The Third Anniversary of the Russia-Ukraine War: Resistance, Disillusionment, and Endgame

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Editor's Note

On February 24, 2022, Russia launched airstrikes on more than ten Ukrainian cities, including Kyiv, marking the beginning of the war. Now it is 2025, three years have quietly passed, and the world has undergone drastic changes. Public attention has shifted to new events, and news about the war in Ukraine has gradually faded from the headlines. Yet on Ukrainian soil, the fighting has never ceased, and the casualties continue.

How are ordinary Ukrainians doing? What does Trump's second presidency mean for the course of the war? What might the endgame look like for Ukraine? How should we make sense of the past three years?

In this episode, we invite international affairs commentators Lu Chen and Gong Jue to share their insights.

Hosts

• Wang Qing

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Guests

• Lu Chen

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Transcript

The Third Year of the War: Key Milestones and Historical Significance

Wang Qing: The last time we recorded an episode about the war in Ukraine was around this time last year, in 2024, marking the second anniversary of the war. At that time, everyone already felt exhausted and disheartened because there had been virtually no breakthroughs on the battlefield.

This year, those feelings are even more pronounced—just a month before, Trump was sworn in as the new president of the United States. The U.S. plays a key role in the Ukraine conflict, and its presidential election has a major impact on the situation.

As we're recording this episode, the annual Munich Security Conference is underway, and the Ukraine issue has been brought up multiple times. I'd like to ask our two guests: You've both been following the Russia-Ukraine conflict for a long time and are engaged in related media and public commentary. How do you feel now, as the war has reached this point?

Gong Jue: At the end of our last episode, Lu Chen mentioned that the West claims defending Ukraine is about defending its own values. Now we need to consider how much willingness the West actually has to invest in defending those values.

If we take the West as being led by the United States, then right now, not only is the U.S. unwilling to defend those values, it may even be undermining them. To exaggerate a bit: if Russia continues advancing into Europe, some of the MAGA crowd in the U.S. might not only refrain from stopping it, but actually be pleased, thinking the European order can be rewritten into a state more aligned with their ideal vision.

Lu Chen: We hesitated a lot while preparing this episode—I felt the content might be quite jarring for the audience. I'm disappointed, but not surprised. Recently, people have been bringing up the Winter War between the Soviet Union and Finland again—perhaps a foreshadowing of Ukraine's future.

In fact, since the beginning of this war, people have been comparing it to the Winter War. I even discussed it on Weibo at the time. Now, three years and over a thousand days later, it all seems to be unfolding as predicted as the Winter War—each step deepens one's disillusionment with the international order, modern values, and even human nature itself.

The Winter War broke out in 1939 and lasted less than five months, much shorter than the Russia-Ukraine war.

But in terms of the pre-war military balance, relative national strength, and war objectives, it shared many similarities with the Russia-Europe situation in 2022, which is why experts analyzed it at the time. At the time, the Soviet Union used the

alleged threat Finland posed to Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) as justification to launch an attack.

The USSR's goal was clear: to annex Finland. Naturally, Finland couldn't accept this, and the war broke out at the end of 1939. At the time, Finland was poor and underdeveloped, with very few highways, relying primarily on rail transport. Facing a massive neighbor, Finland faced an enormous disparity in strength as a small country.

But in the early stages of the war, the Soviet Union failed to translate its advantages in resources, technology, and manpower into battlefield success. During the first two months, it was beaten back by Finland with heavy losses—this outcome shocked the international community.

However, Finland ultimately did not win the war. After five months, it had sacrificed nearly all of its fighting-age population and signed an agreement ceding 10% of its territory, thus ending the conflict.

It can't be considered as a victory for Finland—after all, ceding territory amounts to admitting defeat on the battlefield. It also led to serious historical consequences, as Finland later cooperated with Nazi Germany during World War II in an attempt to reclaim the lost land.

But Finland managed to secure a relatively high degree of independence in the international community during World War II, gaining broad recognition. After all, its military performance earned it a degree of respect, leading the international community to accept it as an independent nation. The Soviet Union's gains and losses in the Winter War were disproportionate—it gained territory and a nominal victory, but its image as a military superpower was shattered.

Since February 24, 2022, people have speculated that the Russia-Ukraine war might end similarly to the Winter War. Later, when Zelensky refused to leave Ukraine and the country put up fierce resistance, part of that prediction became reality. At the end of 2022, when Ukraine reclaimed Kharkiv, there was a brief period of optimism. Many believed this proved that the post-1945 international order and legal system had evolved, offering more stability than before World War II, and that it could deliver peace, justice, and sustainable development. But now we all know—those promises and hopes have ultimately come to nothing.

Ruo Han: To be honest, I felt a bit guilty while preparing this episode. When the war first broke out, Wang Qing and I went to the frontlines and followed the situation closely. But over the past two years, so much has happened in the world—my personal and professional focus have both been diverted. This also reflects the current state of journalism and the media industry: there are so many disasters, and people's attention keeps getting pulled in new directions. After the Ukraine war, the war on Gaza broke out, and then the U.S. election, which directly affects the trajectory of Ukraine.

I can understand why Lu Chen and Gong Jue, who have followed this topic closely for so long, would feel disheartened. I listened to last year's episode—Lu Chen's predictions were spot on. Recently, the Trump administration tore up the previous three years of U.S. commitments to Kyiv—this could mark a turning point in the war.

Gong Jue: When we recorded last year's episode, the U.S. House of Representatives stalled the Ukraine aid bill for a long time. Though the aid eventually resumed, it had already caused significant negative impacts on Ukraine's resistance, both materially and psychologically—and that impact persists to this day.

In the early stages, due to the delay in U.S. supplies, many Ukrainian positions and troops were lost because of the lack of support. By the time the aid arrived, the best defensive positions and top soldiers had already been lost. The consequences of the U.S. bill's delay were severe.

In 2023, the Russia-Ukraine war reached a stalemate. By 2024, Russia regained the upper hand on the battlefield, advancing steadily, especially in eastern and southeastern Ukraine. In 2024, the Russian military's advances were mainly due to artillery superiority; by 2025, its manpower advantage also became evident. From 2023 to 2024, Russia successfully recruited large numbers of troops, luring rural and small-town residents with high pay. This created a manpower advantage that allowed continuous advances along the southeastern front. Last year, we discussed the Avdiivka front. Since then, Ukraine's fortified stronghold cities in the southeast have

fallen one after another. It's expected that more cities will fall to Russian forces in the coming months.

Wang Qing: Since the Trump administration took office, its stance toward Ukraine has been very tough, and Russia seems to be in an overwhelmingly advantageous position. Does it still make sense to follow frontline developments in Ukraine?

Lu Chen: From a practical standpoint, yes. Right now, the Russian military has complete dominance on the battlefield. Before any peace negotiations, the positions to which they advance may determine the eventual lines of control.

Of course, if the outcome of negotiations can alter the current situation, then the front line developments may become less relevant. But at present, Russia's advantage is obvious, so monitoring the front lines still holds significant meaning for soldiers and civilians on both sides.

Gong Jue: Sometimes battles over seemingly inconspicuous towns can have major implications. For instance, a large coal mine southwest of Pokrovsk, currently under Russian attack, accounts for one-third of Ukraine's annual coal production. It has ceased operations due to the encroaching front line. Ukraine's economy relies heavily on its metallurgical industry, and the high-quality coal from that mine is a key energy source for it. If Russia holds the mine after the war, Ukraine's metallurgy sector will lose a crucial domestic energy source and be forced to rely on imports. This would be extremely detrimental to Ukraine's postwar economic development. It shows how seemingly minor locations can end up having sweeping consequences for a country's postwar fate.

In 2024, aside from Ukraine's retreat along the southeastern front, there was also a turning point. In August, Ukraine launched a large-scale offensive in Russia's Kursk Oblast. From the perspective of Russia's overall size, the territory Ukraine gained was negligible. But it significantly shifted the dynamics of the war, as they occupied one county-level town in Kursk and surrounding villages.

Ukraine launched the offensive to regain the initiative on the battlefield and slow down the Russian advance in southeastern Donbas. But in the end, it didn't achieve that goal—in fact, by diverting elite troops, Ukraine weakened its forces in southeastern Donbas, which allowed Russia to speed up its advances.

Still, the Kursk operation was significant in terms of boosting morale, seizing some battlefield initiative, and strengthening Ukraine's bargaining position. I was in Ukraine at the time, and it was obvious that public morale surged for a short period after the operation began. Before that, social media had been full of satire about Ukraine's domestic issues, especially the conscription situation. After the offensive began, the tone suddenly shifted—people started mocking Russia instead. Online sentiment changed accordingly. But after a few months, social media gradually returned to its previous state, with Ukrainians once again joking about domestic politics and conscription issues.

Wang Qing: Gong Jue, when you traveled to Ukraine last summer, you happened to be there during the Kursk offensive. Did that trip make today's outcome feel unexpected to you? Or had you already anticipated how things would unfold?

Gong Jue: I wasn't surprised. The situation in Ukraine has largely depended not on itself, but on what happened afterward—like the events of November 20, 2024. When I visited Ukraine in August, what locals cared about most was who would win the U.S. election.

At the time, Harris was leading in the polls, and people still held out hope. But by September and October, Biden kept delaying approval for Ukraine to strike targets inside Russia—clearly due to the election. This gradually eroded Ukrainians' confidence in the Biden administration.

After Trump won, many Ukrainians felt Biden had been too slow with support and started hoping that Trump's leadership might change the course of the war. But looking at things now—it's hard to say whether any real change will come at all.

The Rise and Fall of Public Sentiment: From Resistance, War Fatigue, to Disillusionment

Wang Qing: In our previous conversations, you mentioned that war-weariness isn't limited to countries supplying aid in the West—it's also present in countries directly affected by the war, like Ukraine and Russia. We don't know much about the situation in Russia, but in Ukraine, the atmosphere and morale now seem very different from the early days of united resistance. Many people want the war to end. Did you sense that mood while in Ukraine? Or is this just part of Russia's propaganda campaign?

Gong Jue: I did feel a strong sense of war fatigue in Ukraine. Most people just want the war to be over as soon as possible. But at the same time, they're adamant that peace shouldn't be reached hastily. Because of the lessons from the two previous Minsk agreements—they're worried Russia won't honor its commitments. So people hope for real security guarantees to make sure any ceasefire or peace agreement will be lasting.

Russia's propaganda machine has indeed been very active on social media. Many suspicious accounts are mocking Ukrainian conscription—some were created recently and post nothing but short videos on this subject. They resemble Russian bots. In the first year of the war, Meta was actively removing these accounts—but now, they've stopped bothering.

Ukrainians themselves are aware that their war-weariness might seem inappropriate. After all, soldiers on the front lines are still dying. But having lived under constant bombardment for so long, their exhaustion, frustration, and desire for relief are things we can hardly relate to.

I also heard many complaints in Ukraine about the government, particularly about corruption. A taxi driver in Kyiv told me that public sentiment now is completely different from the first year of the war. He said that patriotic enthusiasm faded quickly, and after that, it became every man for himself. This shows that people are disappointed and have grown somewhat cynical.

Wang Qing: Lu Chen, what are your thoughts on this? Have you noticed any real changes in Ukrainian public opinion compared to the first year of the war?

Lu Chen: Building on what Gong Jue just said—last year's delay in U.S. aid deepened the divide within Ukraine between those who've joined the military and those who haven't. Those who are already fighting feel they've staked everything on the country's fate, while those who haven't increasingly try to avoid service—and believe they're justified in doing so. The delays from the U.S. confirmed many people's worst fears—it made them feel like maybe the war isn't worth it.

This kind of mentality has a strong impact. The ordinary Ukrainian soldiers I've spoken with often harbor deep resentment toward male friends and neighbors of military age who haven't enlisted. They see them as cowards or selfish. And from what I've gathered, that resentment is even stronger among the soldiers' families—because they have more time to dwell on it.

Honestly, even from the first year of the war, people knew that the sudden unity and passion it inspired couldn't last. Ukraine didn't have much time to drag things out until victory, especially given the stark disparity in national power.

Yet the conflict still devolved into the largest war of attrition since World War II. As an observer, I've watched everything unfold step by step and felt so powerless. It's hard to even imagine what it feels like for those living through it. They must be deeply disappointed, feeling that everything they invested and hoped for in the beginning has turned into an illusion.

Ruo Han: From your perspectives, what would need to happen to change the situation in Ukraine? Not assuming any of those will necessarily happen, just in a kind of retrospective analysis.

Lu Chen: It's extremely difficult to change the current situation. While there are a few factors that could make a difference, achieving them would require something close to a miracle.

For example, citizens of major EU countries would have to willingly give up their current peace, prosperity, and comfort in order to throw themselves into the war effort—which is almost impossible. From the U.S. perspective, one political party would have to truly treat the Ukraine issue as a core national interest, rather than a matter of face-saving or a bargaining chip.

Looking back, many believe that if Obama had taken a hard line when Crimea was annexed in 2014, the outcome might have been different. But at the time, Obama—along with most world leaders—chose the easier, slower path. So it's hard to place blame on him now. Changing the course of events would require powerful actors to alter their behavior at pivotal moments—which is incredibly hard to pull off.

Gong Jue: If we're looking back in hindsight, I think the moment after Ukraine's Kharkiv counteroffensive in the fall of 2022—when Russia announced mobilization—was a critical turning point. At the time, Ukraine and its Western

allies grew overconfident after the victory, thinking Russia's mobilization wasn't a big deal.

They believed Russia couldn't ramp up its industrial capacity. But as we saw later, while Russia's production capacity didn't drastically improve, it still proved more effective than Europe's complacent approach.

In 2023, Russia used money to recruit soldiers, while Ukraine struggled with conscription—low efficiency, widespread difficulty, and mounting social tension. If Ukraine and the West had taken Russia's mobilization seriously in 2022, expanding conscription reserves and boosting arms production, then the situation on the battlefield might have been different.At the very least, Ukraine could have maintained an edge in 2023, and by 2024, both sides might have been on more equal footing, instead of Russia having such a significant upper hand.

Ruo Han: Last year, Gong Jue went to Ukraine and wrote a piece titled "Literary Choices During the War," and this offered a unique angle into how Ukrainians perceive their inner struggles and identity during wartime. Russian literature has had a deep influence on Ukrainians—many streets in Ukraine are still named after Russian authors. But Ukrainians have also maintained a sense of national identity through literature, and some literary qualities seem to echo what's happening on the battlefield. In your interviews, have you seen a shift in Ukrainians' attitudes toward the war reflected in their literature?

Gong Jue: The idea that Russian literature inherently represents empire, while Ukrainian literature inherently celebrates freedom—from a social science perspective, that's arguably an essentialist view, and perhaps even a kind of modern national myth Ukraine has developed.

You can find themes of liberty and resistance even in 19th-century Russian literature. Likewise, imperialist elements can be found in Soviet-era Ukrainian literature. I think the real difference lies in how today's societies and states choose to interpret, frame, and reflect on classical literature. Russia currently has a strong militaristic atmosphere, and it emphasizes the chauvinistic and imperial aspects of its 19th-century literature, with little critical reflection. Ukraine, on the other hand, in its pursuit of freedom and departure from empire, highlights the liberatory elements in classical literature when embracing it.

The literary canon itself is static, but what each country or society chooses to take from it—that's a contemporary decision.

Wang Qing: I just want to recommend Gong Jue's article, "What Should Ukrainians Do With Russian Literature During Wartime?"—we'll link it in the episode description. Gong Jue's way of engaging with Ukrainian society is fascinating. Before I went to Ukraine, I actually asked him for some advice. He said I should observe the changes in people's lives through ordinary schools or everyday institutions. Because what happens on the front lines is relatively easy to track, but changes in daily life are much harder to notice.

Looking back, the timing of Gong Jue's visit may have coincided with the last possible turning point in the war. The U.S. election hadn't started yet, Harris was rising in the polls, and there were some internal shifts happening in Ukraine. It felt like a pivotal moment.

Gong Jue: Looking back now, yes—that was a very precise moment. Morale wasn't exactly high in Ukraine at the time, but things were relatively calm. People still had the mental space to talk about literature. Today, I can't even imagine trying to strike up a conversation about that. They'd probably shut me down immediately—after all, the country is now facing a massive crisis.

Russia–Ukraine Peace Talks: Who Gets to Sit at the Table?

Wang Qing: Over the past few years, we've been following the situation in Ukraine closely, but after Trump was elected, I started feeling like the outcome had already been decided. Before, I thought the war would be tough, but I didn't have this overwhelming sense of finality. Since Trump's election, many analysts have offered varying takes on U.S. domestic politics, global dynamics, and China-U.S. relations. But when it comes to Ukraine, everyone seems to agree that Trump's victory is bad news for Kyiv—there's a kind of fatalism about it.

Recently, Trump had a long phone call with Putin. After that, a "100-day peace plan" for Ukraine, supposedly proposed by the U.S., started circulating online. The plan demands a ceasefire in Ukraine by April 20, a freeze on the eastern front, and the withdrawal of troops from Russia's Kursk region. The plan was negotiated

exclusively between the United States and Russia, without the participation of Ukraine or its European NATO allies. It also stipulates that Ukraine would serve as a permanent buffer zone for Europe and never join NATO.

I'd like to ask both of you—what do you think of this peace plan? How much of it seems realistic, and how much might just be a smokescreen? At this point in time, what might the endgame of the Ukraine war look like? Could we see a conclusion within this year?

Lu Chen: It's hard to say. Lately in the U.S. news, statements keep getting contradicted and clarified—everyone's saying different things. Although Trump's general position is relatively clear, I honestly can't make sense of the U.S.'s concrete plan on Ukraine.

When it comes to how the war might end, there have been a few possible scenarios circulating since 2021–2022. One scenario resembles the Winter War: Ukraine cedes part of its territory and then rebuilds its international standing from that position. Another is that if Ukraine is defeated, its government could be overthrown and replaced with one that includes pro-Russian figures or people installed by Russia through a peace treaty. In that case, Ukraine would essentially become a Russian vassal or colony.

Even now, I still think both scenarios are on the table. Of course, the idealistic version is that Ukraine forms a close relationship with the EU and NATO—even if it loses some territory, it isn't abandoned after the war. But it's better not to be overly optimistic as for now.

Gong Jue: There are all kinds of peace proposals circulating online, and it's hard to tell which are real. In April 2022, Russia and Ukraine nearly reached an agreement in Istanbul, but it ultimately fell through due to various factors.

That one might have been too humiliating for Ukraine. It not only involved territorial concessions, but also demanded drastic military downsizing—virtually the disbanding of its armed forces. On top of that came the Bucha massacre and Boris Johnson's visit to Ukraine, where he promised increased support. As a result, Ukraine refused to sign.

The version circulating now is similar to the Istanbul deal. With Russia now in a stronger position, it might again propose terms like limiting the size of Ukraine's military or granting special status to the Russian language. In the early stages of negotiations, both sides will likely take tough public stances, while private talks happen behind the scenes.

You can see some issues just from the statements of U.S. Secretary of Defense Hegseth—he previously said that Ukraine reclaiming territory and joining NATO was unrealistic, then later walked back his remarks. His behavior in this regard is like someone who doesn't know how to play cards—he lays his hand on the table as soon as he sits down, then tries to take it back. It's baffling.

Wang Qing: In this round of Ukraine-related negotiations, have any of Trump's statements struck you as surprising or particularly memorable? How would you summarize his stance on the war?

Lu Chen: I've heard friends in the U.S. say that Trump is saying things Biden and the Democrats don't dare to say out loud. In this regard, he represents the views of most Americans. Even if there's just a possibility of gaining some practical benefits through a deal, they're willing to try.

Gong Jue: Judging from Trump's statements, he doesn't care at all about the war in Ukraine, the Ukrainian people, or Europe's future. Just a few days ago, in a Fox News interview, he said that once a deal is signed, the U.S. should pull out—and whether Ukraine becomes part of Russia doesn't matter. He clearly doesn't care how those words are received, or what Ukrainians think of them.

What's even more disturbing was Vance's speech at the Munich Security Conference. He seemed to want Europe to become more like Russia, claiming that it's been ruined by the "white left." He thinks Europe needs a figure like Putin to "set things right," with overtones of "Make Europe Great Again." If Putin called Vance and said he wanted to attack Europe, Vance might just agree.

Wang Qing: So what do you think Putin's current state of mind is?

Gong Jue: Aside from the second half of 2022, he's probably felt extremely confident all along. The intelligence he receives is likely all good news with no bad, and on the battlefield, Russia does currently have the upper hand.

However, this advantage isn't overwhelming—it's built entirely on a total disregard for Russian soldiers' lives, and the casualties have been severe. Since the second half of 2024, analysts have noted that Russia's recruitment numbers can no longer keep up with losses on the front lines. Previously, recruitment numbers far exceeded losses, allowing for waves of infantry assaults. But now, the casualties are becoming harder to replace. Recently there have even been reports of soldiers on crutches being forced to the front, and of steadily dwindling equipment supplies. There are also lots of memes online mocking the Russian army—charging on motorcycles and scooters, using donkeys for logistics, and so on.

So this military advantage won't last forever. In November and December 2024, Putin may have felt somewhat anxious, worried that Trump might increase aid to Ukraine—but he probably didn't expect the stance Trump ended up taking. Now he's probably at ease, thinking he might get everything he wants with the resources already at hand.

Lu Chen: Just to add—when we talk about Russia's advantage on the front lines, it's in comparison to 2023. It doesn't mean Russia now has overwhelming military power or rapid advances. The baseline in 2023 was low. Compared to that, in 2024, their pace improved from 2–3 kilometers a day to around 10 kilometers. But even so, progress on the front remains slow—they can still spend five months fighting over a single village.

Ruo Han: It feels like Russia's entire war strategy is based on manpower attrition—just wearing Ukraine down through sheer numbers.

Gong Jue: Much of the Russian military's success is based on total disregard for soldiers' lives. According to estimates by BBC News Russian and independent Russian media, the confirmed number of Russian military casualties is 93,641.

They believe the real death toll is at least double that—around 180,000 to 190,000. Because of the rapid pace of deaths, the actual number of killed is estimated to exceed 200,000. The casualty ratio is somewhere between 1:2 and 1:4, so the number of wounded may be around 600,000 to 700,000. Some of the wounded return to the front; others are left permanently disabled. So an estimate of around 800,000 total casualties seems reasonable. Ukraine's losses are also considerable. And given the difference in population size, the Ukrainian public feels the losses far more acutely than the Russian public does. And their political systems differ—Ukrainians are able to speak openly about their suffering, while Russians are not.

Wang Qing: Have you noticed any changes in Zelensky's current state? If the situation continues along the path Trump's administration is pushing, what might Zelensky's fate be?

Lu Chen: Last year, a journalist who interviewed Zelensky wrote bluntly that he needed rest. At the time, he could barely listen to what others were saying, and even those close to him found it difficult to communicate with him effectively.

He was unwilling to listen or discuss many topics. At that point, there were already calm and Ukraine-friendly voices saying that he might no longer be the most suitable leader during wartime. But in this situation, he can't step down—he has no choice. Judging from his speeches and interviews—at the beginning of 2022, he was skilled at delivering speeches and persuading people. He could adapt his message to different audiences and spoke with charisma. But by the second half of 2024, his tone had grown increasingly assertive and direct. He began to discard rhetorical flourishes and just speak the plain truth. That may be an indirect reflection of his mental and emotional state.

Gong Jue: Starting in October, he seemed to regain a sense of realism in his diplomatic efforts. Back in September, he had pinned all his hopes on a Democratic victory.

His visit to the U.S. even sparked backlash from Republicans. After October, Ukrainian diplomacy began preparing for the possibility of Trump winning. The rhetoric also shifted—they started expressing demands using Trump's favored language. From a domestic perspective, many in Ukraine expect a ceasefire could come soon. After that, both presidential and parliamentary elections would likely follow. Ukraine's political circles are already quietly preparing. Zelensky has begun targeting his rivals—for example, he recently announced sanctions against

Poroshenko. If a presidential election is held immediately after the war, the biggest uncertainty is whether Zaluzhnyi will run. If he does, Zelensky's political fate is unpredictable. If he doesn't, Zelensky is very likely to win re-election. That's because the other opposition figures—like Poroshenko and Tymoshenko—are from the old political class and have extremely low public support. Even though the public is dissatisfied with Zelensky's administration, they'd still rather choose him than the alternatives. So at this point, Ukraine's political future largely hinges on whether Zaluzhnyi decides to run.

Lu Chen: I've also noticed that Ukrainian media and academia are generally unhappy with the pace of domestic reforms over the past three years. They believe reforms in the defense ministry, judiciary, and other areas have made little progress, and many are questioning the government's sincerity. Ukraine made numerous reform pledges to join NATO and the EU, but third-party assessments show that the progress hasn't lived up to expectations.

For example, in anti-corruption efforts, the National Anti-Corruption Bureau (founded in 2015) had staff trained in the U.S. and other Western countries. They developed a strong sense of independence, which made the government uneasy. Zelensky then gave anti-corruption enforcement powers to the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU), leading to turf wars between the two agencies. When it came to prosecuting the oligarch Kolomoisky, both agencies opened investigations at the same time. The SBU rushed in to arrest him first and took control of the investigation. This made the public lose faith in anti-corruption efforts. Situations like this are extremely harmful to Ukraine's reform process.

Ruo Han: Earlier, Gong Jue mentioned that judging by the U.S. response, they don't seem to care much about Europe's future. If peace talks do begin, what kind of far-reaching impact might that have on the European continent—or even on democratic systems as a whole?

Wang Qing: Right—Trump seems to be completely bypassing Europe in this so-called peace plan. And he seems to think this approach is perfectly reasonable—morally, diplomatically, and practically. Do you think this approach to solving the Ukraine issue—without Europe—is realistically feasible? Or is it just posturing for now, with the expectation that allies will eventually need to be placated or brought on board?

Gong Jue: As of now, Trump's special envoy on Ukraine has said that Europe doesn't need to be at the negotiating table—his reasoning is that there are already too many players at the table. Europe will find it hard to secure a seat in the talks. Ukraine would definitely want Europe to be there, but Russia will push hard to exclude them—and on the U.S. side, Trump might only want Ukraine at the table.

Wang Qing: Europe itself is facing many problems—Germany has an election coming up, and countries like France are going through internal upheaval. In this context, European attention to Ukraine may be waning. Trump's approach might actually offer European politicians a convenient out—it lets them breathe a sigh of relief.

Lu Chen: I agree.

Gong Jue: But from my perspective, the threat to Europe is very real. Many Europeans have this wishful thinking that Russia won't dare cross NATO's borders. But that's overly optimistic. If Russian tanks ever roll into Berlin, it's hard to say the politicians from AfD wouldn't side with Russia.

Wang Qing: That wishful thinking is definitely strong in Europe. They likely believe that Russia won't cross NATO's borders. Even if there is conflict, once Ukraine and Russia draw a new border, it'll still be some distance from the EU frontier. That might just be wishful thinking on their part, but it's something I felt quite clearly during the years I lived in Europe.

After the war in Ukraine, the war on Gaza broke out as well. These two wars differ in their causes, scope, and the populations involved, but Europe seems to be undergoing a kind of fragmentation. In the past, the narrative that "Ukraine is part of Europe" was quite persuasive within Europe. But public support is clearly declining now. Gong Jue, when you were in Ukraine, did you feel any shift in how Ukrainians view Europe? Do they still hope for help from Europe—or have they given up and feel Europe can't be relied on?

Gong Jue: Ukrainians are generally disappointed with Europe. They feel Europe has let them down. Their strongest dissatisfaction is directed at Poland. Although the two governments have expressed mutual support at the official level, frictions among their people continue to arise.

On one hand, there are historical reasons—the Volhynia Massacre during World War II has long been a point of tension between the two nations. On the other hand, most Ukrainians heading to Europe pass through Poland. I experienced this myself—I had to wait 14 hours at the border checkpoint when leaving Ukraine for Poland. People are asking: it's been three years of war—why hasn't Poland improved efficiency at the border and opened more lanes? Another friend said that when taking the train through the checkpoint, it was pouring rain, and everyone had to get off, getting drenched because the checkpoint didn't even have a shelter.

Polish border officials aren't friendly to Ukrainians either. They just speak Polish, assuming Ukrainians can understand. In the streets of Warsaw, I even saw job postings in Ukrainian looking for toilet cleaners. That made Ukrainians feel deeply humiliated. So now, many Ukrainians in Europe are beginning to return home, even though the war is still ongoing—because they can't stand the feeling of being second-class citizens in Europe.

Of course, many have settled in Europe and obtained legal status or citizenship. These people may not return to Ukraine to help with postwar reconstruction.

Wang Qing: Previously, there had been calls suggesting that China could play a role in facilitating a peace agreement in Ukraine, and China had also sent signals indicating its willingness to do so. Zelensky and the Ukrainian government have also had communications with China.

After Trump was elected, he even called for China to play a more significant role. Now that Trump and Putin have spoken on the phone, and pro-Russian peace plans are circulating, do you think China can still play any meaningful role under these circumstances? Western societies once hoped China could act as a kind of go-between between Russia and the West—is that still possible?

Lu Chen: This depends on the progress of peace negotiations mediated by the United States. If Trump can actually get Russia and Ukraine to implement the terms they discussed on that phone call, then China and even Europe might have no space to get involved. That said, there may still be roles to play in postwar reconstruction, investment, and humanitarian aid.

But it's unclear whether Trump will stay committed to pushing for peace talks. If talks keep stalling, he may simply walk away from the issue. At that point, everything could reset to square one. The peace plans previously pushed by China, Brazil, Turkey, and others might come back into play. But ultimately, it depends on what Trump does in the next 100 days.

Gong Jue: I think I saw a news story claiming that the Trump-Putin phone call was brokered by China, but it's unclear whether that's true. Once those two have a direct line, they might not need China's help anymore—at least for now. Back in October, Ukraine had already started preparing for Trump's return to office. They even submitted a proposal to candidate Trump outlining their post-election expectations. One clause was that the U.S. would have the right to vet participants in Ukraine's reconstruction. That would mean the U.S. could decide who gets to participate in the

rebuilding process. It's easy to imagine the U.S. would exclude certain countries. But this is just a proposal—whether it actually gets implemented is uncertain. Also, it's hard to say whether a Trump-led U.S. would show sincerity or competence in reconstruction. Ukraine would definitely want broad participation in rebuilding efforts—because it benefits them. But it'll no doubt be a complex geopolitical chess match.

Wang Qing: So what do you think is a realistic and workable timeline? The Minsk Agreement didn't work out—so what kind of timeline might there be for a future deal like it? Is there any chance of the fighting on the ground ending soon? Roughly when might that happen?

Lu Chen: Honestly, I don't think the current conditions are ripe for a peace agreement. Take this "100-day plan," for example—I don't think it's credible. The conflicts of interest are too severe. Putin has too many demands. He won't settle for the status quo. The root of the war goes back to late 2021, when Putin submitted a proposal via his foreign ministry calling for a renegotiation with the U.S.

That document explicitly demanded a renegotiation of the balance of power in Europe and the Eurasian security order. That shows Russia's goal was never just Ukraine—it's the U.S., and what it really wants is for NATO to give up some of its member states. The Russian government has consistently maintained that its position hasn't changed.

So a deal with Ukraine won’t be the end point. It's unlikely that the final signature will come from the Ukrainian president; chances are it'll be signed by the NATO Secretary General or the U.S. president.

Gong Jue: My guess is a bit different from yours. I think that in the short term—within the next few months—a temporary ceasefire deal is possible. Many of Russia’s outrageous demands might just be bargaining tactics for the opening round.

When real negotiations begin, they might settle on an agreement that’s bad for Ukraine—but not catastrophic. But later on, Russia could regroup and wait to see how the situation evolves. Say, four years from now, Trump’s term ends and a Democrat takes office to clean up the mess. If the U.S. appears weak, Russia may strike again. The scenario of February 24, 2022, could play out again.

And in Russia’s domestic media environment, whenever the economy hits a wall, the government starts looking for an external enemy. Russia always finds a pretext. Future targets could include Georgia, Kazakhstan, Armenia, Moldova, or the Baltic states. And the internet with a short memory may forget all about Ukraine in a few years, only to start accusing another country of being Nazis. So yes, the course of history may shift because of unexpected events, but the broader trend is already clear. We need to be mentally prepared for the worst, and materially prepared as well—assuming, of course, that we survive the next wave of crises.