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War, loss and the unravelling of certainties, as Trump and Putin push Ukraine to the brink

Tuesday 18 March 2025, by [KOURKOV Andrei](#) (Date first published: 24 February 2025).

Ukrainian writer Andrei Kurkov describes his country's uncertainty amid war, political tensions and wavering Western support. As Ukrainians mourn their lost loved ones, US-Russian talks spark fear, internal divisions grow, and soldiers persevere despite exhaustion. Future negotiations loom, with speed taking precedence over Ukrainian interests and a just peace.

The third anniversary of the all-out war with Russia doesn't quite coincide with Valentine's Day. But the [Munich Security Conference](#) did. Yet there was no talk of love in the conversations and speeches in Munich as European and American politicians and heads of state gathered to discuss the [Russian-Ukrainian war](#). Instead, a representative of the new US administration told the Europeans why he did not like Europe today.

Words about love were much louder in Lviv, at the Lychakiv cemetery, where Natalia Palamarchuk read poems at the grave of her husband Vasyl, who died in the war last year. She went to the cemetery alone, leaving her three children at home. On Valentine's Day she wanted to be alone with her husband of 21 years. Vasyl Palamarchuk was one of more than a hundred Ukrainian writers and poets killed in the war.

It is true that most Ukrainians did not think too much about Valentine's Day this year. After [Trump's](#) phone call with [Putin](#), some Ukrainians were overcome with despair, while others were simply furious. Social networks are still full of pessimism, bad feelings and dire predictions. It feels like [Ukraine](#) is on an operating table, with two surgeons bent over it, knives in hand.

But the wave of pessimism and panic in Ukrainian society began to gather force even before Trump's phone call with Putin. On the second week of February Ukrainians experienced severe emotional swings, one of which was caused by the Ukrainian parliament's decision to allow the purchase of two old Russian nuclear reactors from [Bulgaria](#) for the Ukrainian nuclear power plant at Khmelnytsky. This decision is still being hotly debated. Buying anything "made in Russia" seems immoral to many Ukrainians. In addition, these reactors are outdated, need additional parts, and would usually need to be serviced by Russia and supplied with Russian nuclear fuel.

Of course, you can buy American nuclear fuel and adapt it to the reactors, but this will significantly increase the cost of running the power plant. And during a war, is it appropriate to spend money on anything other than weapons and ammunition, especially a new nuclear reactor that Russia could destroy with two or three ballistic missiles?

Apparently in order to divert the attention of Ukrainians from nuclear reactors to something safer,

the day after the nuclear reactor decision the parliament [passed](#) a law establishing a national day of prayer.

From now on, every year on 24 February, Ukraine will pray for the safety of nuclear reactors during the war and for the future of Ukraine in general.

Introducing the National day of prayer

Ukrainians, who have always laughed at Russian priests blessing Iskander ballistic missiles and Kalashnikov assault rifles, suddenly woke up in a country with a national day of prayer.

Trump's conversation with Putin took place just one day after the law on the National Day of Prayer was passed - on 13 February. Their friendly conversation, which lasted an hour and a half, gave an immediate boost to the Russian economy - Russian share prices rose and the ruble strengthened against the dollar.

It became clear to Ukrainians that this was not a conversation between the leader of the democratic world and an autocratic aggressor, but between two businessmen focused on trade relations and keen to resume mutually beneficial business. The only thing standing in the way is Ukraine, whose attack has led to the international, but far from total, isolation of the Russian Federation.

The conversation between Trump and Putin, combined with the strange decisions of the Ukrainian parliament, has caused something of a nervous breakdown even among some teenagers.

The 16-year-old daughter of the famous Ukrainian playwright Natalia Vorozhbit could not hold back her tears after reading Trump's comments. "It is better to live under bombs than under the conditions of 'peace' of these two cynics (Trump and Putin)," she cried. "Because under bombs there is hope that the bomb will not hit you, but under this imposed 'peace' there is no such hope."

While [Volodymyr Zelensky](#) spoke in Munich about the need for unity in Ukrainian society, a number of prominent human rights activists and NGOs in Ukraine criticised him.

Before leaving for Munich, President Zelensky signed the National Security and Defence Council's [decision](#) to impose sanctions on a number of oligarchs. The list includes Ukraine's fifth president, Petro Poroshenko, who was therefore unable to attend the Munich conference in person. Instead, he had to spend every day answering questions from investigators and defending himself against accusations of treason from the National Security and Defence Council. The Petro Poroshenko Foundation, which bought arms and ammunition for the Ukrainian army, is no longer able to function. All of Petro Poroshenko's assets have been frozen.

"It is better to live under bombs than under the conditions of 'peace' of these two cynics (Trump and Putin)"

"Sanctions cannot be used as a tool to bring to justice those who commit crimes," the human rights

organisations said in a joint statement. "Sanctions cannot replace criminal accountability because the principles of justice are undermined by the political motives that guide the authors of sanctions. The use of sanctions instead of investigation and fair trial means the destruction of democracy in Ukraine".

At the moment, Petro Poroshenko is still the leader of the opposition and the head of the European Solidarity parliamentary group. Volodymyr Zelensky has been fighting him for a long time, and this battle has reached a new climax, showing Ukraine in a very unfavourable light. Perhaps the reason for Zelensky's efforts is the thought of possible presidential elections, on which the [United States](#) has been insisting.

In any case, the sanctions imposed on the former president do not contribute to the unity of Ukrainian society. And without unity, it will be very difficult for Ukrainians to get through the current military-political period in the life of the country.

This is not just about negotiations with Putin. It is also about relations with the United States, which is demanding guaranteed access to Ukrainian rare earth metals. Trump has decided to put relations with Ukraine on a commercial basis, including military issues. Ukraine has little room for manoeuvre. President Zelensky had promised the Americans these metals in exchange for continued military aid. However, the initial version of the agreement proposed by the US Secretary of the Treasury did not mention any guarantees of aid or security for Ukraine, and Zelensky did not sign it.

Meanwhile, a significant part of the rare earth metal deposits are located in the territories occupied by [Russia](#), including the Donbass and part of the Zaporizhzhya region. Of course, these rare earth metals are of interest to both Russia and [China](#), and indeed private Chinese companies have already set their sights on these territories, apparently intending to build extraction and enrichment plants. Perhaps Russia plans to use these metals to pay China for helping Russia in its war against Ukraine? Or perhaps, because of sanctions, Russia is unable to develop the metal deposits on its own and needs Chinese investment to exploit them effectively.

To date, Ukrainian special services have identified more than ten private Chinese companies that are already working in the occupied Ukrainian territory, carrying out preparatory work to restore the destroyed infrastructure.

The third anniversary of the full-scale war with Russia and the eleventh anniversary of Russia's first attack on Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea have attracted a new wave of foreign journalists to Ukraine, who are more interested in Ukrainians' opinions about the possibility of ending the war this year than in the situation at the front.

The action on the front is turning into a stalemate. Russian troops are still advancing, although the cost in human lives has been very high and progress has been slowed by Ukraine's effective use of combat drones to prevent the movement of Russian ammunition and equipment even deep behind enemy lines.

In some places, including near Pokrovsk, Ukrainian troops have halted the Russian offensive and even liberated several settlements, pushing Russian troops back several kilometres.

The Ukrainian military does not really believe in the possibility of signing a peace treaty with Putin. They are determined to continue fighting, even though they complain of exhaustion and the lack of a demobilisation system or even regular rotation.

Explosive deliveries

It must be said that even a job in the rear is not safe for soldiers. Russian special services used to attack military personnel away from the front lines by searching social networks for young and reckless saboteurs and arsonists, but recently they have changed their tactics. They have tricked unsuspecting Ukrainian citizens into delivering packages to a specific address. The person is promised money for delivering the parcel to an unknown third party.

What the deliverer does not know is that the package is a bomb, and when they arrive calmly at the entrance of the mobilisation centre or somewhere else where soldiers or potential soldiers are gathered, the bomb is detonated by a phone call from inside Russia or from the occupied territories, or sometimes from the city where the bomb is located.

The other day in Mykolaiv, a woman carrying a shopping bag approached a group of Ukrainian soldiers and suddenly there was an explosion. The woman and three military engineers were killed, and six others were seriously wounded. This is not the first such incident.

The Russian media proudly report such 'successes' as proof of an armed Ukrainian pro-Russian underground movement. The Russian people seem to need this 'proof' to feel that victory for the Russian army is near.

On 14 February, in the middle of the Munich Security Conference, I was afraid that a similar terrorist attack would happen in Kyiv or Lviv during the romantic railway journeys organized by the Ukrainian Railways especially for the families of military personnel. Ukrzaliznytsia ran the "Saint Valentine's Trains" out of Kyiv and Lviv. Military personnel could buy a compartment for themselves and their loved ones and spend two hours together on a train that had no destination - just a two-hour ride around the city.

Thank God, the Valentine's Day trips went off without a single act of sabotage.

14 February is behind us, as is the Munich Security Conference. Ahead lies an unpredictable future in which Europe can no longer count on US support, and Ukraine finds itself suspended between the fourth year of full-scale war and negotiations with Russia - negotiations in which Europe will not participate and in which the American partners are more interested in the speed with which an agreement can be reached than in protecting Ukrainian interests and achieving a just peace.

□ [Original article on Dag og Tid](#)

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