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Zelenskyy has no cards to play against Russia or the West

The president seems unable to secure for the Ukrainian people a gain that can compensate for a painful peace.



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German chancellor Friedrich Merz welcomes Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy for German-Ukrainian government consultations in Berlin on April 14, 2026 [Ebrahim Noroozi/AP]

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's artistic skills have earned him the reputation of a public relations genius acknowledged by both friends and foes. United States President Donald Trump, who has openly attacked him in public, famously called the Ukrainian leader "the greatest salesman on Earth". A much more sympathetic voice, New York Times columnist David French, has recently portrayed Zelenskyy as "the new leader of free world".

But Zelenskyy's PR genius can do very little when it comes to changing the dynamics of the battlefield in the Russia-Ukraine war. In recent weeks, his administration and allies have tried hard to create the impression that the war might be approaching a turning point. But realities on the ground tell a different story.

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For example, there were official claims that in February, Ukraine made more territorial gains than Russia did. Some pro-Ukrainian war monitoring platforms have supported these claims while others have not. It is important to note these calculations can be tricky given that along the frontline there is an extensive grey zone in which control is unclear. The advances themselves are measured in 150-200 square kilometres per month. In other words, methodology can be manipulated in order to produce the desired conclusion: that Ukraine is gaining ground.

In reality, there is nothing at all that suggests a significant change in the battlefield dynamics that have been in place for at least two years now.

More importantly, Russian troops are currently besieging a number of industrial cities in the north of the Donetsk region. Their advances all along the northern border, in particular, are extending the active front line by hundreds of kilometres, which is making Ukraine's personnel shortages even more acute.

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Four years into the war, the Ukrainian army has had to resort to brutal campaigns to enforce mandatory conscription, pulling young men off the streets of towns and villages. Meanwhile, Russia is still able to lure volunteers by offering lavish compensation.

Ukrainian officials have also claimed that Russia is losing more troops than it is able to recruit based on dubious casualty data. Zelenskyy, in particular, has stated the Russians suffered the highest number of monthly casualties in March this year – 35,000. But his statement contradicted his own Ministry of Defence, which claimed that the highest Russian monthly losses crossed 48,000 in January 2025, with an average monthly rate of roughly 35,000 throughout 2025.

Zelenskyy's chief of staff, former military intelligence chief Kyrylo Budanov, also contradicted this narrative that Russia is having major difficulty with deploying personnel. He acknowledged in a recent interview that the collapse of the Russian mobilisation effort was not forthcoming.

It should be noted that Ukraine is waging a successful drone campaign to damage Russian oil facilities. But it is doubtful that it could change anything beyond providing dramatic footage of oil tanks on fire for TV networks to broadcast.

In April, Russian oil revenues surged to \$9bn, thanks to the US-Israel war on Iran. The windfall Russia got in a month is equivalent to 10 percent of the loan Ukraine is to receive from the European Union over the next two years to help fund its war effort.

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It cannot be denied that Russia has sustained major economic losses due to the war, and Russian President Vladimir Putin has acknowledged as much. But the Russian economy displays much the same downturn as other European economies, also affected by wars in Ukraine and Iran.

Russia's gross domestic product (GDP) per capita adjusted for purchasing power parity (an indicator reflecting living standards) currently exceeds that of less affluent EU countries, such as Romania and Greece, according to the IMF charts. The same indicator for Ukraine is on par with Mongolia and Egypt, while the country's critical infrastructure lies in ruins and millions of Ukrainians have fled the country, most of them for good.

With Ukraine's prospects bleaker than ever, pro-Ukrainian audiences jump on every news from Russia, which they hope may signify "cracks in the regime". Last month, an Instagram video by Russian influencer Victoria Bonya made Western headlines for its daring criticism of government policies. There may be frustration in Russia, but the regime is far from approaching a downfall.

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This narrative, however, serves to distract Ukrainian and EU citizens from the painful truth that the war is heading towards a deadlock at best and Ukraine's collapse at worst. Zelenskyy may have received a lifeline with the \$90bn euro loan, but his and his allies' lack of vision and winning strategy is staggering.

The reality has already begun to kick in. German Chancellor Friedrich Merz recently suggested that Ukraine would have to concede some of its territory to Russia to end the war but get a faster track to EU membership in exchange. The EU's defence chief, Andrius Kubilius, has gone further by claiming that NATO membership for Ukraine was out of the question and EU membership was going to be a "complicated process". Instead, he proposed a military union of Ukraine and other European countries – an idea that Moscow will reject, interpreting it as NATO through the back door.

What these contradictory statements manifest is that the main bargain over the contours of peace is currently going not so much between Zelenskyy and Putin, but between Zelenskyy and his Western, primarily European, allies.

As Budanov recently claimed, the positions of Kyiv and Moscow can be moved closer to what is realistically attainable in peace talks. But Zelenskyy needs to show at least some kind of gain for Ukraine when a very unpalatable version of a peace treaty is finally signed. Ideally, that gain would be EU membership or real security guarantees, but as Merz and Kubilius's statements suggest, the chances of attaining either are slim.

The frustration among Ukrainians is already palpable. The head of the Ukrainian parliament's fiscal committee, Danylo Hetmantsev, said European officials should stop seeing Ukrainians as "a tool for solving someone's geopolitical tasks" or as a "human shield". They have no right to define Ukraine's destiny, he insisted.

But Zelenskyy, who is dogged by a large-scale investigation into corruption involving his immediate entourage, seems to hold no cards to play against Russia or his Western allies. The status quo in which he retains the position of a war leader serves him well, but it is increasingly becoming untenable.