

Trump may finally see Putin for what he is – a mafia don with nukes

● Russian leader repeatedly defies the US president's overtures for a ceasefire in Ukraine



Barry O'Halloran

Competing for the geopolitical affections of the world's most powerful man must be exhausting at the best of times. When the love triangle in question includes Donald Trump, Volodymyr Zelensky and Vladimir Putin, the unfathomables involved are almost beyond calculation.

That Trump has a soft spot for Putin is abundantly clear from multiple statements he has made about the Russian autocrat over many years. "I always knew he was very smart." On another occasion: "There's no question about it, he's a genius." The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 did nothing to change this.

To make sense of what's happening, it is important to understand that Trump has always divided the world into two types of people; winners and

losers. So Putin, a strong, "smart", powerful leader, in charge of a nuclear superpower, is the epitome of a winner in Trump's eyes.

At the other end of the scale is Zelensky. A head of state forced to scour the world begging for help to ward off his enemy is, in Trump's binary hierarchy, a natural loser.

For Trump, all politics is personal. One of the most revealing aspects of his Oval Office shouting match with Zelensky in February may explain more than anything why he has stuck with Putin through thick and thin.

Referring to the 2016 presidential election and a later controversy over Hunter Biden's laptop, he said: "Putin went through a hell of a lot with me."

It seems this imagined shared adversity may have been a bonding experience for Trump. Yet so far, all of his attempts to bring an end to the war in Ukraine have foundered on the rock of Putin's intransigence.

The Russian's repeated failures to respond adequately to Trump's advances have been the source of huge frustration. Increasingly, the US president is willing to voice those frustrations in public.

"We get a load of bullshit thrown at us by Putin, if you want to know the truth," he said last week. "He's very nice all the time, but it turns out to be meaningless."

As if to rub salt into the wound, following each of his most recent conversations with Trump, Putin launched huge barrages of projectiles at Ukrainian cities, demolishing apartment blocks and killing civilians.

Just hours after Trump's last conversation with Putin a week ago, Russia launched its largest ever ballistic missile and drone attack of the war on Ukraine.

A total of 741 drones and missiles targeted infrastructure and residential areas across numerous cities, forcing tens of thousands to spend the night in makeshift bomb shelters during the seven-hour attack. This strike was a third larger than the previous record of the week before.

The UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine reported Russia had launched 10 times more missile and drone attacks against Ukraine last month than the previous June.

As Russia continues to expand its drone and missile production, military experts estimate that by this autumn it will be able to launch strike packages of up to 1,000 projectiles against Ukraine on a routine basis.

Yet the week before these attacks, the US announced that arms deliveries to Ukraine were being paused, including air defence weapons. Shipments of some weapons resumed last week.



Vladimir Putin launched strikes after the US paused arms shipments.
Picture: Reuters

It is hard not to conclude that this surge in Russian aerial bombardments is linked directly to America's curtailment of military aid.

In the meantime, Trump's frustration with Putin continues. He said on Friday: "I'll have a major statement to make on Russia on Monday." In other good news for Ukraine, he confirmed he had reached an agreement with Nato whereby it would buy weapons from the US to send to Ukraine.

As the US is the largest bilateral donor of military aid to Ukraine, it is important to understand whether this on-and-off military support is a bug or a feature. The decision to halt was made by the Pentagon, ostensibly "to ensure US military aid aligns with our defence priorities". The Trump administration is top-heavy with

senior people who are China hawks and see Ukraine as a sideshow. This is especially true of the Pentagon.

In these circumstances, Ukraine is unlikely to garner the level of US long-term military support it needs to survive an indefinite war of attrition.

Which brings us back to Putin.

He was trained by the KGB to lie, manipulate and murder — and that's what he does and that's what he will always do. In just the last few weeks, several members of his inner circle who fell out of favour with him very soon afterwards found themselves falling out of windows.

Successive Western leaders have been extraordinarily naive in their assessments of Putin.

They have all done so by using a moral framework that is completely

at odds with that of Putin — he's Don Corleone with nukes. This blindness is exemplified in Trump's case by him sending Steve Witkoff, a historically and geographically illiterate lawyer, to Moscow to be hoodwinked by Putin. Ukraine deserves better.

In his famous "Long Telegram" from Moscow in 1946, US diplomat George Kennan wrote that Russia is "impervious to the logic of reason and persuasion but it is highly sensitive to the logic of force".

The West seems to have forgotten that important lesson. Let's hope that relearning it does not prove as costly as it might. Or, as the EU's high commissioner for foreign affairs Kaja Kallas put it last month: "If we don't help Ukraine further, we should all start learning Russian."