

RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR, POLITICS

What Does Trump Presidency Mean for
Ukraine?

By Lena Surzhko-Harned
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President-Elect Donald Trump has consistently spoken about ending Russia's war on Ukraine. Since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, citizen Trump has repeatedly said that ending the war is in the United States' best interests, and that, as president, [he can end the war quickly](#). In truth, Trump claims that if he remained president after the 2020 election, [Russian President Vladimir Putin would not have invaded](#) Ukraine.

Trump's motivations seem to be admirable – end the loss of human life and end the destruction of Ukraine – as he has publicly lamented both. Ending the war would also be a substantial political win. But, of course, the devil is in the details.

If Trump's plan for ending the Russian war in Ukraine was unclear before the November presidential election – when he defeated Vice President Kamala Harris – it is even murkier now.

What do we know?

Trump has often said that Putin and Ukrainian President [Volodymyr Zelenskyy](#) respect him and that he would be able to leverage his “good relationship” with both to bring them to the negotiating table and end the war. Trump has not explicitly stated the details of negotiations or possible conditions, yet some of his proxies have voiced proposals. Trump's incoming vice president, U.S. Sen. J.D. Vance, R-Ohio, [has laid out a plan](#) that includes potential

land concessions on the part of Ukraine and the creation of a demilitarized zone along the battle lines of the Russian-occupied territory of eastern Ukraine.

Trump's son, Donald Jr., co-authored an article with Trump-ally Robert F. Kennedy Jr., arguing that a concession to Russian demands for "[Ukrainian neutrality and a halt to NATO's eastward expansion](#)" were reasonable to avoid a nuclear game of chicken.

These plans have been criticized as [closely resembling those of the Kremlin](#).

Perhaps the most significant step toward a plan has been Trump's pick for his special envoy in Ukraine, General Keith Kellogg. In a co-authored piece, Kellogg laid out [his own plan for the end of the war](#). The policy paper criticized the Biden Administration's policy and advocates for dealing with Russia from a position of strength. In short, the plan includes:

1. Continued military aid to Ukraine should be contingent on Ukraine's participation in peace talks with Russia.
2. Ukraine's NATO membership should be placed on hold.
3. Russia should be offered some sanction relief as a price for peace negotiations.
4. Levies on Russian energy sales should be used for the reconstruction of Ukraine.

It is early to say if this is going to be "the plan." The transition means that Trump and his team might not have all the facts yet. And Kellogg plans on taking a "fact-finding" trip to Ukraine this month.

Bringing Ukraine and Russia to negotiations

A chief assumption is that both Russia and Ukraine are ready for negotiations. [As Kellogg put it](#), "Think of a cage fight: you've got two fighters, and both want to tap out; you need a referee to kind of separate them."

This is a problematic assumption that seems to stem from another flawed logic of two belligerents too proud or stubborn to end the fight. By this logic, Ukraine's resistance in an un-winnable war of attrition against a more powerful Russia is an act of pure stubborn pride.

As such, much of the conversation about a peace deal seems to revolve around concessions that Ukraine is willing make – give up its territory, abandon or postpone NATO membership, and make constitutional reforms to meet the demands of a more powerful adversary. This is factual and historical nonsense.

Ukraine did not start the war. All Ukraine can do is resist or disappear off the face of the Earth, not only as a sovereign country but as a nation. Ukrainians want peace, but they want a lasting and just peace in which their sovereignty and survival will not be threatened by an imperial neighbor. As such, Kellogg's plan is inconsistent with the "victory plan" of Zelensky, in which NATO membership is central to the security of Ukraine and of the world.

Withholding aid for Ukraine will not stop resistance. Ukrainians can resist on a battlefield or through guerilla resistance or in the dungeons and torture chambers. They would rather win on the battlefield, even if outlasting a much more powerful enemy that will be absolutely impossible without the help of the U.S. and its allies. Ukraine is ready for peace, but it is not ready to give up. Thus, withholding support will be a tool of pressure, not a tool of peace.

More problematic is the assumption that Putin is ready for negotiations or peace. We have to ask bluntly, is he?

Putin has, perhaps strategically, remained silent and allusive about any plans from Trump, and the Kremlin has denied any communication with Trump. During his yearly televised "open line" on Dec. 19, Putin indicated he might be open to hearing proposals from the incoming Trump administration. In the same televised press conference, Putin once again threatened to use ballistic missiles against Ukraine's civilians and invited the collective West to take part in a "technological duel" in Kyiv.

Putin's representatives and proxies, on the other hand, have been more vocal. The Russian representative in the United Nations has signaled that Russia is not interested in a ceasefire or freezing the conflict. Russian Foreign minister Lavrov communicated a similar message. has signaled that Russian is not interested in ceasefire or freezing conflict. Russian Foreign minister Lavrov communicated a similar message.

Kellogg's assumption that Russia is interested in negotiations because of heavy losses and military exhaustion seems rational but problematic. Putin has employed Iranian drones and North Korean troops to supplement what Russia lacks. Russian economics is taking a hit, but nowhere near to force Putin to end the war.

Offering some relief might be a motivator. However, there is no guarantee that Russia will prioritize peace. After a short reprieve and ability to re-group, without security guarantees for Ukraine, Russia is more than likely to re-engage in a few months, a year, or a few years.

Thus, Putin is counting on receiving a good deal – a defenseless Ukraine on or shortly after Jan. 20, when Trump takes office. A lasting peace on Kellogg's terms is not likely. If lasting peace is the goal, then Trump and his team must carefully assess what tools they have to pressure Putin.

Can Trump persuade Putin?

Kellogg is correct in one thing – the U.S. can show strength. Not strength to force Ukraine's surrender but strength to show Putin that his threat to world peace and security will not be tolerated. Fearing what Putin might do if he loses should not be the core of U.S. policy. If any lessons can be learned from Russia's performance in Ukraine and Syria, it is that Russia can lose. Breaking from the paradigm of unbeatable Russia that wins every war of attrition is pivotal for a successful foreign policy, which can work very well with overall policy direction of Trump's Strong America policy.

The Ukrainian political and analytical circles are split in their expectations and worries about Trump's policy. While some see Trump as an opportunity to secure Ukraine's security goals and bank on his unpredictability, others are concerned.

It's been observed that Trump's decisions are influenced by those whom he hears last. Ukrainians are aware of this and are spending time on delivering their messages. Ukrainian President Zelenskyy and his team have carefully engaged in public relations campaigns to counter Russian war propaganda. Now, they must redouble their efforts for an audience of one.



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