Russia's War on Ukraine: Analyzing the Situation in the Fall of 2026

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Introduction

Following the media on the war front can be confusing. Reports change rapidly from one of Ukraine's imminent defeat to descriptions of a decisive change that will lead to the collapse of the Russian army and perhaps the end of the Putin regime after over a quarter of a century. By October 2026, the picture had changed again, with Donald J. Trump's decision to lift Russian sanctions, import Russian diesel oil, and discuss a solution to the war in partnership with Russia and possibly China. The situation is increasingly tense and complex, and the fall has seen extensive Russian attacks on its cities, particularly Kyiv, and the protracted war in the Donbas is now entering its fourteenth year.

The Stages of the Invasion

The war can be defined by stages. The first was the unsuccessful attempt to capture Kyiv and to remove Volodymyr Zelensky as president, as well as to eliminate what Russia has termed the "neo-Nazi regime" in Kyiv. The Russian invasion from Belarus was badly planned and a complete failure, largely because of Putin's miscalculation that his army would be welcomed.

The Russians then reverted to the more logical option of exploiting the weakness of Ukraine in the eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk while attempting to move their forces northward from Crimea into the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions.

Before the outset of the wider invasion of 24 February 2022, Putin had recognized the independence of the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, two separatist regimes under quasi-military rule that had existed since the spring of 2014. While Russia assisted the survival of the regimes with weapons and direct military intervention, it had not recognized their independence hitherto. Rather, it adhered to the option of a federalized Ukraine, in which Donetsk and Luhansk would enjoy full autonomy, a concession made by former president Petro Poroshenko a few months after the Minsk meeting in March 2015.

Poroshenko had conceded under acute duress after military defeats at Ilovaisk and Debaltseve, and the Ukrainian Rada had refused to ratify the decision.

In fact, Russia annexed the parts of the two regions it had occupied. Its troops at this early stage of the invasion were mainly from the federation's ethnic republics, inexperienced and frequently brutal. Several massacres of civilians occurred in the suburbs of Kyiv. Notably, the Russian leadership promptly decorated those involved.

Under its initial military commander, General Valerii Zaluzhny, Ukraine managed to regain several territories over the following months, particularly in the Kharkiv region, as well as the city of Kherson. The Russian side then dug in behind defensive walls, heavily mined, as the war became one of attrition.

The Russians mounted numerous offensives, razing cities, and both sides suffered heavy casualties. Zelensky appealed to the United States, the European Union, and the United Kingdom for assistance with weapons. For a time, Russia had complete control over airspace and bombed cities and energy installations with impunity.

Mediation and Rebellion

Various attempts to broker peace, some led by US President Trump and others by China and Türkiye, resulted in failure. Russia insisted on keeping the occupied territories, adding a demand that all of Donetsk oblast should be part of Russia in any agreement. Russia currently occupies 89 percent of it, but Ukraine has fortified the remaining cities of Kramatorsk and Sloviansk.

Russia also survived an internal rebellion in 2023 led by Evgenii Prigozhin, directed against what he perceived as the incompetence of the military commanders Shoigu and Gerasimov, who were prepared to sacrifice thousands of troops for small gains. The rebellion resulted in a brief occupation of the city of Rostov, led by Prigozhin and mercenaries of the Wagner Division.

Prigozhin bore most responsibility for the successful conquest of the city of Bakhmut, having bolstered his army with the recruitment of high-security prisoners, whose sentences would be revoked if they survived six-month terms in the Russian army. During the process, the prisoners were denied contact with their families and lawyers and taken to Ukraine without identification documents, putting them under the sole power of the Wagner Division.

However, Prigozhin, an oligarch best known for his restaurants and social media site, never renounced the leadership of his close friend, Putin. The attack on Moscow was abandoned, and his forces dispersed, mostly to Belarus, where Putin's ally, Aliaksandr Lukashenka allowed them to occupy a disused army camp. The apparent reprieve was short-lived. Prigozhin and other leaders of the Wagner Division died a few weeks later in an air crash, likely because of a bomb explosion on board.

In August 2024, in an attempt to counter Russian advances, Ukraine diverted part of its army from the Donbas and entered the Kursk region. After occupying about a thousand square kilometers of territory, the attack was halted, and the Russians were able to regain captured towns, assisted by some 10,000 troops from North Korea. Arguably, the failed diversion allowed Russia to move toward the key city of Pokrovsk, though there is no consensus among analysts on the relative success or failure of the campaign.

Ukraine, nonetheless, appeared to be close to defeat. The Americans, now under a second Trump presidency in January 2025, halted the provision of weapons to Ukraine following a disastrous White House meeting with Zelensky that received widespread media publicity. Trump and Vice-President J.D. Vance accused the Ukrainian leader of a lack of gratitude and removed the Ukrainian delegation from the White House before they could even sit down for lunch.

Drone Warfare

Both sides resorted to drone warfare, which has become increasingly sophisticated. After Donald Trump decided to halt military aid to Ukraine, Zelensky could ignore previous instructions not to bomb Russian territory. As the drones constructed became more effective, he ordered the military to dispatch hundreds of them to hit Russian energy installations, including around St. Petersburg and Moscow.

These attacks did not result in major civilian losses, but they posed a serious problem to Russian oil production, shut down airports, and brought the war into the lives of residents of Russia's two largest cities. The Russian response was to unleash more destructive attacks on Kyiv and Kharkiv, using cruise missiles and other weaponry.

By the spring of 2026, the possibilities of an outright Russian victory had receded. The Europeans, Britain, and Canada were prepared to offer increased military aid to Ukraine, prompted in part by Zelensky's frenetic visits and speeches, as well as discomfort with the Trump administration's policy of "peace at any price." The displacement of the USA as the main military ally by the Europeans signifies that Ukraine can continue fighting, but also that victory would be a longer-term process, as an alliance based on trade and economy (as well as democracy) needs to upgrade its military presence.

Ukraine's Far-Right Dilemmas

Ukraine is also beset by problems, including corruption at the highest levels of government, enforced conscription to maintain the size of its army, frequent power outages in cities, and the growing influence of far-right political perspectives among some sectors of the military. While the Russian rhetoric about a neo-Nazi regime being installed in 2014 is far-fetched, there is ample evidence that support for the far right exists, primarily because the most recent anti-Russian "heroes" of the past all derive from the era of the Second World War.

Zelensky, in this respect, has followed the practice of earlier presidents Viktor Yushchenko (2005-10) and Petro Poroshenko (2014-19) in heroizing nationalist leaders of the 1930s and 1940s, most obviously Stepan Bandera and Roman Shukhevych, former leaders of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN-B) and Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA). Both leaders were enshrined in the so-called Decommunization Laws of 2015 and the elevation of the "fighters for Ukraine in the twentieth century."

Bandera has been elevated during the most recent war to cult status, revered by the military leadership, with his name adorning streets in cities in central and unoccupied eastern Ukraine, and even in Transcarpathia. Former commander-in-chief of the Ukrainian armed forces, Valerii Zaluzhnyi, was photographed in front of a portrait of Bandera in an obviously reverential pose. Zaluzhnyi also appointed Dmytro Yarosh, the founder of the Right Sector group, as his personal advisor in 2021, following his appointment as commander-in-chief.

The most recent controversy, however, revolves around Zelensky's decision to name a military unit after the "heroes of UPA." Poland regards the UPA almost solely in terms of the Volhynia massacre of 1943, when UPA-North murdered over 60,000 Polish civilians in an act of ethnic cleansing, which also spread into Eastern Galicia. The Ukrainian leadership, in contrast, perceives the UPA as fighting for Ukraine's independence through guerrilla warfare against Soviet forces during 1944-53.

The decision incensed Polish president Karol Nawrocki, who promptly revoked Poland's award of the Order of the White Eagle, Poland's highest honor, given to Zelensky in 2023. The growing controversy threatens the close alliance developed between Poland and Ukraine since the wider Russian invasion began in 2022. About 1.7 million Ukrainian exiles now live in Poland and are heavily reliant on the support of the Polish government. Zelensky's logic has long been that the Ukrainians are protecting Poland and the EU from a potential Russian attack. Moreover, Nawrocki's position is somewhat one-dimensional in that it ignores the difficult relationship between Poland and its large Ukrainian minority in the interwar period.

The Situation in Late June 2026

Ukraine has lost millions of people to migration abroad and military casualties, and it is reliant on the largesse of its allies to offset its growing debts. Politically, its president is now in his eighth year in office, declining to hold another election while martial law is in place. He remains popular, polling at around 65 percent, but only about 20% of respondents would vote for him if he ran for a second term. The conclusion is that most of the electorate perceive Zelensky as the most effective wartime leader but would not necessarily support him in peacetime.

According to the Center for Economic Strategy, about 5.6 million Ukrainians are now war exiles, of whom about 4 million left through the western border. These add to the notable demographic decline evident since the early 1990s, and today the death rate exceeds the birth rate by more than three times. Families suffer from separation – men of service age are not permitted to leave along with their families – as well as deliberate choices not to have more children.

At the same time, on the military front, Ukraine is achieving some small advances and has rendered Crimea obsolete as a Russian naval base. Even the Black Sea is no longer safe for Russian ships. Zelensky's growing confidence is reflected in his sarcastic letter to Putin, as well as the message

"permitting" the Russians to hold a Victory Day parade in Moscow on 9 May 2026. He has shown considerable skill in his political maneuvers, coupled with his remarkable stamina, and in persuading EU leaders to support the Ukrainian cause.

Though the new Hungarian leader, Peter Magyar, has commented that Ukraine's entrance into the European Union should not take priority over those of the Balkan countries, the departure of his predecessor, Viktor Orbán, has unified the EU alliance. The electoral victory of Nikol Pashinyan in Armenia on 7 June 2026 stymied Russian efforts to select a more amenable candidate in Samvel Karapetyan. The Armenian election reflected Russia's failure to maintain its standing in global politics. In the EU neighbourhood, its only reliable ally is Belarus, but even there, the situation is unstable.

Belarus as Part of the Russian Military Command

Aliaksandr Lukashenka, the leader of Belarus, apologized for his harsh words about Zelensky recently, following a meeting with the exiled opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. In February, Zelensky placed sanctions on Lukashenka and his government for their aid to Russia. In June 2026, he gave Lukashenka a six-day deadline to remove relay stations on the border with Ukraine, which he maintained were used to guide Russian drones to their targets, one of which was the Pecherska Lavra monastery in Kyiv.

Lukashenka's concern is twofold. First, that Russian pressure may force Belarus to join the war by sending its army into Ukraine; and second, that Belarusian oil refineries may be a legitimate target for Ukrainian drones if Russia uses them for its war effort. Belarusian exports of refined oil and diesel fuel to Russia rose exponentially over the month of May 2026, creating a Catch-22 situation for Minsk. On the one hand, they relieved shortages in Russia, but on the other hand, they prevented the Minsk regime from exporting the refined oil to Europe to boost hard currency reserves.

At the time of writing, there was much discussion among Western and exiled Belarusian analysts on the question of a potential war between Ukraine and Belarus. For exiled Belarusians, there is no consensus on the benefits of such a conflict. While such a war might bring the end of the thirty-two-year dictatorship of Lukashenka, it could also lead directly to Russian annexation and full control of its smaller neighbor. It seems clear, though, that Zelensky's aggressive stance reflected a belief that the balance of power in the region had changed in Ukraine's favor.

Lukashenka has remained open to US approaches to Minsk, which have resulted in the release of some political prisoners and easing of US sanctions on Belarus. Trump has offered Lukashenka a so-called "Big Deal," the contents of which remain open to speculation. The regime in Belarus has also been added to Trump's "Peace Council."

About five hundred political prisoners were released in 2025, following missions of US envoy John Coale to Belarus and his meetings with the Belarusian leadership. The meetings have brought Belarus out of isolation, and the United States has removed sanctions on the Belarusian potash company, its most profitable enterprise, as well as its national airline Belavia. There are plenty of caveats to the declared success of such missions.

First, the regime arrested an almost identical number of prisoners in the same year, rendering the releases symbolic rather than a sign of moderation by the Minsk regime. Second, other than the final batches of releases, the prisoners were deported to Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine rather than being permitted to return to their homes and families. Often, they were released without personal documents, such as passports, totally reliant on the beneficence of the states receiving them. Third, Coale himself is not an expert on Eastern Europe and appears to have little knowledge of the history, culture, and languages of the countries involved in the Russian invasion. He is essentially a Trump real-estate crony, an octogenarian billionaire who is quite willing to side with Lukashenka in denouncing the Europeans for sanctions that prevent a revival of the Belarusian economy.

Russia has been cautious and even hostile to such approaches that may divert Belarus from its

closely monitored path, particularly now that it has installed Oreshnik missiles and tactical nuclear weapons on its territory. Should Zelensky carry through his threat and launch attacks on Belarusian relay stations, it is likely that Russia would annex Belarus outright and end its independence.

Conclusion

Putin's options seem limited. The war he initiated in 2022 has become a burden. Though it will not lead to immediate economic collapse, the heavy military casualties and the energy losses Russia has suffered outweigh the small gains it has made on the ground over the past four years.

Its economy is suffering from labor shortages and "lack of access to critical imports," according to a June 2026 report by the Kiel Institute. Sanctions are having a serious impact, and inflation is rising. Russia's reliance on China for foreign trade has changed the global balance of non-American power in favor of the communist partner. China has provided covert military aid to the Russian army without committing itself to the cause, ostensibly to prevent Russia's military defeat rather than to occupy Ukraine. Further, it has maintained close trading relations and diplomatic relations with Ukraine.

The Special Military Operation has failed, and the war that replaced it seems like a road to nowhere, with no short-term prospects of victory or even a major advance of the Russian army. On the other hand, the relationship between the Trump administration and the Putin regime has become much closer. On October 19, Reuters announced that Putin had proposed a trilateral summit with Trump and Xi Jinping to bring an end to the war in Ukraine on terms favorable to Russia. Trump evidently declared his willingness to take part in such a meeting, despite the fact that Ukraine would not have a role in discussions. Nor would the European Union, which has provided most support to Ukraine since the United States ceased all military aid to Ukraine.

At the time of writing, it is unknown whether such a meeting would take place, but it would deprive Ukraine of a voice in its own future. The addition of China would tip the balance in Russia's favor. In the meantime, Ukraine approaches yet another winter, with an impending fuel crisis and round-the-clock raids on Kyiv and other Russian targets. Trump condemns Ukraine and attributes the rise in gas prices to Ukrainian drones attacking Russian energy installations. He has declared that Ukraine "should get a new president." Though Trump's position has always been inconsistent, it is an ominous development.