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A year of reckoning: Ukraine's defence and diplomacy in 2024 and the vision of the future



As the calendar turns to 2025, the Russian war in Ukraine has unfolded amid shifting strategies, diplomatic ambitions, and escalating pressures both at home and abroad.

The war, now deeply entrenched in the fabric of European geopolitics, has led Ukraine to pursue increasingly aggressive defence strategies, shifting the fight to Russian territory and raising the stakes for both armies.

The year 2024 was marked by a pivotal shift in Ukrainian military tactics. In the face of relentless Russian bombardments, Ukraine focused its military responses on legitimate military targets—oil refineries and ammunition depots—striking not only in the occupied territories but also within the borders of Russia itself.

By targeting these essential supply lines, Ukraine aimed to cripple the Russian war machine—a move that startled the Kremlin and caused **concerns** in Western capitals.

The stakes grew higher as international oil prices climbed. While the European Union kept a \$60 per barrel cap to curb Russian revenues, the repair of damaged facilities and new ways of satisfying customers allowed Moscow's war funding to remain **robust**, underscoring the complexity of imposing effective sanctions.

Russia struck back resolutely

As a result, Russia struck back resolutely, directing its fury against Ukraine's energy infrastructure. Vital facilities, built with decades of investment during the Soviet era, were systematically targeted by Russian missiles, leaving cities in darkness and the population reliant on humanitarian aid.

By mid-2024, reports indicated that three-quarters of Ukraine's thermal power plants were non-operational—a clear indication of the enduring impact of the war on civilian life and national resilience.

Discussions for peace initiated by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy led to a high-profile **summit** in Switzerland in June 2024, but this summit did not yield any major results as Russia and its ally China were conspicuously absent.

The restoration of energy capabilities in Ukraine was short-lived

Meanwhile, clandestine negotiations mediated by Qatar **offered** some hope - Russia stopped bombarding Ukraine's energy infrastructure for a month and a half.

However, the restoration of energy capabilities in Ukraine was short-lived. With recovery underway, Ukraine's military turned its sights once again on Russian territory, most notably during an incursion into Kursk.

A critical shortage of recruits

This operation temporarily revitalised the morale of the troops amid rising desertion rates within the army. Soldiers were fleeing the frontline in unprecedented numbers, largely due to a shortage of manpower and increasing disillusionment with the way things were going.

The desertion rate reached an unprecedented level of 80,000 soldiers in 2024, while over 100,000 soldiers have been charged under Ukraine's desertion laws since the beginning of the Russian invasion in 2022, **according** to Ukraine's General Prosecutor.

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There was a critical shortage of recruits, leading Ukrainian military recruiters to violate human rights by detaining men on the streets

and forcibly sending even unfit individuals to the front lines.

While the Kursk operation generated some support, it diverted crucial resources from the ongoing fighting in Ukrainian territory, resulting in further territorial losses for the Russian forces, which were not only entrenched on the front but also receiving **support** from North Korea.

The Victory plan

Diplomacy seemed increasingly distant, with not much concrete progress in establishing a coordinated peace effort. The "victory plan" presented in August by Ukrainian authorities suggested a certain level of confusion on how to achieve the long-term vision of sovereignty and resilience.

While Ukraine was battling a barrage of Russian attacks, the geopolitical landscape shifted further with the re-election of Donald Trump as U.S. president.

Public sentiment in Ukraine suggested that many believed Trump's return could herald a new era of peace negotiations, as surveys indicated that 45% of Ukrainians felt his leadership might draw the warring parties closer to resolution.

Until this optimism is backed up by consistent actions and not just words, the prospect of a coherent foreign policy towards Ukraine remains uncertain.

The spectre of continued bombardments looms, threatening critical infrastructure and exacerbating humanitarian crises

The Ukrainian economy suffered greatly during these turbulent times. Inflation **climbed** to 11.2%, and the outflow of citizens surged, with hundreds of thousands more fleeing the conflict.

Diplomatic tensions with neighbouring countries, such as Hungary and Slovakia, only added to the challenges, painting a bleak picture of a nation in pursuit of stability amidst chaos.

As Ukraine secured liquefied natural gas supplies from the U.S. for the first time, there is hope that this energy lifeline can mitigate the impacts of Russian sabotage and prevent the transit of Russian gas through Ukraine. Yet, the spectre of continued bombardments looms, threatening critical infrastructure and exacerbating humanitarian crises.

Restoring democracy

As we enter 2025, Ukraine has to navigate an increasingly treacherous landscape. The dual challenge—maintaining military efforts and simultaneously fostering a viable economic framework—appears monumental.

Whether through diplomacy or continued warfare, Ukraine's path forward will depend heavily on the outcome of negotiations and the willingness of the international community to support the nation.

Potential negotiations promise to be lengthy and difficult in order to reach compromises. Neither Ukraine nor Russia seems willing to accept territorial losses as the new status quo.



Restoring democracy in Ukraine post-war is essential for fostering stability, resilience, and accountability within the nation

However, Kyiv may struggle to regain control

of Crimea or parts of Donbas in the short term or by military means. Currently, Russia partially or fully controls seven of Ukraine's 25 regions.

If the agreements that would at least end the active phase of the conflict come to fruition, the current Ukrainian government will have to consider a return to pre-war norms. This includes the lifting of martial law, the reopening of borders, revitalising the economy, and holding elections.

Reopening the borders may cause some Ukrainians to leave again, while many of the refugees who fled westward are **unlikely** to return. Before the year began, a survey in Norway revealed that approximately 47% of Ukrainian refugees do not wish to return back, even after the war with Russia is over.

The issue of elections also raises significant questions. How can those who have settled abroad participate? How can elections be organised in regions close to the potential line of contact, especially as artillery shelling continues to be a problem even in a calmer phase of the conflict?

Ultimately, the most important questions are how reliable the agreements will be and whether Russia will continue its systematic, massive attacks.

Restoring democracy in Ukraine post-war is essential for fostering stability, resilience, and accountability within the nation. The war has underscored the importance of democratic values, such as the rule of law, human rights, and civic engagement for a united society.

Furthermore, re-establishing democratic institutions will be crucial to rebuilding public confidence, facilitating social cohesion, and addressing the grievances created by the war.

Every new military engagement reaffirms the cost of inaction, just as every ceasefire offers a glimpse of hope.