

Rules of engagement

The Trump administration has thrown European security and the response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine into disarray. Andrew Gunn reports from Kyiv and *Listener* correspondents update the fallout in the UK and Germany.





I am briefly woken by the wail of the air raid siren, but manage to get back to sleep. Call it disassociation, or what you will, but like many others in Kyiv, I have given up on taking shelter every time I hear the siren. It's a sound we have recently heard most nights of the week.

A crude whirring overhead rouses me again: the sound of a Shahed drone on its way over our suburb. At least, I assume it is on its way elsewhere. As the whirring grows louder, I begin to doubt myself. My heart rate picks up. The drones weigh about 200kg and are just shy of 4m long. I count slowly to five, hoping to hear the air defence kick into action.

I hate these intervals – the sense that the drones have not been spotted yet, and are circling freely 100m or so above you, like mechanical birds of prey. The whirring fades away. The booms and the rat-a-tat-a-tat of the air defence begins. Suddenly, the blasts are far deeper. The windows rattle, betraying that we are under more than just a drone attack.

I check the Telegram messaging platform to see exactly what is incoming. "Kyiv, Kharkiv and Pavlograd are under a massive combined attack. In Kyiv were used: 6 Iskander M/KN-23 ballistic missiles, 6 cruise missiles 3M14 calibre, unspecified number of strike UAVs."

The balistyka continue to come. Amid the flurry of updates, one of the moderators simply posts "hold on" with a link to the Gloria Gaynor song, *I Will Survive*. We wake the following day, April 24, to watch the death toll climb. Thirteen would die; at least 90 were wounded.

In April, the mouth of Zvirynetska, our local metro station, becomes an informal marketplace. The headscarved old women have gone from hustling pussy willows to tulips. A woman propped up on crutches is busking in the stairwell, singing a folk song acapella. Her right leg has been amputated; the sleeve of her pants is hitched up around her stump.

I descend down Zvirynetska's seemingly endless escalator. Built during the height of Cold War paranoia, sections of Kyiv's metro system were built deep enough to withstand nuclear assault. A TV plays a recruitment advert for the Khartia Brigade featuring a man, semi-automatic in hand, looking proudly into the distance. It

Offensive: Rescue workers search for survivors after a Russian missile attack on Kyiv residential areas on April 24.



is swiftly followed by an advert for instant noodles. Boarding the carriage behind me are a group of soldiers who look no older than 18. New uniforms, freshly shaved hair. Ukraine has attempted to resolve its troop shortage by introducing one-year contracts for volunteers aged 18-24. Until this, there had been an attempt to keep such young men away from the front, with only men aged 25 and older allowed to serve in combat positions.

THE THWARTED VETERAN

When I press academic and veteran Anton Drobovych on how he would describe the morale of his comrades on the frontline, he replies: “Stubbornness; the core of our resilience is stubbornness.” He gently shuts the door on his son, who is restlessly watching *Spongebob Squarepants* next door: “All of us are tired from this war. We hate this war.”

Drobovych served in the Territorial Defence Forces defending Kyiv in the full-scale early days of the Russian invasion. After, he joined the 78th Airborne Assault Regiment, where he was stationed in Kherston, in southern Ukraine, then in Kharkiv region, near the Russian border in the east. He is a tall, deep-voiced man in his late 30s, and remarkably upbeat during our discussion as he outlines his experience as a drone operator rotating between 20-hour shifts, and eight hours of rest. He describes the constant insects and oppressive heat of summer operations. The war had clearly given him an immense sense of purpose. He was torn

to have left his comrades in Kharkiv after his father had a stroke. “Now, we have this conversation, they have a battle in Kharkiv. So this is a sad reality, and I have mixed feelings about this. One part of me says, ‘Come on! You have perfect luxury life in the capital during the war; this is not normal.’ Another part of me says, ‘This is your duty; this is your father.’”

We discuss the now infamous argument in the Oval Office between US President Donald Trump and Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelenskyy in late-February. He describes the meeting as a “humiliating situation for [the] American nation. In all cultures exist this rule of hospitality. If you invite somebody in your home, and invite [other] guests and somebody attacks him, this is a humiliation of your home. This is a humiliation of your hospitality.”

The signs of the seismic shift in US policy towards Europe had been well-flagged. Two weeks previously, US Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth had called on Europe to take the lead in Ukraine’s defence. “To be clear, as part of any security guarantee, there will not be US troops deployed to Ukraine,” Hegseth told a security meeting in Brussels.

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Europe and the US are no longer allies. No one believes NATO is a strong organisation.

And Vice-President JD Vance slammed European leaders for failing to work with right-wing parties, comparing them to Cold War tyrants.

Trump then intensified pressure on Zelenskyy to accept a heavily one-sided peace agreement that cements Russia’s territorial gains, blocks Ukraine’s future NATO membership and offers no meaningful security guarantees to Kyiv. The proposed deal would effectively legitimise Russia’s occupation of Ukrainian lands, and leave Ukraine vulnerable to future aggression.

This is sharply at odds with the joint EU-Ukrainian position, which includes “robust security guarantees”, no discussion of territorial concessions until a formal ceasefire is in place, and categorically rejects any recognition of Crimea as Russian territory.

After a slowdown in territorial gains over winter, Russia launched a spring offensive in April – taking advantage of Trump’s stance and Ukraine’s difficulties in securing more Western aid. Moscow also dialled up the pressure on Ukrainian civilians, intensifying airstrikes on Ukrainian cities.

Drobovych cannot see any reason Russia would stop its assault now and describes Trump’s peace plan as effectively offering a “victory plan” to Putin.

On May 10, Zelenskyy, Trump and European officials proposed an “unconditional” 30-day ceasefire to begin the process of ending the war, and Zelenskyy called on Putin to meet him in Istanbul. Putin proposed restarting talks “without



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From left, the infamous Oval Office meeting on February 28; a residential building in Kharkiv set alight by Russian shelling on April 29; a Ukrainian soldier guides a drone towards Russian forces in Kharkiv province.

preconditions”.

Ukrainians see this war in the context of hundreds of years of Russian colonialism, and understand that here, Putin is playing the long game. The only way to ensure future sovereignty is to play Russia at its own game, but this means Ukraine will have to remain an extremely militarised country going into the future.

I raise the issue of men of fighting age illegally crossing into Romania to escape conscription. Drobovych assures me there's always a small minority who don't wish to support their country in wartime who will flee. It's a moral dilemma, he says. “In this situation, you must go to the army, because this country protects your way of living. In this situation, a lot of risks that you will die.”

About 13,000 men – of about 5 million who were eligible to fight – crossed into Romania last year. At least 25 died during their attempt, most by drowning.

THE RELUCTANT PROFESSIONAL

A friend of mine, Vladyslav, arrives back from Kharkiv by marshrutka, the famously clapped-out regional buses. Kharkiv city is 30km from the Russian border. He paces back and forwards, agitated after the crowded, eight-hour ride. His father has also recently suffered a stroke and has

needed constant care since then. This entitles Vladyslav, 30, to military exemption. He spontaneously quit his job in freight logistics; I ask him what his plan for work is now. “Well, for a moment there, it looked like I was gonna be working in infantry.” He laughs nervously.

Every 90 days, Vladyslav has to return to Kharkiv, where his address is registered to his parents' property, to apply for an extension to his exemption papers. This always leaves a window of a few days when he is eligible to be conscripted, should he run into an officer. He describes Kharkiv as feeling like “a museum of your past life”.

We meet in Podil, the northernmost stretch of the historical centre of Kyiv. He seems thrown by the seemingly nonchalant life led by the gaggles of teenagers surrounding us in the park, drinking and smoking weed, ducking patrolling police.

Ukrainian men who volunteer to serve generally have some degree of choice as to what position they might take. For those conscripted, it's not uncommon to be sent straight to the tensest positions of the front-line. The weight of this fact hangs over Vladyslav. “I feel this pressure on me every

single day. On the one hand, the obvious reason is to join the army and ‘fulfil your destiny’, but in real life, when you see the death of people, you don't want to do that.”

Like many young professionals, he struggles with the lack of agency he would have in the army. “I have some expertise in my field, which I am good at. In the military, I will be the lowest possible rank – I won't be making any decisions. For some people it's their duty, but for me, it's my life.”

There's also the matter of getting out again – Vladyslav says the length of service required is a deterrent to signing on. If a man aged 25-60 signs up, his contract cannot be terminated until martial law ends, except in very specific circumstances. Women cannot be conscripted but can join voluntarily: about 70,000 are in the 1 million-strong armed forces; 20,000 in combat roles.

Vladyslav sees Russia as becoming increasingly desperate. “They cannot even conquer two oblasts [administrative regions] in four years. “If in fourth year of the war you have to send a million-dollar missile to hit a residential building 500km from the front, you probably are not doing so good.”

THE POLITICAL ACTIVIST

Some weeks later, I meet Lesya Orobets in a café in Podil, where the suburb's ancient old trams rumble past. Orobets is a former politician, now civilian activist, and a founder of Price of Freedom, an NGO dedicated to broader European support for

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Europe & the US

Ukraine's defence forces. Both her husband and brother are on the frontline. She is an extremely passionate speaker with a razor-sharp wit.

Orobets spent much of her political career fighting corruption in Ukraine and vividly remembers serving in the opposition during Viktor Yanukovich's presidency in the early 2010s, when it felt like Ukraine was on the tipping point of becoming a puppet state of Russia – “a new Belorussia”. Her work meant she and her family were subjected to extreme intimidation. At one point, she took to wearing a bulletproof vest into chamber sessions.

“I have a diploma in international law, and I'm [now] useless because international law no longer works. We have to invent a new world order. We will have to rethink the geopolitical alliances. This is the moment to create new security, probably regional security alliances.” She adds that having Ukraine work with European nations to mount strong counterproposals to the US – as evidenced by recent meetings of the “coalition of the willing” – is critical. “If you are not around the table, you are on the menu.”

“Putin is trying to replay the Cold War. Look, he already achieved at least two big goals of the Cold War. Goal number one –” She pauses abruptly to feed a sparrow. “My surname in Ukrainian means sparrow. So I consider them my relatives.” She continues. “Number one: Europe and the US are no longer allies. Second: no one believes that Nato is a strong organisation. Two speeches by Hegseth and Vance – two speeches to ruin something that was created for decades and working beautifully.

“I've been in the headquarters of Nato recently. I've never seen that organisation in such a state of worry about its own future.”

Like Drobovych, she can't see any reason Russia would stop its assault now. “I mean, everyone learnt the lesson in 2014 [when Russia annexed Crimea]. Some people then thought, okay, if we give up territories and we do not fight, they would just stop there. No, they wouldn't.”

Orobets is pushing for the establishment of the Sky Shield security initiative, a European-led air protection zone over uncontested western and central Ukraine. This would relieve pressure on Ukraine's air defence in these territories, allowing equipment and personnel to be relocated to the eastern territories.

“After 2½ years, we find ourselves in the middle of a missile crisis. Because we



Army veteran Anton Drobovych, top, and Price of Freedom co-founder Lesya Orobets.

should the US completely abandon European assistance? Orobets doubts it. “No one's ready. You cannot be ready for a war. You think you are, but you cannot, ever.

“But this is the point where we all have to grow up faster than we thought, because those decisions would change the face of the European continent for decades.”

THE NEW WORLD ORDER

In late-April, as Pope Francis's funeral was getting underway in the Vatican Basilica, Trump and Zelenskyy had a discussion that seemed to indicate some kind of reconciliation. Trump suggested afterwards he may have allowed himself to be led on by Putin. Two days before, he implored “Vladimir, STOP!” on a social media post after Russia launched a new wave of deadly strikes on Kyiv.

But as should be clear by now, Trump's loyalties change on a dime. In Ukraine, as in Palestine, and in his authoritarian reforms at home, his administration has completely eroded any legitimacy the US still possessed. It has been made clear it is to be engaged with in purely transactional terms, and despite any personal revelations Trump may have experienced, Ukraine must look elsewhere for enduring support. As Orobets says, “we have to invent a new world order”, one not shaped by global US hegemony.

I cannot help but be concerned by how the militarisation of European economies will affect the continent's efforts to combat the climate crisis. The Ukrainian response would be that the costs of unchecked Russian aggression has had its own immense ecological toll. Last year alone, 100,000 sq km of Ukrainian forest – equivalent to almost 90% of New Zealand's North Island – were scorched by wildfires due to the war.

Although remaining in the fight is brutalising the lives of this generation of Ukrainians, the deep sense of the historical continuity of the conflict means many Ukrainians seem prepared to fight on, rather than accept a compromising peace deal.

Today, in the courtyard outside our apartment, a cold northerly has picked up. The chestnut trees shake. Arm in arm, a young soldier is guided home by his mother, a cigarette dangling from his mouth.

Andrew Gunn is a New Zealand journalist living in Kyiv with his Ukrainian partner.

shot out most of our arsenal, and western supply was very, very limited, we lost half of our energy supply and energy for production. And the Russians bombed our power plants.”

Is Europe ready to step up to fill the gap



Two speeches to ruin something that was created for decades and working beautifully.

Trump appeasement

The UK hopes to mask its powerlessness by massaging the ego of the US President. **BY ANDREW ANTHONY**

Ever since the Brexit referendum nine years ago, the UK has been mired in angst and uncertainty, one symptom of which has been the appointment of six different prime ministers in that time. Given this general air of socio-economic malaise, it's been hard to say just what effect the war in Ukraine has had on national morale.

When, eight years after it annexed Crimea, Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, the situation was quite straightforward for most Britons. Russia was the bullying aggressor and Ukraine the plucky defender of its national territory, deserving of our sympathy and solidarity.

Many people took in Ukrainian refugees, and, rather late in the day, the UK government instituted sanctions on Russian trade and individuals. While the moral case hasn't changed much, other than at the extremes of political debate, there is little consensus about what needs to be done.

The second term of Donald Trump has utterly changed our relationship with the world at large, because so much of that relationship – economic, military, cultural – was conducted within the American sphere of influence. Now, all that we took for granted is under disruptive challenge.

Nato, the so-called “special relationship”, and the idea that the US is our firmest ally in dealing with Russia aggression: all of it is being torn up by the Trump administration.

In one sense, the UK and Europe in general has relied on a US defence shield that enabled its beneficiaries to become complacently entitled. Like some overgrown adolescent, we complained about American power and influence, but nonetheless expected the US to finance our defence from a dictatorship that is armed to the teeth with nuclear weapons.

Now that we are being called upon to look after ourselves, there is a growing recognition that it's a dangerous, and costly, world out there without the security of US protection. Throw in Trump's early-April tariffs announcements and the angst is turning to

full-blown anxiety. Although the UK and US have since entered trade negotiations, easing tariffs on UK cars and metal exports to the US, uncertainty remains.

One of the UK's foremost economic journalists tells me the tariffs could necessitate further tax rises and/or further cuts in spending by Sir Keir Starmer's Labour administration. Any fragile sense of growth has been crushed by Trump's threats. His trade war with China, the falling dollar, and shrinking markets, says this expert, create conditions that “look very much like 1929 [the start of the Great Depression] all over again”.

It's not as if he's an alarmist kind of character, given to bleak warnings. But he can't really see a way out of the crisis for the UK.

Obviously, most Brits have limited understanding of market mechanics, but they can see their pensions shrinking and, having experienced the effects of the 2008 financial crisis, are aware these things have a momentum of their own that a government – or at least the British one – is powerless to stop when they get started.

The government clearly hopes that if it can indulge and flatter Trump enough, lay on a state visit with all the ego-massaging trimmings, then he might just play nice and cut us a trade deal that enables us to continue sending Land Rovers and whisky to the US.

But that presupposes that international markets and western world as we know it don't collapse. In other words, the best case scenario is that we suck up to Trump and he steps back from triggering a global crash almost 100 years after the last one devastated the world.

POWER & RUTHLESSNESS

By the same token, very few Britons know much about Ukraine, its history, geography or culture. Everyone can see Putin is a bully. It's not been forgotten that he launched several chemical weapon attacks on former Russian agents on British soil, killing one British citizen and severely harming others.

Russian acts of destabilisation and disinformation grow in severity and regularity – from cutting communication cables at sea to economic and digital crime – and so only those who admire power and ruthlessness

for its own sake have any sympathy with Putin's cause.

Yet there is nonetheless widespread belief the Crimea is never going to return to Ukrainian control. It would have been difficult enough to achieve that if the US backed Zelenskyy to the hilt, but impossible given Trump has told him to accept its loss.

If the war is to end, the feeling is it will end on terms that are favourable and acceptable to Russia.

What that will mean for European security

is a question which is beginning to make itself known in the national consciousness. For one thing, Starmer has already committed to raise military spending from 2.29% of GDP to 2.7% within two years.

The post-Soviet bloc days of demilitarisation and falling defence budgets are well and truly over. Unable to depend on the US, and cut off from the EU, the UK feels like an increasingly embattled place to be – as though we are being borne back into a dangerous past by currents we are not strong enough to resist.

Sunny optimists are nowhere to be found.



Sir Keir Starmer: Spending fears.

Rearming Germany

Berliners are maintaining customary freedoms but geopolitical shifts have upended their country's post-war self-image. **BY CATHRIN SCHAEER**

There's a war going on about a day's drive from where I live in Berlin, historic alliances are being torn asunder, Germany's fascist, far-right is rapidly rising and the "international rules-based order" isn't really following the rules any more. But heck, you wouldn't really know it.

It's been one of the warmest springs on record so far and, as usual after a long, grey winter, local bars and restaurants have moved tables and chairs back onto Berlin's streets. Cycling back from a canal-side beer garden as the sun goes down, you wonder (as you always do at the end of winter) where all these delightful, laughing, beer-quaffing people were hibernating up until now.

In other words, it's pretty much life as normal here in the crowded, dirty, always-entertaining capital of Europe's biggest economy.

But of course, as anyone who reads the news is well aware, it's not. Although Berliners are doing all the usual things – working, booking summer holidays, buying groceries, walking the dog – there's a hard-to-describe uneasiness running through daily life.

At the risk of sounding overly dramatic, it feels a bit like a crack has opened up somewhere below us. We can't quite see it. But the earth is shifting beneath those café tables.

And we're not sure if the crack is going to close up quietly again or whether it will widen into a deep, dark chasm that we'll all eventually be sucked into.

Is that overly dramatic, I ask at our table in a Turkish restaurant on the weekend. Or do other people feel that way, too?

"There's definitely a lot of uncertainty about the future at the moment," one German diner agrees. When Spain and Portugal went through a nationwide power blackout in late April, she says, she immediately thought a war was starting. Previously, she might have thought someone had damaged a wire or driven into a power pole.

"You're right, the existing world order is

being broken down," one of the older guests, an Englishman, said, somewhat resignedly.

"Back in the 60s, we were scared of one thing really: the atomic bomb. But in some ways that was easier to deal with. This is much more diffuse. It's hard to know exactly what's going on, or what China or Russia or Trump or the markets will do next."

Another German at the table adds: "I used to be quite proud of the way Germany worked through its war-time history and the Holocaust. But now, I just feel like it was all fake. We learnt nothing. And I really don't know if I can trust the government ever again," she exclaimed passionately over her humus.

It's unclear whether she is referring to the government's support for the far-right Israeli regime – support that has upset a lot of people because of the way it flaunts the system of international justice that actually arose after World War II, and which Germany allegedly supports – or whether she's upset about the government's current drive to spend more on guns and bombs.

DEFENCE SPENDING SPREE

Militarisation has been anathema to many ordinary Germans for decades, precisely because of the country's wartime history. The Germans were the good guys, the pacifists with the money for foreign and development aid, not tanks.

But now, thanks to the Trump administration's comments about the Nato defence alliance and "European freeloading", its wobbly support for Ukraine and ongoing threats to pull American soldiers out of the

country, Germany has become the fourth largest spender on defence in the world.

According to a March report by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Germany's expenditure of \$88.5 billion on its military in 2024 amount to an 89% increase in such spending over the past decade.

The country hasn't spent this much on its army since the Cold War ended 26 years ago, the institute said. The newly elected government is even said to be considering bringing conscription back.

None of that really fits with Germans' post-war, pacifist self-image.

"How times have changed," Joerg Lau, international affairs correspondent for local newspaper *Die Zeit*, wrote in Berlin-based foreign affairs magazine *Internationale Politik Quarterly* late last year. "The idea that we are still living in a 'post-war era' is overshadowed by the premonition that it could also be a pre-war era."

Europeans may have thought they had it all figured out, but for

various reasons – including the Trump administration, the economic and social hangover from the Covid pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine – they are being forced to ask themselves who their enemies are, who their friends are, and even who they are.

That's particularly challenging in Germany where, in many ways, a whole country based its national and cultural identity on the post-war, international rules-based order. That script, with the dull-but-happy "end of history" finale, seems to have been torn up. ■



Backing Ukraine: New German Chancellor Friedrich Merz.