

Is Trump about to drive a stake through Putin's cash cow?

● The ardour between US president and Putin has cooled



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If there was even the slightest doubt before, there is none now: Ukraine is Europe's war to win or lose.

Even by Donald Trump's Olympian standards of capriciousness, his speech to the UN on Tuesday was extraordinary. Since he took office eight months ago, he has been maligning Ukraine, belittling its president, and lauding Kyiv's nemesis, Vladimir Putin — with whom Trump claims to “get on great”.

Trump's private and public love-bombing of the Russian dictator has failed to shift Putin one iota from his open ambition to deal with “the root causes of the war”. For any but the wilfully uninformed, this means only one thing — the annihilation of Ukraine.

And maybe, just maybe, Trump

finally sees that the ex-KGB man has been conning him all this time. And maybe he finally realises that the fantasy belief that he could bring about a peace deal in Ukraine “because of my relationship with Putin” is the pipe dream it always was.

Then again, maybe his latest U-turn on Ukraine is just be a manoeuvre to get his bromance with Putin back on track.

In that context, the temporary nature of Trump's reversal of engines on Ukraine should not be underestimated.

Like all spurned lovers, it would only take the slightest “come on” from Putin to rekindle Trump's ardour for the Russian dictator. But, for now at any rate, Volodymyr Zelensky should heed Joe Biden's advice to a very different politician and “take the win”.

Given everything the US president has said and done regarding Ukraine, both before and since taking office, Trump's online post last week is quite remarkable. He wrote: “Ukraine, with the support of the European Union, is in a position to fight and WIN all of Ukraine back in its original form.”

He added: “With time, patience, and the financial support of Europe... [it] is very much an option.”

He then called Russia a “paper tiger” and said it was in “BIG Economic trouble”. It is extremely difficult at this early stage to pinpoint exactly what has caused Trump's radical and sudden shift to hawkishness on Russia — but there are pointers. Trump's roving crisis manager for the Middle East and Russia, Steve Witkoff, has been hogging the limelight, making rookie mistakes and credulously swallowing Putin's spin.

Taking a totally different approach, however, has been the president's special envoy for Ukraine, retired US lieutenant general Keith Kellogg. Despite the phalanx of anti-Ukraine administration officials arrayed against him, including US defence secretary Pete Hegseth and Witkoff, Kellogg has been plugging a far more supportive position on Ukraine, both internally and in public.

Most importantly, Kellogg has recently been presenting Trump with credible assessments that, contrary to Kremlin propaganda, Russia is in difficulties both at home

and in Ukraine. With the authority of his military credentials, Kellogg has been able to convince Trump with battlefield reports from US military intelligence that show “Russia is losing”.

Last February, during his public dressing down of Zelensky in the Oval Office, Trump told the Ukrainian president: “You have no cards”. It seems that in the intervening months, thanks primarily to the imagination and bravery of his military, Zelensky has now acquired some cards.

This was critical, because Trump is a transactional politician who divides the world into two simple categories: winners and losers. In his worldview, Zelensky and Ukraine have suddenly morphed from losers into winners. And over and above his well-known weakness for dictators, there is nothing the US president loves more than being on the side of winners.

And a reminder that the personal is never completely separate from the political was

Trump's statement that Zelensky is a “brave man” who is “putting up one hell

of a fight”. A softening of attitude that may indicate Trump has been affected by his wife Melania, including her publicly expressed concerns over Russia's extensive kidnapping of Ukrainian children. Nevertheless, we all know that Trump is fickle. So how will we know if Trump's decision to appear sympathetic to Ukraine is a permanent change or just a passing phase?

One strong indication is last week's statement at the United Nations by US secretary of state Marco Rubio that Trump reserves the right to “sell defensive weaponry and potentially offensive weaponry so that Ukraine can defend itself from this assault”.

But beyond these kind of statements, there is one significant indicator that Trump's unexpected change of heart on Ukraine will not be reversed.

There is a bipartisan bill sponsored by senators Lindsey Graham (Republican) and Richard Blumenthal (Democrat) sitting in Congress and supported by more than 80 other senators which is awaiting a nod of approval from Trump.

The bill would impose up to 500pc tariffs on countries like China, India, and others that import Russian oil and gas. If passed, it would drive a stake

through the heart of Putin's cash cow of energy revenues that fund his war.

When Trump was courting Putin during the past few months, he refused to allow Congress to pass the bill. Allowing it to be passed now would be an incredibly strong signal that his administration is serious about defending Ukraine and defeating Russia.

While we await that important development, there is one other factor that has had an overwhelming impact on whether or not Ukraine survives this war. In last week's comments, Trump laid it on the line that Ukraine is Europe's war now. Whether Europe is willing or even capable of rising to this challenge is not entirely clear. With 27 members all having a say, there has always been an element of herding cats about Europe's actions in this war.

In addition, up to now, European countries have done little individually without the US acting first. Now that Trump has kicked away the trainer wheels, these countries will have to show initiative and leadership, things for which they have shown little previous inclination.

If they fail in this and Putin wins, the consequences for every European country could be catastrophic.

