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Trump–Zelensky: an escalation of rhetoric

Marcin Jędrysiak

On 18 February, in a social media post, Donald Trump called Volodymyr Zelensky a “dictator without elections” who enjoys only 4% public support. He also accused him of forcing the United States to provide Ukraine with $350 billion for a “war that cannot be won”.

The following day, during a press conference, the Ukrainian President:

- stated that Trump was influenced by Russian disinformation;
- denied having low public support, citing a February poll by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS), which showed that 57% of Ukrainians trusted him. He also announced plans to assess public confidence in himself, Trump, and European leaders (Donald Tusk, Keir Starmer, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan) to counter Russian disinformation;
- accused the US President of bringing Russia out of international isolation by holding a meeting with him in Saudi Arabia;
- declared his willingness to disclose details of a proposal to grant the US 50% of Ukraine’s natural resources. He explained that he could not accept the offer as it provided no security guarantees for Ukraine and, as Head of State, he was not in a position to approve it without parliamentary consent.

Zelensky’s remarks prompted a swift response from US Vice President J.D. Vance, who warned him against publicly attacking Trump, arguing that such actions would have the opposite effect of what he intended. Mike Waltz, Trump’s National Security Adviser, stated that the United States would not tolerate any escalation of rhetoric from the Ukrainian leader. Zelensky was also accused of lacking legitimacy by figures such as US Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard and Elon Musk.

His comments have led to a bitter personal dispute with the US President, which could have negative consequences for Ukraine just before the start of negotiations to end the war. At the same time, his remarks were well received domestically. Despite a decline in support since the start of the war, Zelensky continues to enjoy significant public trust.

Commentary

- **Zelensky’s strong response escalates his rhetorical dispute with Trump amid US-Russia talks on ending the war.** The increasing personal animosity between the two presidents is adversely affecting Kyiv’s negotiating position, while the war of words could lead to negative, impulsive US decisions regarding further military aid.

- **Zelensky's response to Trump's remarks was well received in Ukraine.** He was supported not only by his own party but also by some of his critics and opposition figures. Yulia Tymoshenko, leader of Batkivshchyna and former Prime Minister, stated that it would be "amoral" to hold elections during wartime. Meanwhile, Vitaliy Portnikov, a prominent journalist critical of Zelensky, argued that Trump's attack was directed not at the Ukrainian President personally but at Ukraine as a state–an accusation that had to be countered. This argument was echoed by other prominent commentators. Some officers and soldiers also voiced their support for Zelensky on social media.
- **Zelensky's statement was criticised by deputies from Petro Poroshenko's European Solidarity party.** They called for national unity, which they claim could be achieved through the formation of a government of national accord. However, the former President's party remains in deep conflict with the incumbent government (see '*Sanctions against Poroshenko: the start of Ukraine's election campaign?*').
- **Trump's claims about Zelensky's low public support contradict opinion polls.** While trust in the President has steadily declined since the start of the war, it has never fallen below 50%. The KIIS survey he referenced is the first since 2022 to show an increase – by 5 percentage points – compared to the previous poll from December 2024. This suggests continued national consolidation around the President. Even the few, less reliable electoral polls indicate that Zelensky could secure between 16% (according to SOCIS, a polling firm linked to Poroshenko's camp, assuming General Valerii Zaluzhnyi would also join the race and garner 27% of the votes) and 23% (according to a Gradus Research poll from 19 February, conducted after Trump's remarks, without Zaluzhnyi as a candidate).
- **US pressure on Kyiv to sign a natural resource exploitation deal, hold elections, and swiftly end the war is likely to strengthen domestic support for Zelensky.** Ukrainians are outraged by Trump's remarks and firmly believe that only they – not the US or Russia – should decide if and when elections are held in their country (which is currently illegal due to martial law) and whether their President has the legitimacy to govern. Attacks on Zelensky, especially those echoing Russian propaganda narratives, are seen as attacks on the Ukrainian state itself, which will further consolidate support around the President.