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# As Russia approaches a grim milestone, Putin projects confidence

3 HR AGO

Analysis by  Nathan Hodge



Four years after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin's objective of ~~seizing control of Kyiv still eludes him~~ (*Mikhail Matzal/Reuters*)

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Russia is approaching a grim milestone: by mid-January, **President Vladimir Putin**'s "special military operation" in Ukraine will have dragged on longer than the war on the Eastern Front that began with the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 and ended with the fall of Berlin in May 1945.

Putin is famously **obsessed with World War II** and official veneration of the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany is part of the ideological glue that holds together the Russian state. Putin's Russia has even seen the rehabilitation of **Josef Stalin**, the Communist dictator who presided over a ruthless purge in the 1930s before leading his country in what is known in Russia as the Great Patriotic War.

But nearly four years after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, a decisive victory over Kyiv eludes the Kremlin leader: Russia controls about 20% of Ukrainian territory, the war **is estimated to have cost** Moscow more than a million casualties, and in perhaps the biggest affront to Putin's war aims, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky **remains in power**.

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But as the year comes to an end, Putin is projecting confidence that time is on his side and that winning is inevitable. Ahead of a summit with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in December, Putin gave an interview with India Today where he **said** Russia would "liberate Donbas and Novorossiya in any case – by military or

other means," doubling down on his demand to acquire all the regions of Ukraine that Russia claims, including those that his troops have not managed to take by force.

And that bloody-mindedness seems to be a bargaining strategy. Putin is surely aware that US President Donald Trump is determined to reach a deal on Ukraine and the Russian leader has done everything in his power to extract the maximum gain from Washington's eagerness to end the conflict.



Putin recently claimed to be ready to "finish the conflict by peaceful means," but his forces continue to advance across the front line. (*Alexander Nemenov/Reuters*)

In his year-end press conference, the Russian president said his country was ready and willing "to finish the conflict by peaceful means" — but not without boasting that his forces were "advancing across the whole of the front line."

Putin's reasons for projecting swagger are clear. For starters, the Kremlin leader has been able to watch as a once-unified Western front supporting Kyiv showed serious fractures after Trump took office in January.

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In February, US Vice President JD Vance stunned European leaders at the Munich Security Conference with a speech excoriating **Washington's transatlantic allies.** That spectacle was followed by a very public dressing-down of Zelensky by Trump and Vance in the Oval Office.



The relationship between Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and US President Donald Trump was turbulent in early 2025, but appeared to heal as the year progressed. (*Jim Lo Scalzo/EPA/Bloomberg/Getty Images*)

A few months later, another public-relations coup for the Kremlin followed with the summit meeting in Anchorage, Alaska, **between Putin and Trump**. While the summit fell short of yielding a thaw in US-Russian relations, it was more than a photo opportunity for Putin: The Russian president was able to play for more time in his relentless war of attrition against Ukraine.

But Putin's apparent reluctance to engage more seriously in peace efforts after Anchorage did eventually test Trump's patience. An invitation to a second US-Russian bilateral summit in Budapest fell through and the Trump administration slapped sanctions on **Russia's two largest oil companies**. The US president, who often has words of praise for Putin, expressed **frustration with his Russian counterpart**.

Still, enough ice appears to have been broken between Washington and Moscow to allow an **unconventional US diplomatic effort** led by Trump's former business associate Steve Witkoff and his son-in-law Jared Kushner to advance.

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Following Witkoff and Kushner's visit to the Kremlin in early December, a flurry of high-level diplomacy involving Zelensky and European leaders ensued, with much talk about hammering out the finer points of a potential agreement.



Zelensky, second from right, joined British Prime Minister Keir Starmer, French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Friedrich Merz for talks in London in early December. *(Toby Melville/AFP/Getty Images)*

By mid-December, Trump's prognosis was optimistic, with the US president telling reporters that "we're closer now than we have been, ever" to a peace deal.

But at year's end, Putin still appears to occupy the role of potential dealbreaker: While Zelensky gained an **audience with Trump** at Mar-a-Lago last weekend to talk through a revised peace deal, the Kremlin leader bookended that meeting with his own phone calls to the American president.

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And the Russian position on peace talks now appears to be hardening. In his conversation with Trump on Monday, Putin informed his American counterpart about an alleged Ukrainian drone attack on his Valdai residence in Novgorod region, according to a readout given to Russian state radio by Kremlin aide Yuri Ushakov.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov also telegraphed outrage over the claimed attack – which Zelensky dismissed as “a complete fabrication” – by saying that “Russia’s negotiating position will be revised” amid the ongoing peace process.

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Most recently, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Sergey Ryabkov reiterated them in an interview with **ABC News**: No surrender of any Ukrainian territory that Moscow lays claim to, and no NATO boots on the ground in Ukraine after the war ends.



Trump's special envoy Steve Witkoff and son-in-law Jared Kushner visited the Kremlin in December for a meeting with Putin, his envoy Kirill Dmitriev and foreign policy aide Yuri Ushakov.  
*(Alexander Kazakov/Reuters)*

“Lavrov, Ushakov, (Kremlin spokesman Dmitry) Peskov, and Putin himself (who has visibly ramped up engagements with the military while doubling down on ‘we will achieve our goals’) have made it clear that the revised plan is entirely unacceptable. Yet Washington continues engaging Kyiv, touting ‘progress’ that Moscow views as illusory,” Russian political observer Tatiana Stanovaya wrote on X after the latest talks in Mar-a-Lago.

“This is precisely what the Russian story about a drone attack on Putin’s residence is about: a forceful ‘pound on the table’ to make the West finally hear that the current peace negotiations are heading in a completely unacceptable direction for Moscow and to derail the emerging US-Ukrainian framework,” she said.

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Putin has Trump's ear but he has not succeeded yet in drowning out those competing voices. How much of the Kremlin's confidence is smoke and mirrors is the big question.

In November, Putin donned camouflage to pay a visit to a military command post in an undisclosed location, where the commander-in-chief of Russia's military, Gen. Valery Gerasimov, claimed Russian troops were in control of the eastern town of Kupiansk.

Just a few weeks later, Putin was upstaged by Zelensky, who posted a video of a visit to Kupiansk, wearing body armor and standing in front of a pockmarked – and very geolocatable – sign. Asked later about the video during his year-end press conference, Putin was dismissive, mocking the Ukrainian president as "a talented artist" engaged in theatrics.

The mood in Russia is hard to gauge – criticizing the military can land a person in jail – and the economy keeps lumbering along, despite slowing growth and a Ukrainian campaign of strikes on Russian energy infrastructure, the cornerstone of Moscow's economic power.

Yet Putin's unchallenged grip on power gives him leverage in any peace process. The graveyards in provincial Russia may continue to grow with war dead, but no parliament can pressure him, no political opposition seems to threaten him and an apparently passive population means he can continue his war on Ukraine.



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