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Will the war in Ukraine end in 2025 and under what terms?

If President-elect Donald Trump keeps his promise to end the war in Ukraine within 24 hours, you can skip this article for more relevant reading. However, there are serious doubts that the war in Ukraine can be ended just like that, at the pleasure of the president of the United States. The matter is too complex, and there are too many actors and levels involved. Nonetheless, since Washington is playing such a pivotal role in the defence of Ukraine, the new administration will bring about some changes.

I will go out on a limb and predict that Donald Trump will be able to impose a ceasefire in the war, the fighting will simmer down and nearly stop early in 2025. This will be done through direct communication between the White House, the Kremlin and the Ukrainian government. The diplomatic follow-up of the ceasefire, aiming to achieve a political settlement of the conflict and stabilise the situation, will, however, get stuck. Ukraine will thus remain at the brink of war, caught in a 'no-mans-land' between fighting and rebuilding, without having the means for either.

Let us look at how we got there. The current trends are not very promising. Russian troops are making incremental gains, trying to secure a better position before the winter freezes movement at the front. Ukraine, on the other hand, is hampered massively by a lack of personnel. On top of that, the nearly three years of war with relentless attacks by Russia on civilian and, specifically, energy infrastructure have taken a toll on the Ukrainian population. War fatigue has set in, and the resolve to continue the war is weakening. The Western support coalition of Ukraine is also affected by war fatigue. In the US, the incoming government was partly carried into office by the feeling that the attention of the government, as well as its funds, should be focused on domestic affairs and not so much on foreign wars.

The same applies to Germany, where the conflict of how to fund the Ukraine support toppled the traffic-light coalition government. Both of these developments will chip away at the ability of Ukraine to make progress on the battlefield, as they raise serious concerns about the continued supply of Western weapons and financial aid to Ukraine. At the same time, the Russian supply of personnel and military equipment will peak in 2025. The involvement of North Korean troops on the Russian side complicates things but does not

change this dynamic fundamentally. This means that both sides might be more open to battlefield management or even more radical steps, as long as they do not have to take responsibility for them.

This becomes even more visible when we look at the strategic aims of both sides. Despite the attritional nature of the warfare, which does not allow for rapid gains or decisive strikes, Kyiv and Moscow have maintained their initial war aims. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy presented his 'victory plan' in the autumn of 2024 to allies, including the then-Republican candidate, Donald Trump. The main elements are an invitation for Ukraine to join NATO, more Western weapons without strings attached and a bolstering of Ukrainian defence capabilities to deter any future Russian attempt to wage war again. The recapturing of the occupied parts of Ukraine is not explicitly mentioned in the victory plan. It refers only to a 'just peace', that needs to be achieved through strength. Russian President Putin, on the other hand, has repeatedly stated his aims for Ukraine, which are mainly a recognition of the annexed territories, permanent neutrality of the country and its demilitarisation. This illustrates how both war parties are stuck in their initial strategies. Although both strategies failed – Russia could not subdue Ukraine in a *Blitzkrieg* with just a few casualties, and Ukraine could not recover substantial parts of the occupied territories nor threaten Russia enough to change gears – they are still being pursued. A game-changer from outside is thus more than welcome. Enter Donald Trump.

His attempts at initiating peace, even before his inauguration, will be welcomed by both sides. In Kyiv, President Zelenskyy can use the rather bluntly applied American pressure accompanied by much public fanfare as the ideal excuse to walk back on his unreachable aims. Ukraine will not be forfeiting the occupied territories, but aim to secure the current frontline to recover militarily and economically. Putin, on the other hand, has a chance to stabilise the land gains Russia made until then, which are approximately 20% of Ukrainian territory. He can present Trump's initiative as a silent Western acknowledgment of Russia's success. He will also feel vindicated in his worldview, since a US president pressuring Ukraine to a ceasefire fits perfectly into his narrative of a world dominated by big powers, telling their proxies when to fight and when to stop fighting.

The ceasefire will thus be quick to establish. The devil will wait in the details of the subsequent process aiming for a political settlement and a longer-term solution to the conflict. This is a far more complicated lock to pick, as it includes negotiations not only between Russia and Ukraine, but also between Ukraine and the West, Russia and the West – more specifically Russia and the US – and in the end will also need the inclusion of outside actors. In this situation, a decisive deal, cutting the Gordian knot is near impossible. It will need a strategic approach to negotiations involving coordinating a broad variety of actors and managing different objectives and expectations on every one of these levels. Here, the self-appointed dealmaker, Donald Trump, will be bored into losing interest. Without political backing at the highest level, the negotiations will linger on without any realistic result in sight. For Ukraine, this will mean a terrible situation of neither-nor. Due to the end of the immediate fighting, war fatigue in the West will kick in, and the supply of Western weapons will slowly peter out. The long-term ability of the country to defend itself will be

seriously put into question. On the other hand, the reconstruction of the country will also be hampered by the missing settlement, since investments will only trickle slowly into Ukraine, whilst it remains under the sword of Damocles of a reignition of the war at any moment. That will leave two winners. Donald Trump will gloat about his achievement in ‘ending the war’. Vladimir Putin will leave the negotiations to continue as long as it takes to weaken Ukraine ever further. Since the country will not join NATO anytime soon, its economy will not be regaining traction and its warfighting capabilities will wane; Putin has achieved most of his aims.