offender is not an ally, sanctions are imposed immediately; if the offender is an ally, the EU either fails to adopt a unified position or settles for statements of condemnation, but does not impose sanctions.

Russia committed aggression to Ukraine, so sanctions are rightfully applied against Russia. However, the West and Ukraine did everything they could to ensure this aggression would occur. The West could have prevented the escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict three times in the past 12 years by urging the implementation of the agreement between the Ukrainian opposition and the president,

the Minsk agreements, and by supporting the 2022 Russian-Ukrainian peace plan; however, it did not do so, because it wanted this war.

Sanctions will only have an effect in 5-10 years and do not promote the conclusion of peace quickly, but rather the continuation and escalation of the war. If we add to this the fact that Europe wants the Russian Federation to break up, Russia wants to get Ukraine, Ukraine wants to join NATO, the United States wants Canada, Greenland, Iran, Cuba, Venezuela, and Panama, China plans to reunite with Taiwan, Turkey wants to gain influence in Syria, and Israel seeks to defeat Iran, it seems that we are facing a redivision of the world and another world war, which could be triggered by the escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian war. The Russian compromise necessary for peace would be easily achievable if the EU reduced its military support for Ukraine after the ceasefire and suspended sanctions against Russia. In this case, Europe could prevent another world war rather than starting it.

At the same time; action against US aggression must also be considered. Trump is not a politician, but a violent, unscrupulous, glory-seeking businessman, and one can only speak to him in the language of force. Several options are available: freezing access for American companies to European public procurement markets or blocking certain investments (applying tools against economic coercion). The EU could give even greater emphasis to regulating data protection and digital markets, which could further limit the expansion of American tech giants, by signing the Mercosur agreement, the EU could create a huge free trade area, reducing dependence on the USA, the US administration's goal is to push down yields on longer-term bonds to improve the situation of retail and business borrowers, which could be significantly influenced by the potential sale of European bond holdings (8-12 trillion dollars).

#### **A new reason for the Russian aggression: protecting the interests of the ruling class.**

The presentation and analysis of the Russian special military operation requires knowledge of theories that explain any Russian aggression. This includes the Marxist theory that emphasizes protecting the interests of the ruling class.

According to this theory, by initiating the war in Ukraine, Putin is protecting the rational, collective interests of the Russian ruling class. To understand this, it is worth reviewing the development of capitalism in the Russian Federation after the collapse of the Soviet Union from a lesser-known but interesting Marxist perspective. Marxist experts believe that initial capital accumulation occurred in the Soviet Union during the Soviet state's and the economy's centrifugal disintegration. By creating and exploiting their informal connections with state officials, most new ruling class members privatized state property at below market value, deliberately created legal loopholes for massive tax evasion and capital outflow, and carried out suspicious corporate acquisitions to achieve quick, short-term profits.

The insider rent model, as described by Russian Marxist economist Ruslan Dzarasov, depicts Russian capitalism as an economy in which powerful "insiders" – often state officials and their connected business elite – derive income by controlling the allocation of funds and exerting political influence, rather than solely through market competition or innovation. Hungarian sociologist Iván Szelényi termed this phenomenon political capitalism. In Russia, political capitalists are that part of the capitalist class whose main competitive advantage comes from state-provided benefits, rather than from technological innovations or particularly cheap labor. Political capitalists in large numbers appeared in areas where the state

historically played a dominant role in the economy, investing vast capital, and these areas became available to private enterprises through privatization or other means.

In capitalist states, the bourgeoisie generally does not directly control the state. The state bureaucracy enjoys significant autonomy, independent of the capitalist class, but it supports the latter by creating and enforcing rules that serve capitalist accumulation. In contrast, political capitalists demand much stricter control over political decision - makers. Alternatively, they themselves occupy political offices for private enrichment; they are called oligarchs.

It remains an open question whether political capitalism is sustainable in the long term. After all, the state must acquire resources from somewhere to redistribute them among political capitalists. State distribution makes corruption a fundamental condition for the existence of political capitalism.

Opportunities such as new investments or labor exploitation encounter structural obstacles in the era of post-Soviet political capitalism. Many fear embarking on long-term investments when the existence of their business models and properties depend on those in power. Transferring profits to offshore accounts is more efficient. Regarding labor, the post-Soviet workforce is urbanized, skilled, and not cheap. The relatively low wage levels in the region were possible due to the extensive infrastructure and welfare institutions left behind by the Soviet Union. This legacy places a heavy burden on the state; it is not easy to change without alienating key voters.

Expansion offers a solution, such as Russian-led integration projects like the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), in which political capitalists of EEU member countries do not threaten the competitiveness of Russian political capitalists.

An important result of Russia's internal consolidation was fostering the growth of the educated middle class. Many benefited from certain advantages of the system; for example, they were employed in the bureaucracy or strategic state-owned enterprises. However, the vast majority of them were excluded from the privileges of political capitalism. Thus, their income and careers depended on connections to the West. Working for EU and US-led institutions, and Western firms in Russia represented their future. This led to a break with the post-Soviet elite, institutions, and the mass mentality that sought stability.

Western-led institutions could not, or did not even want to integrate the post-Soviet political capitalists. Instead, they sought to strip them of their main competitive advantage: the privileges they had gained through their political-economic influence in post-Soviet states. Political capitalists were also disturbed by the fight against corruption, a vital element of Western institutions' vision for the post-Soviet space, supported by the region's pro-Western middle class. For political capitalists, however, its success would mean the end of the feasibility of their political-economic goals.

Publicly, the Kremlin tries to present the war as a struggle for Russia's survival as a sovereign nation. The war, as a manifestation of class conflict between political capitalists interested in maintaining their incomes through territorial expansion and the middle class, excluded from the benefits of political capitalism, receives less attention.

Several factors can explain the timing of the invasion. These include Russia's temporary advantage in hypersonic weapons, Europe's dependence on Russian energy, the suppression of the pro-Russian opposition in Ukraine, the refusal to implement the 2015 Minsk agreements, and the Russian intelligence prognosis promising a quick

and easy victory. The most important factor, however, is the survival of the Russian ruling class and the model of political capitalism.

The war legitimizes the Russian efforts to become independent from the West. At the same time, there are already signs of a shift towards a more consolidated, ideological, authoritarian political regime capable of greater mobilization, one that views China's effective political capitalism as a model to follow. For Putin, this is essentially another stage in the post-Soviet consolidation process initiated in the early 2000s to gain the support of Russian oligarchs. This subsequent phase of establishing stability seems to be replaced by a narrative of a more articulated conservative nationalism, also supported by the middle class due to the hopelessness of improving relations with Western countries and institutions, and the multitude of large-scale domestic projects requiring skilled professionals.

The war seems to have definitively closed the cooperation between Europe and Russia while opening new perspectives in the relations between Russia and China, Iran, North Korea, and the Global South.

The projects aimed at restoring the occupied Ukrainian territories will most likely ensure the resource demand required for the survival of the political capitalism model. This is a prerequisite for a shift towards an authoritarian political regime that views China's effective political capitalism as a model. (Ishchenko, 2022).

#### **From a special military operation to a prolonged war of attrition (i.e., exhausting the opponent with continuous personnel and material losses until their collapse)**

The war has been ongoing for four years. It started as a special military operation, then transformed into a war of attrition with no end in sight. It is important to be familiar with the definition of special military operation, its primary goals, and the reasons for its initial failure in Ukraine.

According to Russian military terminology, war and armed conflict fall into the category of military conflict. Military conflict is defined as resolving a dispute between two states, or between opposing parties within a state, through military force. During wartime, Russian military operations primarily focus on achieving military strategic goals, such as destroying the enemy's military capabilities or occupying its territory, to achieve declared political goals, such as territorial or political concessions. This requires multiple operations. In contrast, the military strategic goal of the special military operation /SMO/ (the liberation of Donbas) was not separate from the political goals ("restoration of Ukraine's neutral status", "denazification", and "demilitarization"); consequently, success was supposed to be achieved with a single decisive operation.

Since the beginning of the aggression, two Russian military experts, Viktor Litvinyenko and Vladimir Kvachkov, have attempted to define the 'special military operation'. In their definition, it is a special operation below the level of war, involving a single combined arms operation capable of achieving a direct strategic-political goal in a relatively short time. (McDermott, Bartles, 2022)

In this case, as already mentioned, the direct political strategic goal was the "denazification" (the removal of the pro-Western political regime, settlement of the situation of the Russian national minority, the elimination of extremist nationalist military units —the so-called Azov and Aidar formations), the "demilitarization" of Ukraine (the dismantling of Ukrainian military capabilities, the termination of the Western military presence on the territory of Ukraine), and withdrawal of the intention to join NATO.

The broader geopolitical goal of the special military operation was to halt the West's eastward "expansion," restore Ukraine's role as a buffer zone (neutral political status), and renegotiate the European security architecture.

The "special military operation" did not achieve its declared goals but transformed into a long-term war of attrition, supplemented by hybrid warfare (mixed application of conventional, irregular, cyber, economic, political warfare tools) and gray zone operations (disinformation, economic pressure, support for armed militias), resulting in non-linear (complex, unpredictable) effects. Based on these factors, it can be reasonably assumed that the definition of the SMO and its transformation will be subjects of research.

Despite Ukraine's size and significant military capabilities, the Russian military leadership was not prepared for a local war against an equal enemy. Therefore, the steps characteristic of the initial phase of the war (destruction of Ukrainian command centers, non-contact combat aimed at eliminating air defense) were not considered during the planning of the operation; instead, the ground forces immediately launched attacks in multiple directions, parallel to long-range strikes.

This may also explain why Russian units did not operate according to regulations during movement and combat, and why there appeared to be no unified commander for the operation during the first six weeks of the war.

The Russian military leadership was not preparing for a local war against an equal enemy, and experts blame Russian intelligence for this: it provided unreliable, unverified, and wrongly assessed information, unfounded proposals to the political and military leadership. As a result, an inaccurate picture of Ukraine's domestic political situation emerged among Russian political leaders in February 2022. The assumptions - that a significant portion of the country's population supports the removal of the Ukrainian political leadership, that many high-ranking governmental, military, and intelligence officials support pro-Russian politicians and would support the FSB operation leading to a pro-Russian takeover - and that local politicians possess sufficient influence, legitimacy, and personal capabilities to lead Ukraine after the takeover, proved to be false in all respects.

The reasons for this are as follows:

- 1) The failure of the Federal Security Service (FSB) to collect, verify, and properly process credible and controlled information about the state of the Ukrainian political system and the political-cultural attitudes of the population. (Russian intelligence in Ukraine is conducted not by the Foreign Intelligence Service (the SVR), but by the Operational Information Directorate of the FSB's Fifth Service);
- 2) Consequently, the incorrect planning of the operation intended to trigger a pro-Russian takeover;
- 3) The unnaturally limited information ecosystem and decision-making characteristics of the autocratic political regime, which hinder the correction of incorrect views prevailing at the top of the political system;
- 4) American and other foreign counterintelligence support provided to Ukraine. (Waller, 2023)

The poor situation assessment is incomprehensible because, until the start of the war, Russian intelligence had great opportunities in Ukraine. Advantages included the similar language, easy movement across the Russian-Ukrainian border and especially the presence of Russian sympathizers among the predominantly Russian-speaking

Ukrainian population who were willing to cooperate. There is no reason to doubt that Ukraine was a relatively easy target for Russian intelligence until the outbreak of the war and that it had built an effective agent network. Russian officers previously serving in Ukraine could also provide intelligence with extensive information about the Ukrainian army, especially regarding defense capabilities and fortifications. (Shapiro, 2023)

While precise information is not yet available regarding Russian intelligence's pre-war estimates and conclusions about Ukrainian military capabilities, it is difficult to imagine that either civilian or military intelligence, possessing the aforementioned opportunities, would provide false information to the leadership of the services.

However, it cannot be ruled out that the leadership of the FSB, as the responsible intelligence service, did not want to, or was unable to exert sufficient influence on strategic decision-making before the special military operation. Intelligence chiefs in authoritarian regimes commonly face difficulties when reporting facts that contradict the opinions of decision-makers. For unknown reasons, the Security Council of the Russian Federation and President Putin, as the sole supreme decision-maker, formed a completely unrealistic view of Ukraine. Accordingly, probably under self-imposed duress, the FSB leadership provided assessments that allowed for multiple interpretations, including the one favored by leadership, that the overwhelming majority of Ukrainian citizens would welcome the arrival of Russian troops and the installation of a pro-Moscow government. (This method, or rather approach, is well known to those who have worked in the analysis and evaluation departments of intelligence services.) This was done, although according to Americans, extensive public opinion polls commissioned by the FSB in Ukraine showed that a large part of Ukraine's population was ready to resist a Russian attack, and that any expectations that Russian forces would be welcomed as liberators were unfounded. (Miller, Belton, 2022)

*This is the phenomenon known as "groupthink," where no one dares to question the boss' viewpoint. "Groupthink" is a concept coined by Irving Janis, describing a group dynamic in which maintaining agreement becomes more important than seeking truth, reality, or a better solution. Group members often unconsciously self-censor, suppress their doubts, and conform to the dominant narrative because standing out seems risky. "Groupthink distorted by consensus compulsion" is perhaps the most appropriate phrase to describe its essence. (Telkes, 2026)*

Russian opposition media also supported this viewpoint, saying that after the failure of SMO, Putin dismissed only the leadership of the FSB's 5th Service's responsible directorate; however, for such a mistake, the entire directorate/department should have been disbanded and reorganized. (Meduza editorial, 2024)

The failure of the SMO and its transformation into a war of attrition required an increased Western military aid to Ukraine, including arms shipments, training of Ukrainian officers abroad, provision of Western assistance in weapon handling, and assurance of intelligence support for the Ukrainian army, as well as assistance in targeting Russian strategic objects by long-range strike assets like missiles and drones. With the Western strategic political and military objective remaining unchanged (weakening Russia and forcing it into peace negotiations), a proxy warfare thus developed.

*A proxy war is an armed conflict in which the main opposing parties do not fight each other directly, but*

*indirectly through the support of a third party. The same is true in this current proxy war: the West and Russia do not fight each other directly, but through the support of Ukraine by the West with weapons, money, and training. It aims to reduce the risk of direct nuclear or all-out war (see Vietnam War, Syrian Civil War).*

NATO sees Russia as an enemy and weakens Russian offensive potential wherever and whenever possible, and increases its own capabilities by expanding the organization.

According to the Russian position, the fundamental reason for the proxy war is NATO expansion, which Europe will probably never give up, and Russia fundamentally started the war to stop NATO expansion. It is difficult to accept this standpoint, especially for NATO member countries. But it is thought-provoking that all declared Russian war aims (elimination of anti-Russian, extreme, rough and harsh Ukrainian nationalism in domestic and foreign policy, in culture and other areas, or de-Nazification; reduction of Ukrainian military capabilities, elimination of Western military presence, or demilitarization; resolution of the situation of the Russian minority due to the failure to implement the Minsk agreement, or liberation of Donbas; and restoration of the neutral political system, or stopping the NATO accession process) can be derived from this.

NATO expansion was pushed by American foreign policy. In the meantime, support for Ukraine's NATO membership and the arming of Ukraine have been taken over by European countries, meaning Russia is not facing Ukraine, nor the current American administration, but rather those European countries and European integration organizations, as well as the global economic and financial actors influencing the decision-makers of these integration organizations, who advocate for NATO expansion and militarily support Ukraine.

*Two questions immediately arise regarding proxy war:*

1. *From what point does a supporting state become a belligerent party?*
2. *How does international law judge the possible direct, open, armed intervention of supporting states on Ukraine's side?*

*1. There is no precise definition in international law as to when a supporting state becomes a belligerent party: the answer lies somewhere around the joint planning, organization, execution of operations, and support capable of causing significant damage to the opponent. The essence lies in how the states involved classify the support. Currently, it seems that it is not in the interest of the opposing parties to classify Western support as participation. We can encounter two precedent-setting legal decisions:*

- a) *In the so-called Nicaragua case, the International Court of Justice examined whether the USA was responsible for the unlawful acts of the armed group called "contras" operating in Nicaragua and supported by the United States. In this context, the Court found that American assistance, which manifested in material, organizational, training, supply, and armament support, was not sufficient for the USA to also be responsible for the violations, because, according to the Court, these violations could have been committed by the "contras" even without general American support.*
- b) *According to the judgment of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in the Tadić case, "if, in addition to financial support, training, or operational support, the supporting state jointly organizes, coordinates,*

*or plans operations with the belligerent party it sponsors, thereby exercising full control over the armed force in question, then the activities of the supported state can be considered de facto activities of the supporting state."*

*2. Regarding the overt intervention of foreign states, a state's potential involvement in the conflict to assist Ukraine against the aggressor is not contrary to international law, as such involvement would fall into the category of collective self-defense. It would also mean that if Russia were to attack the intervening country in response that would again be aggression, as the supporting state is exercising collective self-defense. If this were to happen, Russia would commit aggression, but would not violate international humanitarian law by attacking military targets. (Varga, 2023)*

**The escalation process of the Russian - Ukrainian conflict**

Herman Kahn (1922-1983), an American physicist, strategist, and futurist, while working at the American strategic research institute, the RAND Corporation, at the height of the Cold War in the early 1960s, developed various scenarios for the escalation of conflict between rival parties.

In this 44-step escalation ladder, the rungs led from mild disagreements between powers to total nuclear war. Today, Herman Kahn's work is often cited because it is also applicable to the Russian-Ukrainian war.

Kahn's ladder can be roughly divided into seven relatively well-defined stages:

- In the first stage (rungs 1-3), the confrontation between the parties involved is visible only at the level of declarations.
- In the second stage (rungs 4-9), positions harden, mobilization occurs, followed by military clashes.
- In the third stage (rungs 10-20), the crisis intensifies, and a limited conventional war begins, accompanied by widespread sanctions.
- In the fourth stage (rungs 21-25), hostilities cross the nuclear threshold, but the use of nuclear weapons is a one-time, local, and demonstrative act.
- In the fifth stage (rungs 26-31), sporadic nuclear attacks occur against military forces and assets, and infrastructure objects, leading to widespread evacuation of the population.
- In the sixth stage (rungs 32-38), nuclear attacks against military targets become generalized, and finally,
- In the seventh stage (rungs 39-44), the civilian population also becomes targets of nuclear attacks; nothing else matters, only destruction.

Of course, at each rung, one can turn around and climb down the ladder, and Kahn discusses this in appropriate detail, highlighting what each party can gain or lose through de-escalation. (Maini, 2025).

If we also include a zero point, when there is no tension yet, and everything is fine between the stakeholders, then the escalation ladder of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict is as follows:

**Application of Kahn's escalation ladder to the Russian-Ukrainian war (Source: the author):**

Ladder Stage Number	Number and Content of Rungs Belonging to the Given Ladder Stage	
0. No sign of tension, everything is fine between the parties.	0	US Secretary of State James Baker promised Gorbachev that if a united Germany could join NATO, NATO would not expand one inch East.

1. Rivalry between the opposing parties occurs only at the level of declarations.	1.	Almost simultaneously with Baker's promise, Charles Krauthammer proclaimed a unipolar world dominated by America in Foreign Affairs, the main journal of American foreign policy.
	2.	The announcement of the Partnership for Peace Program, developed in 1993, which was the first step in NATO enlargement, followed by the US Senate's decision to expand NATO.
	3.	NATO's continuous eastward expansion, despite Russian protests.
2. Positions harden, mobilization occurs, followed by military clashes.	4.	NATO's Bucharest decision to invite Ukraine into NATO.
	5.	The Maidan Square revolution, opposition takeover in Kyiv, annexation of Crimea, and declaration of Donetsk and Luhansk's secession from Ukraine. Ukrainian anti-terrorist operations against Donbas.
	6.	Failure of Ukrainian anti-terrorist operations, Minsk negotiations, signing of the Minsk Agreements, then Ukraine's refusal to implement them.
	7.	Russian proposal to resolve security policy problems with the United States. Large-scale Russian military exercises in the Russian-Ukrainian border area.
	8.	The Geneva talks in January 2022, where US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman rejected Russia's request not to admit Ukraine to NATO.
	9.	Launch of Russian aggression (special military operation), stopping the Russian attack on Kyiv, withdrawal of Russian forces, start of Minsk and Istanbul talks.
3. The crisis intensifies and a limited conventional war begins, accompanied by widespread sanctions.	10.	Failure of peace talks, beginning of limited conventional war.
	11.	Imposition of widespread sanctions against Russia, institutionalization of military support for Ukraine and foreign training of Ukrainian troops. Reorganization of Ukrainian forces, increasing their combat readiness.
	12.	Ukrainian attack against the Kursk region, occupation of part of the region. Appearance of North Korean combat units on the Russian side.
	13.	New nuclear doctrine, threat of nuclear strike.
	14.	Partial Russian successes on the fronts. Ukrainian military operations against

		remote Russian strategic targets, including oil processing facilities. Conducting secret operations to eliminate important Russian figures with direct Western support.
	15.	Application of the Oresnik hypersonic missile.
	16.	Constant Ukrainian attacks against energy facilities deep inside Russia. Effective destruction of Ukraine's energy and critical infrastructure. Unsuccessful drone attack against the Russian presidential residence. Repeated application of the Oresnik hypersonic missile.
	17.	The first trilateral Russian-Ukrainian-American expert peace talks in the United Arab Emirates.

We are currently at 3. ladder stage, 17. rung.

If the opposing parties fail to make peace, the following escalation stages await us:

3. ladder stage, 18-20 rungs: more intensive conventional war begins, accompanied by more widespread sanctions.

4. ladder stage, 21-25 rungs: hostilities cross the nuclear threshold, but the use of nuclear weapons is a one-time, limited, and demonstrative act.

5. ladder stage, 26-31 rungs: sporadic nuclear attacks occur against military forces, assets, and infrastructure objects, leading to widespread evacuation of the population.

6. ladder stage, 32-38 rungs: nuclear attacks against military targets become widespread.

7. ladder stage, 39-44 rungs: even the civilian population becomes targets of nuclear attacks; nothing else matters, only destruction.

According to Hungarian political scientist Károly Lóránt, Kahn's ladder does not entirely fit the Russian-Ukrainian military conflict, as Kahn's theory assumes that two parties are fighting each other, who can mutually inflict damage as escalation increases and can weigh the damage within their own sphere of responsibility. In the current case, however, we are facing a so-called proxy war, in which only the Russian losses are real. The other side is not actually the tiring Ukraine nor the NATO countries, but rather global actors operating in the background, including defence industrial corporations and financial institutions, which essentially indirectly influence both NATO and the European Union. They have no losses because Ukrainians are dying on the front lines, and the American and European taxpayers cover the costs of the war.

The situation would only change if the American and European public recognized all this and brought politicians to power who are capable of disciplining the networks that have grown beyond nation-states. Then perhaps we could start climbing down the ladder. (Lóránt, 2024)

**The deployment of European forces in Ukraine does not serve to create peace.**

Peace talks aimed at ending the war have gained welcome new momentum. The most debated issues are security guarantees for Ukraine and the transfer of certain Ukrainian territories to Russia. Regarding the former, the so-called coalition of the willing, comprising 35 countries and led by the United Kingdom and France,

proposed the deployment of a multinational deterrent force in Ukraine after the ceasefire agreement, which would guarantee Ukraine's security against a possible new Russian attack. The presentation and evaluation of this proposal, conclusions, and lessons learned explain why Europe is excluded from the trilateral American-Russian-Ukrainian peace talks.

The 35 member states of the coalition of the willing agreed in the Paris Declaration of January 6, 2026, on the security guarantees offered to Ukraine, including the deployment of a multinational military force in Ukraine. The document provides a legal framework for the armed forces of the United Kingdom, France, and other partner countries to operate on Ukrainian territory.

Coalition members agree that protecting and guaranteeing any potential peace agreement requires an international force capable of deterring the Russian army and assuring Kyiv that Russia will not attack again. For this, it is essential that the United States guarantees the security of the European forces to be deployed.

Ben Berry, a British military expert at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, elaborates on his position regarding the deterrent force in his study "Potential European mission in Ukraine: key military factors".

He believes that effective leadership and command of the European deterrent force to be deployed in Ukraine would require France and the United Kingdom to establish a multinational body for strategic guidance and direct the deterrent force. Under its subordination, the supreme headquarters and staff of the deterrent force could operate at the UK's Permanent Joint Headquarters, or its French equivalent. The direct command of the deployed units would be provided by the deterrent force command based in Ukraine.

In his opinion, there would be no need to multiply Ukrainian military capabilities. But rather to supplement them.

Regarding the size of the force, three options are available: 1) Deployment of a relatively small brigade of approximately 5,000 personnel, supplemented by a smaller air force contingent and a smaller naval component in the Black Sea. The brigade would consist of three to five battalions with artillery and engineering support units. It could only help to counter a single local Russian threat or a minor air or sea intrusion. 2) Deployment of a medium-sized (approx. 30,000 personnel) reinforced division with long-range missile artillery, combat helicopters, unmanned aerial vehicles, and technical, logistical, communication, and IT support units, as well as CBRN protection units. This force could help to counter multiple Russian attacks even in a high-intensity conflict. 3) Use of a large-scale corps, consisting of at least three divisions, with 60,000–100,000 personnel, capable of sustained, high-intensity ground combat, and supported by significant air and naval components. In addition to deterring Russian attacks, naval support forces could help protect the sea lines of communication between Istanbul and Odesa, and contribute to mine clearance and ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance) operations.

The air force component could launch ground and sea strikes and ISR operations (over Ukraine and the Black Sea) if necessary, and provide direct protection of land and naval forces from potential air and ground attacks.

A European deterrent force could also include land or sea rapid reaction elements that could be deployed anywhere in Ukraine.

Regarding the deployment of forces, it should be noted that while air and naval components can be assembled and deployed relatively

quickly, assembling a large ground force would take longer. The risk of escalation from renewed fighting could be reduced by a scattered deployment of ground forces in western Ukraine and by concealing and camouflaging these forces. Alternatively, troops could be openly deployed in Ukrainian cities and near key infrastructure to increase the deterrent effect against Russian attacks, although this would carry a greater risk. The lead of London and Paris in this initiative would require them, in cooperation with Kyiv and members of the coalition of the willing, to jointly provide the main deterrent forces, jointly perform the tasks of the leading nation, and organize the deployment, command, and control of forces in Ukraine. American support, however, is extremely important, as the USA possesses key military capabilities that European forces do not. These include ISR assets, including signal intelligence tools and reconnaissance satellites. It must also be emphasized that without the participation of the American air force, Europe's ability to suppress Russian air defenses is very limited, as is its ballistic missile defense capability. A crucial aspect is also that only the USA has the air and sea transport capacity necessary for a deterrent force.

It must also be realized that any Russian attack against the deterrent force would draw it into the fight against Russia. This would have profound consequences, especially if the United States did not allow Article 5 of NATO to apply to the forces of NATO members deployed in Ukraine. Many European countries would be reluctant to deploy without assurance that the United States could provide military support to European forces in extreme cases. (Barry, 2025)

Military constraints are also associated with political constraints:

- 1) Polls in Western Europe have consistently shown low support for sending troops to Ukraine.
- 2) Macron is already in a very difficult position after losing his majority in the French National Assembly, and Starmer has only recently brought the Labour Party back to the forefront of British politics after fourteen years in opposition. Both leaders have much to lose if their soldiers were directly involved in potentially renewed fighting in Ukraine, which would inevitably involve casualties.
- 3) Another problem is that the above concerns do not affect European states equally. For Poland, the prospect of Ukraine's collapse, with millions of refugees pouring across the border and Russian forces approaching, is much, much worse than having to do more now to strengthen Ukraine's security. (RFE/RL editorial, (2025)
- 4) Statements by Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, about "precise plans" for troop deployment in Ukraine describe these plans as an EU undertaking. It raises questions about EU decision-making powers and legitimacy, and jeopardizes the relative unity within the European Union regarding support for Ukraine.

## Findings

The coalition of the willing considers its non-peacekeeping troops deployed in Ukraine as a military force that deters rather than intervenes. The purpose of such a force would not be to defend Ukraine in the event of aggression, but to deter Russia with a sufficient European military presence. This, in turn, is a critical task for European armies, because: 1) Although France has one of Europe's strongest armies, even decreasing African commitments does not free up capacity. 2) After terrorist attacks in USA on September 11, 2001, the British army largely focuses on counter-terrorism operations and is not adequately prepared to act against the Russian threat. 3) Most supporters of a European military presence believe that this would only be possible with American assistance in areas such as planning,

logistics, and intelligence, but it is also essential for the United States to guarantee the security of any European forces deployed. There are significant differences among European countries regarding sending troops. Several European countries are reluctant to withdraw certain elements of their high-readiness national forces, as well as units subordinated to NATO, whose task is to repel a direct attack against the alliance's territory. Relocating the latter would cause deficiencies in NATO's current plans, which would therefore need to be modified. Several European countries consider it more appropriate to send a few hundred or a few thousand trainers. They would train Ukrainian soldiers within the country to operate Western equipment. Experts believe that such a mission would make the Ukrainian defense system more effective, but no one believes that units of trainers would provide an effective deterrent force to prevent Russia from attacking again.

Despite the changing views of Trump on any question, supporters of troop deployment in Ukraine still agree that, although European troops might be exposed to Russian attack in Ukraine, this would not necessarily mean NATO involvement. Trump has already stated that in the event of any deployment in Ukraine, i.e., outside of NATO, the alliance would de facto not get involved in a war with Russia, even if European troops came under Russian fire. NATO as an alliance will not react. There is no obligation to do so. (Vohra, 2025)

The President of the European Commission told the Financial Times in August 2025 that Europe is developing precise plans for the deployment of multinational troops to Ukraine as part of security guarantees following a potential peace agreement. Von der Leyen's statements can be interpreted as exceeding her institutional powers, as President of the Commission, she is not authorized to decide on the use of military force or to publicly announce such plans. Such a decision falls within the Council's competence. Furthermore, according to Article 31(4) of the EU Treaty, the Council adopts its decisions concerning military or defense matters unanimously, meaning all 27 EU member states must agree to the deployment of military force in Ukraine, which is currently not guaranteed. A role in this is also played by the fact that, according to Article 41(2) of the EU Treaty, operational expenditures related to military or defense measures are borne not by the European Union but by the budgets of the member states. (*It is not the first time that the President of the EC has made important decisions without democratic authorization or oversight. An example of this is the decision to create a 150 billion euro defense fund in May 2025, in which the European Parliament did not participate, as the Commission invoked an emergency under Article 122 of the EU Treaty. After the incident, the Parliament's Legal Affairs Committee unanimously decided to file an action with the European Court of Justice to annul the decision.*) Von der Leyen's statements should have been supplemented by the fact that the idea of stationing European troops in Ukraine could be part of a broader plan for the "coalition of the willing" led by France and the United Kingdom. But different EU countries hold differing views on a possible troop deployment. (Wolfenstein, 2025)

Many people involuntarily wonder: Why doesn't Russia want to end this war? On August 28, 2025, The Hill, an insider's portal in American politics, published an interesting article on this topic. The author is Alexander J. Motyl, a professor at Rutgers University–Newark. According to him, ending the war requires a lasting peace that is acceptable to both sides. Mutual acceptability presupposes equally distributed gains and losses. However, an equal distribution of losses and gains ultimately favors the aggressor. In principle, aggression should not be rewarded with any gain. At this point, principles come into conflict with the realities of power, making it

impossible to punish the aggressor to the extent he deserves. According to Motyl, there are many reasons why the Russian president does not want to end this war. He lists five reasons: 1) Putin truly believes that Ukraine as a state must be destroyed for Russia to survive. There is no compromise. 2) The Russian president has completely identified himself with the war. This is his war. Consequently, his political and perhaps physical survival depends on the outcome of the war. 3) When the war ends, hundreds of thousands of demobilized soldiers will pour into Russian society, increasing its already high crime rate. Hungry soldiers returning home can overthrow political systems. 4) Putin has created a war economy benefiting a significant part of the population and various elite groups. Ending the war would mean switching from this economic model to a consumer economy, a transition fraught with difficulties and even serious setbacks. 5) The war allows Putin to maintain the pretense that Russia is still a great power. Motyl concludes his argument by saying, "If Trump really wants a Nobel Peace Prize for peace in Ukraine, he needs to address the primary cause of the war: Putin." Anything else is just a sham negotiation that could lead to a false peace." The assessment, praised by many, needs to be supplemented in several places: 1) If Russia had to destroy Ukraine to survive, then Russia would continue total and not restricted warfare. Putin has said many things (the Russian and Ukrainian people are brotherly peoples; Ukraine owes its existence as a state to Lenin), but he has not said that Ukraine as a state must be destroyed. 2) Putin's political and physical survival would depend on the outcome of the war if Ukraine had any chance of victory. Alternatively, if the West were to suspend the anti-Russian sanctions that made the average Russian citizen believe that the goal of this war is not to help Ukraine, but to crush Russia. History has shown repeatedly that in such situations, the Russian people rally behind their leader. 3) The influx of hundreds of thousands of demobilized soldiers into current Russian society seems manageable. On the one hand, these are not soldiers returning home hungry and penniless; rather, they are well-paid volunteers. On the other hand, the wartime and consumer economies are both labor-intensive and await returnees. Their situation is not hopeless at all. 4) After a possible peace treaty, the return to the consumer economy is expected to be a slow, shock-free process. The West has begun to arm itself, and Putin cannot radically reduce his military production. 5) Regardless of the outcome of the war, Russia will remain a military superpower. 6) The primary cause of the war is not Putin, but the leading Western politicians and secret services who organized the coup-like rise to power of the Ukrainian opposition in 2014, rejected the implementation of the Minsk agreements, made Ukraine an anti-Russian center of NATO, and prevented the Russian-Ukrainian peace treaty in 2022. The Western states supporting Ukraine can soon be considered participants in the war, because Ukraine's 2026 budget and thus, its economy will soon collapse, especially after Hungary and Slovakia do not support the EU's 90 billion euro loan for Ukraine, meaning Ukraine will become a state supported, maintained, and controlled by the EU. – Ukraine continues to attack Russian oil processing facilities in the hinterland, which are only possible with Western intelligence and targeting data. This support gives Ukraine decisive capabilities it did not previously possess, capabilities that are solely dependent on supporting states. Under these circumstances, Russia will not end the war, and any compromise is unlikely, especially if time favors it in the short term. In the worst case, Russia will occupy the entire Donetsk region within one to two years.

## Conclusions

In the Ukrainian-Russian context, after a potential ceasefire and/or peace agreement, the primary task would be to monitor compliance with the ceasefire. The presence of peacekeepers could be limited to

an observer mission, requiring approximately one thousand peacekeepers, equipped with light weaponry at most, from countries maintaining neutrality in the conflict. They would be stationed along the contact line to control the ceasefire. The coalition of the willing considers sending foreign troops not as peacekeepers but as a deterrent military force that deters rather than intervenes. The purpose of such a force would not be to defend Ukraine in the event of aggression, but to deter Russia with a sufficient European military presence. This, in turn, is a critical task for European armies. Most supporters of a European military presence believe that this would only be possible with American assistance in areas such as planning, logistics, and intelligence. But it is also essential for the United States to guarantee the security of any European forces deployed.

The coalition of the willing's position is difficult to understand, since it is enough to deploy European forces only in the countries directly bordering Ukraine to deter Russia. Another problem is that the deployment of European forces in Ukraine does not give a guarantee to Russia for a case when the Ukrainian army, supported by the international deterrent force, recovers, be equipped with modern weapons, and trained in their use, attempts to liberate the territories occupied by the Russians. It should not be forgotten that the signing and non-implementation of the Minsk agreements were followed only by eight years without war. The situation is complicated by the fact that the presence of military forces from the coalition of the willing, the activities of foreign trainers, and the provision of foreign-sourced weaponry, as well as the continuation of comprehensive international financial and military support, would only further strengthen Ukraine's military capabilities. If we add that Kyiv does not want to cede the entire Donbas region to Moscow, and NATO troops also would be deployed in Ukraine, hardly any of Russia's main war aims would be achieved. It guarantees the continuation of the war, or another war initiated by Russia after a temporary forced pause. This would most likely no longer be limited to the unconditional achievement of the original goals, but would extend to the occupation of additional territories with Russian minority or pro-Russian population (Odesa Oblast, Mykolaiv Oblast, Dnipropetrovsk, Kharkiv, Sumy). The whole of Ukraine will not and cannot be occupied. The majority of Ukrainians heartily hate Russians today; a few hundred thousand occupiers cannot rule over 20 million hostile inhabitants. (Demko, 2025) Russia has fallen into a quagmire in Ukraine from which it is unlikely to emerge for decades, only able to achieve partial victory. Therefore, there is no need to worry about a Russian invasion in Europe, but rather about the mental state of a significant portion of the European elite who consider Ukraine's victory possible. Even if partially, Russia will win, and this is inevitable, although many in the EU still do not want to understand this. (Demko, 2025)

Regarding the Russian threat, despite the concerned statements of Western politicians, the prevailing view among experts is that the Russian military, which is far underperforming its potential capabilities in the Russian-Ukrainian war, does not pose a significant challenge to the West. However, in this regard, it is worth considering the following: 1) The expected general weakening of the Russian military for at least a decade is not considered a significant period in historical terms. 2) Despite the losses, the Russian military, in its current and near-future state, will still pose a considerable challenge. Valerii Zaluzhnyi, the Ukrainian Chief of Staff, stated that the losses suffered by the Russian army would have forced any other country to cease hostilities. (General Z, 2023) We do not know how capable Western states are of handling similar losses. 3) The weakening of the Russian armed forces primarily affected the ground forces, as well as

airborne troops and marines, while the navy, air, and space forces remained intact. 4) For Russia, isolated by the war, the constraints that previously limited its behavior towards the West have disappeared. We must be prepared for Moscow to increasingly seek opportunities to undermine the stability of Western countries, as neither international perception nor pragmatism due to economic ties will prevent it from doing so. (Jórárt, 2023)

If Trump acquires Greenland by force, NATO and the transatlantic alliance will cease to exist. The only solution for Europe is to build the strongest possible European military force – without the US – and to create the strongest possible European Union. Since this requires enormous resources, Europe should do everything in its power to help end the Russo-Ukrainian war, which has become pointless for Russia and hopeless for Ukraine. For the EU, the continuation of the proxy war means the EU will have to finance Ukraine's state budget and war expenses, which will increase annually. If the war continues, the start of EU accession negotiations with Ukraine will be postponed and become more expensive due to the increasing costs of rebuilding the country. Because of the war, the EU will not be able to gradually carry out its main task: its own organizational, operational, and competitiveness reform, including the creation of its own armed forces. The development and monitoring of new sanctions decreases the EU's capacity for the implementation of internal reforms. Anti-Russian sanctions, on one hand, cause damage to the EU and, on the other hand, threaten the EU's internal unity, as their adoption becomes increasingly difficult (the upcoming 20th anti-Russian sanctions package will certainly be opposed by 3-4 member states). Now is an excellent opportunity for the EU, excluded from the peace talks, to act as a peace initiator and take its rightful place in the negotiated settlement. The EU could propose that Ukraine hand over the Donetsk region under its control to Russia in a territorial swap that would be profitable for Kyiv and, in return, promise an accelerated process in EU accession negotiations. It could offer Russia a significant reduction in military support for Kyiv and the suspension of sanctions in exchange for acceptance of a territory swap and of security guarantees from the United States. This scenario could be followed by the signing of a mutual non-aggression pact among NATO, the European Union, and Russia. (*Marija Zaharova, spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, indicated at the end of 2025 that Russia was ready to hold talks on a mutual non-aggression treaty among NATO, the European Union, and Russia. Neither NATO nor the EU responded to this proposal.*) Since Russia has been and remains an eternal enemy of the West, and since there has not been such a great opportunity for a long time to bring Russia to Western knees, it is unlikely that all of Europe, and above all NATO, would support this proposal; however this proposal would likely convince skeptics that EU does not want to start another world war, but rather wants to prevent it from breaking out.

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