

FINAL: Let's Make a Deal: Inside Negotiations between Ukraine and Russia a/o 5/6/25

Let's Make A Deal: Inside Negotiations between Ukraine and Russia

Ukraine and Russia expert, Professor Alexander Motyl of Rutgers University, gives us his analysis of the current situation.

Hello, I'm Vanessa Corwin

And, I'm Kathleen Kaan

VC: The US and Ukraine signed an agreement granting the US access to Ukraine's valuable mineral resources. To discuss this deal and what it means going forward, Professor Alexander Motyl, Ukraine and Russia expert at Rutgers University, joins us. Welcome, Alex. Thanks for being with us today.

AM: Thank you for having me, ladies.

VC: So, Alex, what do we know about the terms of this deal?

AM: Well, it's about nine or ten pages, that's the initial memorandum, and we know that it's significantly more equitable than the one that had preceded it. This is now the fourth draft. The first one was basically exploitative. The second one was much fairer, at least as far as Ukraine was concerned, the third was exploitative again and then the Ukrainians basically bargained hard and now they've come up with a deal that is equitable for both sides. In terms of practicalities, developing these mineral resources takes something like ten to fifteen years so there's not going to be any immediate consequences. So, the deal is important because of its symbolism. It suggests that the United States is committed to some kind of long-term Ukrainian existence, at least for 15 years, which, given Trump's record, is quite a lot. It suggests that they're going to be working together as opposed to having one side have a determining voice. The details will come in later memoranda, but the overall deal seems to be a step forward in terms of the American recognition of Ukraine as an equitable partner, so that's good. And it's a signal to Russia, I think, that the United States is serious about helping Ukraine. Again, given Trump's mercurial nature and the fact that he flips flops on a daily basis, we won't know for sure whether the deal will mean what it's supposed to mean for a few weeks or months, nevertheless it's far better than the alternative, which was a colonial exploitative deal that was completely unfair.

VC: It's some kind of investment fund, is that right?

AM: It's an investment fund jointly owned by the Ukrainians and the Americans. Both sides would have equal say. They're supposed to divide the profits in some equitable manner. A certain amount is supposed to go to the United States for initial investment. Investment will be encouraged. Ukraine's ability to join the European Union isn't affected by the deal which is very important because the earlier draft would have excluded it as an option. There is an implied security concern. Not a guarantee but a security concern within the deal as well. Which is, again symbolically it's great. Practically, we'll see what it means after 15 years. But for the time being it's a good step forward.

KK: Well, after the nightmare in the White House with Trump and how he exploited Zelensky, something happened in between, obviously because now he criticized Putin for striking Ukraine again. Interesting,

Zelensky and Trump in Rome, during the Pope's funeral, I thought that was quite interesting. Does this mean that Zelensky is back in Trump's good graces?

AM: Well, it's hard to say, again. It's clearly, Trump's current attitude toward Zelensky is obviously preferable to the attitude he expressed in the oval office back in February. That was just insulting, distasteful, every possible negative characterization applies to Trump's behavior, so the fact that the two men huddled in that famous shot in the Vatican seemingly one on one with this *tete-a-tete*, that alone is an encouraging image. Unfortunately, with Trump you never know. He's called Zelensky a dictator at least twice (KK: And that he started the war) He started the war, he said that twice as well. In the interim they kind of kissed and made up, and then he called him a traitor so for all we know he's going to call him a traitor tomorrow as well. Likewise, if you look closely at what Trump said about Putin's attack on civilians in Ukraine, it was a very mild criticism. He says, "Vladimir, stop!" If you're going to be critical you would say, "Hey, you! Stop!" But when you use the first name that's basically another way of saying, you're still my pal. And then he went on to say the firing of the missiles was untimely, something to that effect. And many Ukrainians said, "oh, that implies that at other times it was timely?" It was at best a very weak criticism. But that said, it was a criticism nonetheless and we should be thankful for the small gifts that we get. Whether he will continue in this manner, we'll see. Just yesterday he gave an interview, I think it was NBC (KK: Oh, Meet the Press?) Yes, when he was asked about the three-day cease fire proposed by Putin and he said, "well, it's actually a lot." Well, it's not a lot, it's nothing. So that seems to suggest that he's softer on Putin than he should be. But again, you never know. So far within the last two weeks, the tendency on Trump's part seems to be in the right direction. And as I said, we should be grateful for the small blessings.

VC: Yeah, for those small things. So, the Russians are still hammering at how Ukraine, is still attacking. And Ukraine needs to bolster its army. So, there's been reporting that Ukraine is drafting men under the age of 25, even lowering medical requirements or standards, such as allowing people who had HIV, or maybe tuberculosis, to serve. So, to your knowledge, is this happening?

AM: What I've read is that they have been encouraging younger men to join. It's basically kind of a propaganda, advertising campaign. And I'm sure somewhere along the way standards have been reduced to get the requisite number of people into the army. So, there is a problem. I mean the Ukrainians are quite up front on this, it's not just Western journalists and policy makers have noticed. There is a problem. Is it a significant problem? At this point, probably not. Because if you look at the battlefield performance of the Ukrainian army, they actually pretty much stopped Russian advances. Three or four months ago the Russians were gaining something like 100 or 200 square kilometers per month. Now it's down to about 20 or 30 so it's a significant drop. They haven't stopped attacking, it's just that they obviously stopped advancing. And that suggests that the Ukrainian army is performing well. It may not be capable of pushing the Russians back although again it's too soon to say if that's possible but at this point the mere fact that they can stop Russia from advancing further can be considered a minor victory. So, we'll see how the future develops but at this point it looks like the Ukrainians are in a pretty good position on the battlefield. One of the things that has led to these minor successes is the fact that the vast majority of the fighting is now being done by drones on the battlefield. In the early years of the war, it was artillery which is still important but is no longer quite as important as drones. The Ukrainians are producing something like 200,000 drones a month and they expect to produce two and a half million by the end of the year. (VC Wow) And a drone costs several thousand dollars, four or five thousand, so it's significantly cheaper than missiles and so on. And basically, the entire country is behind this project of

creating drones in garages, and underground factories. So, if this continues, and it will, it'll have a kind of evening out effect. And will it enable the Ukrainians to push the Russians back? Who knows. But for the time being it certainly serves the purpose of halting their advance.

KK: Is the United States helping to finance these drones?

AM: The Ukrainians have committed something like a quarter or a third of their budget to defense so it's Ukrainian money. Mind you, a drone costs 4,000, 5,000, of course if you multiply that by two and a half million, you're talking about serious money. But it's largely Ukrainian funds that are going towards this. The EU is helping; the United States as far as I know has not provided significant assistance. However, what is important is, and this is all within the last few days, White House officials as well as Pentagon officials have said they are approving something like 300 million dollars of military assistance to Ukraine to repair and refurbish F-16 planes and there's also talk, just yesterday and the day before, that Israel will be supplying Ukraine with a Patriot missile system, a defensive missile system, and another one should be coming from either Germany or Greece. Again, 350 or 300 million is a drop in the bucket when you consider that Ukraine needs 30-40 billion, but it's a step in the right direction and three weeks ago, two weeks ago it looked like Trump was going to nix any kind of assistance whatsoever. So, the mere fact that they crossed this particular Rubicon so to speak is a potentially good sign of the administration's intention.

VC: Yeah, so speaking of the drones, Ukraine recently attacked Moscow with some drones in advance of this big parade that they're having in Moscow. Is this going to affect the peace negotiations one way or the other?

AM: Well, you know, the drone attacks on Moscow, the Ukrainians aren't going to be sending drones on Red Square where foreign diplomats will be assembled, thousands of people, that would be crazy as well as inhuman so they're targeting places on the outskirts just to send a message that if we wanted to we could and in the meantime you should be a little terrified of our potential to be able to inflict some damage on you. Will this affect the peace negotiations, which are pretty much moribund at this point in time? My own sense is that the answer is pretty much no. There are two key factors behind the peace negotiations, rather behind the lack of movement in the peace negotiations. One concerns Trump and his team, especially Steve Witkoff, whom I call witless Steve Witkoff. Again, they have no idea of what they're doing. This is amateur hour. Witkoff goes off, meets Putin, Putin tells him that when Trump was almost assassinated, he said a prayer for him in his church, and Witkoff believes him. It's as if Hitler told someone, oh yeah, I went to a synagogue to pray. I mean for Christ's sake; you really need to be totally naïve to believe something like that.

KK: Well, he believes what Trump tells him, so...

AM: So why not. This is true, you have a point. But in any case, on the one hand the Americans don't know what they're up against. They don't know what Russia's doing. They don't understand Russia. They don't understand Ukraine. They don't understand why the war broke out. They just don't know. That's not to say everybody doesn't know, but certainly the key players, Witkoff and Trump, are ignorant when it comes to Russia and Ukraine. So how can you expect them to come up with some solution. So that's problem number one. Problem number two is Putin. Putin has insisted throughout that his minimal demand is the complete and total annexation of the entire provinces that Russia formally, officially annexed at the end of 2022. These provinces are currently about half occupied or half controlled by Ukrainian forces. So technically, from his

point of view, Ukraine is occupying Russian territory and not the reverse. He can't agree to anything short of that, that would make him look stupid and weak and he can't look stupid and weak. He needs to justify the fact that Russia is close to losing a million dead and wounded, and to say that he simply captured a bunch of territory but fell short of these provinces is essentially to admit that he's wasted enormous human and economic resources. That would undermine his legitimacy and undermine his authority. So, Putin is in no hurry to make any kind of concessions. And of course, Trump and Witkoff think that he could be persuaded to do this and he can't, he won't. It's simply not in his genes on the one hand and secondly, it's his own political survival that's on the line. Zelensky, in this regard, he's been a masterful diplomat. He's basically said "yes, sir" to everything Trump has suggested. You want a three-day cease fire? Absolutely, we want a cease fire. Three days? No way. How about 30 days? How about forever? The US is doing everything right. I think Zelensky knows better and he understands that the US is not doing everything right. But he understands that he's got to agree. And this puts Putin into a bind because Putin has thus far rejected this peace proposal that was developed by Witkoff and Trump for obvious reasons. And that makes him look like the obstreperous bad guy, and suddenly Zelensky looks like the skillful diplomat who's been manipulating Trump and Putin. Now we'll see whether that continues, but so far, so good.

KK: Does this include Crimea? We hear so much about that and I don't believe Zelensky would say yes to Trump and in my heart, I believe that Trump has asked him to do that.

AM: Well, the Crimea business...

VC: It's what Putin wants, right? It's one of his demands.

AM: It's one of his demands and some analysts have argued that Putin should have agreed to the peace deal suggested by Witkoff because he gets Crimea, de jure, he gets the other Eastern territories, would be recognized as de facto occupied which isn't too bad but of course again that just misses the point that he wouldn't be getting more provinces in their entirety, only those that are currently occupied by Russian forces. Zelensky can't agree to the giving of Crimea partly because it would violate the Ukrainian constitution, which is of some importance, partly because it would violate international law. Now Trump, and this is where it gets a little subtle, has told Zelensky, "I'm not asking you to recognize Crimea. We would recognize Crimea as a de jure annexation by Russia. It wouldn't mean that you would need to do so." And that seems like a clever way of splitting the difference at first glance. But the problem is, of course, that if the United States recognizes Crimea, and it is a superpower that has enormous influence over the globe that would soon lead to other countries recognizing Crimea. And before you know it, it would be recognized as part of Russia. And of course, Zelensky can't agree to that. He could agree to Russia temporarily being the occupying power, and basically, he's already agreed to that. He's already said that he'd be willing to recognize that Russia is in control of these territories without recognizing that they are in legitimate control. Fair enough, but that's not what Putin wants. And that doesn't quite seem what Trump is suggesting.

VC: You mentioned as part of this deal, Ukraine could be a member of the European Union, but what about NATO?

AM: Well, part of the deal would be that Ukraine would promise not to become a member of NATO. Well, you know, aside from the fact that the deal is probably unacceptable for Ukraine for all sorts of other reasons,

that's one of the reasons that's less significant partly because promises were made to be broken, and imagine for the sake of argument that there is in fact a peace and it breaks out that Russia and Ukraine become the best of friends. On the one hand that would make NATO membership irrelevant and if they remain enemies Ukraine can always say, "sorry, we lied." End of story. Countries do this all the time. The other point is, as I think I've said on this program before, being a member of NATO simply doesn't guarantee your security because Article five which ostensibly means that countries are obligated to intervene on behalf of countries that are attacked by outside countries. It says nothing about the form in which they need to respond. So, it doesn't have to be military. It could be political, diplomatic, cultural, social, humanitarian, and so on. So, the bottom line is, as people are increasingly coming to understand, and this is basically the Ukrainian position, yes, membership in NATO would be great because it would mean that Ukraine is moving toward the West. It would be part of a Western institution, would improve its military and so on so that's good, but in terms of security basically the only country that can make a secure Ukraine against Russia is Ukraine. So, the bottom line is it needs to have the wherewithal, military hardware, armed forces, air force, navy, blah blah to be in a position where they could deter any possible Russian attack. Because no one's going to come defend Ukraine, not the Americans, not the Poles, not the British, not the French, not the Germans. So, the bottom line is the only security guarantee is the security guarantee that the Ukrainians could give themselves. And that's good because on the one hand the Ukrainians are building up their military capacity, we already talked about the drones, but at the same time it means that all Europe and the US need to do is simply provide Ukraine with the hardware. If they send in 10 or 20,000 troops, to maintain air bases, that's all very nice and good, but it won't make a significant difference. End of story.

KK: Do they have the manpower to do that now, Ukraine?

AM: Well, at this point yeah, they have something like 700,000 troops if I'm not mistaken that are currently battle ready. That's a significant amount. (VC Yeah) And they've got the drones. They've been promised assistance on the artillery front. They're getting some F-16s, which is important. Remember, to deter Russia, they don't need to beat the pants off Russia. They just need to make any possible Russian aggression too painful for the Russians to bear. And the Ukrainians have already done that when you consider that the Russians have lost a million men or close to losing a million men and women. Their economy is in tatters, inflation is rising and all that, when you consider all that the Ukrainians have essentially shown that they can impose enormous cost on the Russians. The Russians claim to be the second most powerful army in the world, and the Ukrainians have shown that they are not. Again, who would have thunk it back in 2022? It looked like it would be a cakewalk for the Russians but the Ukrainians have obviously shown that A, they had the resilience and the strength but B, they have also shown how miserable the Russian armed forces actually are. This is remarkable. The Russians are in such deep problems with logistics. They're using donkeys in order to move supplies on the front. I don't mean to say every part of the front is using donkeys but the mere fact that they are resorting to donkeys, I mean, this is World War I.

VC: That's pretty desperate.

KK: And Putin is, his ego won't let him give in.

AM: He can't give in. And the same applies to Trump. Trump has been saying he's going to withdraw, he's going to leave it alone. When he said, back in 2024 that he's going to fix this in 24 hours that was effectively a

way of stating that he now owns the war. Now the Republicans are saying no, no, it's Biden's war. Well, I'm sorry. It was Biden's war till Trump said I'm going to fix it. Now it's his war. And as we all know, he's got a big ego as well. And if he cuts and runs that's just going to look at best foolish, at worst cowardly. (VC: Exactly.). He's in a bit of a bind himself.

VC: Exactly. That would make Trump look weak.

AM: Look weak, and stupid. (VC: totally).

VC: In terms of, I know we spoke a bit earlier about security guarantees for Ukraine under this deal. is it true that this deal, the minerals deal, did not provide any sort of security guarantees for Ukraine from the US?

AM: It didn't. It didn't provide. But there's talk of Ukrainian security, there's an implication that the United States would resume military assistance if and when Russia misbehaves. It's kind of fuzzy, squishy language. But at least again, on the plus side, at least it mentions Ukrainian security concerns which the initial draft did not. So, it's at least a sign that the United States seems to recognize that this is an important issue. Whether the United States will proceed to do anything about it is a different story. Secretary of the Treasury Bessent said the mere fact that we signed this deal, which may produce concrete mining results in about 10-15 years, obviously implies that we expect Ukraine to exist as a sovereign state in 10 or 15 years. And he's right. It would be nice if the United States said that explicitly, and it would be nicer if it said they would support this sovereignty explicitly. But as I said, considering where we were back in February when it looked like the end of the world for Ukraine and Zelensky, these are all steps in the right direction. They still fall short of where Ukraine would like to be, but considering there was that disastrous meeting in the oval office this is all to the good.

KK: Listening to everything you say about Putin and that he's basically weak, what about security for this country? Do you think Putin is going to take advantage of that we have these incompetent people in the White House?

AM: Well, I think someone will take advantage of that. I'm not sure Putin will. I don't know if he quite has the capacity at this point with the military losses. The Russians are promoting a variety of subversive and terrorist acts in Europe, so in Poland, Germany and Norway and other places there have been these mysterious explosions, fires. Just recently the Poles captured some individual who was planning to attack Polish buildings with bombs. And that clearly has the hand, the signature of the secret police, the Russian secret police on it. And he's doing that to sow fear, to create disunity, to promote the right, to create the impression that the liberals and the democrats are incapable of defending the country. The US is a little too far away. Again, it's possible. I would imagine that hackers and people like that who don't have to be present in the country will continue to do what they've been doing for the last five, ten years but in terms of direct involvement, I'm not sure. That said, I think the greater danger for the United States is that the FBI and the CIA, which have their own checkered history, they have ultimately the task of protecting the United States from internal and external enemies, are being decimated. Thousands of people have been let go, there is a structural reorganization. The people working for these two institutions appear to be demoralized. And it seems to me that these are simply conditions that are ripe for subversion and possibly terrorist action by outside groups, whether these are terrorists and there are many who dislike the United States, whether it's China or other such countries. Now would be the time to take

advantage of this disorganization in this country, infiltrate your people into the country and to wreak havoc. It's almost an invitation for that to happen.

VC: So, Alex, thank you, as usual, for your incisive analysis of the current situation, just helping us clarify what's going on in this ever changing and volatile situation.

AM: As always, it's a pleasure.

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