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■ WEEKLY ANALYSIS: The EU Advocates Strengthening NABU and SAPO While Also Bolstering Ukraine's Defence



Photo: RBC.ua

In early September, the National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine (NABU) and the Specialized Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office (SAPO) launched another high-profile investigation into alleged corruption involving senior Ukrainian officials. Operation “Carthage,” which remains ongoing, has already precipitated an emerging institutional crisis within Ukraine's Office of the Prosecutor General: both former Prosecutor General R. Kravchenko and his First Deputy, M. Vdovychenko, have tendered their resignations, creating a “leadership vacuum.”¹ Beyond the issue of corruption, the operation also raises another concern of particular significance amid the full-scale war: **the erosion of the authority and legitimacy of state institutions, particularly the presidency.**

NABU and SAPO's activities attracted particularly extensive media coverage in 2025–2026, a period marked by a series of high-profile investigative operations. The launch of the “Clean City” investigation in February 2025, concerning the unlawful appropriation of land in Kyiv, led to the dismissal of P. Olenych, Deputy Head of the Kyiv City State Administration. The case also undermined public confidence in both the city administration and the Kyiv City Council². The subsequent Chernyshov case, launched in July 2025, directly implicated the

¹ Кривіцька, О. (2026, 10 вересня). Злочинні кол-центри і Генеральна прокуратура. Все, що відомо на цей час про операцію «Карфаген». Радіо Свобода.

<https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/kryshuvannya-koltsentriv-kropyva-ofis-henprokurora-kravchenko/33851189.html>

² Суд відсторонив від роботи заступника голови КМДА Петра Оленича. (2025, 26 лютого). Радіо Свобода.

<https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/news-kmda-olenych-vidstoronyly/33329321.htmlradiosvoboda>

then-serving Deputy Prime Minister. Although his eventual dismissal formed part of a broader government reshuffle, the case precipitated a crisis of confidence in the Cabinet of Ministers and its personnel policy³. The same period also witnessed the so-called “July Crisis”—an attempt to subordinate NABU and SAPO to Ukraine’s Office of the Prosecutor General⁴. The stated grounds for this campaign were suspicions raised by the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU), the Office of the Prosecutor General, and the State Bureau of Investigation (SBI) concerning possible Russian involvement, data leaks, and abuses of power by NABU personnel. Searches conducted by these institutions triggered widespread criticism, as they were perceived less as efforts to investigate suspected misconduct than as political pressure and retaliation against NABU and SAPO for investigating senior officials⁵. The crisis culminated in the Verkhovna Rada’s adoption of Bill No. 12414, which granted the Prosecutor General decisive influence over procedural decisions in cases handled by NABU and SAPO. The President of Ukraine signed the legislation that same day⁶. The decision provoked a public backlash, culminating in the so-called “Cardboard Maidan”—a protest campaign against restrictions on the institutional independence of NABU and SAPO. Faced with the prospect of escalating public unrest and losing control of the situation, the Ukrainian government opted to preserve the pre-existing institutional arrangement. Bill No. 13533 was therefore adopted, restoring the previous safeguards for the agencies’ independence⁷. **Subsequent developments, however, suggest that the “July Crisis” marked the beginning of a new confrontation between government institutions and NABU and SAPO.** Notably, the period following July 2025 saw a series of large-scale operations that generated major scandals and destabilised the existing configuration of power. Foremost among these was Operation “Midas,” which dealt a direct blow to the reputation and functioning of the Office of the President of Ukraine. In the course of the operation, Energy Minister S. Hrynychuk⁸, Justice Minister H. Halushchenko⁹, and Head of the Office of the President A. Yermak¹⁰ were dismissed. Operations “Forrest Gump” and “Themis,” as well as the case involving R. Shurma, likewise directly concerned figures associated with the presidential office. Following revelations of pressure, I. Mudra, Deputy Head of the Office of the President, tendered her resignation¹¹. Finally, the previously discussed Operation “Carthage” precipitated an institutional crisis within the Office of the Prosecutor General. Taken together, these NABU and SAPO investigations reveal two discernible patterns: 1) *Anti-corruption investigations generate crises of public confidence in the authorities and disrupt the functioning of government institutions*; 2) *Officials’ resignations or dismissals are prompted by suspicion and involvement in an investigation, rather than by proven wrongdoing*. Accordingly, just as the actions of the SBU, the Office of the Prosecutor General, and the SBI towards NABU and SAPO have been interpreted as politically motivated, **the investigations conducted by the anti-corruption agencies may likewise be viewed as potentially serving as instruments of political pressure.**

³ Віцепрем’єру Чернишову оголосили підозру. Він каже, що «вивчає документи». (2025, 23 червня). Українська правда. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2025/06/23/7518357/pravda.com>

⁴ Патрікеєва, Н. (2025, 22 липня). Закон 12414: Зеленський підписав. Чи це кінець незалежності САП і НАБУ. BBC News Україна. <https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/articles/cgeqllep70nobbcc>

⁵ Війна СБУ проти НАБУ — чому це важливо. (2025, 21 липня). BBC News Україна. <https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/articles/cgmw01mkw2pobbcc>

⁶ Патрікеєва, Н. (2025, 22 липня). Закон 12414: Зеленський підписав. Чи це кінець незалежності САП і НАБУ. BBC News Україна. <https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/articles/cgeqllep70nobbcc>

⁷ Рада ухвалила закон про повернення незалежності НАБУ і САП. (2025, 31 липня). Українська правда. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2025/07/31/7524224/pravda.com>

⁸ Гринчук написала заяву про відставку. (2025, 12 листопада). Укрінформ. <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-politics/4058030-grincuk-napisala-zaavu-pro-vidstavku.html>

⁹ Полішук, В. (2025, 12 листопада). Галущенко написав заяву про звільнення. РБК-Україна. <https://www.rbc.ua/rus/news/galushchenko-yde-min-yustitsiyi-1762957853.htmlrbc>

¹⁰ Черниш, О., & Червоненко, В. (2025, 28 листопада). Єрмак пішов у відставку. Чому це сталося і що означає. BBC News Україна. <https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/articles/cy0ye4k52geobbcc>

¹¹ Зеленський підписав указ про звільнення Мудрої з посади заступниці голови Офісу президента. (2026, 19 серпня). Рубрика. <https://rubryka.com/2026/08/19/zvilnennya-mudroyi/>

Beyond the direct impact on government institutions—which, as the content analysis indicates, generates institutional crises in almost every case—the **Ukrainian government faces another challenge in relation to NABU and SAPO: European integration**. Under the revised EU accession methodology, applicant countries must fulfil the requirements of Cluster 1, “Fundamentals.” The work of NABU and SAPO is directly relevant to several of this cluster’s core areas, including the rule of law, the fight against corruption, and judicial independence¹². Consequently, *attempts to curtail these institutions’ independence or bring them under government control could undermine Ukraine’s progress towards EU membership*. The European Union’s response to the “July Crisis” lends support to this argument. On 22 July 2025, European Commissioner for Enlargement M. Kos described the dismantling of safeguards for NABU’s independence as “a serious step backwards.” Meanwhile, in a conversation with V. Zelenskyy, European Commission President U. von der Leyen stressed the need to preserve the independence of anti-corruption bodies as a “cornerstone” of the rule of law¹³. European Commission spokesperson G. Mercier also addressed the situation surrounding NABU and SAPO, describing the restoration of their independence as a crucial element of Ukraine’s anti-corruption architecture¹⁴. The sensitivity of the issue of control over NABU and SAPO is also reflected in the European Commission’s *Ukraine Report 2025*, published in November 2025. The report recommends that Ukraine guarantee the full independence of NABU and SAPO, extend the jurisdiction of anti-corruption bodies to encompass all positions carrying a high risk of corruption, and strengthen SAPO’s autonomy—particularly in cases involving members of parliament, without requiring the Prosecutor General’s consent¹⁵. Notably, Ukraine, represented by Deputy Prime Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration T. Kachka, publicly affirmed its willingness and commitment to implement the European Commission’s recommendations. These include strengthening the independence of NABU and SAPO by protecting their jurisdiction against circumvention and undue influence through a clear delineation of investigative jurisdiction among pre-trial investigation bodies, alongside the introduction of effective rules for preventing and resolving jurisdictional conflicts in criminal proceedings¹⁶.

Alongside its pursuit of European integration, **Ukraine’s efforts to foster constructive dialogue with the EU are also essential to strengthening its defence capabilities**. In this regard, the European Union has maintained a consistent position since the outset of the full-scale invasion, centred on comprehensive support and cooperation. As of September 2026, EU member states and institutions had mobilised €89.7 billion to bolster Ukraine’s military and defence capabilities. In late 2025 and early 2026, the EU agreed on and adopted the €90 billion Ukraine Support Loan, of which €60 billion is earmarked for procurement, the enhancement of defence capabilities, and the development of Ukraine’s defence-industrial base. The EU Military Assistance Mission in support of Ukraine (EUMAM Ukraine), whose mandate was extended until 15 November 2026, has already provided military training to approximately 97,000 personnel¹⁷. Beyond direct assistance, cooperation on defence-industrial matters and joint projects is gaining momentum. The European Defence Industry Programme’s budget for

¹²European Commission. (2022, October). *EU accession process*.

https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-10/eu_accession_process_clusters%20%28oct%202022%29.pdf

¹³European Pravda. (2025, July 22). *EU enlargement commissioner slams Ukraine’s law eroding autonomy of anti-corruption watchdogs*. Ukrainska Pravda. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2025/07/22/7522940/pravda.com>

¹⁴European Pravda. (2025, July 29). *EU Commission reveals what anti-corruption demands President von der Leyen made of Zelenskyy*. Ukrainska Pravda. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2025/07/29/7523950/pravda.com>

¹⁵Babel. (2025, November 4). *The European Commission highly appreciated Ukraine’s European integration progress*.

<https://babel.ua/en/news/122771-the-european-commission-has-published-a-report-on-ukraine-s-european-integration-progress>

¹⁶European Commission. Directorate-General for Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood. (2025, December 11). *Joint statement between Commissioner Marta Kos and Deputy Prime Minister of Ukraine Taras Kachka*.

https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/joint-statement-between-commissioner-marta-kos-and-deputy-prime-minister-ukraine-taras-kachka-2025-12-11_en

¹⁷European Commission. (2026, September 18). *EU military support to Ukraine*.

https://commission.europa.eu/topics/eu-solidarity-ukraine/eu-assistance-ukraine/eu-military-support-ukraine_en

2026–2027 includes funding for joint procurement, collaborative projects, and start-ups¹⁸. In July 2026, the EU–Ukraine Defence Industrial Partnership was signed, with the aim of integrating Ukraine’s defence sector into its European counterpart in practical terms. Its priorities include the joint production of drones and counter-drone systems, including under the Drone Deal; the joint production of anti-ballistic missiles by 2028; the serial production of ammunition, artillery systems, and components essential to sustaining the tempo of a war of attrition; and the establishment of joint consortia for EU-funded research and development projects¹⁹. The security framework envisaged by the Coalition of the Willing should also be taken into account. Although its operational arrangements have yet to be finalised, the initiative’s very existence has signalled the EU’s determination to assume responsibility for guaranteeing the region’s post-war security architecture. These developments are becoming increasingly urgent and consequential as the United States displays passivity and a lack of political will to play a constructive role in bringing the Russo-Ukrainian war to an end on terms consistent with Ukraine’s Peace Formula²⁰.

The Ukrainian government thus faces *a dilemma: one of its most influential partners, whose support is indispensable to victory in the war, simultaneously adopts a supportive stance on defence-sector assistance and a destructive one in demanding the independence of NABU and SAPO*. Naturally, combating corruption is essential not only to European integration but also to the functioning of the state as a whole—particularly under martial law. Yet experience suggests that **anti-corruption investigations and proceedings may be pursued either on legitimate grounds or with the intention of exerting pressure on institutions of power, thereby contributing to their destabilisation. Without institutional levers of oversight, bodies such as NABU and SAPO could become vehicles for destabilising the political order from within**. Under these circumstances, the Ukrainian government—and the Office of the President in particular—has little alternative but to maintain its commitment to European integration while ensuring that the relevant security agencies monitor the activities of NABU and SAPO to prevent either subversive campaigns or infiltration by Russian intelligence operatives.

¹⁸European External Action Service. Delegation to Ukraine. (2026, March 31). *Commission adopts €1.5 billion work programme to boost European and Ukrainian defence industry*.

https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/ukraine/commission-adopts-%E2%82%AC15-billion-work-programme-boost-european-and-ukrainian-defence-industry_en?eeas.europa

¹⁹European External Action Service. Delegation to Ukraine. (2026, July 16). *EU launches Ukraine defence industrial partnership, Drone Deal and disburses €1 billion for drones*.

https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/ukraine/eu-launches-ukraine-defence-industrial-partnership-drone-deal-and-disburses-eur1-billion-drones_en

²⁰Президент України. *Формула миру Президента Зеленського*.

https://www.president.gov.ua/storage/j-files-storage/01/19/45/a0284f6fdc92f8e4bd595d4026734bba_1691475944.pdf

■ WEEKLY ANALYSIS: A Return to the Trilateral Negotiating Track—Genuine Peace or Ukraine’s Capitulation?



Photo: Hromadske

Developments in September 2026 signalled a shift in the negotiating process, which had effectively remained frozen since February. Washington’s diplomatic initiatives, statements suggesting the possibility of a ceasefire, and signals from both belligerent states indicating a willingness to resume peace talks are all losing their relevance against the backdrop of increasingly large-scale and frequent aerial attacks on Ukrainian cities, particularly transport infrastructure hubs and petrol stations. The question of de-escalation—or further escalation—has also gained renewed significance in light of Russia’s parliamentary elections, whose results only reaffirmed the entrenched position of V. Putin and his inner circle. This article examines the prospects, as of September 2026, for reviving the trilateral Russia–US–Ukraine negotiating format.

US special envoys S. Witkoff and J. Kushner undertook diplomatic visits to Moscow on 5 September and Kyiv on 6 September. Notably, this initiative coincided with an intensification of reciprocal long-range missile and drone strikes between Ukraine and Russia. Against this backdrop, media outlets have advanced several explanations for Washington’s attempt to revive peace negotiations. According to V. Zelenskyy’s remarks, the US delegation sought to *discuss reciprocal measures concerning energy infrastructure, oil and gas exports, grain shipments, and the electricity sector*²¹. Another explanation centres on *US efforts to assess the conflict’s ripeness for a negotiated settlement*: the parties’ actual willingness to compromise on a range of sensitive issues and matters of principle, as well as to identify topics that could potentially be addressed through a separate technical negotiating track²². A further factor concerns the Middle East. According to K. Volker’s assessment, a moratorium on strikes against energy infrastructure

²¹Зеленський розповів про план США щодо деескалації на зимовий період. (2026, 7 вересня). Комерсант Український. <https://kommersant.in.ua/2026/09/07/zelenskyy-rozpoviv-pro-plan-ssha-shhodo-deeskalacziyi-na-zyimovyi-period/>

²²Kullab, S. (2026, September 6). *U.S. envoys Witkoff and Kushner hold talks in Ukraine after meeting with Putin*. Los Angeles Times. <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2026-09-06/u-s-envoys-witkoff-kushner-hold-talks-in-ukraine>

has become particularly relevant to the United States amid rising fuel prices, themselves a direct consequence of military operations against Iran. In his view, *the renewed prominence of the Russo-Ukrainian war on the White House's agenda is attributable, in part, to the need to prevent Republicans from losing their congressional majority in the elections scheduled for November this year*²³. On the other hand, the US government is well aware of Russia's military-technological cooperation with Iran. The US delegation's visit can therefore be interpreted as *an attempt to improve US–Russia relations and, in doing so, undermine Russian–Iranian ties*. In this connection, it is worth noting that, following the Witkoff–Kushner delegation's visit, media reports began to suggest a shift in the US approach to economic cooperation with Russia. Previously, the Trump administration had presented the prospect of expanded business ties and broader trade relations as a “reward” for ending the war: first a settlement, then contracts. However, the fact that economic relations were discussed at the Kremlin on 5 September 2026, together with the inclusion in the US delegation of J. Lang, the official responsible for sanctions policy at the US Treasury, indicates that D. Trump has changed his approach²⁴. The underlying rationale is *to signal to V. Putin that the United States is genuinely committed to improving bilateral relations, rather than merely offering temporary concessions or pursuing initiatives within the negotiating framework*. Finally, **even limited progress towards a settlement of the Russo-Ukrainian war could be presented to the international community at large—and to the American public in particular—as another diplomatic achievement**. Highlighting foreign-policy successes is a well-established political tactic for boosting political leaders' approval ratings, especially in the run-up to elections.

At the same time, J. Kushner's remarks on the prospects for peace indicate that **no compromise has yet been reached on the most sensitive issues, including territorial concessions and troop withdrawals**. Moreover, the special envoy's rhetoric suggested that Ukraine's withdrawal from the Donbas would be sufficient to secure a peace agreement²⁵. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that **the United States did exert a degree of pressure on Russia**. First, this involved *strengthening the sanctions regime*. On 5 June, the US House of Representatives approved the Ukraine Support Act—a legislative initiative combining support for Ukraine, sanctions against Russia, and oversight mechanisms governing any potential easing of sanctions. In addition to sanctions pressure, the legislation provided for up to \$8 billion in *direct loans to Ukraine for military equipment*, the extension of the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative (USAI) through 2027, and allocations of \$300 million to the initiative in each of 2026 and 2027²⁶. Of particular interest is the principle of conditional sanctions relief: the President would be authorised to suspend the sanctions only after formally certifying to Congress that Russia had fully ended its war against Ukraine and was complying with peace agreements. Any renewed act of aggression would trigger the reinstatement of the restrictions. Another significant development was *D. Trump's signing of Lindsey Graham's sanctions bill targeting Russia and Iran (2026) on 18 September. According to reports, the legislation tightens restrictions on Russia's energy and defence sectors and its “shadow fleet,” while also authorising tariffs of up to 100% on countries that are major purchasers of Russian energy resources or assist Russia in circumventing sanctions*²⁷.

US military assistance was considerably more limited in scope. Between June and September 2026, the intensification of attacks on Ukrainian cities drove a sharp increase in the urgent demand for Patriot interceptor missiles. However, shortages resulting from military

²³Фохт, Є., Хоменко, С., & Горяшко, С. (2026, 15 вересня). *Всі підігрують цьому фарсу. Чого (не) чекати від поновлення перемовин про закінчення війни Росії проти України*. BBC News Україна.

<https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/articles/c84gkv1wlexdo>

²⁴Troianovski, A. (2026, September 17). *Trump wants Putin to end the war. He may offer Russia business deals first. The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/09/17/us/trump-putin-russia-sanctions.htmlnytimes>

²⁵Д'яконов, І. (2026, 13 вересня). *Кушнер: Якби Україна погодилася віддати території, які вимагає Путін, ми б уже мали угоду. Українська правда*. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2026/09/13/8053164/>

²⁶Європейська правда. (2026, 5 червня). *Як у Конгресі США подолали опір Трампа і чи вдасться відновити підтримку України*. <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/news/2026/06/5/7239096/>

²⁷Закон Ліндсі Грема прийнято: радіти особливо не потрібно. Еспreso.

<https://espreso.tv/poglyad-zakon-lindsi-grema-priynyato-raditi-osoblivo-ne-potribno>

operations against Iran meant that no direct deliveries from the United States to Ukraine took place during this period. Instead, Washington confined its involvement to authorising Germany to transfer ten MIM-104E GEM-T interceptors previously acquired from the United States, with an estimated value of \$29.6 million²⁸. Clearly, such a quantity is negligible, making the decision largely symbolic rather than of practical value. *A more substantive response to Ukraine's need to replenish its air-defence capabilities—and diversify them, given its heavy reliance on a single weapons system, the Patriot—came on 18–19 September, when the US Department of State approved a potential sale to Ukraine of equipment and services worth approximately \$2.7 billion to develop and modernise its air defences*²⁹. According to the State Department, the package includes S-300 Clone missiles; GAM-67 missiles; extended-range laser-guided missiles for air-defence systems; modification kits for launchers and mobile launch systems; RPS-202 radars for drone detection and counter-drone operations; software, technical documentation, and spare parts; and engineering, transport, logistical, and technical support. The latest related development at the time of writing concerns US approval to grant Ukraine a licence to manufacture Patriot interceptor missiles, as announced by V. Zelenskyy on 22 September 2026³⁰. However, *the statement itself does nothing to address the current shortfall in Ukraine's defence capabilities, as the US side has neither formally adopted nor announced the corresponding decision*. Moreover, similar expressions of support for granting the licence featured in remarks and statements by senior US officials throughout the summer, yet no tangible progress followed. Although it remains unclear whether Congress will approve these initiatives—the assistance package and the granting of the licence—a provisional conclusion points to an emerging trend: **Washington is gradually moving away from scenarios premised on a swift peace settlement**. Beyond the initiatives and proposals outlined above, this shift is also reflected in remarks by US Under Secretary of Defense for Policy E. Colby at the meeting of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group in early September. His central message was that partners should prepare for the war to continue for years, along with Ukraine's need for assistance. Accordingly, E. Colby urged the Euro-Atlantic community—without, however, mentioning the United States—to scale up support for Ukraine's immediate battlefield requirements. **Yet while shifts in the US approach to managing the Russo-Ukrainian conflict are discernible at the rhetorical level, they have not translated into practical changes—at least for now**. To secure a just peace and thereby achieve victory in this war, Ukraine requires credible security guarantees, sufficient military and financial assistance from its partners, including the United States, and sustained pressure on Russia. Of these requirements, Washington is actively pursuing only the last. However, as the experience of the Russo-Ukrainian war demonstrates, *relying exclusively on sanctions without resorting to more hawkish measures tends to yield results only over the longer term and is not always sufficiently effective*.

The final focus of this article is the Kremlin's response to proposals by both the United States and Ukraine to establish a ceasefire. An analysis of statements made by senior Russian officials, including S. Lavrov, D. Peskov, and V. Putin, between June and September 2026 reveals a set of positions that have remained unchanged to date^{31 32 33 34 35}: 1) Achieving peace

²⁸US ready to approve transfer of Patriot missiles from Germany to Ukraine. RBC-Ukraine.

<https://newsukraine.rbc.ua/news/us-ready-to-approve-transfer-of-patriot-missiles-1789665937.html>

²⁹Singh, K. (2026, September 19). US clears way for \$2.7 billion sale to Ukraine of air-defense development upgrades. Reuters.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/us-clears-way-27-billion-sale-ukraine-air-defense-development-upgrades-2026-09-19/>

³⁰Волошина, В. (2026, 23 вересня). Трамп дав згоду на надання Україні ліцензії на виробництво ракет Patriot — Зеленський. Подробиці.

<https://podrobnosti.ua/2520555-tramp-dav-zgodu-na-nadannja-ukrain-litsenz-na-virobnitstvo-raket-patriot-zelenskij.html>

³¹TASS. (2026, June 5). Russia sees no progress on settlement in Ukraine since Anchorage — Lavrov.

<https://tass.com/politics/2142081tass>

³²Reuters. (2026a, June 26). Russia's Lavrov contradicts Rubio, calls for clarity on US mediation role.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-lavrov-contradicts-rubio-calls-clarity-us-mediation-role-2026-06-26/>

³³Popeski, R. (2026, June 28). Putin says Russia will press on with front-line campaign regardless of Ukraine proposals. Reuters.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-says-russia-will-press-with-front-line-campaign-regardless-ukraine-2026-06-28/>

³⁴TASS. (2026, August 27). Kremlin mum on next round of talks between Russian, Ukrainian delegations — spokesman.

<https://tass.com/politics/2178355tass>

³⁵Мирошніченко, Є. (2026, 21 вересня). У Кремлі висловилися про відновлення переговорів з Україною та США. Новини

depends on Kyiv's willingness to make concessions; 2) US support for Ukraine undermines Washington's credibility as a neutral party or mediator in the conflict; 3) Russia remains open to negotiations, but their agenda must be grounded in Russian interests, with references to the 2022 Istanbul talks and the "Spirit of Anchorage." **The fact that the positions of the two belligerents remain fundamentally irreconcilable, despite the recent intensification of US diplomatic efforts to secure peace in Ukraine, underscores the inadequacy of Washington's efforts to date.** In other words, to play a more constructive role in resolving the conflict, *the Trump administration must take more decisive steps to shift the balance of power in the Ukraine–Russia dyad in Ukraine's favour. It is Ukraine's proposed framework for a peace settlement that would establish a durable security architecture not only for Ukraine but for the region as a whole.* **Without such measures, the trilateral negotiating format will remain an ineffective forum characterised by a pronounced asymmetry in communication among the participating parties.**

The course of the Russian-Ukrainian war

Russia: External and internal challenges

Trend: *Putin's Autumn Military Campaign Plan Is Faltering*



Photo: Pravda

According to an analysis by the BBC team, **the Russian Armed Forces' summer–autumn military campaign through September not only failed to achieve success but also exposed adverse trends for the Russian side.** Chief among these was a decline in the number of combat engagements along the front: the monthly average fell from 256 in July to approximately 220 in September. Nevertheless, compared with March (160) and April (170), the intensity of hostilities remains elevated. Furthermore, analytical assessments by the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) and DeepState suggest that, measured by the area of territory captured, Russia's summer 2026 campaign yielded only a quarter of the gains achieved during the previous summer. Several key factors contributed to this trend. First, *over the summer, the Ukrainian Armed Forces conducted several counteroffensive operations on the Oleksandrivka, Zaporizhzhia, Lyman, and Kupiansk axes.* Second, *the same period saw record Russian personnel losses, reaching 40,000–43,000 per month between June and August 2026.* Taken together, these developments indicate that **Russia's operational effectiveness on the battlefield is indeed declining.** At the same time, the situation remains difficult on certain axes, particularly in Donetsk Oblast. The focus remains on Ukraine's Sloviansk–Kramatorsk–Druzhkivka–Kostiantynivka defensive line. Severing its connecting route—the Dobropillia–Kramatorsk highway—would enable Russian forces to outflank the line from the rear. In this context, according to P. Palisa, Deputy Head of the Office of the President of Ukraine³⁶, *The Kremlin intends to accelerate the pace of operations and intensify its efforts to complete the occupation of the Donbas by December this year—or, according to more*

³⁶Казакова, К. (2026, 8 вересня). Росія встановила новий дедлайн щодо захоплення Донбасу, — Паліса. УНІАН. <https://www.unian.ua/war/zahoplennya-donbasu-palisa-rozpoviv-pro-noviy-dedlayn-kremlya-13493136.html>

*realistic Russian military estimates, by the end of March 2027. However, as of mid-September, ISW's assessment indicates that Ukraine is demonstrating the capacity to counter this Russian initiative at both the operational and strategic levels*³⁷.

Another dimension of escalation in the Russo-Ukrainian war is **the intensification of reciprocal missile and drone strikes**. In particular, Ukraine has employed long-range precision strikes against oil refineries, associated logistics infrastructure, and military logistics hubs. This campaign, which peaked between June and August, sought *to erode Russia's relative power by forcing it to divert resources towards restoring destroyed facilities, disrupting supply chains, and increasing pressure on the Russian economy*. Between June and August, Ukraine carried out at least 131 strikes against Russian strategic targets, with the monthly total rising steadily: 23 in June, 44 in July, and 64 in August. Oil logistics infrastructure accounted for 13% of the strikes, while the remainder targeted refineries and other fuel and energy facilities³⁸. Consequently, **output of refined petroleum products declined markedly**. In June, Russian refineries processed approximately 8.7 million barrels of crude oil per day—a year-on-year decline of 3.8 million barrels per day, or roughly 30%. According to the International Energy Agency (IEA), this was the lowest level since May 2004³⁹. In July, refinery throughput fell to approximately 3.6 million barrels per day, according to EA Analytics—the lowest level since May 2002 and roughly one-third below the seasonal norm⁴⁰. According to S&P Global Energy, refinery throughput was approximately 28% lower than in July 2025⁴¹. Attacks on oil refineries peaked in August, with at least 18 recorded during the month. Notably, the damaged facilities had a combined nameplate capacity exceeding 90 million tonnes of crude oil per year, and some suspended refining operations either entirely or partially⁴². Overall, according to *The Moscow Times*, *direct losses incurred by oil companies as a result of the Ukrainian Armed Forces' series of strikes on these facilities exceeded 1 trillion Russian roubles (approximately \$11.1 billion)*⁴³. **Another consequence was a fuel crisis in Russia**. In July and August, a series of export restrictions and bans were imposed on petrol, diesel, marine fuel, gas oil, and aviation fuel⁴⁴ ⁴⁵. However, imports and the drawdown of reserves, together with the aforementioned restrictions and bans, increased the share of domestic demand met from 70% to 85%, indicating **a persistent structural shortfall**⁴⁶. Alongside oil-refining facilities, *the logistics networks of Wildberries and Ozon have also been targeted by Ukrainian long-range strikes*. Notably, these two companies account for up to 73% of Russia's e-commerce market. In the first half of 2026, they handled 84% of all deliveries destined for Russia. Furthermore, between 2022 and 2024, the share of online sales in Russian retail more than doubled, with the value of the e-commerce

³⁷Institute for the Study of War. (2026, September 13). *Russian offensive campaign assessment, September 13, 2026*.

<https://understandingwar.org/research/russia-ukraine/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-september-13-2026/understanding-war>

³⁸Центр стратегічних комунікацій. (2026, 14 вересня). *Як далекобійні удари України позбавляють РФ воєнних та економічних ресурсів*. Українська правда. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/columns/2026/09/14/8053317pravda.com>

³⁹Bousso, R. (2026, September 15). *Trump's Ukraine energy truce won't fix global diesel crunch*. Reuters.

<https://www.reuters.com/commentary/reuters-open-interest/trumps-ukraine-energy-truce-wont-fix-global-diesel-crunch-2026-09-15/>

⁴⁰*Russian oil refining falls to 24-year low after Ukrainian drone strikes* – Bloomberg. (2026, August 3). *The Moscow Times*.

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2026/08/03/russian-oil-refining-falls-to-24-year-low-after-ukrainian-drone-strikes-bloomberg-a93404themoscowtimes>

⁴¹Alhan, D. (2026, August 25). *Oil giant Russia turns to fuel imports as refinery crunch deepens*. Anadolu Agency.

<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/energy/oil/oil-giant-russia-turns-to-fuel-imports-as-refinery-crunch-deepens/59228>

⁴²*Ukraine strikes could leave Russia with 30% less refining capacity for 18 months, IEA says*. (2026, September 11). *The New Voice of Ukraine*. <https://english.nv.ua/russian-war/ukraine-strikes-threaten-30-of-russia-s-refining-50640741.html>

⁴³Хоменко, В. (2026, 16 березня). *Через українські атаки збитки російських нафтових компаній перевищили 1 трлн рублів*. Мілітарний. <https://military.com/uk/news/zbytky-naftovoyi-galuzi-1-trln-rubliv/>

⁴⁴Reuters. (2026a, August 25). *Russia to extend diesel export ban through September, sources say*.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/russia-extend-diesel-export-ban-through-september-sources-say-2026-08-25/>

⁴⁵Reuters. (2026b, August 28). *Russia's gasoline output drops to 70% of domestic demand late in August after drone attacks, sources say*.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/russias-gasoline-output-drops-70-domestic-demand-late-august-after-drone-attacks-2026-08-28/reuters>

⁴⁶Reuters. (2026c, August 29). *Russia extends ban on diesel exports until September 30*.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/russia-extends-ban-diesel-exports-until-september-30-2026-08-29/>

market reaching 13 trillion roubles in 2025⁴⁷. However, during July and August, when strikes on Wildberries' logistics hubs peaked, between 22% and 43% of its warehouse facilities were destroyed, according to various estimates. In financial terms, the combined losses incurred by Wildberries and Ozon are estimated at approximately 200 billion Russian roubles, while their commercial partners lost between 450 billion and 500 billion roubles. From Ukraine's perspective, however, the most significant effect was the disruption of warehousing and supply networks handling goods, some of which were dual-use.

Continuing its hybrid warfare tactics, Russia's military and political leadership has once again resorted to a campaign of terror against Ukraine's civilian population. *Late August marked the beginning of an escalation in the frequency and scale of aerial attacks across Ukraine, targeting logistics and supply networks, petrol stations, and civilian infrastructure.* This likely represents an early launch of a strategy aimed at exhausting Ukraine ahead of winter. In particular, the UN Commission warns of an increased likelihood of regional or more widespread power outages, heating shortages, disruptions to water supplies, and communications failures during peak winter demand if systematic attacks continue⁴⁸. Ukraine's Minister of Energy and First Deputy Prime Minister D. Shmyhal noted that Russia's previous winter campaign had damaged or destroyed facilities accounting for approximately 80% of Ukraine's electricity generation, leaving a generating capacity shortfall of around 6 GW⁴⁹. According to estimates by the Razumkov Centre, as of August 2026, virtually no substations, thermal power plants, combined heat and power plants, or hydroelectric power plants in Ukraine remained undamaged. *The cumulative toll over four years of full-scale war amounted to \$24.8 billion in direct damage to the energy and extractive sectors, \$88.2 billion in economic losses, and \$90.6 billion in recovery needs*⁵⁰. Moreover, **Russia's strategy towards Ukraine's energy sector centres on sustained attrition, seeking to erode Ukrainian citizens' quality of life through relentless pressure and repeated strikes on critical infrastructure.** This interpretation is supported by the Razumkov Centre's assessment that attacks have increasingly targeted not only electricity generation facilities but also transmission and distribution networks, district heating systems, and gas infrastructure. Damage to network nodes, in turn, prevents electricity and heat from reaching consumers⁵¹. The water supply system is also vulnerable, as it depends on electricity. Moreover, 85% of the major water utilities assessed lack sufficient backup power capacity⁵². **Relentless strikes on critical and civilian infrastructure have another consequence: the depletion of Ukraine's air-defence capabilities.** According to Reuters reporting dated 18 September 2026, *Ukraine has nearly exhausted its stocks of Patriot interceptor missiles—effectively its only means of intercepting Russian ballistic missiles*⁵³. Against this backdrop, Russia has modified its strategy for wearing down Ukraine's defence

⁴⁷Belkin, V. (2026, September 22). *The consumer boom is over: Ukrainian drone strikes on Wildberries and Ozon mark the end of Russians' spending spree.* The Insider. <https://theins.press/en/economics/297384theins>

⁴⁸Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine. (2026, September 21). *UN Commission concerned about human impact of Russia's systematic targeting of energy infrastructure, militarisation of education, and recruitment of foreign nationals.* United Nations in Ukraine.

<https://ukraine.un.org/en/323052-un-commission-concerned-about-human-impact-russia%E2%80%99s-systematic-targeting-energy>

⁴⁹Institute for the Study of War. (2026, August 4). *Russian offensive campaign assessment, August 4, 2026.*

<https://understandingwar.org/research/russia-ukraine/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-august-4-2026/>

⁵⁰Razumkov Centre. (2026, September 23). *Україна: від війни до миру та відновлення (липень–серпень 2026) [Ukraine: From war to peace and recovery (July–August 2026)].*

<https://razumkov.org.ua/assessments-uk/ukraina-vid-viiny-do-myru-ta-vidnovlennia-lypen-serpen-2026>

⁵¹Razumkov Centre. (2026, September 23). *Україна: від війни до миру та відновлення (липень–серпень 2026) [Ukraine: From war to peace and recovery (July–August 2026)].*

<https://razumkov.org.ua/assessments-uk/ukraina-vid-viiny-do-myru-ta-vidnovlennia-lypen-serpen-2026>

⁵²Націлевич, Є. (2026, 14 вересня). *Вода під час тиші й тривоги.* Карітас України.

<https://caritas.ua/voda-pid-chas-tyshi-i-tryvog/caritas>

⁵³Dixon, R., & Hunder, M. (2026, September 18). *Russia adapts a training missile to lead its ballistic onslaught of Ukraine.* Reuters.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/ukraine-russia-war/revamped-missile-leading-russias-ballistic-onslaught-ukraine-2026-09-18/reuters>

capabilities. In particular, the RM48U training missile, adapted by Russia for combat use, is being extensively employed to strike Ukrainian territory at relatively low cost. It has a smaller warhead and lower accuracy than the Iskander, but these characteristics are of little consequence when the objective is to conduct large-scale, indiscriminate bombardment. By deploying relatively inexpensive warheads, Russia thus depletes Ukraine's air defences, forcing the Ukrainian Armed Forces to expend scarce Patriot interceptors. **This tactic is arguably among the most dangerous instruments in Russia's autumn–winter campaign, as the issue of Patriot supplies remains unresolved: shortages persist, attacks are intensifying, and no official approval has yet been granted for a production licence. Direct deliveries, where they have occurred, have involved very limited quantities, as illustrated by the transfer through Germany.** *Intercepting Russian drones has also become more difficult.* According to the statistics, the interception rate for jet-powered Shahed drones stands at 60%, compared with over 90% for older models⁵⁴. Moreover, the frequency of their deployment has also increased, from 350 attacks in June to 1,500 in July and more than 2,800 in August⁵⁵. In September, this trend not only persisted but intensified markedly: in just one week, from 14 to 21 September, Russia carried out more than 2,000 drone strikes⁵⁶. As of late September, there are no signs of de-escalation.

However, despite its overtly terroristic aerial campaign against civilian and critical infrastructure, Russia has yet to achieve either the objectives of its summer–autumn campaign on the front or those of its so-called “special military operation” more broadly. Moreover, **Russia's aggressive conduct has only heightened European states' awareness of the urgent need to counter V. Putin's plans.** Following the drone incident near Leipzig Airport, Ursula von der Leyen described it as “a new escalation on European soil” and stated that the EU must close every loophole Russia exploits. NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte likewise warned of Russia's increasingly reckless behaviour and the growing number of drones and missiles entering the airspace of NATO's eastern flank⁵⁷. Prime Minister Donald Tusk warned that Russia could potentially target NATO countries supporting Ukraine with drones or missiles as early as “the next few months”⁵⁸. More broadly, Reuters reports that European states increasingly view hybrid attacks as elements of a coordinated Russian pressure campaign: sabotage of critical infrastructure, cyber operations, drone activity, disinformation, airspace violations, and provocations on the eastern flank. **European ministers stressed that the response must involve unity, deterrence, heightened readiness, and continued support for Ukraine ahead of winter.** Western criticism increasingly highlights Russia's inability to defeat Ukraine—and, consequently, the futility of the war. During a meeting between a US delegation and Putin at the Kremlin in early September, Jared Kushner reportedly responded to the Russian president's claim that Russia would soon capture the Donetsk region by pointing out that similar claims had been made a year earlier. In his address to the UN General Assembly, Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski called on his Russian counterpart to end a war that Russia cannot win, underscoring the stark imbalance in capabilities both between Ukraine and Russia and between Russia and the European community as a whole⁵⁹.

⁵⁴Тесленко, О., & Коновалець, А. (2026, September 23). Реактивні дрони Shahed проривають українську ППО: Росія змінює повітряну війну швидкістю, висотою і масовістю. Газета Дейком. <https://daycom.com.ua/news/reaktyvni-drony-shahed-proryvaiut-ukrainsku-ppo-rosiia-zminiuiie-povitriannu-viinu-shvydkistiu-vysotoiu-i-masovistiudaycom.com>

⁵⁵Garman, B., & Murphy, M. (2026, September 10). Russia's new jet-powered drones outpacing Ukraine's air defences with daily launches. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c804d9lyj2jobbc>

⁵⁶Hyatt, L. (2026, September 21). Russia launched more than 2,000 drones at Ukraine over past week, Zelensky says. The Kyiv Independent. <https://kyivindependent.com/russia-launched-more-than-2-000-drones-at-ukraine-over-past-week-zelensky-says/>

⁵⁷Jozwiak, R. (2026, September 2). EU, NATO seek stronger response to Russian threat after Leipzig “escalation”. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. <https://www.rferl.org/a/europe-leipzig-drone-russia-threat-ukraine/33845626.htmlrferl>

⁵⁸Щербій, Ю. (2026, September 19). Європейські лідери попереджають про зростання загрози з боку Росії — Politico. Апостроф.

<https://apostrophe.ua/politics/foreign-policy/jevropejski-lideri-poperedzhajut-pro-zrostannja-zahrozi-z-boku-rosiji-politico.html>
⁵⁹Nv.ua. (2026). Радослав Сікорський, голова МЗС Польщі, через Лаврова закликав Путіна зупинити війну проти України. <https://nv.ua/ukr/world/geopolitics/radoslav-sikorskiy-golova-mzs-polshechi-cherez-lavrova-zaklikav-putina-zupiniti-viynu-proti-ukrajini-50644380.html>

Thus, against the backdrop of Russia's escalating terrorist attacks on Ukrainian cities and towns, it is clear that its military leadership has failed to achieve the objectives set for the summer-autumn campaign. Moreover, *alongside its lack of success on the front, Russia has suffered substantial losses from long-range Ukrainian strikes on oil and logistics infrastructure deep in its rear.* Russia has also suffered heavy losses among its combat forces. Nevertheless, through hybrid tactics of intimidation and terror, it continues to wear down Ukraine's defences and critical infrastructure. Russia's efforts are aided by a shortage of air defence systems, particularly those capable of intercepting ballistic missiles, and by serious vulnerabilities in the protection of Ukraine's energy, water supply, and heating infrastructure. *At the same time, despite strong statements from Western partners, their practical response to Ukraine's defence needs remains weak, increasingly undermining the country's long-term defence capabilities and resilience.* **The Ukrainian government and General Staff should therefore continue to exert pressure on the enemy directly on the battlefield, where its performance is weakest, while using every available means to advocate for strengthening Ukraine's defence capabilities.**
