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Polite but firm: Zelensky's efforts to de-escalate relations with Trump

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On 23 February, Volodymyr Zelensky held a two-hour press conference in Kyiv. A significant part of the event focussed on Ukraine's relations with the United States and the prospects for ending the war. The president stated that:

- **he believes that Donald Trump is committed to helping end the war. He also expressed hope that the US president would stand by Ukraine** and that the United States would not limit itself to acting solely as a mediator in talks with Russia;
- **negotiations cannot proceed without Kyiv's participation, and he will not accept any agreement reached without Ukraine's involvement.** In his view, the United States, Europe (broadly understood beyond just the EU), Japan, and Turkey should be present at the negotiating table (he also did not rule out China's participation). He also announced upcoming discussions with partners regarding security guarantees for Ukraine;
- **if US assistance were to cease in the future, "serious European countries" would be prepared to increase their support.** He also emphasised the need to establish principles for deploying European peacekeeping forces to Ukraine, including Turkey's involvement;
- **he could not agree to the US-proposed deal on the exploitation of Ukrainian mineral deposits, as it lacked security guarantees** for Ukraine. He confirmed that intensive negotiations with the American side are ongoing and expressed his willingness to reach a pragmatic and mutually beneficial agreement;
- **US aid to Kyiv amounted to $100 billion, not $500 billion as claimed by Trump.** He also clarified that this assistance was non-repayable. He considered the US demand for repayment (with interest) to be unfair, citing the precedent of American aid to countries such as Israel. Furthermore, he cautioned that such a move could set a dangerous precedent, potentially prompting European countries to demand similar repayments;
- **an audit of mining licences granted in Ukraine is currently underway,** with those issued unlawfully set to be revoked. He reaffirmed Ukraine's openness to American investment and proposed a future profit-sharing model for the exploitation of domestic mineral deposits on a 50/50 basis;
- **the best guarantee for securing US investments in Ukraine would be to ensure their safety through the presence of US troops on the ground.** He stressed that including security guarantees for Ukraine in any mineral extraction agreement is essential;

- although he understands the opposition of the United States and several European countries to Ukraine's rapid accession to NATO, he emphasised that the issue should always remain 'on the table'. When asked by a journalist, he also stated that if his resignation were a condition for peace or Ukraine's entry into the Alliance, he would be willing to step down;
- **foreign partners are not pressuring Ukraine to hold elections.** He also stated that, in his view, holding an election during wartime is technically impossible. He remarked that he was not offended by Trump calling him a dictator, as he is not one;
- **he is not concerned about Ukraine being cut off from the Starlink network, as** access to it is paid for and currently covered by foreign partners (he thanked Poland and Germany for their support).

Commentary

- **Zelensky made it clear that he would not accept any agreement to end the war that was negotiated without Ukraine's involvement.** If an unfavourable settlement were imposed, Kyiv would continue its resistance, relying on its own resources and European support. To reinforce this message, at the outset of the conference, he referenced the upcoming talks on security guarantees with European partners and emphasised his near-daily communication with French President Emmanuel Macron. The president suggested that Ukraine's share of the war's financial burden is steadily increasing and that Kyiv would continue fighting even without US assistance.
- **Zelensky's conciliatory tone should be seen as an attempt to break out of the spiral of rhetorical escalation with Trump** in recent days. The Ukrainian leader used the press conference as an opportunity to explain his country's position on the resource extraction agreement in a calm yet assertive manner. He put forward business-oriented arguments, highlighting the mutual benefits that both countries could gain from a deal, including a fair profit-sharing arrangement, and referencing the practice followed by the United States in its dealings with other allies.
- **Kyiv's rejection of the US-proposed resource extraction agreement does not rule out the possibility of reaching a deal soon.** According to Andriy Yermak, head of the President's Office, both sides are engaged in advanced discussions on the matter, and US investments could form part of Ukraine's security guarantees. Meanwhile, Deputy Prime Minister Olha Stefanishyna stated that negotiations with the US are nearing completion, with almost all key issues settled.