



## **The nuclear factor in the Russian-Ukrainian war**

### **(expert survey)**

The Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation conducted a survey of experts on the nuclear factor in the Russian-Ukrainian war from 16 September to 24 October 2025. The purpose of the survey was to find out the experts' opinions on the potential use of nuclear weapons by the Kremlin. Twenty-five foreign policy experts responded to the questionnaire.

### ***The nuclear factor in the Russian-Ukrainian war: geopolitical and security aspects***

- 20 interviewed experts consider it unlikely or categorically impossible that Russia would use nuclear weapons against Ukraine, with only 5 participants in the study considering such a scenario likely.
- 23 experts assess the possibility of Russia using nuclear weapons against European countries as low, while only two consider such scenario quite likely.
- Experts are unanimous in their estimation of the possibility of Russia using nuclear weapons against the United States, considering it unlikely (with 15 out of 25 experts having responded 'definitely not').
- 23 experts consider a Russian attack on American military facilities outside the United States unlikely.
- However, experts' opinions differ on the probability of a nuclear strike by the Kremlin on neutral territories. 16 experts consider such a scenario unlikely, while 9 respondents believe it is likely.
- 22 experts consider Moscow's nuclear arsenal to be the main factor restraining Western countries from increasing military aid to Ukraine in its fight against the aggressor, while only 3 experts disagree with this.
- The 18 interviewed experts believe that Moscow's periodic escalation of hostilities near the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant is a deliberate attempt to cause a nuclear disaster and achieve the same political/psychological effect as the use of tactical nuclear weapons. Another 6 experts note that such actions by the Russians pursue other goals. And only one expert considers those actions to be unconscious.
- 21 experts believe it is reasonable for Ukraine to continue operations to destroy components of the Russian Federation's nuclear triad, while 4 respondents abstained from answering this question.

### ***The Kremlin's nuclear arsenal: between propaganda and reality***

- In the opinion of 10 experts, the declared size of Russia's nuclear arsenal is close to the real number. Another 7 respondents believe that the real size of Russia's nuclear arsenal is far from what the Kremlin claims, while 8 experts noted that this question is difficult to answer.

### ***Ukraine's nuclear status: historical and political myths***

- 13 of the experts surveyed believe that Ukraine's nuclear arsenal would not have prevented Russia from attacking. The opposite view is held by 10 experts.
- 10 experts surveyed consider that acquiring nuclear power status is impossible for Ukraine, as this would weaken Ukraine's relations with Western countries and could provoke a nuclear strike from the Kremlin. On the other hand, 7 interviewed experts expressed a positive opinion on this prospect if there are no other real security guarantees for Ukraine. For 8 experts, this question was difficult to answer.
- Periodic mentions in the global media about Ukraine's possible plans to restore its nuclear potential have no impact on the course of the war, according to 11 surveyed experts. In the opinion of 8 respondents, such mentions rather draw attention to Ukraine's need for security guarantees. Meanwhile, 5 participants in the study consider that this harms Ukraine by creating additional tension in its relations with the international community.

### ***Nuclear blackmail and the balance of power in modern geopolitical and security realities***

- Experts were almost equally divided on the possibility of European nuclear powers (The United Kingdom and France) becoming an alternative nuclear 'umbrella' for the European Union in countering the Kremlin's nuclear blackmail. 13 respondents answered in the positive, while 12 experts were sceptical about this possibility.

### ***Geopolitical aspects of US nuclear strategy: is Washington afraid of nuclear blackmail?***

- 20 experts agreed that the current White House administration is extremely vulnerable to nuclear blackmail by authoritarian regimes (Russia, Iran, North Korea). Only 5 of the experts surveyed disagreed.

### ***The Kremlin's nuclear blackmail: disinformation and propaganda campaigns***

- On the question of whether Moscow's periodic nuclear threats during the Russian-Ukrainian war should be taken seriously, experts' opinions were almost equally divided: 13 experts answered in the positive, while 12 respondents think that such threats from Russia should be ignored, as this rhetoric is evidence of Moscow's military weakness in the conventional war against Ukraine.
- 18 experts surveyed agree that the Kremlin's periodic nuclear blackmail deters Western countries from providing substantial assistance to Ukraine, while 6 participants in the study believe that the Russian Federation's periodic nuclear blackmail is gradually 'dulling' the fear of Western countries and contributing to their determination to help Ukraine.

## **SURVEY RESULTS**

***The nuclear factor in the Russian-Ukrainian war: geopolitical and security aspects***

*1.1 In your opinion, how possible is it that Russia will use nuclear weapons against Ukraine?*

	Number of responses
1. Highly likely	0
2. Quite likely	5
3. Unlikely	18
4. Definitely not	2
5. It's hard to say.	0

*1.2 In your opinion, how possible is it that Russia will use nuclear weapons against European countries?*

	Number of responses
1. Highly likely	0
2. Quite likely	2
3. Unlikely	14
4. Definitely not	9
5. It's hard to say.	0

*1.3 In your opinion, how possible is it that Russia would use nuclear weapons against the United States?*

	Number of responses
1. Highly likely	0
2. Quite likely	0
3. Unlikely	10
4. Definitely not	15
5. It's hard to say.	0

*1.4 In your opinion, how possible is it that Russia would use nuclear weapons against US military targets in other parts of the world (outside the continental United States)?*

	Number of responses
1. Highly likely	1
2. Quite likely	0
3. Unlikely	17
4. Definitely not	6
5. It's hard to say.	1

*1.5 In your opinion, how possible is it that Russia would use nuclear weapons on neutral territory?*

	Number of responses
1. Highly likely	1
2. Quite likely	8
3. Unlikely	12
4. Definitely not	4
5. It's hard to say.	0

*1.6 Do you agree that the Russian Federation's nuclear arsenal is the main factor preventing Western countries from increasing their military support for Ukraine in its fight against the aggressor?*

	Number of responses
1. Strongly agree	8
2. Mostly agree	14
3. Mostly disagree	2
4. Strongly disagree	1
5. It's hard to say.	0

*1.7 In your opinion, is the Russian Federation's periodic escalation of hostilities near the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant a conscious plan by the Kremlin to work out a scenario for causing a nuclear disaster and achieving the same political/psychological effect as the use of tactical nuclear weapons?*

	Number of responses
1. A fully conscious escalation	12
2. Mostly deliberate escalation	6
3. Unconscious escalation	1
4. The escalation of hostilities around the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant has other objectives	6
5. It's hard to say.	0

*1.8 Should Ukraine continue to carry out operations to destroy components of the Russian Federation's nuclear triad?*

	Number of responses
1. Yes	21
2. No	0
3. It's hard to say.	4

***The Kremlin's nuclear arsenal: between propaganda and reality***

*2.1 How would you estimate the real size of the Russian Federation's nuclear arsenal?*

	Number of responses
1. The declared official data is close to the actual figures.	10
2. The official data declared is far from reality.	7
3. It's hard to say.	8

***Ukraine's nuclear status: historical and political myths***

*3.1 In your opinion, would Ukraine's potential possession of a nuclear arsenal prevent Russia from implementing its aggressive plans against Ukraine?*

	Number of responses
1. Yes, it would have prevented Russian aggression back in February 2014.	6
2. Yes, it would have prevented a full-scale Russian invasion in February 2022.	4
3. This would not have affected the Russian Federation's determination to launch aggression against Ukraine, but it would have corrected the Kremlin's plans.	11
4. This would not have affected the Russians' determination and plans to launch aggression against Ukraine.	2
5. It's hard to say.	2

*3.2 How do you estimate Ukraine's possible steps towards acquiring nuclear weapons?*

	Number of responses
1. Positively, because in the absence of security guarantees, this is the only way to preserve the statehood and sovereignty of the country.	7
2. Negatively, because it will alienate Western countries and provoke a nuclear strike from Russia.	10
3. It's hard to say.	8

*3.3 In your opinion, what impact do periodic mentions in the global media about Ukraine's possible plans to restore its nuclear potential have?*

	Number of responses
1. It harms Ukraine because it creates tension with the international community.	5
2. This does not generally affect the course of the war.	11
3. This rather increases attention to Ukraine's need for security guarantees.	8
4. It's hard to say.	1

***Nuclear blackmail and the balance of power in modern geopolitical and security realities***

*4.1 Are European nuclear powers (The United Kingdom, France) capable of becoming an alternative nuclear 'umbrella' for the EU in countering Russia's nuclear blackmail if the United States refuses to continue providing its protection?*

	Number of responses
1. Fully capable	3
2. Rather capable	10
3. Rather incapable	12
4. Completely incapable	0
5. It's hard to say.	0

### ***Geopolitical aspects of US nuclear strategy: is Washington afraid of nuclear blackmail?***

*5.1 Do you agree that the current US administration is extremely vulnerable to nuclear blackmail by authoritarian regimes (Russia, Iran, North Korea)?*

	Number of responses
1. Strongly agree	5
2. Mostly agree	15
3. Mostly disagree	5
4. Strongly disagree	0
5. It's hard to say.	0

### ***The Kremlin's nuclear blackmail: disinformation and propaganda campaigns***

*6.1 In your opinion, how should we respond to the periodic nuclear threats from the Russian Federation during the Russian-Ukrainian war?*

	Number of responses
1. It is important to take a serious approach to preparing citizens for the possible consequences of a nuclear strike.	13
2. It is worth ignoring, as such rhetoric is evidence of the Russian Federation's military weakness in conventional warfare against Ukraine.	12

*6.2 Which of the following statements do you agree with most?*

	Number of responses
1. Periodic nuclear blackmail by the Russian Federation allows the Kremlin to prevent Western countries from providing substantial support to Ukraine.	18
2. Periodic nuclear blackmail by the Russian Federation gradually 'dulls' the fear of Western countries and contributes to their determination to help Ukraine.	6
3. It's hard to say.	1

## LIST OF EXPERTS SURVEYED

1. Chalyi Valeriy
2. Dzerzh Serhiy
3. Fakhurdinova Marianna
4. Fedorenko Kostiantyn
5. Herasymchuk Serhiy
6. Honchar Mykhailo
7. Horbach Volodymyr
8. Khara Oleksandr
9. Klimkin Pavlo
10. Krayev Oleksandr
11. Kryvdyk Ostap
12. Melnyk Oleksiy
13. Myronenko Petro
14. Orobets Lesia
15. Pashkov Mykhailo
16. Polyakov Leonid
17. Prysiazhniuk Marianna
18. Shelest Hanna
19. Skrypchenko Maksym
20. Solodkyy Serhiy
21. Sungurovskyi Mykola
22. Temirov Yuriy
23. Todorov Ihor
24. Zhdanov Ihor
25. Zhovtenko Taras