STEFAN BATORY FOUNDATION

Ukrainian Spring

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Polish-Ukrainian relations have cooled as historical questions have once again proven stronger than the strategic challenges of today and tomorrow. But is this dispute really about the past? Or is it rather a harbinger of a rivalry over the future of the region and of Europe – one in which both Poland and Ukraine want to play a key role?

After Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine broke out in February 2022, Poland quickly moved to the head of the class, committing itself with extraordinary energy into supporting its attacked neighbour. Humanitarian aid, deliveries of heavy military equipment and diplomatic support were, in the first months of the war, of enormous importance to the effectiveness of Ukrainian resistance. We rightly have no doubts on this point and Ukrainians do not question it.

But are we equally right to demand gratitude from Ukrainians for this help? And active expressions of it – if only in the form of greater compliance with Polish claims concerning history, the exhumation and burial of victims of that history or other gestures? Ukrainians do thank us for our help, yet they remind us that Poland – and the other European countries that have engaged in supporting Ukraine – are, in helping Ukraine, in fact helping themselves most of all. Why? Because, at a relatively modest cost when measured against GDP, they are buying an insurance policy against the risk of war with Russia.

The unchanging aim of the war

In 2021, Vladimir Putin set out the aims of the war to come: the revision of the European – and, more broadly, global – order, including the subordination of Ukraine and curtailment of sovereignty of the states of the former Eastern Bloc by reducing the presence of NATO infrastructure and personnel. The fact that Putin achieved the opposite effect – given that Sweden and Finland joined NATO – does not change his original intentions. The Russian dictator has not changed his ambitions and continues to

repeat that he is at war with the West. Or rather, as Russian propagandists put it, that he is defending Russia against Western aggression.

A spectacular illustration of this threat came in the form of a violation of Polish airspace by Russian drones in September 2025 and later, similar attempts in other European countries. Poland triggered NATO action under Article 4 of the North Atlantic Treaty; the joint procedures worked and the Alliance proved that it exists and is capable of defending its members. In doing so, it confirmed the assumptions of Polish security policy, which rests on membership in alliances – first and foremost NATO and, secondly, where security is concerned, the European Union.

Of fundamental importance within this arrangement are relations with the United States as effectively the only real external guarantor of security. The internal guarantor is to be the Armed Forces, developed since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine with great intensity and at great expense. How well we are actually using these resources is for the experts to judge. In any case, Poland's intentions, the will of its political elites and public support for strengthening military capability have been acknowledged by Western partners. From being the top performer with respect to defence spending, we are growing into a key element of the future, post-war architecture of European security on the eastern flank.

Ukraine's status

What about Ukraine? By holding back the Russian army for more than four years, is it really protecting Poland and Europe from Russia? Or, by drawing European partners into providing aid, is it increasing the real risk of escalation and dragging them directly into the war? The question of escalation has existed since the full-scale invasion began, raised by US President Joe Biden, who gradually rationed deliveries of ever more advanced weaponry and widened the permissions for its use. It was raised in much the same way by German Chancellor Olaf Scholz when he refused to supply Taurus missile systems.

The Polish policy stance was clearly articulated by Donald Tusk in September 2025 at the opening of the Warsaw Security Forum: "The war in Ukraine, whether anyone likes it or not, is also our war." This sentence, however, must be read together with its corollary – the declaration that Poland will not send soldiers to Ukraine as part of any stabilisation mission. So it is our war, but we are not participants in that war. We do not want Russia to win, because Poland, Europe and the West would all lose, so we help Ukraine. Yet we want to avoid war with Russia at all costs, so we help in a way that prevents us from being drawn into the war ourselves.

Seen in this light, perception of Poland's strategic position differs in Poland and Ukraine. Ukrainians are convinced that they are ensuring the security of Poland and the countries of the region by holding back the Russian army. That is true; no one questions the significance of that effort or the costs Ukrainians are paying for it. At the same time, however, the war in Ukraine illustrates the danger for which Poland and other countries must prepare, taking into account every possible scenario for how the war might end.

Asymmetry

At this point a fundamental asymmetry emerges between perception of the war in Ukraine and in Poland. For Ukrainians, the war against Russia is existential; they are convinced that Russia's aim is to destroy Ukrainian statehood and national identity. The most recent opinion polling by the Kyiv

International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) from the end of May shows that 60% of Ukrainians are indeed ready to compromise and accept the front line as the de facto post-war border with Russia (though without recognising this de iure). They expect, however, that troops from European states will be stationed on Ukrainian territory, ready to take up the fight against the Russians in the event of renewed aggression.

In Poland, depending on the survey, a similar or larger share of society is opposed to sending soldiers, even on a peacekeeping mission, let alone any combat involvement. The difference is therefore fundamental. Ukrainians are ready to fight to the end. Poles (and not only Poles) want to avoid war at all costs, so they are preparing for it. Ukrainians are not only convinced that they must fight to the end; they are also waging that fight consistently, prepared for the possibility that it may last a good while longer. But as a reward, within a decade Ukraine will be a flourishing member state of the European Union – so say 63% of respondents in KIIS's April survey.

Ukraine's cards

Ukraine's partners, Poland among them, may congratulate Ukrainians on their optimism because faith in the possibility of a better future is certainly a key resource serving wartime mobilisation and social resilience in the hardest of times. One cannot, however, expect Poland or Romania to base their own security on Ukrainian optimism and the conviction that victory is possible. A security system must take every scenario into account, including that of a Ukrainian defeat. Especially since, not so long ago – at the beginning of 2025 – Ukraine's future looked rather bleak.

Donald Trump began his presidency by arguing that Ukraine was losing the war and that Volodymyr Zelensky had no cards to play. The US president clearly set himself the goal of bringing this war to an end and normalising American relations with Russia, even at the expense of Ukrainian aspirations. The shift in White House policy, reinforced by the suspension of material aid to Ukraine, did indeed seem to presage its fate. A year and a half later, the situation has fundamentally changed.

A growing number of military experts note that the Ukrainian army has seized the strategic initiative. Assessing the situation at the start of June 2026, General Mick Ryan argues that Russia has begun to lose the war in every important dimension: military, cognitive, moral, industrial and economic. This does not mean it has already lost. The Australian strategist points out that adequate Russian mobilisation and insufficient Ukrainian concentration of forces could yet reverse this state of affairs.

The turning point

Even so, Ukrainians have shown that they can continually develop their capabilities and close the largest deficits that have until now hampered the conduct of defensive operations. Defence Minister Mykhailo Fedorov has launched a comprehensive reform of the armed forces, intended to solve the greatest problem – the conscription of soldiers – without provoking social protests. At the same time, the army's structure is being reorganised and shifted to a corps system. In parallel, new military technologies are being developed and tactical and operational innovations introduced.

As a result, Ukraine is gaining ever greater striking power deep inside enemy territory. The attacks on Kronstadt and St Petersburg, the effective cutting-off of Crimea and the strikes on oil-refining installations and arms factories demonstrate the growing offensive potential of the Ukrainian army. More importantly, over 50% of the army's supplies come from domestic production. Over the course

of the war, Ukraine's defence industry has increased its production capacity fiftyfold – from one billion dollars in 2022 to fifty billion today. Only the lack of financing prevents this potential from being fully exploited.

Unmanned systems, particularly ground-based systems – which are being developed at an increasingly rapid pace – are designed to reduce the need for soldiers. Operational automation on the front line has reportedly cut human losses in the Ukrainian army by more than 30%. It is true that Ukrainians are acutely short of anti-missile air-defence systems, yet they are developing ever more effective counter-drone combat systems.

No less important than the military situation is the economic and social one. The exceptionally harsh winter did not, contrary to fears, lead to catastrophe – though the humanitarian costs arising from the lack of heat and electricity were of course very high. Even so, the macroeconomic effects of the disruption to energy supplies and cold proved negligible. The economy held steady. Foreign aid, now mainly coming from Europe, plays a key role. But Ukrainian business, and not only the defence sector, is not losing its momentum. Sales of new flats and cars are rising. Since the start of the war, the number of electric cars has increased fivefold to more than 250,000 (almost twice as many as in Poland), according to the T&E report Electric Resilience: *How Ukraine Became a Rising Star in EV Mobility*.

Politics

The optimistic indicators mentioned earlier are just one of the signals showing that a high level of mobilisation and social consolidation still holds. It is also clearly visible in the trust ratings for Volodymyr Zelensky. In May 2026, according to KIIS polling, 61% of respondents trusted the president, a figure that has remained steady within three points for a year. This is important information because over the course of that year Ukraine was shaken by several political scandals involving the president.

In July 2025, Zelensky – acting through then head of the Office of the President, Andriy Yermak – attempted to push through a law curtailing the powers of the institutions fighting corruption. The law's adoption in a single-day, express legislative process triggered social protests across Ukraine. European capitals and Brussels also reacted, signalling that weakening the anti-corruption system could lead to the suspension of aid and would complicate the accession process.

The old legal order was restored as quickly as it had earlier been changed. The president regained control of the narrative, but his relations with his own political base in the Verkhovna Rada deteriorated dramatically. This is having a growing impact on law-making – the outcomes of even key votes have ceased to be predictable. And yet the EU accession process will require the adoption of many politically difficult legal acts to align Ukraine with EU norms.

In the autumn, Ukraine was rocked by a corruption scandal at Energoatom involving Zelensky's former business partner and friend, Tymur Mindich. Among the suspects were many top-tier politicians, Andriy Yermak included. The head of the Office of the President lost his job when Zelensky decided to sacrifice his closest associate. In the spring, Yermak was formally charged.

Ukrainians have no doubt that the president bears political responsibility for this affair and, more broadly, for corruption. Many believe that he is directly entangled in it. Even so, the level of trust remains steadily high. Sociologists interpret such results as an expression of wartime consolidation

around a symbol of unity: the Office of the President. This does not mean, however, that Zelensky will still be able to count on public support after the war.

Political competition is clearly growing. When it comes to public trust, those with military experience enjoy the greatest esteem. At the top is Valerii Zaluzhnyi, the former Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces and now ambassador in London – trusted by 73%, with a balance of positive over negative ratings of 52 points. Next are Robert Brovdi "Madyar", who commands the drone forces (70%/63 points), and Kyrylo Budanov, now head of the Office of the President, who previously led the defence ministry's Main Intelligence Unit (GUR) (70%/48 points).

Despite these scandals and assorted problems, Zelensky manages to maintain relative political stability in the country. A paradoxical consequence of a concentration of power in the president's hands (unprecedented in modern Ukrainian history) – assisted by an expansive office that de facto performs the political functions of a government – is that the government itself is not political in character and is made up of technocrats responsible for running the state. They do so quite efficiently, the best example being Mykhailo Fedorov, who moved from the Ministry of Digital Transformation to the post of Head of the Ministry of Defence. He quickly demonstrated that the competences he had leveraged in digitalising Ukraine also work well in reforming the army and the ministry.

A new geopolitics

A year and a half after the memorable meeting between Volodymyr Zelensky and Donald Trump in the White House, it turns out that Ukraine is not losing the war after all and that Zelensky himself holds quite a few cards – and fairly strong ones, as the contest for international support for Ukraine shows. The perception of the country, especially in Europe, began to change once Donald Trump revealed his waning interest in engagement with the Old Continent and its defence. What is more, the threat to annex Greenland and announcements of a reduced presence in – or even withdrawal from – NATO strained confidence in the durability of the Transatlantic Alliance.

Further announcements of reductions to the military contingent in Europe have only fuelled these doubts. The war waged by the United States and Israel against Iran, in turn, revealed other disquieting facts. True, the United States showed that it still commands unrivalled firepower. On top of that, new AI-based battlefield-management technologies radically shortened the *kill chain*, demonstrating lethal effectiveness. Yet it is also true that even the United States does not possess sufficient stocks of weaponry and ammunition to wage a protracted war.

Moreover, it has also become clear how limited the United States' ability is to defend its allies in the Persian Gulf states against attacks from what once seemed to be a broken Iran. Ukraine exploited this situation, offering its experience in drone warfare and developing drone-combat technology – experience still relativized by Western experts who argue, as the head of Rheinmetall AG, Armin Papperger, that Ukrainian drones are LEGO sets that housewives could assemble.

On the other hand, there is a growing conviction that, now that the American pillar of the European security system has been weakened, a new architecture is needed, one based on Europe's own capabilities. Yet that capability will not, for a long time to come, reach the level needed to face down the Russian threat – unless Ukraine becomes part of this architecture.

Ukrainian aspirations

Ukrainians are ready to assume such a role, and not only for political reasons. The role of a security provider to European states is an excellent argument in negotiations over accession and Europe's involvement in the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine. Ukrainians are ready in military terms, as they prove every day. They possess not only the skills but also armed forces made up of more than 100 brigades – more than all the European states combined. On the other side stands Russia with more than 200 brigades. And finally, Ukrainians are also ready for such a role socially.

In a public survey published in May by the Rating Group, "Ukraine in Europe's Security Architecture",[1] 73% of respondents had no doubt that, in the war against Russia, the Armed Forces of Ukraine would defend not only the Ukrainian nation but also Europe. This result is no surprise; Ukrainians have been saying as much since the start of the war. More telling are responses to the question: "Imagine that Russia attacks the following European states. Would you maintain your support for the participation of the Ukrainian army in defending that state?" 58% of Ukrainians are ready to defend Poland; 63% would want to help Lithuania.

No one knows when the war will end. The probability is growing, however, that it may end in a settlement that is acceptable to Ukrainian society. That settlement encompasses agreement to the de facto loss of occupied territories without international recognition of that fact. There is, however, no agreement to relinquish sovereignty – the purpose of which is to enable the country to pursue its European and Euro-Atlantic path – that is, to join the European Union and, ultimately, NATO.

It is worth remembering, though, that 35 years of independence have taught Ukrainians distrust of the durability of agreements and alliances. They know that membership in the EU or NATO is not an end but a means to achieving greater security and broader opportunities for development. They are convinced that Ukraine is an attractive partner – now mainly because of its military potential – as well as due to its future economic possibilities.

An approach to Ukraine

The uproar over Volodymyr Zelensky's decision to give one of the military units the name "Heroes of the UPA" revealed not only the weight history exerts on the relationship between our two countries. It also exposed the way Ukraine is perceived by Poland's political elites and, it seems, by most commentators. We tend to assume that Polish-Ukrainian relations are still governed by an asymmetry in which we are the stronger party, the one Ukraine needs more. Yes, Ukrainians know that without Poland's consent they will not join the European Union. They appreciate our country's economic strength and Poland's developmental success; Ukrainian economic elites invoke it as a source of inspiration.

At the same time, however – as I wrote in *Poland and Ukraine: Overcoming the Past, Winning the Future* and *The Great War*[2] – Ukrainian society is undergoing a great transformation, manifesting both in a consolidation of identity and culture, and a strong sense of agency stemming from a feeling of efficacy at both the individual and collective level. Ukrainians have proven themselves capable of

1 *Ukraine in Europe's Security Architecture: Citizens' Views. Special Study by Rating Group*, 25 May 2026, https://www.ratinggroup.ua/en/news/defense-apr2026 (accessed here and below: 15 June 2026).

2 E. Bendyk, *Polska i Ukraina: pokonać przeszłość, wygrać przyszłość* (*Poland and Ukraine: Overcoming the Past, Winning the Future*), Stefan Batory Foundation, Warsaw 2026, https://www.batory.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/Polska-i-Ukraina_pokonac-przeszlosc.pdf; E. Bendyk, *Wielka wojna* (*The Great War*), Stefan Batory Foundation, Warsaw 2026, https://www.batory.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/Wielka-wojna.pdf.

standing up to a stronger enemy, so they not only believe in a better future but also want to shape it themselves.

Ukraine's citizens are puzzled by the Polish conviction that there is no alternative to relations with the United States, certain as they are of the ill intentions of the US, which wants to force Ukraine into an unfavourable agreement with Russia. But if Ukrainians are not prepared to yield to pressure from Washington, then they are all the less likely to yield to Warsaw, Berlin or Budapest on other matters. And even if they are bluffing a little, playing a stronger hand than they hold, we had better check carefully what cards we ourselves are holding.

In the Ukrainian media space, analyses have appeared whose authors speak with approval of Poland's growing strength and rising aspirations on the international stage. This is well illustrated by the irritation arising from Poland's exclusion from the negotiating table on the war – a table dominated by the E3: Germany, France and the United Kingdom. A paradoxical consequence of this growing strength is reluctance, or unwillingness, to acknowledge that Ukraine does not want to play the role of a younger sister who can be lectured on how to behave in Europe's drawing rooms. Its aspirations to influence the future – not only its own, but also that of the region and of Europe – are no smaller than Poland's. And it is convinced of its own strength.

We need a better approach to Ukraine than cyclical emotional outbursts, both positive and negative – even if they are based in reality.

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"Ukrainian Spring" is another text in a series of analyses devoted to various aspects of the functioning of Ukraine and Ukrainian society during the war, and to the consequences of that war for the future of Ukraine, Poland, Europe and the world.

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