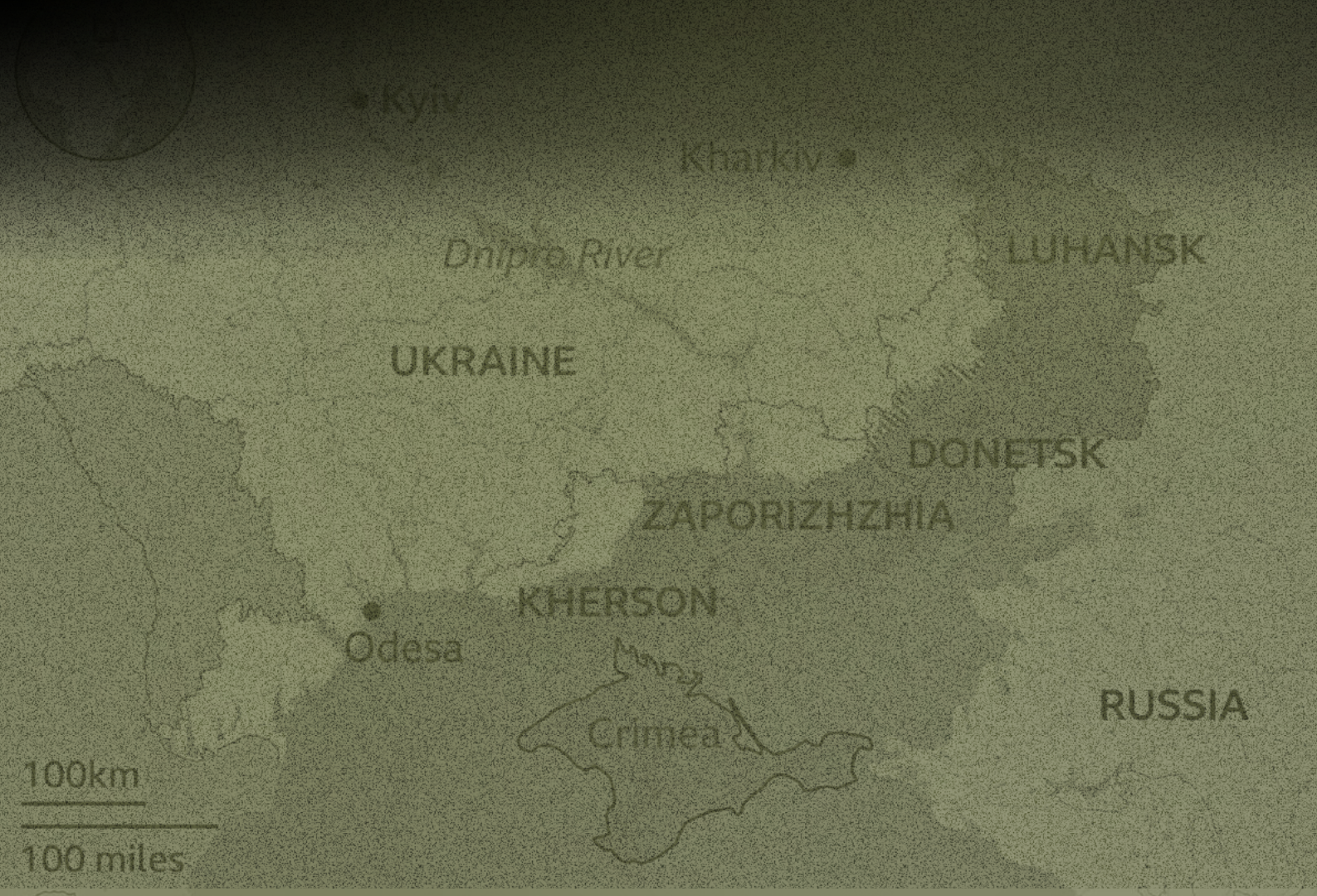
Serpens Center for International Security

Russia's Strategic Exploitation of Military Pauses in Ukraine



Executive Summary

The Serpens Center conducted an analysis of Russian ceasefire behavior patterns from 2014-2022, combining archival research with primary source interviews from Ukrainian frontline personnel who were fighting from 2014-2022. This assessment reveals a consistent pattern of strategic deception wherein Moscow systematically exploits ceasefire agreements as operational pauses to reconstitute forces, enhance military capabilities, and prepare for expanded offensive operations.

In May 2025, SII surveyed 26 Ukrainian service members with direct operational experience spanning the 2014-2022 period and the current war. These frontline perspectives, combined with documented violations and intelligence assessments, form the empirical foundation of this briefing. All quotes in the briefing are direct quotes from the soldiers who participated in our survey.

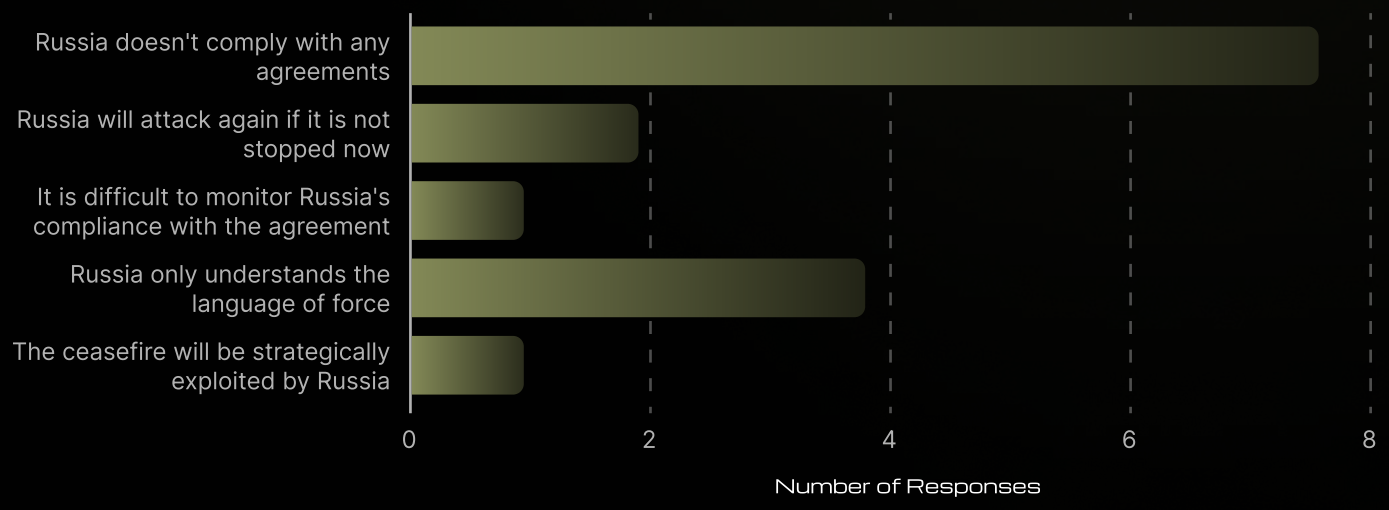
The voices from Ukraine's defenders provide critical insights often absent from policy discussions.

Key Findings:

- **91%** of respondents reported having directly witnessed or experienced violations of ceasefire agreements.
- **100%** of respondents expressed no trust in Russia adhering to future ceasefire commitments.
- **95%** believe Russia's primary goal in ceasefire negotiations is to regroup and prepare for further offensives.
- Traditional ceasefire frameworks lack enforcement mechanisms to prevent exploitation.

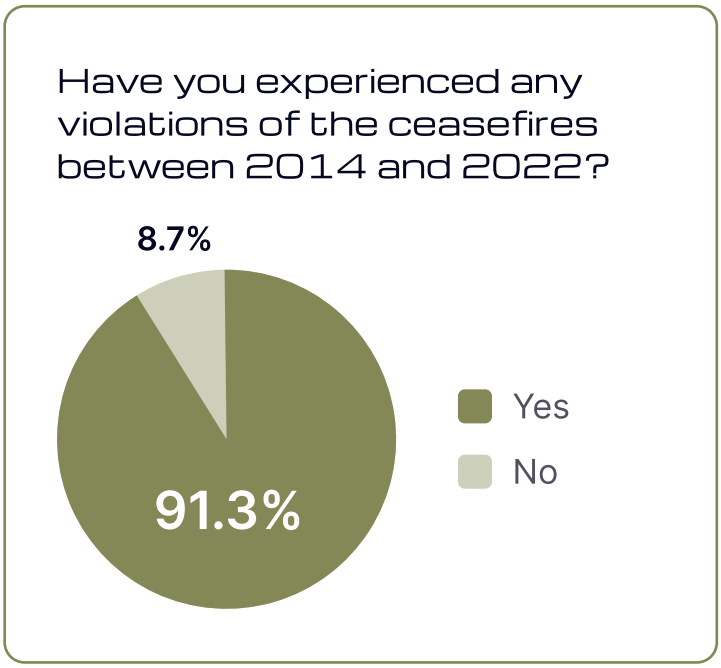
As one battalion reconnaissance chief observed:***"Real ceasefires by Russia occurred only when OSCE representatives entered the combat zone, and these combat actions were resumed upon their departure."*** Such testimony illustrates the reality behind strategic assessments.

Why don't Ukrainian soldiers trust a ceasefire with Russia?



Introduction

Since Russia's initial invasion of Ukraine in 2014, every ceasefire agreement Moscow has signed has failed to halt military operations. ***"I have no trust whatsoever. Russia always violates all agreements as soon as it suits them,"*** said one Ukrainian veteran who fought in 2014-2022, polled by SII.



Ukraine, Russia, and the OSCE signed Minsk I in September 2014 and a detailed follow-up, Minsk II, in February 2015 under U.N. Security Council Resolution 2202.[1] These accords committed Moscow and Kyiv to an immediate ceasefire, the withdrawal of all heavy weapons from the front, the removal of foreign troops and equipment under OSCE supervision, and full, unhindered monitoring access. In practice, OSCE observers recorded hundreds of violations every day: artillery strikes, sniper fire, and mortar rounds echoed along the line.

Satellite imagery confirmed what the monitors could not ignore: modern T-72B3 tanks and Pantsir-S1 air-defense systems rolling into separatist-held areas, in direct violation of the ban on foreign equipment. ***"Even after the Minsk agreements were signed, a real ceasefire only held when OSCE monitors were watching, and collapsed the moment they left,"*** one veteran said.

The human cost of Russia's deception became apparent at Debaltseve, where Russian forces launched a major offensive just three days after Minsk II's signing. Over 110 Ukrainian servicemen died in what amounted to a strategic ambush under ceasefire cover. This pattern repeated consistently: agreements provided diplomatic legitimacy while military operations continued unabated.

Agreements consistently allowed Russia to "[regroup] troops, replenishing losses, [prepare] for the next maneuvers." Moscow has always used diplomatic negotiations to gain military advantage, deceive international players, and use Ukraine for greater conquests. Therefore, history suggests that any future ceasefire will be effective only if it is backed by swift punishment and sanctions, real-time monitoring, and zero tolerance for even "minor" violations. Without such mechanisms, a new ceasefire will simply give Russia the time it needs to recharge before its next offensive, which will worsen the situation for Ukraine and its partners.

COVERT ROTATIONS AND FORCE EMBEDDING

Russian exploitation of ceasefire periods extends beyond treaty violations to systematic military enhancement. NATO intelligence estimated over 60,000 Russian troops and 2,000 military advisers operated in Crimea and eastern Ukraine by late 2014, many cycling through frontlines to maintain combat readiness while officially designated as "local volunteers."

From 2014 through 2022, Minsk II explicitly forbade “all foreign armed formations, military equipment, and mercenaries” on Ukrainian soil under OSCE supervision. Yet, almost immediately, Russia rotated “volunteer” fighters and cadre-level advisers through Donbas, embedding fresh Russian battalion tactical groups into units, a clear breach of the accord’s prohibition on foreign formations and “set up a gray zone for further actions, carried out constant attempts at sabotage, shelling, etc”, as described by one of the respondents.

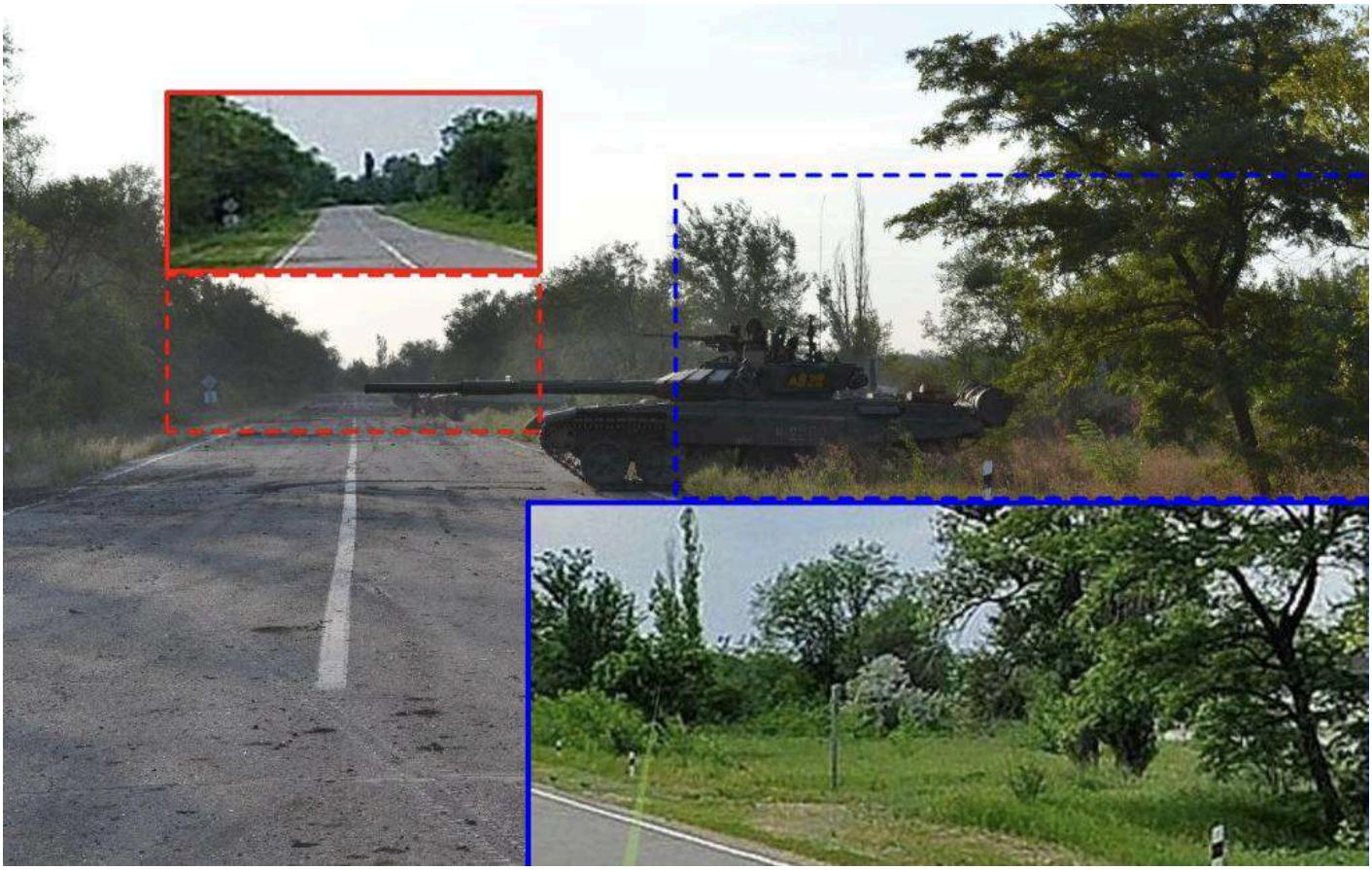
The rotation system served dual purposes: preserving operational security while providing Russian forces with combat experience. As one Ukrainian staff officer noted: **"This is their chance to rotate troops and bring in more ammunition... and to repair their positions. Preparation for the next attempts to break through."**

Satellite imagery revealed the infrastructure development accompanying these rotations. New rail spurs, equipment depots, and staging areas materialized near the Ukrainian border during supposed peaceful periods, in 2017.

The 8th Guards Combined Arms Army headquarters in Rostov functioned as a coordination hub, systematically building capabilities for future operations under diplomatic cover.

Satellite imagery further showed new field camps and storage sites springing up days after exercises near Rostov and Belgorod facilities in 2015-2016, identical to those later detected ferrying troops and equipment into Donbas. There was even evidence of modern T-72B3 tanks and Pantsir-S1 air-defence systems from these depots into separatist-held areas, proving that re-arming a proxy force violated Minsk II well before a single shot was fired. Russia used the ceasefire period **“to establish geopolitical contacts in the economic sphere while building up its military potential for a new, stronger, and more widespread attack on Ukraine."**

Ukrainian soldiers are afraid that even in the event of hostilities stopping along current lines, Russia “[will] start building engineering fortifications, laying mines or removing ours, installing or removing camouflage (confusion...) and improving their position in every way possible”, because it will be **“preparation for the next attempts to break through.”**



Russia's 200th Separate Motorized Infantry Brigade T-72B3 near Luhansk, July 2017

Pantsir-S1 on the road near Makiivka, January 2015

What do you think is Russia's main goal when it proposes or agrees to a ceasefire?

STRATEGIC TRAINING AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Meanwhile, while Moscow projected normalcy to international observers, describing border activities as routine rotations, it systematically hardened frontier regions for large-scale military operations. In 2016-2021, across Rostov, Belgorod, and Kursk oblasts, a shadow military infrastructure emerged: new railheads capable of rapid heavy equipment transport, permanent storage facilities for munitions and vehicles, and reinforced transportation networks designed to support mechanized formations.

The spring 2021 military buildup exemplified this dual-track approach. Following the deployment of approximately 100,000 troops to border regions, temporary facilities became permanent installations. Tent cities evolved into established bases, supply depots expanded rather than contracted, and what officials characterized as training exercises never fully concluded.

The 8th Guards Combined Arms Army headquarters in Rostov emerged as the operational nexus, coordinating personnel and equipment flows that transformed border regions into launching platforms.

Satellite shot of a facility in Valuyki (Belgorod Region), November 2016

Maxar Technologies satellite images of one of the bases in Crimea, CNN, February 2022

Large-scale military exercises provided additional cover for preparation activities. Operations Zapad and Kavkaz, presented as routine training events, enabled the positioning of over 150,000 combat-ready personnel along Ukraine's frontier by late 2021. These forces arrived with pre-positioned bridging equipment, engineering assets, and logistical support infrastructure that remained in place following the exercise. Deployment of Iskander short-range ballistic missile systems to Kursk and Belgorod installations revealed the true nature of these "peaceful" preparations: systematic preparation for full-scale invasion under the guise of defensive exercises.

HYBRID WARFARE AND INTELLIGENCE OPERATIONS

Concurrent with cyber attacks, Russian information operations intensified during ceasefire periods. State-backed disinformation networks targeted both Ukrainian public morale and Western support networks, exploiting the apparent calm to sow doubt about continued assistance needs. This dual-track approach maximized strategic advantage while maintaining plausible deniability.

A ceasefire should consider that Russia will continue to weaken Ukraine through ***"information warfare, spying, and other methods of destabilizing Ukraine and our allies".***

On 23 December 2015, the Sandworm hacking group knocked out Ukraine's western power grid, cutting electricity to roughly 230,000 consumers for up to six hours; in June 2017, the NotPetya malware strike, attributed to Russian state actors, inflicted over $10 billion in global economic damage.Saboteurs linked to Russia's GRU then orchestrated massive blasts at the Balakliya depot in March 2017 and at Kalynivka in September 2017, destroying tens of thousands of tons of munitions and forcing the evacuation of more than 40,000 civilians. State-backed disinformation networks and cyber-ops continued uninterrupted during every "pause," degrading Ukraine's critical infrastructure, sapping public morale, and planting doubt within Western societies. Russia will continue to cripple Ukraine and menace NATO members via digital and informational attacks, and serious ceasefire attempts must consider what tools will remain in Russia's disposal to conduct hybrid warfare against Ukraine and its allies.[2]

RUSSIA'S PREPARATIONS FOR POTENTIAL CONFLICT WITH NATO

Following 2022, Russia expanded its military capacity not only to sustain ongoing operations but also in anticipation of a potential confrontation with NATO. In 2022, the active-duty force numbered ~900,000. By early 2025, it had reached 1.13 million, with plans to grow to 1.5 million by 2026. This includes 343,000 additional troops recruited in 2025, with many new units stationed in regions such as Karelia near NATO borders.[3]

Russia's 2025 defense budget soared to 15.5 trillion rubles (~$145 billion), or 7.2% of GDP, the highest since the Cold War. These funds support weapon procurement, drone programs, and the new Unmanned Systems Forces branch. Russia took advantage of a pause to continue mobilizing for a future conflict and continues reinvesting in its defense industry after learning lessons in 2014 and 2022 to better prepare for the future wars.

European intelligence services with ISW assess that Russia is not only preparing for prolonged war in Ukraine but is laying the groundwork for a future confrontation with NATO. Germany's BND and Denmark's Defense Intelligence Service warned in 2025 that Russia sees NATO as a systemic adversary and may escalate if alliance cohesion weakens. These assessments underscore that Russia's post-2022 military build-up is not limited to Ukraine but aligns with long-term preparation for interstate war with NATO powers. Russia thinks the West is weak without the US, and ***"if the enemy is weaker, [Russia] will use all negotiations for trickery, deception, and stalling for time, in order to eventually win or wait until circumstances change to more favorable ones."***

CONCLUSIONS

When asked under what conditions a ceasefire with Russia would be acceptable, their answers reveal a clear understanding that traditional ceasefire frameworks are insufficient to prevent renewed Russian aggression.

COMPLETE TERRITORIAL RESTORATION

The most consistent theme across responses centers on complete Russian withdrawal from Ukrainian territory. Multiple respondents specified "complete withdrawal of RF troops from occupied Ukrainian territory" and return to "1991 borders" as non-negotiable preconditions, as partial territorial concessions create launching points for future offensives, as demonstrated repeatedly since 2014.

This unanimous insistence on territorial integrity reflects soldiers' understanding that any Russian military presence on Ukrainian soil provides infrastructure for renewed aggression.

Under what conditions is a ceasefire with Russia acceptable to the military who took this survey?

RUSSIAN MILITARY DEFEAT

A significant number of respondents identified Russian military capitulation or destruction as the only reliable guarantee against future attacks. Responses included “when Russia signs capitulation,” “only upon Russia's capitulation,” and “complete destruction of the enemy's combat capability.”

One veteran noted that acceptable conditions require “complete destruction of the Russian Federation as a country” while another specified “total collapse of Russia.” These responses indicate that frontline personnel view the current Russian state structure itself as incompatible with sustainable peace, based on direct experience of systematic treaty violations.

ENFORCEMENT MECHANISMS AND INTERNATIONAL GUARANTEES

Several respondents emphasized the necessity of robust enforcement mechanisms, specifying “real guarantees from allies,” “only under international control,” and “automatic sanctions for violations.” This reflects recognition that previous ceasefire failures resulted from absent enforcement capabilities.

The emphasis on “automatic sanctions” demonstrates understanding that reactive enforcement mechanisms enable violation patterns—consequences must activate immediately upon detection rather than requiring additional diplomatic consensus that enables delay and obstruction.

REGIME CHANGE AND JUSTICE

Multiple responses identified Russian leadership change as essential for sustainable agreements. One respondent specified “change of leadership of the aggressor state” while others used more direct language about regime elimination. This assessment reflects experience that current Russian institutional structures systematically produce aggressive behavior regardless of specific leadership personalities.

Several respondents also emphasized accountability mechanisms, requiring “punishment of those guilty of all war crimes” and reparations payments. This reflects understanding that sustainable peace requires addressing the costs of aggression rather than simply ending active combat operations.

Existing ceasefire frameworks suffer from fundamental structural weaknesses that enable Russian exploitation. Monitoring mechanisms lack real-time response capabilities, verification procedures cannot address hybrid warfare activities, and enforcement mechanisms remain reactive rather than preventive. These gaps create operational space for continued military activity under diplomatic cover.

The OSCE monitoring experience in eastern Ukraine illustrates these limitations. While observers documented hundreds of violations daily, their presence actually enabled more sophisticated Russian deception by creating predictable monitoring patterns. As noted by Ukrainian personnel, violations ceased only during direct OSCE observation periods, resuming immediately upon monitor departure.

Any ceasefire agreement that enables Russian force reconstitution presents long-term strategic risks extending beyond Ukraine. Current Russian military expansion specifically prepares for potential NATO confrontation, meaning a direct threat to Alliance security.

Ukrainian military personnel consistently emphasize that Russia “can only communicate on equal terms with the strong” and responds solely to credible military pressure. This assessment suggests that ceasefire frameworks lacking enforceable military consequences will fail regardless of diplomatic architecture or international guarantees. As one Ukrainian commander warned: ***“Russians will use this to get better. It'll be a very dangerous, slippery moment.”***

Annex 1

INSIGHTS FROM THE FRONT LINE: SURVEY OF UKRAINIAN SOLDIERS (2014-2024)

91%

of soldiers reported having directly witnessed or experienced violations of ceasefire agreements.

Common example:

"When, during the signed Minsk agreements, a real ceasefire and attempted assault actions by Russia occurred only when OSCE representatives entered the combat zone. And these combat actions were also resumed upon their departure".

100%

of respondents expressed no trust in Russia adhering to future ceasefire commitments.

Common justification:

"No trust. The experience of past "Minsk agreements" shows that Russia does not adhere to any rules and conditions of warfare".

95%

believe Russia's primary goal in ceasefire negotiations is to regroup and prepare for further offensives.

Recurring themes:

"Re-armament and rotation", "Force accumulation", "Taking more favorable positions under cover", "To show the international community and their people that they are ready for negotiations."

92%

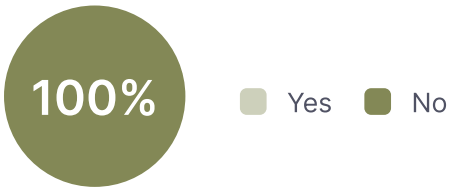
believe that a real ceasefire with Russia is only possible in the case of the withdrawal of troops from the territory of Ukraine, capitulation, and immediate critical sanctions for violation of the agreements.

Common examples:

"Complete withdrawal of troops from occupied territories", "Only under international control", "Automatic sanctions for violations".

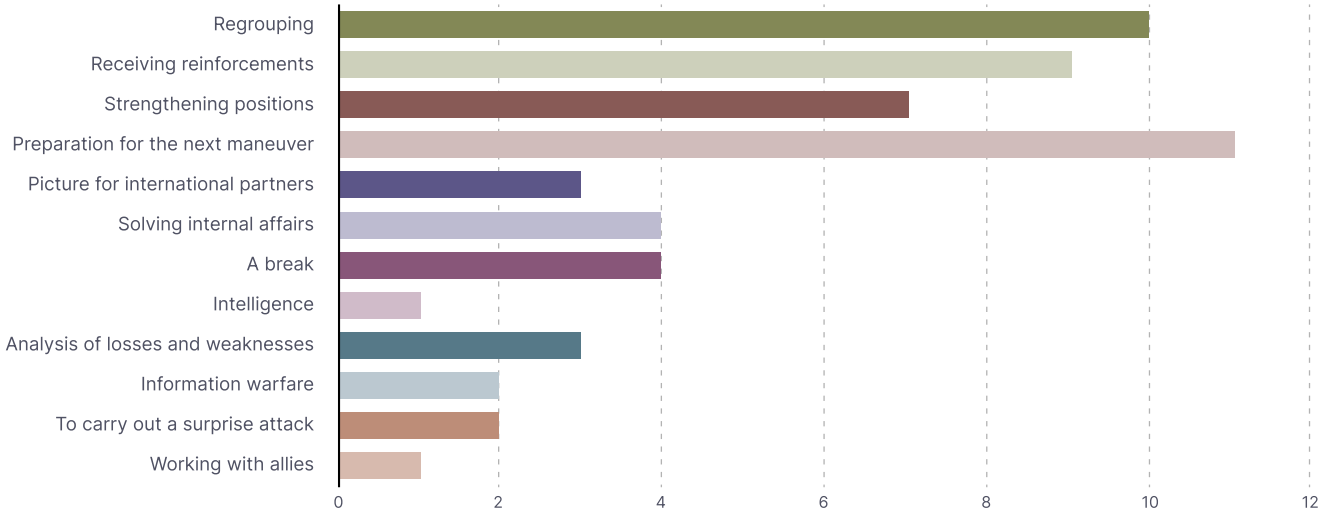
Annex 1

Do Ukrainian soldiers trust in a ceasefire agreement with Russia?

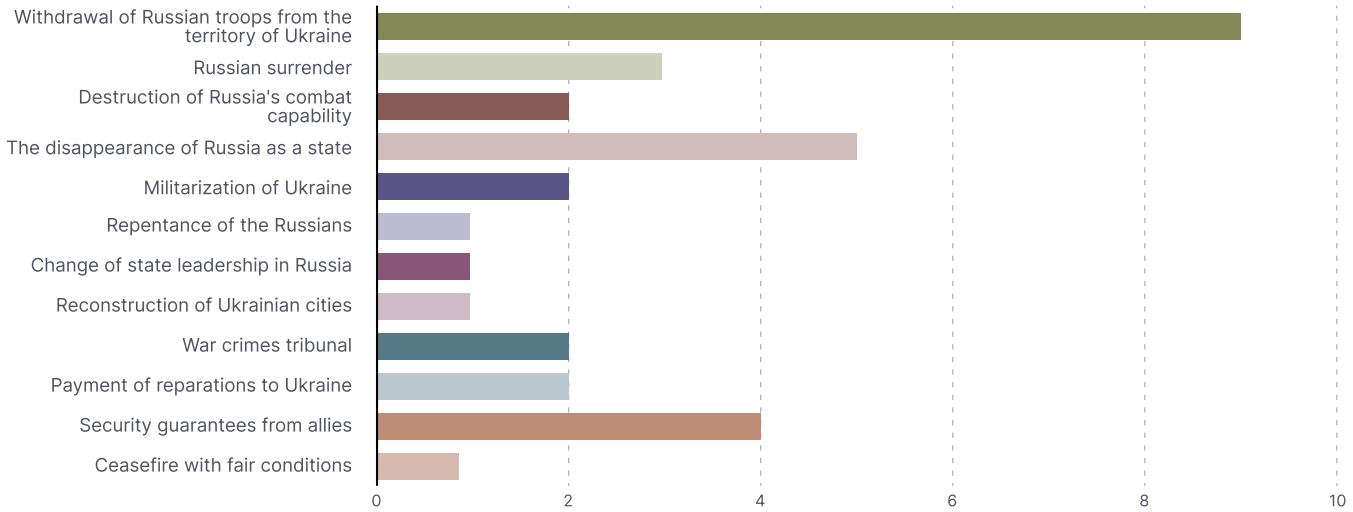


How often, in your opinion, has Russia used ceasefires to regroup, rearm, or redeploy troops?

What do you think is Russia's main goal when it proposes or agrees to a ceasefire?



Under what conditions is a ceasefire with Russia acceptable to the military who took this survey?



Annex 2

KEY EVENTS DURING WHICH RUSSIA VIOLATED THE CEASEFIRE

EVENT/DATE	COMMENT
Ilovaisk, August 2014	Ukrainian forces were promised a humanitarian corridor by Russian and separatist forces. As troops withdrew, they were ambushed and shelled. Over 360 Ukrainian soldiers were killed, more than 180 wounded, and many were captured. This betrayal occurred during early ceasefire discussions and set the tone for subsequent violations.
Debaltseve, February 2015	Just three days after the signing of Minsk II, Russian forces and their proxies launched a full-scale offensive on the strategic rail hub of Debaltseve. Ukrainian troops, surrounded, fought their way out in heavy combat. At least 110 Ukrainian servicemen were killed and hundreds wounded or captured.
Donetsk Airport, Late 2014 – January 2015	Despite the ceasefire under Minsk I, intense battles continued. Ukrainian defenders, dubbed “Cyborgs,” resisted nonstop assaults until the terminal was completely destroyed. The area saw continuous shelling and attacks in direct breach of the agreement.
Periodic Violations 2016–2021	“Harvest ceasefires,” “school-year truces,” and “Easter truces” were routinely broken. Artillery attacks, sniper fire, and covert operations continued under the cover of silence. These violations made daily life unpredictable and deadly, even in periods declared as “peaceful.”
Energy Ceasefire (March–April 2025)	Brokered by the Trump administration, energy ceasefire aimed to protect Ukraine's critical energy infrastructure. However, Russia violated this agreement over 30 times since its inception on March 25, targeting energy facilities across Ukraine. These breaches were documented by Ukraine's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and shared with international partners.
Easter Truce (April 19–20, 2025)	Russia unilaterally declared a 30-hour ceasefire during the Orthodox Easter. Despite Ukraine's acceptance, Russian forces continued attacks, including missile and drone strikes on Kyiv, leading to casualties and infrastructure damage.
Victory Day Ceasefire (May 8–11, 2025)	Announced by Russia to coincide with its Victory Day celebrations, this three-day ceasefire was marred by continued Russian military operations. Notably, on May 8, Russian forces dropped guided bombs on residential areas in Sumy Oblast, resulting in civilian casualties.

Serpens Center
for International Security