

VC: Hello, I'm Vanessa Corwin

KK: And, I'm Kathleen Kaan

VC: President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine scheduled a visit the White House along with several European leaders after President Trump backed Russia's demands that Ukraine give up a large portion of its territory in a direct peace agreement. Professor Alexander Motyl, Ukraine and Russia expert at Rutgers University, joins us to discuss the implications. Welcome, Alex, thanks for joining us today.

AM: As always, thanks for having me, ladies.

VC: So, Trump's current position reflects a total about-face from his original demands for a cease-fire and threats of sanctions against Russia. So where now does this put Zelensky?

AM: On the one hand it creates potential problems because it looked like up to the summit in Alaska and afterwards, immediately afterwards as well, it looked like Trump was sticking to his original plan to impose sanctions and so on, but then, as you know, things seem to have changed. Now he's come out with what is essentially a pro-Putin position. So that creates a problem for Zelensky inasmuch as he's got to navigate these new waters. Is this the end of the world for Zelensky? Not necessarily. But as you know, Trump has changed his position, he's flip-flopped on Ukraine and Russia how many times? Five, ten, twenty? So, is this ultimately the decisive and final position that Trump will adopt? Will he change his position in the course of his conversations with Zelensky? The Europeans today, will he possibly change his position in the course of Vladimir Putin's subsequent attacks on Ukraine? Fourteen people were killed tonight, amongst them were two children. Melania wrote a special letter to Putin encouraging him to defend children, although interestingly, by the way, she never mentioned Ukraine, just this generic appeal to save children, which is all very nice and good, but anyway clearly Putin got the message. So, is this the final position of Trump, is he flexible, will he change his mind? It's possible. The other point to keep in mind is that Zelensky has shown up with I think it's six or seven heavy-hitting Europeans...

KK: That's what we were going to ask you, (AM: Right) what do you think?

AM: Well, this is impressive. On the one hand, I think there was an article in the Times that referred to them as Zelensky's bodyguards, (KK: Oh, did they?) and clearly, he's bringing them with him so as not to be dissed in the Oval Office as happened back in February of this year so there's strength in numbers. But more importantly, obviously, they are expressing their support of Ukraine, of Ukraine's position and their opposition to whatever it is that Putin stands for and wants. Now Trump can easily say no to anybody he wants to. He's already shown that to be the case. But at the same time, you can't just diss the Europeans and the Ukrainians all at once. It just doesn't look good. I watched the opening of the session of their negotiation just before we started talking and Trump starts out with this very effusive introduction of each of the leaders, everybody's terrific, great, great friends of mine and so forth. And he expects significant progress to be made. Now whether that's going to happen, I don't know. But it may mean that everybody's going to be looking for some kind of compromise solution that keeps Trump happy, doesn't necessarily alienate Putin too much and keeps the Ukrainians and the Europeans happy as well. Zelensky faces a difficult task. He would have preferred to be told that the United States supports an unconditional cease-fire tomorrow. But all said and done we don't yet

know if it's the end of the world and as I said, I'm inclined to think it probably won't be, but then it's Trump. (VC: Exactly). He could have them all assassinated.

VC: You just never know with him, right?

KK: You never know with Putin either.

VC: The two of them.

KK: You can't believe anything he says.

AM: Well, Putin lies, as does Trump, of course, but Trump contradicts himself continually. Putin doesn't. He's very consistent in his lying. He's very consistent in his mendacity and his arrogance. He doesn't flip-flop and say, oh, Ukrainians are the greatest people in the world one day and we've got to destroy them all the next day. Trump could say something like that about whichever people, nation or leader he happens to be annoyed with. But he seemed very gracious in the opening remarks. Zelensky followed and he, too, was very gracious. And Zelensky, you can see, is bending over backwards to be thankful (VC/KK: Oh, yeah), which is, you gotta do what you gotta do.

VC: Gotta play the game. Now prior to this there was kind of an unusual thing. Trump and Zelensky actually held a press conference where they answered questions from the press about what they wanted to talk about and so on and so forth and a lot of people have said this is obviously highly unusual. You don't go talking about what you're going to talk about prior to having the meeting. So, what are your thoughts on that, that this is kind of an anomaly, really.

AM: You're right, the press conference takes place after and not before and it's supposed to enlighten the press about what actually transpired. So, this is unusual and I'm guessing, this is pure guesswork on my part, that to my mind this is a good sign. Or let me put it this way, it's not a bad sign to let Zelensky have an opportunity to express his opinions, some of his hopes, expectations, desires, suggests, again, with the caveat that this is Trump, suggests that Trump may be more or less open to listening to him and to the Europeans. And in Alaska he let Putin speak first which is apparently contrary to protocol since it's always the host who speaks first. The guest then follows. (KK: Right and, he was late) Yeah, yeah, so maybe this is the new soft Trump who wants to ingratiate himself with everybody he's involved with. I'm being semi-sarcastic.

VC: I think more than semi...

KK: I think so.

VC: There were so many, as the commentators like to say, bad optics about the whole Alaska thing. Trump's body language was kind of not good; he seemed kind of resigned, and really deferring in a big way to Putin.

KK: He even called him the boss. Did you know that?

AM: Yeah, I read that somewhere. Well, you know, it started out with the red-carpet treatment which, I mean honestly, it's kind of unnecessary. But the red carpet obviously suggests that this is a very special guest. Again, I could see sucking up to Putin in the preliminaries to the meeting if the intent was to sock it to him at the meeting. You know, soften him with all this praise, with red carpets and everything else and then you really give it to him. Instead, Trump gave it to himself. He just caved on every single issue. So not only did he give him the red-carpet treatment, not only did he applaud, those effusive smiles and everything else, that sent all the wrong signals and people were absolutely right to say this is outrageous because, it's one thing if this is a more or less democratic leader, but this is an accused war criminal. This is a man who started a war, perpetrating a genocide. I read someplace in the conservative press that's an invalid argument because Roosevelt met with Stalin and Nixon met with Mao Tse Tung who were also mass murderers. But the difference there is that they happen to have been, Stalin was an ally against Nazi Germany, again, for better or for worse, but he was a critically important ally. And Mao was important in pushing the... China away from the Soviet Union so both of them had an additional reason. Here, you're trying to stop a war that the war criminal began. And if you look at the Russian response, they are ecstatic, propagandists and everybody else, this is a victory for Putin, red carpet treatment, there's that photograph of three soldiers unrolling the carpet, they're kneeling at the foot of the airplane. They're not kneeling, they're not genuflecting for Putin (VC: No...) but it certainly looks like they are. All of that was at best unnecessary, at worst quasi-criminal because it really puts Trump in the same camp as Putin. He didn't need to do that. On the other hand, he's done that with the president of El Salvador who is a thug and a criminal. He alienates our allies, so what else is new?

KK: I mean, to alienate our allies. I believe that he, and this is my own personal opinion, does he not think Putin is a murderer? How could you not recognize it?

AM: He said in the past, he keeps on bombing, this is atrocious, he's even cursed with regard to Putin, he must be aware. You may want to avoid the word murderer. OK, I get it. It's a diplomatic tete-a-tete. You don't want to alienate the other guy. Right, OK. But that having been said, surely, he must understand that this is a war that he began. Now again, that having been said, you recall several months ago he accused the Ukrainians of starting the war. We already talked about this on the program. How could somebody possibly make that claim? (VC Exactly)

KK: I don't understand why he keeps saying it's Biden's war.

AM: For a simple reason. Because he doesn't want to accept responsibility for the fact that he's failed. And certainly, he's failed this far. The war became his war, although he doesn't want to admit it, when he said he would solve it in 24 hours. Now every effort on his part or his minions to say no, no, no, this is still Biden's war, sorry. Your president for seven months, you said you would solve this problem in 24 hours, and then you said it would be three months, two months, one month, nine days, ten days, whatever. Sorry, it's your war. You can't wiggle out of this.

VC: He cannot accept responsibility for anything. You name it, he will put it off on, oh, it was Biden. Oh, it was Obama. I had nothing to do with it. It was them. And as you had mentioned, there is in all of this business there is no acknowledgement whatsoever that Russia was the aggressor, that Russia invaded Ukraine, no sort of pushback...

KK: You're right and I wonder, having all these dignitaries come today with Zelensky, does that not make him feel... what does it make him feel? They're serious.

AM: On the one hand, he's probably flattered at least to some degree since basically they're all come to pay respects to the emperor. On the one hand it's flattering, it's flattering to be told, to be considered to be the key to this problem. At the same time, I would be somewhat intimidated in his position. But again, we're talking about Trump. Trump is not intimidated by anything. He could mouth off and say stupid things in public and except for a few journalists everybody else claps and cheers. These are seven or eight very important men and women, very smart, and you can't pull a fast one over their eyes. It's just not going to work. And Trump has to be aware that he is dealing with people who are serious, more serious or at least as serious as he claims to be.

VC: Going back to the Alaska meeting, Trump did mention, well, he and Putin talked about the root of the war. Can you explain what that is?

AM: Putin keeps referring to something he calls the root causes. It's the deeper stuff that presumably really truly annoys him. There are two ways of looking at these root causes. The root causes that he sees are on the one hand, NATO expansion and the supposed threat that the imminent inclusion of Ukraine in NATO which is a farce as you know, that was never in the cards, would have posed for Russia. So hence his continual repetition of the fact that refrain, "Ukraine can't be a part of NATO." Though notice, there is a contradiction here. Because at the same time he's apparently said he would be willing for the United States and Europe to extend "NATO-like guarantees" to Ukraine. Now what's the difference between being a member and just getting NATO-like guarantees? It's the same thing. So, his problem with NATO isn't really about the potential security threat that it poses. It's the fact that if Ukraine becomes a member of NATO that's another way of saying Ukraine is leaving Russia's sphere of influence. That's what bugs him. He keeps on insisting that Zelensky is a neo-Nazi. As you know, he's been saying this for three and a half years. And what that means in Putin talk is that he wants Ukraine to be independent and democratic and a member of the West. So, he paints this bogey man and calls Ukraine a Nazi state. And of course, from his point of view, to de-Nazify Ukraine means to get rid of Zelensky, get rid of anybody who is a Zelensky look-alike, so to speak, who has the same political ideas, to demilitarize Ukraine, to stop its movement westward, to destroy its democracy, in other words to transform it into a vassal of Russia. The real problem with this Nazi business is that Putin has, has always had, frankly for about 30 if not more years, he is of the opinion that Ukrainians don't exist, they're simply a branch of the Russian people, the Ukrainian state is artificial and hence shouldn't exist either. And he is persuaded that if Ukrainians assert themselves as a nation, as a separate nation with a separate language, culture and history, this will undermine Russian imperial identity. If I'm right about the root causes then once could conclude the following. One is, Trump seems to have no appreciation of the true root causes whatsoever, namely that Ukraine wants to be part of the West, wants to be democratic and wants to leave Russia's sphere of influence. He doesn't get that. He doesn't seem to understand that despite the fact that Putin says this to his face, that Ukraine is critical to Russian identity and to Russian imperial expansion. And does Trump understand that? My guess is nyet.

VC: I would agree with that.

KK: I just want to ask you this. I don't completely understand if the rest of NATO will agree to have Ukraine as part of them, what makes it stop? It's not gonna be Putin. Is it?

AM: Well, the problem is for a country to become a member, there is a procedure with a bunch of steps. The bottom line is at each step of the way there has to be unanimous support on the part of existing NATO members. As of this moment, the United States has said no, as have Hungary and Slovakia. Everybody else is either on board or a little uncertain and probably could be gotten on board. But all it takes is for Mr. Orban of Hungary to say nyet. Imagine Trump has a vision and decides that Ukraine should join tomorrow and the same

holds true of Slovakia, Orban is one vote and will be sufficient to prevent Ukraine from starting the membership process.

VC: Now Trump has signaled that he's open to or willing to provide some form of security guarantees for Ukraine. There's no elaboration as to what that might entail. Do you believe he sincerely means this?

AM: Remember that was one of the items that he said they'll be discussing, that they presumably are discussing as we speak. I don't know if he means it but at least it will be seriously considered. Well again, the devil is in the details. So, it's one thing to say we'll provide you with security guarantees and totally different to spell out what would happen precisely if the Russians were to attack. Remember, in 1994 the Ukrainians, when they gave up their nuclear weapons, they signed something called the Budapest Memorandum which ostensibly gave Ukraine security guarantees and it was signed by the UK, France, the US and Russia. But as it turned out, there were two versions. The Ukrainian language version spoke of guarantees. The English language version spoke of security assurances which is another way of saying we'll clap you on the back and say go for it. Were with you. We really support you and your security but other than that we don't do anything at all. So, it's all a question of what they would actually be willing to do, the Americans and Europeans. Trump has suggested that the US would play kind of a complimentary, secondary role. And that again is fair. You know, it could continue to provide intelligence, it could provide raider covers, it might be able to provide some soldiers to guard ammunition dumps but far from the front, something like that. But the bottom line is, for any of this to be meaningful, they have to specify what will happen. If Russia attacks, what will you do? And of course, they're attacking while they're talking. Ultimate irony.

VC: And what does that say about Putin's true intentions?

AM: This is where Trump is completely wrong. He keeps on saying, I believe that Putin wants peace. That's like saying, I believe that Hitler wants peace. And he did, he wanted to kill all the Jews and he would have had peace. And all the Ukrainians, and Russians, and Poles, Germans and French, would have brought peace which is the peace of the graveyard which is exactly what Putin wants. He's not ready to compromise which is why the so-called deal that Trump and Witkoff have floated where the Russians want the remaining parts of the Donbas area that Ukraine still controls and in exchange they'll say, and we won't attack anywhere else. (VC: Gee...) That's supposed to be a swap. It's called extortion. It's like the insurance business as performed by the Mafia (VC: Exactly). The problem is, you see, he can't even agree to that, at least not in the medium to long term. Back in 2022, Russia officially annexed all four of these contentious provinces. So, Putin wants the two parts of the provinces he still doesn't hold and of course he bases that on this annexation. And then he says we're not going to attack and let you keep the territories of those other two provinces. But do you believe him? No, he's just going to say we'll do this for a year, maybe two, and in the meantime prepare our forces and we won't be attacking, we're simply defending our territories from the Ukrainian neo-Nazis. (KK: There doesn't seem to be a solution). The simplest solution would be something like Korea. You declare an armistice which is something like a cease-fire. You dig a big trench along the extent of the Ukrainian border with Russia or along the current line of fighting and you simply agree to disagree. The territory that Russia controls, Russia controls. No one will recognize it as being truly Russian, the Ukrainians certainly won't, but you want it, you got it. At least for, well, forever or for however long. And that's the end of the story. And that would be possible. Zelensky would probably agree to this and most Ukrainians would probably agree to this. They realize what they can and cannot achieve. And this is achievable, it's not great but it's basically a recognition of the status quo. The problem, as always, is Putin. He can't agree to a cease-fire because that means that he's not liberating those four territories that he claimed are Russian. He's also made these enormous promises to the Russians. He's identified himself politically exclusively with the war. He is killing, it's not so much even the Ukrainians, roughly 1,000 soldiers a day. The numbers are rapidly approaching 1,250,000 deaths and

wounded. He can't just go home and say well, we've lost a million soldiers and I've gotten a little bit of these territories that I promised to get but the rest... he can't do that. That will undermine him politically at home with the elites and possibly even with the masses.

VC: Trump said in an interview, he kept bringing up Biden and 350 billion dollars going to Ukraine. Is that true?

AM: That's absurd. The number is significantly less, more like 100 billion and of that number 90% actually went to US armaments makers

KK: So, what is the United States doing? They're not giving them money, and from my own understanding we take the military equipment and sell it to the allies?

AM: Well, that's the plan. First of all, the US is providing Ukraine with intelligence. That's a big deal because that enables them to target infrastructure, boats and things like that. But more importantly, or as importantly, is the fact that the United States has said, we're not going to be supplying weapons to Ukraine anymore. OK, fair enough. But if the Europeans buy them and then transfer them to Ukraine, that's cool. Which is actually a great idea, to be honest, because the US has been kvetching, rightly so, about the fact that the Europeans have been getting a free ride on security. This is one point, perhaps the only one, on which I agree with Trump. But they have been getting a free ride. They haven't been spending what they're supposed to be spending. And this is a good way of getting them to carry the burden. And after all, they are next door to Ukraine. Again, Trump has a point when he says it's really your problem more than it is ours. So, the US supplies the weapons and the Europeans pay for it, the Americans get the money. And then in return the Ukrainians get the stuff they need. So, it's kind of a win, win, win. And if that continues, that would be OK.

VC: We'll see what happens. Well Alex, as usual, this has been terrific. It's helping shed some light on this crazy, complicated situation, crazy dynamics.

AM: It's always my pleasure, ladies.

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