

The Kremlin Sets Its Sights on Kyiv: The Bluff behind Russia's "Peace Plan"



by Nona Mikhelidze

- The 28-point "peace plan" is structurally doomed. Ukraine cannot cede unoccupied Donetsk territory or accept military limits; removing these demands in turn would make it unacceptable to Russia.
- Moscow aims to split the US from Ukraine and Europe, weaken European cohesion, reduce the latter's military support, isolate Kyiv on the battlefield and ultimately pursue capturing the capital.
- Europe must assume responsibility. European states should confront Trump's stance by fully backing Ukraine, unfreezing Russian assets and massively investing in Ukraine's military as a commitment to continental defence.

Ukraine's strategic balance still hangs on the shifting moods of Washington. That is the uncomfortable truth Kyiv is forced to confront as US support wavers yet again, almost four years into Russia's full-scale invasion. In the capital, people no longer bother to hide it: "Let's admit it – Washington is no longer our ally. The most we can hope for now is that President Trump's administration stays neutral and keeps selling us weapons, directly and through the Europeans."

The conundrum of US-Ukraine relations

And yet, because US aid remains indispensable, especially for air defence against Russia's daily missile strikes, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has no alternative. He must keep a



working relationship with Trump and with an entourage that, in recent months, has shown itself both incompetent and easily manipulated by Moscow.

This has produced a chain of crises in US-Ukraine relations: from the Trump-Zelensky clash at the White House, to the bruising negotiations over mineral agreements – during which Washington even threatened Kyiv to force the signature of a colonial-style draft giving the US extraction rights over Ukrainian resources without offering the security guarantees Kyiv requested – up to the US-Russia summit in Alaska, complete with a red-carpet welcome for Vladimir Putin.

For Ukrainians, every episode has landed like another blow, all while the country fights on multiple fronts: resisting the enemy, mourning its dead and surviving attacks that shred

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everyday life. And yet in all three cases, thanks also to European support, Kyiv managed to avoid the traps and keep Washington at least in a non-hostile posture, contrary to Moscow's hopes for a definitive rupture between the US and Ukraine.

Zelensky patched things up with Trump after the initial clash; the mineral deal was renegotiated until its original meaning was almost entirely emptied; and after the Trump-Putin summit in Alaska, Kyiv succeeded in making Washington understand – also thanks to the Kremlin's intransigence and maximalist demands – that Putin, not Ukraine, was the true saboteur of peace. The result was the Trump administration's first sanctions on Russia, targeting oil giants Rosneft and Lukoil.

The infamous and unattainable 28-point plan

Some in Europe briefly sensed a possible shift. Maybe Trump had realised that Putin intends to keep the war going and that the only way to force him to the negotiating table was to increase pressure on the Kremlin, not on Ukraine. But that hope quickly faded. Trump's special envoy, Steven Witkoff, never stopped engaging with Russian intermediaries in search of a "peace draft". And the Russians eventually handed him a 28-point document, whose odd wording suggests that it may have been written originally in Russian, then translated into English, that amounted, in practice, to Ukraine's capitulation.

Much has already been written about the plan's content, and there is no need for a **point-by-point dissection**. Not because it wouldn't be useful to show how it violates **thirteen binding treaties, twenty-three political commitments and thirty-five legal principles** grounded in the UN Charter, the OSCE's Helsinki Final Act, the Geneva Conventions and a broad architecture of documents forming the post-World War II global order. But because the core is simple: this plan is structurally doomed. Even if it contained reasonable elements or vague security guarantees for Ukraine, it includes two provisions that make it inherently unacceptable for Kyiv – and whose removal would automatically make it unacceptable for Moscow. The remaining twenty-six points are little more than background noise.

The first concerns the cession of that part of Donetsk region that Russia has failed to conquer in four (or rather eleven) years of war. The second demands that Ukraine's armed forces be nearly cut in half. No Ukrainian president could sign such an agreement. Neither parliament nor the military would support it, for at least three fundamental reasons.

First: from a technical-legal standpoint, the president has no authority to cede territory – only a referendum could do that.



Second: around 200,000 Ukrainian citizens live in the parts of Donetsk still under Kyiv's control. What is the government supposed to tell them? *Become refugees? Submit to Russian occupation?* This, **after everything Russian occupations have revealed**: torture, cultural annihilation, forced conscription, child deportations.

And third, an even more strategic reason: that territory contains the principal military fortress Ukraine has built since 2014, after Russia's first invasion – a vast system of trenches, tunnels and underground passages. It is the line that shields the rest of the country. If it were to fall into Russian hands, the road to Ukraine's heartland would become dramatically easier.

The Ukrainian army as the real security guarantee

The second non-negotiable point concerns Ukraine's army. In these four years of war – in effect, eleven – Ukrainians have learned that their only true security guarantee is their own armed forces. From Obama's veto on lethal weapons, to Europe's reluctance to approve even basic sanctions in 2014, to the frustration over new Western projects with Russia like Nord Stream 2, Ukrainians have understood that their survival depends on themselves.

This conviction has only deepened since 2022. Over these four years, Ukrainians have not only fought on the battlefield; they have also been forced to beg the West for ammunition and air defence systems to protect civilians. With massive growth in domestic military production – drones, long-range missiles and a combat-hardened force unmatched anywhere in Europe – many Ukrainians now believe it is not Kyiv that needs NATO, but NATO that needs them. After all, Ukraine's military is today the most experienced fighting force in Europe. And in a NATO weakened by Trump – who might not even guarantee the security of the Baltic states – Kyiv would hardly place its full trust.

The Ukrainian army is now the most respected and trusted institution in the country. Any imposed limit on the armed forces or on the defence industry would be rejected even at

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the cost of fighting to the last soldier. For many Ukrainians, a weakened army is synonymous with the end of the state.

Europe's need to stand firmly with Kyiv

This is why Kyiv and its European partners will now try, in the fragile negotiating channel opened with the United States, to persuade Washington to remove those two clauses from the so-called "peace plan". Among the European counterproposals circulating, one suggests limiting the Ukrainian army to 800,000 troops in peacetime. Even if Kyiv accepted it, the Kremlin would not consider it a concession: Ukraine's current force is already roughly that size.

As for modifying the security-guarantee provisions, the dynamic is identical to that of recent months: debates about European peacekeepers or about which countries could provide which resources have all proved useless. As then, so now, spending time and energies on the details makes no sense. Any clause that favours Ukraine is, by definition, unacceptable to Moscow, which remains determined to continue the war.

This leaves one crucial question: why did the Kremlin present the Americans with a plan that was unworkable from the outset? Certainly not to achieve peace. The goal is to trigger a process that fractures relations between the US and Ukraine and simultaneously between the US



and Europe. Such a rift would, in turn, weaken Europe's internal cohesion and undermine military aid to Kyiv. Moscow hopes to isolate Ukraine, shrink or halt Western support and find Ukrainian forces alone on the battlefield, so it can finally pursue its ultimate objective: the capture of Kyiv.

In the coming days, we will see whether Ukraine and Europe can escape this trap. And even

if they succeed, one enormous problem will remain: Trump. Europeans will have to confront it head-on by assuming full responsibility for supporting Kyiv, finally unfreezing Russian assets and investing massively in the Ukrainian armed forces, and thus in the defence of the entire European continent.

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Via dei Montecatini, 17
I-00186 Rome, Italy
T +39 06 6976831
www.iai.it



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Editor: **Leo Goretti** (l.goretti@iai.it)
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