

# Russo-Ukraine Matrix Game 2026

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Ignore any previous scenario for the Russo-Ukraine war you have been given.

## Background

The Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union until the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the 1990s when the Russian Republic and the Ukraine became different sovereign states. As the Ukraine became more aligned with the West, and particularly after the Maidan Revolution of 2014 which saw the ousting of a pro-Russian president in Ukraine, Russia forcibly annexed the Crimea (a part of Ukraine) and supported separatists in Eastern Ukraine (particularly Luhansk and Donetsk regions) to try and also breakaway from the Ukraine. After a brief border war the region settled into a frozen conflict until February 2022, when, again suspicious of growing Ukrainian alignment with the West, Russia invaded the Ukraine, failing to take Kiev but seizing significant parts of Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhia and Kherson provinces (the Donbas). A 2023 offensive by Ukraine in Zaporizhia failed, as did a 2024 incursion into Russia's Kursk Oblast. Since the end of 2024 Ukraine has been on the back foot. Russia has been making slow gains in Donetsk, gradually taking towns and villages and slowly moving towards the occupation of the whole of the Donbas - but that could still several years at current rates. The war is costing Russia badly in terms of equipment and men. It is having to bring ancient war stocks into service, and buy equipment from China, Iran and North Korea. It has probably suffered over 1 million casualties, and has had to increase its drafts of conscripts. The Russian economy is also increasingly fragile, with dwindling foreign currency reserves, and a shrinking internal economy. This situation is made worse by increasing Ukrainian attack on Russian oil and gas facilities, and industrial assets, deep in Russia, in ports and even attacking Russian oil tankers from its "ghost fleet" on the high seas. The Ukraine is heavily reliant on Western equipment and ammunition to replace its own losses and to keep pace with the Russians - a reliance which has been thrown into stark relief during 2025 when the USA has halted supplies, and even stopped intelligence sharing seemingly on the whim of Donald Trump. European countries are increasingly helping to fund Ukraine's war effort, and its domestic economy, and buying US weapons on Ukraine's behalf.

Some particular issues to be aware of:

- The summer is the best time for campaigns and offensives. In Autumn/Fall and especially Spring much of Ukraine turns to mud, making ground combat difficult. Combat is possible in Winter when the ground is frozen hard but it's tough on the soldiers due to the cold.

## Current Situation

The current date is: 1 February 2026.

The war grinds slowly on, with Russia taking villages and towns in the Donbas at a very slow rate, and a more or less static front line elsewhere - although there is increasing activity around Kherson and Sumy in the NE.

Diplomatic moves appeared to be building before Christmas, but Trump now seems diverted by Venezuela (abducting President Maduro) and reasserting his claims over Greenland.

## Challenge/Disagreement /Crux/Dissonance

As the war nears its 4th anniversary there has been increasing talk of a ceasefire, but not recently with Russia and Ukraine in the same room. Russia is averse to any agreement which allows a security guarantee from foreign (i.e. US or European) troops being stationed in Ukraine, but Zelensky is demanding just such a guarantee. Trump as ever seems more driven by deals and the idea of the Nobel Peace Prize than anything else - and has talked about (and even done a deal for) US sharing in resource extraction rights to put US companies and engineers on the ground - which he thinks would stop any new Russian attack.

With no major diplomatic initiative the conflict is likely to just grind on, or become a frozen conflict. There seems to be no appetite for a ceasefire in Ukraine which could mean ceding parts of Ukraine they have lost, let alone parts of the Donbas which they still hold (as Putin is demanding). Trump seems to vacillate between keen support for Putin and lukewarm support for Zelensky. A key question is just how long with the Russian economy hold out. There also is as yet no obvious internal opposition to Putin, despite all the soldiers being killed and wounded and the state of the internal economy.

## Game Turns

Each game turn represents about 1 month of real time. Ensure that all actions are representative of what could be achieved in that amount of time. Turn 1 is February 2026. Play until told to stop.

## Actors

In this game do not create separate player personalities. Instead base the personality of each actor on the real leader named below, based on what real information you know about them and their personalities.

The actors/players and their aims are:

- Vladimir Putin, President of Russia
  - Stay in power
  - Retain an iron grip on Russia
  - Secure as much of the Ukraine as possible, in particular the whole of the Donbas.
  - Keep hold of the Crimea
  - Try and get Ukraine to stop its alignment with the West, and particularly joining NATO
  - Keep NATO out of the war
  - Exploit Trump as a "useful idiot"
- Volodymyr Zelenskyy, President of Ukraine
  - Regain all land lost to Russia since the war started in 2022, mainly in the Donbas, i.e. Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhia and Kherson provinces
  - Regain all land lost to Russia since 2014, mainly in Luhansk and Donetsk provinces
  - Regain the Crimea
  - Stay aligned to the West
  - Only relinquish power if it will further Ukraine's cause and any successor is firmly aligned to the West
- Donald Trump, President of the USA
  - Try and win the Nobel Peace Prize by bringing peace, any form of peace, to the conflict
  - Look for anything which gives the US (and himself) a "good deal" in terms of trade deals and resource exploitation - with Russia or Ukraine
  - Do not commit US forces directly to the conflict, even if there is a clear breach of NATO Article 5
  - Stay friends with Putin unless he double-crosses you

- Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Union
  - Support Ukraine through supplies and equipment against Russia
  - Encourage eventual NATO and EU membership for Ukraine
  - Ensure that Poland and other EU states (E.g. Hungary) toe the EU line
  - Use economic, diplomatic and other non-military means to hurt Russia
  - Avoid a war with Russia

Randomise player order each turn.

## Reporting

Unless otherwise instructed, play each game through without further input from the user. Summarise each turn in 2 sentences, and the whole game at the end in 300 words or less. Also at the end score each actor on a scale of -5 to +5, where -5 means that they have suffered very badly and achieved none of their aims, 0 means that they have achieved little but losses have been manageable, and 5 means that all aims have been achieved for minimal casualties.

## Sources

### Putin Is Out of Options

Project Syndicate - Oct 16, 2025

Carl Bildt

It is now clear that Russia's army cannot get the job done in Ukraine, and that Donald Trump cannot force Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky into submission as long as European financial support for his government holds. Whether Russian leaders realize it or not, they have no path to victory.

STOCKHOLM – The outcome of Russia's war on Ukraine matters not just for those countries' future, but for all of Europe. The root cause of the conflict is Russian President Vladimir Putin's obsession with restoring his country's status as an imperial power. Old Russia was a highly centralized empire, or what Lenin called a "prison of nations." Indeed, it is Lenin whom Putin blames for breaking the old imperial order and allowing Ukraine to find its own path.

But Putin has not been very successful in pursuing his vision. When he sent more than 100,000 troops into Ukraine in February 2022, most observers – including virtually all the West's experts on the Russian army – anticipated a quick victory. But three and a half years later, most of that initial invasion force is gone. Putin may have three times as many newly recruited soldiers stationed along the front lines, but he controls less than 20% of Ukraine's territory.

No one expected the Russian army to perform so abysmally, and the question now is whether there is any way Putin can still win the war. His first option is to keep pursuing his original objective: an outright military defeat for Ukraine. But the nature of the war has changed considerably over the past few years. Owing to rapid technological changes on both sides, defense works better than offense. It is much easier to hold territory than to take more of it.

While Ukraine has achieved a technological edge, Russia is catching up fast, and both sides have increasingly targeted the other's vital energy infrastructure. But the likelihood of the Russian army defeating Ukraine's is very small. Putin boasts about incremental advances – as when he recently assembled his commanders in St. Petersburg to lay flowers on the tomb of Peter the Great – but these gains lack much strategic significance. For almost two years, the Russian army has not been able to mount any consequential offensive operations, and there are few signs of this changing.

Putin's second option was to persuade US President Donald Trump to impose a settlement in Russia's favor, akin to the agreement Hitler struck with Neville Chamberlain and Édouard Daladier in 1938 to gain part of Czechoslovakia. That is why Putin invested so much in flattering Trump and dangling various pecuniary temptations like new investments in Russian natural resources. It almost worked. Putin came close to getting his way at the ill-fated meeting with Trump in Alaska. But Europe's leaders quickly stepped in, and their subsequent support for Ukraine has effectively blocked this option.

A third avenue to victory is to buy time and hope that European support withers away. Since US financial and military assistance for Ukraine has largely dried up under Trump, the entire burden now falls on the Europeans (and a few others). This is no small matter. We are talking about €60-80 billion (\$70-93 billion) per year, 0.2-0.3% of European GDP.

But European political support for Ukraine is robust. While fiscally strained countries like France, Spain, and Italy are unlikely to contribute much financially, Norway, which has profited mightily from the war-driven run-up in energy prices, could make up for much of the lost US financing. Moreover, a proposal to extend Ukraine a €140 billion loan backed by frozen Russian assets held in Belgium could shore up Ukraine's economy and defense production. While the proposed scheme is complicated, pulling it off is eminently achievable with sufficient political will.

If Russia's army can't deliver victory, and if Trump can't force Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky into submission as long as European financial support holds, then the Kremlin has no credible path to victory. Although Russia's leadership seems utterly oblivious to this reality, the conclusion is inescapable.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, what happens next is an open question. Putin might well try to escalate, even though he has no good options for doing so. Or he might eventually agree to a ceasefire and try to dress it up as victory. But any end to the war – or to its active phase – in which Ukraine remains sovereign and independent will represent a loss for Putin. While territory matters, sovereignty is the key issue.

After that, securing and rebuilding a still-sovereign Ukraine will be a demanding task, but certainly not an impossible one. This process would include accession to the European Union, deep economic reforms, and a strong defense posture to deter future aggression.

In this scenario, the only viable path for the current Kremlin leadership would be to give up its imperial dream and concentrate on strengthening Russia as one nation-state among many. The sooner those in power come to this realization, the better it will be for Russia and its neighbors.

## **Zelensky moves towards demilitarised zones in latest peace plan for Ukraine**

BBC News - Paul Kirby  
Europe digital editor

Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelensky has given details of an updated peace plan offering Russia the potential withdrawal of Ukrainian troops from the east and the creation of a demilitarised zone in their place.

Detailing the 20-point plan agreed by US and Ukrainian envoys in Florida at the weekend, Zelensky said the Russians would respond on Wednesday once the Americans had spoken to them.

Describing the plan as "the main framework for ending the war", he said it proposed security guarantees from the US, Nato and Europeans for a co-ordinated military response if Russia invaded Ukraine again.

On the key question of Ukraine's eastern Donbas, Zelensky said a "free economic zone" was a potential option.

He told journalists that as Ukraine was against withdrawal, US negotiators were looking to establish a demilitarised zone or a free economic zone. Any area that Ukrainian troops pulled out of would have to be policed by Ukraine, he stressed.

"There are two options," Zelensky said, "either the war continues, or something will have to be decided regarding all potential economic zones."

The 20-point plan is seen as an update of an original 28-point document, agreed by US envoy Steve Witkoff with the Russians several weeks ago, which was widely seen as heavily geared towards the Kremlin's demands.

The Russians have insisted that Ukraine pulls out of almost a quarter of its own territory in the eastern Donetsk region in return for a peace deal. The rest is already under Russian occupation.

Sensitive issues including questions over territory would have to be resolved "at the leaders' level", but the new draft would provide Ukraine with strong security guarantees and a military strength of 800,000, Zelensky explained.

Much of the updated plan resembles what came out of recent talks in Berlin involving US negotiators Witkoff and Jared Kushner with Ukrainian and European leaders. The setting then moved to Miami last weekend where US President Donald Trump's team spoke separately to Russian envoy Kirill Dmitriev and then Ukrainian and European officials.

There now appears to be far more detail on the territorial issue, although it is clear the Ukrainian side was unable to reach a consensus with the Americans.

Zelensky explained that if Ukraine was prepared to pull its heavy forces back by five, 10 or 40km in the 25% of Donetsk it still held to create an economic zone, making it virtually demilitarised, then Russia would have to do the same "accordingly by five, 10, or 40km".

Russian troops are currently about 40km (25 miles) east of Ukraine's "fortress belt" cities of Sloviansk and Kramatorsk, having captured the town of Siversk.

Russian President Vladimir Putin is unlikely to be impressed by the kind of compromise being proposed for Donetsk. He said this month that Russia would take control of the entire east of Ukraine by force if Ukrainian troops did not pull out.

However, Trump is pushing for a deal to end almost four years of full-scale war and the Ukrainian president believes Russia cannot afford to reject the US plan.

"They cannot tell President Trump, 'look we're against a peaceful settlement'," Zelensky told reporters. "If they try to obstruct everything, then President Trump would have to arm us heavily, while imposing all possible sanctions against them."

Zelensky made clear that if a free economic zone were established in Donetsk it would have to be under Ukrainian administration and police - "definitely not the so-called Russian police". The current front line would then become the boundary of the economic zone with international forces on the ground along the contact line to ensure no Russian infiltration.

Russia has so far rejected a European proposal to police any peace deal through a Coalition of the Willing as a "brazen threat".

A referendum would need to be held on the whole peace plan, Zelensky said, and only a referendum could decide on the idea of a potential free economic zone in Donbas.

He emphasised that an economic zone would also have to be set up around the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant currently occupied by Russia, and that Russian troops would have to pull out of four other Ukrainian regions - Dnipropetrovsk, Mykolaiv, Sumy, and Kharkiv.

The current US proposal for the nuclear plant would be for Ukraine, the US and Russia to operate it jointly, but Kyiv disagreed with that, Zelensky said.

The main points of the plan reaffirm Ukraine's sovereignty and propose a non-aggression pact between Russia and its neighbour with a monitoring mechanism.

As well as strong security guarantees mirroring Nato's Article Five, which requires members to aid an ally under attack, Ukraine is to be allowed a maximum military strength of 800,000 in peacetime.

Discussions are still going on over a US plan to receive compensation in return for security guarantees, so Zelensky says it is not currently part of the document.

There is no reference barring Ukraine from joining Nato, which was in the original 28-point plan and something Russia has consistently demanded.

And the latest framework proposes that Ukraine joins the European Union with a defined date of accession. It is currently a candidate, but a number of other candidate countries are seen as first in line, such as Albania.

There are plans for a Ukraine investment fund of about \$200bn (£150bn) involving both the US and Europe.

Among the other points is a requirement for Ukraine to hold elections as soon as possible after the deal is signed. Russia and the US have both pushed for a vote, even though Ukraine is under martial law because of the full-scale invasion.

## **What we know about leaked US draft plan to end Russia's Ukraine war**

BBC News: ByPaul Kirby

Europe digital editor

21 November 2025

Updated 24 November 2025

Talks in Geneva aimed at discussing a US-backed draft peace plan to end the war in Ukraine have concluded after a day.

US and Ukrainian teams reportedly went through the 28-point proposal drafted by American and Russian officials last month. Ukraine is likely to have pushed back on some particularly contentious elements - namely those concerning territorial issues and security guarantees for Ukraine.

Russia has said it has not seen any updated plan off the back of talks between the US and Ukraine.

The original iteration of the plan proposed to hand over those areas of Ukraine's industrial eastern Donbas region still under Ukrainian control to the de facto control of Russian President Vladimir Putin - an unpalatable option for Ukraine.

The plan also called for Kyiv to cut the size of its armed forces to 600,000 people.

### **What are the key points?**

On the face of it, several of the plan's 28 key points could be acceptable to Ukraine. Others come across as vague and imprecise.

Ukraine's sovereignty would be "confirmed" and there would be a "total and complete comprehensive non-aggression agreement between Russia, Ukraine and Europe", with robust or reliable "security guarantees" for Kyiv and a demand for snap elections in 100 days.

If Russia were to invade Ukraine a "robust co-ordinated military response" is proposed along with a restoration of sanctions and a scrapping of the deal.

Although elections are impossible in Ukraine as there is martial law in place, they could theoretically be held if a peace deal is signed.

But on security guarantees, there is no detail on who would provide them and how robust they might be. This falls well short of a Nato-style Article Five commitment to treat an attack on Ukraine as an attack on all. Kyiv would want more than a vague promise if it were to sign up.

## **Handover of Ukraine's territory and cut in armed forces**

Among the most contentious proposals are Ukraine handing over its own unoccupied territory and cutting the size of its armed forces.

"Ukrainian forces will withdraw from the part of Donetsk Oblast [region] that they currently control, and this withdrawal zone will be considered a neutral demilitarised buffer zone, internationally recognised as territory belonging to the Russian Federation. Russian forces will not enter this demilitarised zone."

Ceding territory where at least a quarter of a million Ukrainians live - the Donetsk "fortress belt" cities of Sloviansk, Kramatorsk and Druzhkivka - will not be acceptable to most Ukrainians. Russia has spent well over a year trying to capture the town of Pokrovsk - Ukraine is unlikely to hand over such important strategic hubs without a fight.

"The size of the Ukrainian Armed Forces will be limited to 600,000 personnel."

Ukraine's military was estimated last January at about 880,000 active personnel, up from 250,000 at the start of the full-scale invasion in February 2022.

While 600,000 might seem a potentially acceptable number in peacetime, that kind of limitation would infringe on Ukrainian sovereignty. It might also be too big a number for Russia to accept.

"Our red lines are clear and unwavering," Ukrainian representative Khrystyna Hayovyshyn told the UN security Council: "There will never be any recognition formal or otherwise of Ukrainian territory temporarily occupied by the Russian Federation as Russian. Ukraine will not accept any limits on its rights to self defence or on the size or capabilities of our armed forces."

The draft also proposes that "Crimea, Luhansk and Donetsk will be recognised as de facto Russian, including by the United States".

In other words Ukraine and other countries would not need to recognise Russian control by law. That could enable Kyiv to accept such phrasing, as it would not impinge on Ukraine's constitution that says its borders are "indivisible and inviolable".

Elsewhere, in the southern regions of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia, the front lines would be frozen and Russia would relinquish areas it has occupied elsewhere in Ukraine - a reference to the north-eastern Kharkiv and Sumy regions, as well the Mykolaiv region in the south.

On Monday Zelensky said allowing Moscow to seize land by force would set a dangerous precedent. Giving legal recognition to the territories "stolen" by Russia would "break the principle of territorial integrity and sovereignty", he said.

## **Ukraine's future - with EU but not Nato**

The draft proposes significant commitments on Ukraine's strategic future:

"Ukraine agrees to enshrine in its constitution that it will not join Nato and Nato agrees to include in its statutes a provision that Ukraine will not be admitted in the future."

"Ukraine is eligible for EU membership and will get short-term preferred market access to the European market while this issue is being evaluated."

There is little chance of Ukraine joining Nato any time soon and Russia has in recent months softened its stance on Ukraine's candidacy for EU membership. The document appears to offer Kyiv access to EU markets while ignoring the views of 27 European countries.

Joining both the EU and Nato are part of Ukraine's constitution and another of Khrystyna Hayovyshyn's red lines at the UN was: "Nor will we tolerate any infringement on our sovereignty including our sovereign right to choose the alliances we want to join."

Other draft proposals are that Nato agrees not to station troops in Ukraine and that European fighter jets will be stationed in neighbouring Poland. Kyiv would also have to commit to being a "non-nuclear state".

That appears to reject the West's Coalition of the Willing's plans led by the UK and France to help police any future deal.

## **Bringing Russia back from isolation**

Several points refer to Russia being brought back from isolation with "Russia to be re-integrated into the global economy" and invited back into the G8 group of powers.

That seems a long way off for now, with Putin under an arrest warrant from the International Criminal Court. Russia was thrown out of the G7 after it seized and then annexed Crimea in 2014 and Trump tried to bring Putin back into the fold six years later.

If the UK, Canada, France, Germany, Italy and Japan were reluctant before the full-scale invasion, there's even less chance of that happening now.

## **What about Russia's frozen assets?**

The draft proposes that \$100bn (€87bn; £76bn) of frozen Russian assets should be invested "in US-led efforts to rebuild and invest in Ukraine", with the US receiving 50% of the profits and Europe adding \$100bn in investment for reconstruction.

This is reminiscent of the US minerals deal with Ukraine earlier this year, extracting an American price for involvement, and it also leaves the European Union with nothing but hefty bills.

The sums it mentions may not be sufficient, either: earlier this year the total cost of reconstruction in Ukraine was put at \$524bn.

Some €200bn in Russia frozen assets are largely held by Euroclear in Belgium, and the European Union is currently working on a plan to use the money to fund Kyiv financially and militarily.

The rest of those frozen assets would go to a "US-Russian investment vehicle", under the draft, so Russia would see some of its money come back, but again there would be a financial benefit for the US.

## **What is not in the plan?**

Several commentators have pointed out that the plan does not require weapons limitations on Ukraine's military or its arms industry, even though there is a provision saying: If Ukraine fires a missile at Moscow or St Petersburg then the security guarantee will be considered null and void.

But it does not place an restriction on the long-range weapons Ukraine has been developing - such as its Flamingo and Long Neptune missiles.

Is this a definitive peace plan?

No.

"There's still some work to be done," US Secretary of State Marco Rubio admitted late on Sunday, after his team's crisis talks with Ukrainian and European negotiating delegations in Geneva, Switzerland.

"But we are much further ahead today at this time than we were when we began this morning and where we were a week ago, for certain," America's top diplomat added. He refused to go in details on what main sticking points remained.

Rubio also said that any new plan had to be agreed with Russia, which has not publicly commented on the latest developments.

Meanwhile, several media outlets reported and published what they said was an alternative plan from Ukraine's European allies led by the UK, France and Germany.

But Rubio said he was "unaware" of any European counter-proposals to the US plan.

The US was initially keen to press ahead fast under an "aggressive timeline" with its proposals, giving Ukraine until 27 November to agree to it.

However, Trump later said it was not his "final offer" for Kyiv, after Ukrainian allies voiced concerns over the plan.

Rubio said a deal may be reached by Thanksgiving, or before or even after the US holiday.

## **Is the draft a Putin wishlist?**

Russian special envoy Kirill Dmitriev is known to have spent as long as three days with Trump's special envoy Steve Witkoff discussing this plan, raising suggestions of a stitched-up deal to suit Moscow.

A group of US senators have said they were told by Rubio that the plan was not an American proposal - that it represented the Russian position and was leaked by a representative for Moscow.

This contradicts the position of the White House, which says the plan has been endorsed by President Donald Trump, having been drawn up by his officials.

Rubio later said the peace proposal had been "authored by the US".

"It is offered as a strong framework for ongoing negotiations. It is based on input from the Russian side. But it is also based on previous and ongoing input from Ukraine."

Russia's response has so far been cautious but Putin has said it could be the "basis" for a peace settlement.

The handover of Ukrainian territory to Russia, even in a demilitarised zone, is the biggest sign of a slant towards Russia's narrative, but freezing the front lines in the south could prove difficult for the Kremlin which has annexed both Kherson and Zaporizhzhia in its constitution.

One of the proposals is for the lifting of sanctions to be "agreed upon in stages and on a case-by-case basis" - which Moscow will probably see as far too slow.

However, a plan for a "full amnesty" for all parties will go down well in Moscow and very badly in Kyiv and European capitals.

Commentators have pointed out that while there do appear to be major concessions to Putin, some of the requirements for Nato might be too vague for Kremlin tastes.

Russia has also consistently demanded that a peace plan would need to eliminate what it sees as "the root causes" of the war. One of those root causes is halting Nato expansion in Eastern Europe, which the draft appears to deal with.

Some of the other 28 points of the draft also nod to Russia's claims of discrimination against Ukraine's Russian-speaking population without explicitly endorsing them.

One point is explicit but even-handed: "Both countries will agree to abolish all discriminatory measures and guarantee the rights of Ukrainian and Russian media and education."

Another apparent attempt to be even-handed comes from a proposal to distribute electricity generated by the Russian-occupied Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant - the biggest in Europe - "equally between Russia and Ukraine".