

# Trump is skating on thin ice by cosyng up to the Russian dictator

● If the Americans believe Putin will not renege on a peace deal they are in for rude awakening



Barry O'Halloran

Donald Trump regularly stands accused of being an American isolationist; this is a fundamental misreading. His America First agenda does not involve abandoning the world stage — for a supreme narcissist, that would be asking too much.

Trump is not displaying the typical indifference to world affairs of an isolationist. Quite the contrary, as his immediate interventions in two of the world's "hotspots" — Gaza and Ukraine, make clear.

Ireland is also likely to get some sharp reminders of this, as we can see

already from the St Patrick's Day White House "no invite" kerfuffle. Even if the Taoiseach does get invited, with the unpredictable president Trump in the hot seat it is not inconceivable that on the day Micheál Martin might be asked to leave the bowl of shamrock at security.

From his first four weeks in office it is evident Trump wants to secure his presidential legacy with geopolitical wins against the odds. A peace deal in Ukraine is his most long-standing ambition. However, it is a geopolitical gamble that has not begun well.

Trump's rapid descent into transgressive victim-blaming has flabbergasted most observers.

Even by his usual standards, Trump's press conference on Tuesday evening at Mar-a-Lago was astonishing — pedalling a preposterous lie about the war that Volodymyr Zelensky "should have never started it". The next day, he went further again, accusing Ukraine's president of being "a dictator".

This was a crass attempt by Trump to undermine Zelensky's democratic legitimacy, a cut-and-paste claim straight from the Russian autocrat's playbook.

True, Zelensky's approval ratings are down from their high of 90pc in 2022, but at 57pc they are significantly higher than his putative ally-turned-arch-critic Trump, whose own approval ratings in a Reuters poll last Tuesday stood at 44pc.

At last week's first round of Ukrainian peace negotiations between the US and Russia, Putin's team showed no sign of complying with Trump's desire for a speedy settlement. Why would they?

After years of being shunned by international polite society there they were in Riyadh posing for photographs with secretary of state Marco Rubio, national security adviser Mike Waltz and, fresh from his Middle East successes, Steve Witkoff. The caption should have read: Putin's Boys Are Back.

The adults in the Trump administration who believe, despite the evidence, that the recidivist deal-breaker Putin will not renege on whatever is agreed should reacquaint themselves with Aesop's fable of the scorpion and the frog — basic instincts are irresistible.

As Trump warmed to his task of

castigating Zelensky while cosyng up to Putin, he made exaggerated claims for the amount of military aid the US has given to Ukraine. Starting with \$200bn (€191bn), it quickly went to \$250bn, with his latest unsubstantiated figure rising to \$350bn.

With exotic names that you've probably never heard of, so-called rare-earth minerals are vital components for critical modern technologies like electric vehicles, solar and wind power, and high-tech military equipment including fighter jets.

**Trump has claimed that Ukraine has "very valuable rare earths"** and then proceeded to make an outlandish demand for "\$500bn worth of rare earth" in recompense for military aid already given.

The mainstream media was all over the story. A *Telegraph* headline was typical: "The war in Ukraine has become a war for rare earth dominance." Stories about how the dastardly Trump was trying to plunder Ukraine's rare-earth mineral wealth proliferated.

However, what had happened was that everybody — Trump, the media,

and many politicians — had gone down the rabbit hole where Alice politely informed them: "I'm sorry, but there are no rare earths here." And there are virtually none in Ukraine either.

The leading world authority on minerals, the US Geological Survey, doesn't mention Ukraine having any reserves of rare earths, nor does any other mineral database used by the international mining industry.

Furthermore, the total value of all the world's rare-earth production amounts to \$15bn per annum, so Trump's demand for "\$500bn worth" from Ukraine alone is nonsense on stilts.

This whole rare-earth saga is an indication that little or no serious thought has gone into Trump's Ukrainian peace plan.

There is, therefore, a non-trivial chance that the whole thing could fall apart sooner rather than later.

Furthermore, recent CNN polling shows that Trump's pro-Putin proclivities are not shared by the vast majority of Americans. In 2020, 28pc of Americans had a favourable view of

Russia. Two years later it had dropped to 15pc, and by 2024 even that figure had halved again to 8pc — the same number of Americans who believe the moon landing was faked.

In light of these figures, Trump may be skating on thin ice domestically by cosyng up to the unloved Russian dictator.

So where do these dramatic developments leave Europe?

Faced with an aggressively expansionist Russia and a newly indifferent and more detached America, Europe can either curse the dark or light a candle. Looked at positively, out from under Uncle Sam's protective security umbrella, this might be Europe's chance to shine.

When Ukraine comes knocking on Europe's door in this new reality of US disengagement, Europe's response has to be way more substantial than heretofore. And with no military worth talking about, what can Ireland do?

Will Europe rise to this challenge? Let's hope so, not only for its sake but for the sake of the ever-brave Ukrainian people.