

## RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR, POLITICS

### Peace in Ukraine Nowhere in Sight

By Lena Surzhko-Harned  
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It was supposed to be settled in 24 hours with two phone calls, one to Moscow and one to Kyiv. Yet, over 100 days into President Donald Trump's second term, the end of the war between Russia and Ukraine is nowhere in sight. In fact, Trump's role as a peacemaker in the largest conflict in modern Europe seems to be fizzling.

Far from ending the war between Russia and Ukraine, the first few months of Trump's presidency have been marked by notable escalations. This is not a coincidence, but a consequence of the new U.S. foreign policy toward Russia and Ukraine, which far from saving lives caused more destruction and death.

Russia has started its summer offensive campaign in hopes of breaking through Ukrainian defenses along the front lines where the Russian army has had very limited success, moving by inches and meters, not miles, over the past year.

According to a report by TEXTY<sup>[i]</sup>, Ukraine's independent journalism source, since Trump's inauguration, Russia has intensified its attacks on Ukrainian civilians. The bombings and drone attacks on major Ukrainian cities have doubled with attacks on Odesa increasing tenfold. Bloody attacks on children's playgrounds in Kryvyi Rih<sup>[ii]</sup>, in the center of Sumy on Palm Sunday<sup>[iii]</sup>, massive multiple attacks<sup>[iv]</sup> on Kyiv — each setting a record since the start of the full-scale invasion — are targeting civilians.

On June 1, Ukraine's security forces successfully executed "Operation Spiderweb,"<sup>[v]</sup> a massive drone attack deep into Russian territory targeting and destroying a significant part of Russian strategic aviation that has been used to deliver the deadly attacks on Ukraine. Apart from being audacious, this operation has shown Ukraine's ingenuity out of necessity in inventing and mastering 21st-century warfare.

Predictably, the experts have a lot to say about Ukraine poking the Russian bear, the escalation of the war, the increased risk of nuclear threat, and the end of any possible peace talks. But let's be honest, the peace talks, thus far, have been a farce, a theater for the benefit of one

spectator — Trump. Further, Trump's approach to Vladimir Putin has been mild compared to his actions and harsh language toward Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Brought from isolation and emboldened by someone willing to listen to Russian grievances, Putin has no real interest in a peace deal that does not meet all his goals and demands. He is perfectly happy to participate in the charade of the "peace talks," while setting traps by refusing a ceasefire and demanding unacceptable conditions.

A few days following Ukraine's operation, on June 4, Trump and Putin broke the silence. Putin, very predictably, promised retaliation and questioned the prospect of any peace talks with the "criminal Kiev regime," whom he falsely accused of terrorism and targeting civilians. Trump announced on his social media<sup>[vi]</sup> that he had a "very good" hour-long telephone call with Putin, peace is unlikely, and Russia will retaliate. Trump's statement encapsulates his overall foreign policy — sympathetic to Russia and Putin.

### **The peace talks**

Ending the war in Ukraine was a large part of Trump's electoral campaign. His administration has made this one of the top priorities of its foreign policy. Yet, the road to peace talks has not been easy. Putin has refused Trump's calls for a ceasefire on several occasions. He further refused to have any discussions between Russia and Ukraine at the top level, citing Zelenskyy's illegitimacy as Ukraine's leader, and the need for the "technical details" and "first causes of war" — Ukraine's capitulation — to be agreed on. And Ukraine has refused to capitulate or surrender its people and territories to the occupier that failed to gain those goals by military means for over 10 years.

The two rounds of direct talks between Russian and Ukrainian delegations, which took place in May in Istanbul, were an extraordinary display of bad political theater. Putin announced a meeting in Istanbul without discussing it with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and it featured an unknown cast of characters, an unclear agenda, and no participation by Zelenskyy, Putin, or Trump.

Why did the talks happen? For the benefit of Trump, who insisted that the two belligerents were tired of war but refused to settle and needed a symbolic adult in the room to make them talk<sup>[vii]</sup>. The U.S. threatened Ukraine with withholding military support and intelligence sharing, with serious consequences. Russia has been threatened with sanctions; however, no such threats have materialized despite Russia's refusal to a ceasefire.

In terms of substance, the two rounds of talks have produced very little progress toward peace or a ceasefire. Russia failed to issue the memorandum outlining its conditions for peace<sup>[viii]</sup> before the June 2 meeting, despite Putin's promise to Trump that he would. To date, the talks did result in some notable achievements in humanitarian matters. The largest prisoner exchange between Ukraine and Russia<sup>[ix]</sup>, 1,000 for 1,000, was completed after the first round of talks in Istanbul. During the second round of talks, more discussion of a prisoner exchange and the return of Ukrainian children<sup>[x]</sup> were discussed. These are important humanitarian matters. However, these talks should be taking place as a technical secondary track in the larger peace negotiations. One can be optimistic about small steps toward a larger goal, yet, as we have seen in several even more recent cases, humanitarian agreements do not lead to a larger cessation of hostilities<sup>[xi]</sup>.

The problem with the peace talks is that all sides, including Trump, the initiator of this "peace deal," have very different goals.

It seems that for Trump, a ceasefire with the process of ongoing talks would be sufficient to claim his status as peacemaker. A quick ceasefire would have been an ideal outcome. However, talks seemed to be enough to keep him interested in the matter and stop him from punishing the side he sees as uncompromising or unwilling to go along.

Keeping Trump interested and appearing as cooperative is important to Ukraine and Russia, albeit for very different reasons.

For Russia, which is not interested in either peace or a ceasefire, the charade of participating in the peace talks allows it to avoid the sanctions in the short term and appear like a credible partner for the U.S., not only in dealing with Ukraine but also in other global endeavors of Trump's second administration — be it Arctic, Middle East, or Southeast Asia. Tempting Trump to cooperate in other projects more interesting to him<sup>[xii]</sup> and away from Ukraine would be a great win for Russia.

Ukrainians want lasting and just peace. For Ukraine, peace and survival of their country are essential goals. The U.S. has been Ukraine's key ally in its existential resistance to Russia. Losing this ally would not force Ukraine to stop resisting, but it would make that resistance to Russia that much more difficult and deadly.

The war between Ukraine and Russia is also a war for Trump's attention. Thus, it is also a war of narratives. Which story will he find most interesting and persuasive? For Ukraine, this is an uphill battle as several false narratives have taken a stronghold in the collective imagination of many Americans, including Trump.

### **Operation Spider Web — a message for Trump**

Two interrelated narratives seem to shape Trump's approach to war and peace in Ukraine. One is about the invincibility and military greatness of Russia. Another is that Ukraine shares responsibility for the Russian full-scale invasion.

Both date back to the 19th-century notion of “might makes right,” in which the great empires are free to carve the world to their liking, and smaller, weaker countries do their best to submit to the will of the stronger. This is to minimize the suffering or face their just punishment, which can involve full annihilation, for disobedience. During the Cold War, these ideas were rebranded with the use of more benign terminology of “superpowers” and “spheres of influence,” but the gist remained unchanged. If anything, it was bolstered by the invention of the ultimate destructive weapon — the nuke.

In the now infamous meeting in the Oval Office in February, Trump told Zelenskyy that without U.S. support, he had “no cards”<sup>[xiii]</sup> in the game with Putin and he should never have started the war with a great military power like Russia. Both narratives are evident in this behavior. In Trump's view, the much stronger Russia, of which he, of course, heard and even visited, has the right to demand respect from its smaller and weaker neighbor — Ukraine. Trump likely never thought of Ukraine as an independent country before his infamous call to Zelensky in 2019 asking for an investigation of Joe Biden in exchange for the release of Congressionally approved arms, which led to Trump's first impeachment. Notwithstanding Trump's personal dislike for Zelenskyy, Ukraine's resistance to Russian imperial claims on Ukraine's sovereignty and territory seems foolish.

Similar arguments were voiced by respectable members<sup>[xiv]</sup> of the scholastic and diplomatic community even before the start of the full-scale invasion in 2022. Yet, these narratives are problematic at best, and Ukraine has repeatedly and audaciously challenged the core principles.

Russia's invincibility and greatness has been called into question many times throughout history. Russia has and can lose wars even to smaller adversaries. While Putin carefully curates the image of a great leader and protector, his record is stained in blood and failure. Ukrainians have challenged the notion of Russia's invincibility as well, with the counteroffensive in 2022, the incursion into Russian Kursk in August 2024<sup>[xv]</sup>, and now with the carefully planned strike on Russia's strategic aviation — a part of Russia's feared nuclear triad.

On the day of the attack, social media was filled with jokes about Ukraine's cards, recalling Trump's comments. Without a doubt, Operation Spiderweb was a message for Trump, maybe even more than for Putin. Ukrainians have aces up their sleeves. They conducted a successful and ingenious operation, rewriting the rules of war for the new century with the application of new technology, ingenuity, and pure nerve.

### **The real problem with a peace deal**

The difficulty of achieving a ceasefire, let alone lasting peace, so far, stems from one simple but important problem – Putin sees no reason to stop the war. This is plain to see in Putin's repeated refusal of a proposed 30-day unconditional ceasefire, continued attacks on Ukraine's civilian population, refusal to meet with Zelenskyy, and insistence on addressing the causes of war — achieving the absurd goals of his Special Military Operations as a precondition to peace.

To date in the haze of its commitment to the illusory “peace deal,” the Trump administration has put no pressure on Russia or given Putin any indication to believe that these pressures will come. The threats of “hellish sanctions,” despite the bipartisan support from the Senate<sup>[xvi]</sup>, are still to materialize. Moreover, Trump officials have refused to recognize Putin as a war criminal, and the U.S. delegation at the U.N. voted with Russia against resolutions condemning Russian aggression in Ukraine.

The “peace talks” brought Putin from isolation. Putin is eager to keep the attention of the American president by playing to his ego, highlighting their “good personal relationship” and promising economic and other geopolitical cooperation in areas of interest to Trump. The goal is to persuade Trump of the legitimacy of Russia's actions in Ukraine with the hope that the U.S. will stop military support and intelligence-sharing with Ukrainians and walk away from what Russia sees as its “sphere of influence.” The larger goal is to reduce U.S. influence around the world, drive a wedge between the U.S. and its European allies, and restructure the international system.

### **Retaliation and escalation**

After Ukraine's successful attack on Russia's military aviation on June 1, many fear Russian retaliation and escalation of the conflict through the use of tactical nuclear weapons by Russia. Once again, Ukraine's defensive actions are portrayed as reckless provocation. Will this be the point when Russia uses nuclear weapons against Ukraine?

Russia can certainly do it. Yet, it has not done it so far.

Russia chooses to terrorize the civilian population by nightly attacks instead. This tactic, however, is not a matter of retaliation, but part of ongoing strategy that Russia has implemented without stop since February of 2022.

A more important question is, what will the U.S. reaction be?

Statements made by Trump following his June 4 phone call with Putin, which he described as “very good,” are deeply troubling. Rather than condemning Putin’s threats, Trump appeared to echo them, raising doubts about whether this U.S. administration is prepared to confront Russian aggression head-on. Whether out of fear of damaging a personal relationship or from a desire to preserve Putin as a strategic partner in dealings with China or Iran, Trump seems to have boxed himself into a corner.

Now is the time for the Senate and Congress to take a decisive step and pass the bill on sanctioning Russia. This might provide much-needed support for the president and provide a way out of further escalation.

It is very important now not to let fearmongering be used as an excuse for cowardice. Not acting might seem like a good idea for not provoking. Yet it also allows Russia to continue carrying out with impunity the killing of Ukrainian civilians, imprisonment, and torture of loyal Ukrainian civilians in occupied territories, and prisoners of war. The prospect of peace can be forever lost, along with U.S. credibility, reputation, and power.

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### End Notes

- [i] <https://texty.org.ua/articles/114922/the-number-of-strikes-in-ukrainian-border-regions-increased-after-trumps-inaguration-infographic/>
  - [ii] <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/09/world/europe/ukraine-kryvyi-ri-attack.html>
  - [iii] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/apr/15/its-sheer-terrorism-sumy-buries-dead-after-russias-palm-sunday-attack>
  - [iv] <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/russian-launches-massive-nighttime-drone-and-missile-attack-on-kyiv>
  - [v] <https://www.axios.com/2025/06/02/ukraine-spider-web-surprise-attack>
  - [vi] [https://x.com/Gerashchenko\\_en/status/1930306807689318892](https://x.com/Gerashchenko_en/status/1930306807689318892)
  - [vii] [https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://www.cnn.com/2025/06/05/politics/ukraine-war-trump-kids-fighting&ved=2ahUKEwiyoJOiqe6NAXXKEDQIHdcMFhcQFnoECB0QAAQ&usg=AOvVaw2Y\\_BQtslzygZAJ2kpuq39t](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://www.cnn.com/2025/06/05/politics/ukraine-war-trump-kids-fighting&ved=2ahUKEwiyoJOiqe6NAXXKEDQIHdcMFhcQFnoECB0QAAQ&usg=AOvVaw2Y_BQtslzygZAJ2kpuq39t)
  - [viii] <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/putins-punitive-peace-terms-are-a-call-for-ukraines-complete-capitulation/>
  - [ix] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/may/25/ukraine-russia-complete-1000-for-1000-prisoner-exchange>
  - [x] <https://www.euronews.com/2025/06/04/ukraine-demands-return-of-children-taken-by-russia-how-did-kyiv-come-up-with-the-list>
  - [xi] <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cd7geg3lvz1o>
  - [xii] <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/putin-is-ready-help-trump-iran-nuclear-negotiations-kremlin-says-2025-06-05/>
  - [xiii] [https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://www.youtube.com/watch%3D%3DbCFMEoRCmEY&ved=2ahUKEwjWody4zNqNAXV7ElkFHch6F\\_UQtwJ6BAgGEAI&usg=AOvVaw273lxaOd54PTM9M1xwG3I](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://www.youtube.com/watch%3D%3DbCFMEoRCmEY&ved=2ahUKEwjWody4zNqNAXV7ElkFHch6F_UQtwJ6BAgGEAI&usg=AOvVaw273lxaOd54PTM9M1xwG3I)
  - [xiv] <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/02/09/how-not-to-save-ukraine-arming-kiev-is-a-bad-idea/>
  - [xv] <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/15/opinion/ukraine-russia-kursk.html>
  - [xvi] <https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/senate-bill/1241>
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