

Europe as the Last Obstacle on Russia's Path to Victory in Ukraine?

Arkady Mil-Man and Yaron Gamburg | No. 2038 | September 29, 2025

Russian President Putin sees an opportunity to drive a wedge into the transatlantic partnership, exploiting disagreements between Washington and its European allies over the Ukrainian issue. From Moscow's perspective, Europe remains the last obstacle to achieving its goals in the war due to its geographical proximity to Ukraine and Russia, its economic power, and its sweeping support for Ukraine, as well as its readiness to provide both military and economic assistance. Against this backdrop, Russia has intensified its rhetoric toward Europe and has escalated its military activity, such as the recent actions against Poland, Romania, and Estonia.

In recent weeks, especially after the Trump–Putin summit in Alaska on August 15, followed by President Trump's meetings with European leaders and the Ukrainian president in Washington on August 18, Russia's rhetoric toward the European states and their leaders has become increasingly harsh. The reason is clear: The European governments continue to demonstrate cohesive and resolute support for Ukraine's independence, its war efforts, and safeguarding its interests within any future peace settlement.

While Putin seeks to enlist President Trump's support to end the war in Ukraine on terms favorable to Russia, he views the European states as the main obstacle. He sees Trump's stance, emphasizing a ceasefire and/or quick conclusion of the war, without delving into the details of an agreement between Russia and Ukraine, and on opening a new chapter in economic relations with Russia, as creating an opportunity. At the Alaska press conference, the [Russian president emphasized](#) regarding the possibility of ending the war: "We expect that Kyiv and European capitals will perceive that constructively and that they won't throw a wrench in the works. They will not make any attempts to use some backroom dealings or conduct provocations to torpedo the nascent progress."

These remarks reflect Putin's fear of Europe's determination to block his efforts to secure a deal with Trump over the Ukrainian issue. Beyond the diplomatic arena, Putin is also concerned by Europe's growing ability to supply military aid to Ukraine. Data on military assistance shows that the Europeans are sustaining a high and consistent level of support. A significant share of the weapons supplied no longer comes from existing stockpiles but is purchased directly from defense industries. Since March, Europe has surpassed the United States in the overall volume of military assistance provided through procurement contracts with defense firms. On September 9, Kaja Kallas, the European Union's High Representative for Foreign Affairs, [announced](#) that EU member states had provided Ukraine with €25 billion in assistance this year alone—a record figure since the start of the war. To date, the total financial aid is estimated at €169 billion, including €63 billion in military support.

Moreover, Ukraine is advancing cooperation with several European countries in the development of ammunition production and advanced weapons systems. For example, in May this year, the governments of Germany and Ukraine announced a partnership to establish an industrial framework in both countries for the production of advanced long-range missiles. In August 2025, the Swedish government declared a new partnership with Ukraine for the production of ammunition and weapons systems to be implemented in Sweden. Similar agreements have been signed in recent months between Ukraine and Romania, Poland, and Denmark. This strategy strengthens Ukraine's military and economic integration into Europe—an outcome Russia sought to prevent through its invasion of Ukraine. Putin has also taken note of the fact that Europe has trained over 150,000 Ukrainian soldiers and officers from various branches of the armed forces, including Ukrainian Air Force pilots.

One of Putin's major concerns is Europe's potential role in a future settlement in Ukraine that could include a European military presence on Ukrainian soil. On several occasions after the Alaska summit, the Russian president reiterated his firm stance that such a presence is unnecessary and unacceptable to Russia.

Furthermore, European sanctions on Russia continue to strain its economy, although their effectiveness remains a matter of debate. The European Union's 18th package of sanctions entered into force in July 2025. It includes lowering the price cap on Russian oil to \$47 per barrel, prohibiting the purchase of refined oil products made from Russian crude, sanctions against Russia's shadow fleet engaged in oil exports, and measures targeting various officials in the energy sector as well as those responsible for influence operations against European institutions. At present, the European Union is coordinating with the Trump administration on a new package of sanctions. Although Russia has found ways to circumvent some of the sanctions and adapt to the new reality, the mounting economic difficulties have affected the economy and its ability to sustain the war machine. [Recent data](#) indicate systemic challenges and stagnation. Inflation remains high, the central bank's interest rate stands at 17%, and a slowdown is evident across most sectors of the Russian economy.

Russia's toolbox for dealing with the European challenge is well known. It includes influence operations aimed at deepening internal divisions within the European Union; blatant election interference (as in Romania, where the Constitutional Court annulled the results of the first round of the presidential elections after intelligence revealed Russian meddling in the electoral process through social media platforms, including Telegram and TikTok); sowing fear among European populations through various provocations, including assassination attempts (in July 2024, US intelligence exposed a Russian plot to assassinate the CEO of the German defense conglomerate Rheinmetall); deploying the Russian propaganda apparatus; and bribing European politicians. The Kremlin has also escalated militarily against Europe. It attacked Poland with 19 drones on September 9; a Russian drone penetrated Romanian airspace for about 50 minutes on September 13; and three Russian Air Force MiG-31 aircraft entered roughly 10 kilometers into Estonian airspace on September 19. These actions, with significant escalation potential, are intended both to instill fear among local populations and to test Europe's response in advance of further measures.

From Russia's perspective, the reelection of US President Donald Trump has fundamentally shifted the trajectory of the war with Ukraine. In sharp contrast to President Biden's position,

the Trump administration has expressed dissatisfaction with the continuation of the war and with US involvement alongside Ukraine. It has maintained direct dialogue with Russia in the hope of normalizing bilateral relations—an approach serving Russia’s interests. Consequently, Europe’s resolute pro-Ukraine stance poses a complex challenge that Russia is determined to neutralize.

In recent months, a new Russian narrative has emerged in which Europe—rather than the “collective West” led by the United States—is portrayed as Russia’s primary adversary in its pursuit of a military and strategic victory in Ukraine. This propaganda line relies on manipulative claims, portraying European states as historically prone to totalitarianism, such as Italian fascism and German Nazism in the 20th century, which produced destructive global conflicts. German Chancellor Merz has [been described](#) as “a descendant of a Nazi family that served Hitler’s regime” and is accused of being motivated by revenge against Russia. France is [accused of collaborating](#) with the Nazi regime, while Britain is predictably accused of committing genocide in its overseas colonies.

According to Moscow, the current tensions in US–EU relations stem partly from European accusations of authoritarianism against Trump. Within this context, Moscow sees potential for rapprochement with Washington. Since Trump’s return to the White House, Moscow has identified growing rifts between the United States and Europe and has sought to widen them. While the United States is presented in Russian rhetoric as a potential partner with “shared conservative values,” Europe is depicted as a stubborn historical adversary, traditionally hostile toward Russia. Moscow’s primary objective is to drive a wedge into the transatlantic partnership between Europe and the United States, thereby weakening NATO and undermining Europe’s motivation to assist Ukraine.

The Trump administration’s policy toward Russia is thus viewed in Moscow as a strategic window of opportunity, bringing Russia—so it believes—within reach of victory in Ukraine. Isolating Europe while enlisting the United States into a comprehensive agreement that legitimizes Russia’s hold over Ukraine appears, from Moscow’s perspective, to be within reach. Renewed dialogue with Washington allows Russia to reclaim international legitimacy for continuing the war without concessions, while at the same time deepening divisions within the transatlantic alliance. While Russia sees President Trump as enabling a change in the rules of the game, Europe—thanks to its geographical proximity, economic power, and willingness to provide Ukraine with military and economic assistance—remains the last obstacle to Moscow’s goals. Russia’s success in undermining European unity could grant it a strategic advantage, but as long as Europe maintains a united front, it remains the most significant barrier to Putin’s ambitions.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurz, Eldad Shavit and Ela Greenberg