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Greater risks, greater hopes: Ukraine's stance on Trump

Tadeusz Iwański

President Volodymyr Zelensky described Donald Trump's inauguration as a day of change and hope for addressing global challenges and achieving a lasting and just peace. He also assured the new US leader of Ukraine's readiness to cooperate in pursuing this goal.

Kyiv welcomed the change in the White House with optimism and hope, despite being aware of the risks involved. Zelensky expects Trump to be more decisive and proactive in assisting Kyiv than Joe Biden's administration, which has been criticised for its overly cautious stance on Moscow due to concerns about conflict escalation, including nuclear threats. Ukraine believes that, if no agreement is reached with Vladimir Putin, Trump will be more willing to increase pressure on Russia and enable Ukraine to continue its effective fight against the invader.

Commentary

- **The Ukrainian leadership has effectively presented itself to the Trump administration as a constructive partner willing to make concessions.** Even before the election, the Ukrainian government had softened its rhetoric on the conditions for resolving the conflict. It hinted at a de facto, though not de jure, willingness to forgo the full restoration of territorial integrity and to exclude occupied territories from security guarantees under a potential NATO membership. With this approach, Zelensky responded to the new US president's declared intent to end the war quickly, aiming to convince him that it is the Kremlin that is responsible for obstructing negotiations. The Ukrainian government believes that, once Trump becomes aware of Putin's true objectives and role in the conflict, their relations will inevitably become strained, and thus the US leader will choose unequivocal support for Ukraine, including substantial military and financial assistance.
- **Kyiv took effective steps to communicate its vision for ending the conflict to Trump as early as 2024.** This approach focuses on strengthening Ukraine militarily and financially while securing Western, particularly US, security guarantees – or, ideally, NATO membership – before any negotiations with Putin commence. In September, Zelensky met Trump in person in New York and spoke with him by phone after the election. In view of the new president's transactional style in policymaking, two of the five points in the so-called Victory Plan, which Zelensky presented to Trump in September last year, were designed to highlight tangible benefits for the US in supporting Kyiv. These included leveraging Ukraine's strategic mineral resources and replacing US troops stationed in Europe with Ukrainian forces. In December, Andriy Yermak, the head of the Office of the President of Ukraine, conducted further talks in Washington, including with Mike Waltz, a

candidate for national security adviser, and General Keith Kellogg, Trump's special envoy for Ukraine and Russia. Then, in January, Zelensky gave a three-hour interview to Lex Fridman, a podcaster popular among Republicans, to reach MAGA (Make America Great Again) supporters.

- **Ukraine pins its hopes on Trump, as it has been frustrated with his predecessor's approach.** Biden has been criticised for his excessive caution in providing military aid – enough for Ukraine to survive but insufficient for victory – which has prolonged the war, causing massive infrastructure destruction and significant casualties. This does not mean Kyiv is unaware of the risks. The primary concern is that the new US leader might pressure Ukraine into accepting an unfavourable compromise by cutting off military aid and intelligence support, securing a deal with Putin without Ukrainian involvement, or simply losing interest in negotiating peace. Furthermore, Ukraine is uncertain as to whether it will be able to convince Trump to maintain and increase assistance or to recognise that providing Ukraine with security guarantees is the only way to achieve lasting peace.