

TODAY'S MEDIA TRENDS

ESPRESSO

FEBRUARY 20, 2026

THE GDELT PROJECT



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UKRAINE NAVIGATES A PERILOUS
CONVERGENCE OF
TRANSACTIONAL DIPLOMACY,
INTERNAL PURGES, AND
BATTLEFIELD STALEMATE IN THE
FIFTH YEAR OF WAR

DAY-AT-A-GLANCE

February 20, 2026, marks a critical inflection point for Ukraine as it enters the fifth year of full-scale conflict. The day is dominated by the tension between the 12th anniversary of the Revolution of Dignity and a new, highly controversial phase of diplomacy in Geneva involving the Trump administration and the Kremlin. While the Ukrainian public commemorates the "Heavenly Hundred," the political leadership is embroiled in high-stakes legal warfare, evidenced by the corruption scandal surrounding former Energy Minister Herman Galushchenko (code-named "Sigismund") and public friction between President Zelensky and former Commander-in-Chief Valerii Zaluzhnyi. These internal rifts emerge as the national mood shifts, with nearly 60% of the population now favoring negotiations to end active hostilities, even as

skepticism regarding Russian intent remains absolute.

Strategically, the battlefield is characterized by a "war of heights" and frozen rivers, with Ukrainian forces executing localized counter-attacks near the Zaporizhzhia-Dnipro border to stymie a Russian push toward industrial centers. Simultaneously, a massive security operation, "Enigma 2.0," has successfully thwarted a transnational Russian assassination plot targeting military and media figures in Ukraine and Moldova. This serves as a grim reminder that despite the diplomatic theater in Switzerland, Russia's objective remains the total dismantling of Ukrainian statehood. The day represents a convergence of existential threats: the physical pressure on the front, the systemic decay of the energy grid under constant bombardment, and the risk of a "transactional peace" brokered by a US administration seeking a \$12 trillion economic alignment with Moscow.

MAJOR DEVELOPMENTS

The "Sigismund" Files and Institutional Purges

- National anti-corruption authorities (NABU/SAP) have released recordings from the "Midas" case involving [former Minister Herman Galushchenko](#), who allegedly sought to flee the country as an ambassador to the US while deeply entangled in energy sector kickbacks.
- The scandal highlights the persistent issue of "internal looting" during martial law, with allegations that corrupt officials laundered energy scheme proceeds into [offshore accounts and cryptocurrency](#).

- Political tension is exacerbated by Zaluzhnyi's public criticism of the Zelensky administration's [handling of the 2023 counter-offensive](#), framing his recent diplomatic appointment to the UK as a move to neutralize a potential political rival.

Geneva Negotiations and the \$12 Trillion "Peace Deal"

- Trilateral talks in Geneva involving the US, Ukraine, and Russia have produced a "ceasefire mechanism" proposal, though analysts warn it may be a [strategic stall by the Kremlin](#) to regroup.
- The Trump administration is reportedly entertaining a massive economic package with Russia valued at \$12 trillion, which Zelensky has characterized as "historical trash" when used to [justify territorial concessions](#).
- European intelligence agencies express extreme skepticism, viewing the talks as a "theater" where Russia seeks to [bypass sanctions](#) rather than reach a durable peace.

Security Operation "Enigma 2.0"

- Ukrainian and Moldovan special forces have dismantled an [assassination cell](#) recruited in Russian prisons and tasked with eliminating high-profile military leaders and journalists.
- The group planned to use explosives and firearms to create social panic, with bounties of up to [\\$100,000 per target](#) offered by Russian handlers.

The Battle for the Heights

- Military activity has intensified around the Zaporizhzhia-Dnipro border, where Ukrainian tactical groups are attempting to strike the [junctions of three Russian armies](#).
- Russian forces are leveraging the [Siverskyi Donets heights](#) to threaten Sloviansk and Kramatorsk, marking a shift in combat intensity toward the Donbas uplands.

KEY GOVERNANCE TOPICS

Armed Conflict & Militarization

- Ukrainian forces are prioritizing the [coordination of mobile reserves](#) to compensate for manpower shortages against superior Russian numbers.
- Discussions continue regarding the deployment of [laser-based air defense systems](#), though military analysts doubt their immediate readiness for serial production.

Critical Infrastructure Security

- Kyiv faces a severe heating crisis in the Dnipro and Darnytsia districts following [attacks on the Darnytsia TPP](#).
- Decentralization of power via solar panels and mini-boiler plants is being accelerated for [schools and hospitals](#) to mitigate total grid failure.

Diplomacy & Statecraft

- Trump's newly launched "Peace Council" in Washington aims to establish an [alternative to the UN](#), inviting Russia and Turkey while marginalizing traditional European allies.

- President Zelensky is pushing for a [national referendum](#) on any peace deal to legitimize potential "painful compromises" and avoid accusations of constitutional overreach.

Energy & Critical Minerals

- The Druzhba oil pipeline remains inoperable following Russian drone strikes, leading to a [diplomatic spat between Hungary and the EU](#) over repair timelines.
- Russian diplomats are attempting to outmaneuver Ukraine by offering the US [access to Arctic minerals](#) and rare earth metals.

Information Warfare & Disinformation

- The "Midas tapes" are being used both to purge corruption and as a tool in the [Zelensky-Zaluzhnyi](#) political rift.
- Russian propaganda is actively [instigating fear in Crimea](#) through staged "nationalist bus" scenarios to discourage integration.

DEEP DIVE: TRENDS AND THEMES

The Transactional Peace Trap The current US administration's foreign policy is increasingly defined by "transactionalism," where Ukrainian territory is treated as a component of a larger economic negotiation with Russia. The mention of a \$12 trillion investment package suggests a framework where the US secures future resource access in exchange for allowing a "neutral buffer zone" in Eastern Europe. Ukraine's strategy is to shift this narrative back to sovereignty, using the [legal definition of Russian actions as "terrorism"](#) to block economic normalization.

Systemic Corruption as a Frontline Threat

The Galushchenko case indicates that as the war drags into its fifth year, the "exhaustion of honesty" among state elites has become as dangerous as Russian artillery. The [revelation of "Sigismund"](#) suggests that the vertical of power may have enabled high-level figures to enrich themselves on energy projects intended to protect the nation, directly contributing to current blackouts.

The Evolution of Ukrainian Resilience The public's desire for negotiations (60%) is not necessarily a desire for surrender, but a [pragmatic adaptation](#) to a war of attrition. Ukrainians are increasingly localized in their survival, building "energy islands" at the school and district level. This [decentralized resilience](#) is the primary factor preventing state collapse despite the central government's internal turmoil.

INTERNAL DYNAMICS & DOMESTIC INSTABILITY

Ukraine is experiencing significant **elite-level instability**. The public divergence between Zelensky and Zaluzhnyi is viewed by some as the [start of an unofficial election campaign](#). The arrest of Galushchenko serves as a "sacrificial" move by the administration to regain public trust amid the "Midas" tapes scandal. Societal rifts are also opening between [front-line soldiers and those at home](#), and between older generations who support mobilization and younger citizens who view it as increasingly illegitimate ("bus-ification").

In the United States, the Trump administration faces its own **institutional checks**. The Supreme Court's ruling against [unilateral tariff imposition](#) and migrant policies suggests a deepening conflict between the executive and judicial branches,

potentially distracting the President from the Ukrainian track or prompting a "distraction strike" abroad (e.g., Iran).

EXTERNAL DYNAMICS & GLOBAL POSTURE

The international arena is currently a **fracturing multipolar system**. Trump's "Peace Council" represents a move away from the post-WWII liberal order toward a system of ["purchased influence,"](#) where countries can buy "lifetime membership" in diplomatic forums. Europe is reacting by attempting to forge an independent ["Steel Porcupine" defense strategy](#) to prepare for a future with diminished US security guarantees. Russia is successfully framing itself as an economic partner to the global south and transactional western leaders, even while its [assassination squads](#) continue to operate in Europe.

THE ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

The economic state is one of **managed depression** in Ukraine and **high-stakes brinkmanship** globally. Commodity transit remains a primary weapon, with the blockade of the Druzhba pipeline serving as a lever for the Orban government against EU energy policy.

- **Currency:** The Hryvnia (UAH) has shown slight gains; Zloty at 12.06, Euro at 50.91, [USD at 43.26](#).
- **Market Sentiment:** Global markets are buoyed by the US Supreme Court's check on Trump's tariffs, while oil prices [rise due to Middle East tensions](#).
- **Sanctions Impact:** Russian oil companies are reportedly [cutting production](#) as sanctions on technology and financing finally bite into their systemic stability.

- **Retail/Consumer:** Average transaction value in Ukraine rose to 354 UAH, though [non-cash transactions](#) dominate at 74%.

LEADERSHIP CHANGES

The day is marked by significant churn in high-level Ukrainian personnel, often under the cloud of investigation or political realignment.

- **Herman Galushchenko:** Former Energy Minister [arrested and detained](#) in connection with the "Midas" tapes; currently in a pre-trial detention center with a 200 million UAH bail.
- **Serhii Shefir:** Former First Assistant to the President [spotted in Geneva/Warsaw](#) after leaving the country, following his dismissal.
- **Valerii Zaluzhnyi:** Transitioned from military leadership to the [Ambassadorship in the UK](#), though his public critiques of the government signal he remains a potent political actor.
- **Kyrylo Budanov & Mykhailo Fedorov:** Noted as "new faces" of the [government's recent strengthening](#), with Fedorov potentially taking on expanded roles in defense management.

EDITORIAL POSTURE & STORY HIERARCHY

Espresso TV maintains a **nationalistic and defensive posture**. The lead stories prioritize national security threats (Enigma 2.0) and national memory (Heavenly Hundred), framing the war as a generational struggle for dignity. There is a conspicuous **skepticism toward the Trump administration**, with frequent comparisons between current diplomacy and the 1918 Brest-Litovsk treaty,

which the channel frames as a Russian "betrayal" of Ukraine. Critical coverage of the Galushchenko scandal suggests an editorial commitment to exposing "enemies within," though it remains careful not to directly implicate President Zelensky in the corruption schemes. Buried stories include the specific details of Middle Eastern escalations, which are only mentioned in the context of their impact on US attention toward Ukraine.

GEOPOLITICAL FRAMING

The geopolitical subtext suggests a world where **principled stands are being replaced by transactional gains**, with Ukraine struggling to maintain its status as a "principled" actor in a "chaotic" global environment.

COUNTRIES

- **Ukraine:** Portrayed as resilient but **exhausted and institutionally fragile**. Quotes describe it as "one giant Epstein file" regarding the depth of Russian penetration [into its state structures](#).
- **Russia:** Framed as **deceptive and opportunistic**. They are viewed as "imitating nuclear madness" to extract concessions while their military remains [entirely committed to total conquest](#).
- **United States:** Portrayed as **chaotic and unpredictable**. The administration is framed as seeing the war as an "economic deal" rather than an existential crisis [of the western order](#).
- **Poland:** Viewed as a **steadfast but increasingly frustrated** ally. They are preparing to deploy [anti-personnel mines](#) and are cutting social support for refugees, signaled by the "Navrotsky Law."

LEADERS

- **Volodymyr Zelensky:** Framed as a **weakened but defiant** leader trying to balance public fatigue with a refusal to accept a "quasi-capitulation" [dictated by Washington](#).
- **Donald Trump:** Portrayed as an **egocentric and transactional** "Home Alone character" who prioritizes his self-image of "making a deal" over [human suffering](#).
- **Vladimir Putin:** Characterized as a **stubborn and fanatical** "boring bureaucrat" who believes he has "won" the factor of time and is waiting for [western support to collapse](#).
- **Prince Andrew:** Framed as **corrupt and entitled**, his arrest on his birthday is presented as a symbolic win for the [rule of law](#).

INFORMATION WARFARE ENVIRONMENT

Information warfare is currently centered on **delegitimization**. Russia is using "historical excursions" by Medinsky to argue that [Ukraine is not a real state](#), a narrative designed to make Western concessions more palatable. Internally, the leak of the "Sigismund" tapes appears to be a **narrative seeding** exercise aimed at cleaning out the Old Guard while potentially distracting from current battlefield failures. There is a significant delta between the "Geneva Progress" narrative from the White House and the "Geneva Theater" narrative from [European intelligence](#), indicating a deepening rift in Western information spaces.

HYPOTHESES AND FUTURE OUTLOOK

- **The Referendum Crisis:** Zelensky may call for a referendum on the Geneva peace proposals within months. This will likely trigger a constitutional crisis as Ukrainian law [prohibits such votes under martial law](#).
- **The Rise of the "Veteran Party":** Public friction between Zaluzhnyi and Zelensky, combined with Budanov's rising profile, suggests the emergence of a [military-led political alternative](#) that may challenge civilian leadership if the peace deal is perceived as a sell-out.
- **Energy Autarky:** Ukraine will shift entirely to a [local energy model](#), with towns and schools operating independent grids, making the centralized Russian targeting of the TPPs less effective over time.

STRATEGIC FORESIGHT

Short Term (1-4 Weeks): Expect a surge in Russian drone and missile strikes intended to pressure Ukraine during the "Geneva consultation" period. Protests may occur in Kyiv regarding the [Galushchenko detention](#) or perceived "capitulation" in talks.

Medium Term (1-6 Months): A major political showdown over elections is likely. If martial law is not lifted by the summer, internal [unrest over the "illegitimacy"](#) of the government may be weaponized by Russian information ops.

Long Term (1-5 Years): Ukraine will likely become a "Steel Porcupine" [outside of NATO](#), with a permanent high-tech military alert status and a deeply decentralized infrastructure, regardless of whether a formal "peace deal" is signed.

RISK ASSESSMENT

- **Risk of Constitutional Collapse:** Triggers: Calling a referendum or election while martial law is active. Likelihood: High (given current 2026 trajectory). Impact: Catastrophic; leads to internal political fragmentation and civil unrest. Mitigations: International legal mediation and a strict adherence to the 83rd article of the [Constitution](#).
- **The "Brest-Litovsk" Scenario:** Triggers: Signing a transactional deal that trades land for investment. Likelihood: Moderate. Impact: High; would potentially trigger a military coup or "Third Maidan." Mitigations: Transparency in Geneva talks and [consultation with the military command](#).
- **Assassination of High-Value Targets:** Triggers: Breaches in security uncovered by Enigma 2.0. Likelihood: High. Impact: High; could decapitate GUR or leading media outlets. Mitigations: Continued [joint ops with Moldova and NATO partners](#).
- **Kyiv Energy Total Failure:** Triggers: Successful strike on the remaining sub-stations or winter storms exceeding -25°C. Likelihood: Moderate. Impact: High; requires evacuation of districts [like Darnytsia](#). Mitigations: Massive deployment of Polish generators and modular boiler units.
- **US-EU Security Schism:** Triggers: Trump's Peace Council making deals that bypass European security concerns. Likelihood: High. Impact: Moderate to High; could lead to the [collapse of the Unified NATO command](#). Mitigations: Immediate bilateral security pacts between Ukraine and the EU core (France/Germany/Poland).

GAPS & BLIND SPOTS

- **Russian Military Logistics:** The transcripts focus on Russian numbers but fail to detail the **actual sustainability** of the Russian VPK, which Clark hints is [working 24/7](#).
- **The Role of China:** Mentioned only as a source of "material support" for Russia, but its role as a [potential mediator](#) in the Trump-Putin deal is not explored.
- **Public Mobilization Resistance:** The transcripts mention "bus-ification" and rifts but do not give a [concrete data-driven view](#) of draft evasion rates.
- **Environmental Damage:** The destruction of the Darnytsia TPP has major [ecological impacts](#) that are ignored in favor of the immediate heating crisis.

CONTRARIAN NARRATIVE SCENARIOS

The "Sigismund" Sting: The arrest of Galushchenko may not be a genuine anti-corruption move, but a **pre-emptive strike** by the administration to prevent him from testifying in a future "Geneva Fallout" investigation or to consolidate control over the [lucrative energy reconstruction funds](#).

The Trump-Putin "Arctic Divert": The \$12 trillion deal may be a **deliberate misdirection**. Putin may have no intention of honoring economic deals, instead using the "mineral negotiations" as a cover for a major [military escalation in the Baltics or Arctic](#) while the West is focused on Ukraine.

Black Swan Event: A **mutiny within the Russian 58th Army** over the "meat штурми" (meat assaults) mentioned in Zaporizhzhia,

which could collapse the southern front faster than any [diplomatic agreement](#).

RECOMMENDATIONS & IMPLICATIONS

For Statecraft/Public Sector:

- **Security:** Ukraine must formalize its "Steel Porcupine" doctrine, shifting away from a reliance on the [Article 5 trigger](#) which analysts now view as unreliable.
- **Economic:** The government should prioritize the [repair of the Druzhba pipeline](#) despite political friction, as it remains a critical link to European influence.
- **Diplomatic:** Institutionalize the "referendum" debate now to [avoid a chaotic breakdown](#) when a peace deal is eventually presented.

For Private Sector/Investors:

- **Energy Strategy:** Opportunity exists in [modular energy infrastructure](#) (solar/mini-boilers) as the centralized model becomes obsolete in war zones.
- **Regulatory Risk:** The "Sigismund" scandal serves as a warning that any entry into the [Ukrainian energy market](#) requires extreme vetting and anti-corruption safeguards.
- **Logistics:** The shift of combat to the [heights and heights-based defense](#) necessitates investment in high-altitude drone tech and specialized cold-weather mobility.

LEGISLATIVE ROUNDUP

The legislative environment is defined by the "Martial Law Paradox," where the need for security [conflicts with constitutional requirements](#) for democratic renewal. Key

debates center on the "Navrotsky Law" in Poland and the "Referendum Proposal" in Kyiv.

BILLS DISCUSSED/DEBATED:

- **The Navrotsky Law (Poland):** Legislation to move [Ukrainian refugees](#) under the general status of foreign migrants, effectively ending special wartime protections.
- **Referendum Framework:** A proposed mechanism to allow a [national vote](#) on territorial integrity, despite current legal prohibitions.
- **Anti-Corruption "Midas" Reform:** Proposed strengthening of oversight in the [energy sector](#) following the Galushchenko revelations.

HEARINGS & PRESS EVENTS:

- **Geneva Summit Debrief:** Zelensky's closed-door session with his cabinet to discuss [non-public negotiation results](#).
- **Trump Peace Council Inauguration:** A symbolic gathering in DC aimed at [replacing the UN framework](#).

KEY STORIES

- **The "Sigismund" Corruption Case:** Arrest of Herman Galushchenko for money laundering and [looting energy resources](#) during a national crisis.
- **Operation Enigma 2.0:** Thwarting a Russian-led cell in Ukraine and Moldova that targeted representatives [like GUR's Andriy Yusov](#).
- **Geneva Trilateral Talks:** The emergence of a "ceasefire mechanism" amid US-Russian rumors of a [\\$12 trillion economic deal](#).

- **Kyiv Heating Emergency:** Critical failure of the energy system in Darnytsia and Dnipro districts [affecting over 1,400 buildings](#).
- **Revolution of Dignity 12th Anniversary:** Commemoration of the "Heavenly Hundred" while the country [faces new existential threats](#).
- **Zaluzhnyi vs. Zelensky:** Zaluzhnyi's public critique of the administration's [war strategy](#) and his diplomatic "exile" to the UK.
- **The Arrest of Prince Andrew:** The high-profile detention of the British royal on his birthday in connection with [Epstein files](#).
- **Druzhba Pipeline Spat:** Victor Orban's demand for the EU to force Ukraine to repair the [oil pipeline](#) following Russian drone strikes.
- **Zaporizhzhia Tactical Counter-Attacks:** Ukrainian efforts to strike the [junction of three Russian armies](#) to prevent a breakthrough toward Dnipro.
- **The "Navrotsky Law" in Poland:** Poland's move to normalize [Ukrainian refugee status](#) as domestic fatigue increases.
- **US Supreme Court vs. Trump:** Rulings that invalidate the President's [unilateral tariff and migrant policies](#).
- **Solar-Powered Education:** The Borodyanka Lyceum's successful winter transition to [solar energy](#) as a model for survival.
- **Assassination Target List:** Revelations that Russian agents offered [\\$100k per murder](#) for figures like Dmitry Gordon.
- **Siverskyi Donets Heights Battle:** Intense fighting for dominance of the [high ground](#) near Sloviansk and Kramatorsk.

- **European "Steel Porcupine":** Intelligence assessments favoring a [long-term deterrence model](#) over the Geneva talks.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Today's Media Trends is a public interest experiment in applying deep thematic trend analysis to television news coverage from around the world to explore how responsibly applied advanced AI can help journalists and scholars better understand the overarching trends, themes and patterns of our global world.

No data is used to train or tune any AI model.

Each morning, in collaboration with the Internet Archive's TV News Archive, we apply Google's Gemini 3 to deeply examine yesterday's coverage from each television news channel to tease out the overarching themes and trends of its news coverage into a richly annotated thematic analysis. Each high-level insight is connected back to the original broadcast, allowing journalists and scholars to

understand the dominate themes and trends and instantly click out to the underlying sources for details.

By helping journalists and scholars see the broader trends and patterns of global news coverage, this analysis helps them identify relevant stories and coverage they might not otherwise have encountered and uncover connections, emphases and narrative shifts that enable more comprehensive reporting and deeper, evidence-based research.

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