

# Peace in Europe at risk if Ukraine endgame goes Putin's way

## Barry O'Halloran



It has been pretty clear for over a year that the endgame in Ukraine was approaching fast. With last November's election of Donald Trump, the pace quickened considerably.

On Wednesday, President Trump announced on his Truth Social platform that he had a "lengthy and highly productive" conversation with Vladimir Putin. Trump also revealed that during the lengthy phone call the two leaders "agreed to have our respective teams start negotiations immediately".

While this does not necessarily mean the immediate end of the biggest armed conflict in Europe since World War II, it undoubtedly signals the beginning of the end.

Although it has been clear for some time that Ukraine has been losing the war, what is absolutely vital now is that it does not lose the peace.

I have followed the war in Ukraine in detail and written extensively about it since the start of the invasion three years ago; and it is my firm belief that we have now entered the most dangerous phase of this conflict.

If these negotiations do not go well, not only will Ukraine's prospects be detrimentally affected, but the future peace of Europe will be jeopardised.

The reaction to Trump's claim on his social media post that there was a "good possibility of ending that horrible, bloody war!!!" wasn't just explosive, it was thermobaric.

The first thing to note is that Trump's approach to Ukraine is a radical departure from that of Joe Biden.

During the three years since Putin's full-scale invasion, Biden resolutely refused to discuss the war with him. "Nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine" became the mantra of both the US and the EU. That has now been completely discarded by Trump.

Everyone on this side of the Atlantic has been taken completely by surprise by this turn of events. America's European allies were not consulted and had no advance warning of any of this. Needless to say, Nato and the EU are seething — as they have every right to be. This sidelining is a major blow to the prestige of Europe and the future of Ukraine.

Europe's new foreign policy su-

premo Kaja Kallas voiced a probably forlorn hope that "in any negotiation, Europe must have a central role". Former UK defence secretary Ben Wallace put it more bluntly.

"President after president knew that transatlantic security benefited both the US and Europe. It seems Trump thinks he knows better. History shall be the judge of this decision."

German foreign minister Annalena Baerbock responded with a combination of frustration and resignation. "This is the way the Trump administration operates," she said. "This is not how others do foreign policy, but this is now the reality."

**There is real fear now that Ukraine** is about to be sold out by Trump. Far from leading any peace talks with Putin, the concern in Kiev is Ukraine may not even have a seat at the table.

When asked if Ukraine would be an equal partner in the upcoming peace negotiations, Trump answered in his by now familiar free-wheeling manner: "It's an interesting question." He then went on to muse that Ukraine "may be Russian some day".

Ever since his 2019 "perfect phone call" with Volodymyr Zelensky that led to Trump's impeachment by the Democrats, the Ukrainian leader has not been a favourite of the mercurial Trump.

When asked by journalists if Zelensky would have to concede territory in the negotiations, Trump said: "He's going to have to do what he has to

do." He followed up with a not-so-gentle dig at the beleaguered Ukrainian president: "But, you know, his poll numbers aren't particularly great, to put it mildly."

Meanwhile, there are reports of euphoria in the Kremlin that Trump has spoken directly with Putin in the first publicly acknowledged contact between Russian and American leaders since the invasion.

The Russian stock market jumped 5pc and the rouble strengthened against the US dollar. Across Russian media, jubilant commentators boasted that Trump's phone call "broke the West's blockade".

Trump's action is seen by European leaders not so much as appeasement as capitulation to the 21st century's version of Hitler. To add insult to injury, at a meeting of senior European defence officials in Brussels last week,

the new US secretary of defence, Pete Hegseth, outlined the Trump administration's new policy on European security — it's not really America's problem any more.

In trying to make sense of all this, there are two things to consider. Firstly, in so far as one can take anything t Trump says to the bank, his phone call with Putin is eminently bankable.

Unlike his Gaza Riviera plan that came out of the blue, his desire to end the Ukraine war is long-standing. He repeated it over and over during the election campaign. It also has very considerable support within his neo-isolationist base in the Republican party.

Second, Trump has always fancied himself as a consummate dealmaker. However, nowhere in his *The Art of the Deal* book does it say "give up all your important bargaining positions

before you even start negotiations". Yet that is exactly what Trump is doing with Putin.

He has accepted that Ukraine will never join Nato, that Zelensky will have to give up territory in eastern Ukraine and most astonishingly, that someday Ukraine might become part of Russia. No wonder Putin is on cloud nine.

After his September 1938 Munich meeting with Neville Chamberlain, Hitler must have had a similar euphoric rush.

The Nazi leader was given the Sudetenland in return for a promise that he would make no further land grabs in Europe.

As we know, that did not end well for the peoples of Europe.

And to cap it all, Europe has little effective leverage to influence what's unfolding. As a result of its decades-long addiction to 'soft power', Europe is left in the invidious position of bringing a knife to a gunfight — as a result, it will be largely ignored.

What is profoundly sad about this is that it could have been so different.

If the uncommon bravery of the Ukrainian people were matched by unstinting rather than piecemeal military support by the West at critical stages of the war, then Putin might have been sent packing.

Instead, it looks like now we will all be left to pick up the pieces. Let's hope at least that the shattering goes no further than what has already happened in Ukraine.



Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky