

UKRAINE: THE COST OF PEACE



The confrontational meeting between President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine and President Donald Trump (and Vice-President J D Vance) has dominated the news bulletins since the day of the meeting on Friday, February 28.

According to media comments in the countries that, traditionally, are allies of the United States, Trump overreached his authority and humiliated Zelensky – a process that started when a reporter commented on Zelensky’s dress code in front of Trump.

Although Zelensky’s way of dressing is uncharacteristic and, at times, inappropriate, these comments certainly suggest that America’s allies are firmly behind the Ukrainian President and his country, even accusing Trump of setting him up for failure.

At the heart of the problem was Zelensky’s insistence that Ukraine must continue to fight against Russia, and that the United States should offer security assurances to guarantee the success of any peace deal. However, Trump made it clear that he wanted to achieve an immediate ceasefire, and any suggestion or insistence to continue the war would make this goal impossible to achieve.

Following the kerfuffle, Zelensky left Washington DC to attend a hastily organised summit of European leaders in London. The UK Prime Minister, Keir Starmer, received the Ukrainian President with an affectionate embrace and the 18 assembled European leaders treated him as a heroic celebrity. They repeated their bizarre offer to stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes to repel the aggressor. In a press conference, Starmer even indicated his willingness to lead a ‘coalition of the willing’ and to commit boots on the ground and planes in the air to police a ceasefire.

As Zelensky’s infamous visit to the United States contrasts with his enthusiastic reception in the UK, it is appropriate to ruminate on the different priorities of President Trump and the European leadership.

It is obvious that, in continuing the conflict and slaughter, hundreds of thousands more soldiers will die, thereby decimating Ukraine. The point is that, in encouraging Ukraine to keep on fighting, the possibility of a lasting peace is simply made impossible, and soldiers keep on dying. The European leaders, in supporting Ukraine unconditionally, fuel this unending cycle of death, misery and deprivation, and also make their own populations poorer and less secure in the process.

Opponents of peace negotiations argue that Ukraine would have to relinquish territory that it lost during the war – an outcome abhorrent to Ukraine. Although such an outcome would be undesirable for the Ukrainian government, realistically, it may be the price to pay for peace. In any event, most people in the occupied

territories are ethnic Russians and their right to self-determination under international law should be considered in any peace negotiations.

The European leaders have also advanced the claim that, in continuing the fight, Ukraine would be saving its 'democracy' from totalitarianism. This is a deeply contestable proposition. After all, Zelensky has cancelled democratic elections scheduled to take place in 2024. Proponents of the cancellation might say that this was also done by Churchill in the second world war, but unlike Ukraine, Churchill invited the Opposition to become part of a unity government and committed himself to elections following the defeat of Nazi Germany; these elections, held in July 1945, resulted in a resounding loss for Churchill's Conservative Party. By contrast, in March 2023, the Zelensky government effectively concentrated its power by banning all opposition parties. In addition, television channels were nationalised and state-controlled, citing martial law as an excuse.

The government of Ukraine is known for shutting down the media, for arresting political opponents, for the assassination of journalists, and for banning the Russian language in education for Russian speakers, which violates the rights of ethnic Russians who comprise a considerable part of the Ukrainian population.

If that was not bad enough, the Ukrainian government fatally struck a blow at freedom of religion on the ground that Orthodox churches are traditionally affiliated with the Russian Orthodox Church. Security forces in Ukraine regularly raid churches and arrest their clerics on accusations of treason. Since February 2022, churches in Ukraine have been stormed, closed, and destroyed. At the same time, the mobs who organise violence in churches are protected by the Ukrainian authorities. The involvement of the Azov movement in these violent actions against Orthodox priests is particularly disturbing. It has been alleged that some members of the Azov adherents embrace neo-Nazi imagery and practices.

The government of Ukraine has also adopted laws which state that only books published in Ukrainian or 'the Indigenous languages of the European Union' can be published in the country. Since the beginning of Euromaidan in late 2013 the Russian-speaking segment of the Ukrainian population has been brutally repressed and marginalised. As one Ukrainian politician candidly stated: 'Good Russians do not exist.'

So, when Russian troops crossed the border to protect the Russian-speaking majority in the east, the Ukrainian government understood this to be an opportunity for a more radical, uncompromising transformation of the whole country in their image and likeness on a scale that was impossible before. The war helped to silence the voices of discontent.

As can be seen, contrary to what the European leaders believe, Ukraine is not a beacon of democracy: the adoption of laws aimed at de-Russification of Ukraine is, at least potentially, inimical to the basic tenets of a democratic country that truly values the protection of basic human rights. Besides, Ukraine is universally identified as one of the most corrupt countries in the world, and certainly the most corrupt country in Europe.

Finally, it is important to consider that attempts at continuing the tragic war may well have unsavoury geopolitical implications for Western countries. In not agreeing to a ceasefire, Ukraine inevitably drives Putin further into an alliance with a powerful China, that, increasingly, is threatening the West, as evidenced very recently by the military drills off the coast of Australia.

In their infamous meeting, Trump accused Zelensky of toying with a third world war, which could be the possible (or even likely) outcome of continuing to fight, especially if Nato were to send troops to Ukraine. The desire of Ukraine to join Nato would have to be a topic for discussion in the negotiations because Russia sees the acquisition of Nato membership as a direct challenge to its sovereignty.

Of course, having elements of the most powerful military alliance in the world only five hundred kilometres from Moscow would naturally change Russia's strategic situation in unprecedented ways. If Russia did not react, it could lead China, the new global superpower, to swallow up the entire country's Far East and Siberia. A

greatly weakened Russia would also likely lose the North Caucasus and the Volga region to the growing Muslim populations.

Hence, it is incredible that Europe and its sanctimonious leaders would even consider a continuation of the conflict for as long as it takes to be an inspired option for Ukraine. A rational understanding of the contrasting events in Washington DC and London thus suggests that not President Trump, but the European leaders have overreached their power.

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