

Has a comedian from Kyiv wrong-footed the Kremlin's KGB man?

● EU help has always been a day late and a dollar short – and that's not how you win a war



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A spy, a comedian and a property developer walked into a bar in Istanbul... Like all such storylines, this one also sounded more than a little improbable. And so it proved to be.

Despite the Russian dictator having proposed last Thursday's direct "without conditions" talks with Volodymyr Zelensky in Istanbul, Vladimir Putin was a no-show.

Donald Trump was enthusiastic at the prospect of the Russian and Ukrainian leaders meeting directly. On Truth Social, he demanded: "Ukraine should agree to this, IMMEDIATELY." Trump even suggested he might turn up in Istanbul himself.

In the event, there was no meeting of leaders in Istanbul. Zelensky, however, did go to Turkey where he instead met with the Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, in Ankara.

Is this yet another instance of the US

president misreading Putin and being played by him?

To many, it seemed that the wily Russian ex-KGB man had out-smarted the deal-making property developer from Queens.

In the light of what transpired, however, it could also be said that the comedian from Kyiv may have wrong-footed Putin in the end. In a smart move that avoided him being labelled a party-pooper, Zelensky agreed to a meeting between "representatives" of Ukraine and Russia.

At this meeting, Putin wants the terms of Ukraine's unconditional surrender discussed, while Ukraine's agenda is the simpler and Trump-approved one of a 30-day ceasefire.

Given the chasm between the two sides, any agreement in the short term seems remote.

Since the diplomatic disaster in the Oval Office in February, Zelensky seems to have learnt to "manage" Trump much better. Though incongruous at the time, with Pope Francis lying in his coffin just metres away, the meeting in St Peter's

Basilica between Trump and Zelensky proved to be a turning point in their relationship.

On the other side of the equation, could Istanbul be the straw that breaks the camel's back with regard to Putin? Or, given his long-standing admiration for the Russian autocrat, will Trump continue to appease Putin? On balance, the US president is rather more likely to revert to a Putin-friendly stance.

Flitting from one Arabian sheik's palace to another, where all that glitters is actually gold or diamonds, Trump was in his element last week. Luxuriating in the reflected glory of mega-deals with seemingly endless zeros... no cat that ever got the cream could have looked more self-satisfied.

At least we were spared one really bizarre spectacle. There were rumours during the week that Edan Alexander, the recently released Israeli-American hostage, would join Trump in the UAE. He would then have had the opportunity to shake the hands of the Qatari paymasters of his Hamas kidnappers who had accommodated him in the death dungeons of Gaza for 583 days.

However, he was unable to make the trip – for health reasons, apparently.

Nevertheless, as Trump comes down from his Gulf high, he will still be faced with the reality that the leader most likely to rain on his parade of deals is Putin. It is important to understand why. For

Volodymyr Zelensky and Nato chief Mark Rutte in Albania last week. Picture: PA



more than 1,000 years, Russia's national identity has been shaped by war. It's no coincidence that the defining work of one of its greatest novelists, Leo Tolstoy, is called *War and Peace*.

For Russians, the military past is never dead, it's not even past. Russian history is seen as a never-ending process of combating existential threats. A historical continuum in which the players may change but their fundamental objective remains the same – the subjugation of mother Russia.

An essential part of this and Putin's worldview is that the threats emanating from the West are eternal. Putin reiterates this regularly: the "threats are not decreasing today. They merely transform themselves by changing colours."

Russian profligacy with the lives of its citizens is legendary. Since the start of the last century alone, tens of millions of Russian lives have been squandered in class wars, industrialisation, the forced collectivisation of agriculture – and of course World War II, in which up to 27 million Russians died.

We see the same pattern today in Moscow's endless "meat-wave" attacks all along the frontline in Ukraine, where already Russia has notched up more than one million casualties. For Putin – like Stalin and the tsars before him – no sacrifice is too great in defence of the motherland.

Underlying these toxic trends is the desire for an ever-expanding Russian empire, which is driven by a strange formulation. To secure its borders, Rus-

sia feels the necessity to conquer the territory that lies immediately beyond them, which in turn creates a new border, dictating yet more expansion. This fuels an endless pattern of imperialist aggression and enlargement that literally knows no boundaries.

It is a type of mythic thinking in which geography is not just a physical phenomenon – it is spiritual. It's what lies behind every ethno-nationalist dictator's desire for "breathing space".

We've been here before.

Mein Kampf, the book in which Hitler laid out his expansionary plans for "lebensraum" was published in 1925. It was largely ignored until it was nearly too late. Similarly, Putin has made known his explicit intentions of destroying Ukraine as a first step towards creating his idea of a Slavic empire.

To that end, the rhetorical mood music emanating from the Kremlin has been aimed at preparing the Russian public for long-term war, not near-term peace.

By repeating his maximalist demands for effective Ukrainian capitulation in advance of even ceasefire talks, Putin seems to have doomed Trump's Ukrainian peace effort. If that happens, senior Trump administration officials have already said the US will simply walk away.

From the outset of this war, European military assistance to Ukraine has always arrived a day late and a dollar short. However, with America disengaging from Ukraine, there is a dawning realisation that virtue signalling by European leaders and endless expressions of solidarity do not amount to a strategy.

Kaja Kallas, the new EU high representative for foreign affairs and security, wrote recently: "Ukraine is Europe! We stand by Ukraine. We will step up our support to Ukraine so that they can continue to fight back the aggressor."

To ensure that this isn't just more high-blown European rhetoric, greatly enhanced flows of military, financial, and intelligence support will need to happen quickly – because time is not on the side of Ukraine. And in Ukraine, time is not money, time is blood.