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# The failure of Zelensky's US visit and Europe's plan to end the war

Zespół OSW

On 28 February, Volodymyr Zelensky visited the White House, but the US side shortened the meeting following a heated exchange between the Ukrainian leader, US President Donald Trump, and Vice President J.D. Vance. It remains unclear how this unfortunate meeting will affect Washington's policy towards Kyiv. For now, the planned signing of a memorandum on the creation of a US-Ukrainian fund for the reconstruction of Ukraine – financed in part by profits from the extraction of Ukraine's natural resources – has been cancelled.

The failure to normalise relations between Trump and Zelensky has intensified European consultations, prompting European allies to join negotiations between Kyiv and Washington. Led by the United Kingdom and France, Europe has expressed its willingness to work with Ukraine to develop a plan to halt hostilities and coordinate it with the US. Given the uncertainty surrounding continued US military assistance to Kyiv, the EU is also preparing to increase its support. The success of this plan depends on European countries significantly increasing military aid and securing backing from the Trump administration.

Russia is watching the setback between Washington and Kyiv with satisfaction, reiterating that it will not agree to a ceasefire unless its key demands are met, nor will it accept the presence of NATO troops in Ukraine. The Kremlin intends to negotiate exclusively with the United States, hoping to deepen the rift between Kyiv, Europe, and the Trump administration, halt US military aid to Ukraine, and ultimately force Kyiv into capitulation. This would enable Russia to achieve its broader goal of revising the post-Cold War order in Europe.

**USA: rapid end to hostilities and thawing relations with Russia**

Washington's overriding goal is to end the war in Ukraine as quickly as possible. This would not only fulfil a campaign promise but also serve as a step towards thawing political and economic relations with Russia. In the Trump administration's view, such a reset would help stabilise European security and allow the United States to focus on countering China. The current leadership also hopes to distance Moscow from Beijing as much as possible and weaken the informal Sino-Russian alliance. In negotiations over ending the war, Ukraine is seen not as an equal partner but as a supplicant dependent on US military aid. Consequently, Washington expects Kyiv to align more closely with its position.

The confrontation in the White House will likely increase acceptance among Republican politicians and voters for sidelining Ukraine in peace talks, with only a handful of Republicans having criticised Trump. Meanwhile, Zelensky's image in conservative media, both traditional and social, has deteriorated further, with criticism focusing on what many

commentators perceived as a lack of respect towards the US during the meeting. A further hardening of Washington's rhetoric towards Kyiv is expected, alongside intensified pressure in the form of withholding military aid previously approved under the Biden administration.

The agreement on extracting Ukraine's natural resources, which had already undergone significant revisions, played an important role in US domestic politics. It was intended to showcase Trump's negotiating prowess in foreign relations and convince his electorate that he could better protect national interests than his predecessor. His administration framed the deal as a way to recoup some of the costs the US had incurred in supporting Ukraine while also benefiting Kyiv by providing a form of security guarantee through American economic involvement. A future agreement cannot be ruled out. Trump stated that Zelensky could resume talks with the US 'when he is ready for peace.' However, Washington may make any renewed dialogue conditional on additional requirements, such as holding presidential elections – or, in the best-case scenario, an official apology from the Ukrainian leader, which he has so far refused to offer.

**Ukraine: US security guarantees as a priority**

The primary goal of Zelensky's visit to the United States was to normalise relations with Trump by signing a memorandum covering, among other things, the extraction of natural resources, and to persuade him to provide Ukraine with credible and lasting security guarantees as a condition for beginning ceasefire talks with Russia. The dispute in the White House was part of a broader conflict between the two presidents that had been escalating for weeks (see '*Trump–Zelensky: an escalation of rhetoric*'). Trump is determined to end the war quickly, even at the cost of Ukrainian concessions to Moscow (though the exact scope of these remains unclear), while Zelensky seeks US security guarantees and acceptable ceasefire conditions. His assertive stance at the end of the White House meeting was driven by concerns that the US president was pursuing an agreement with Russia at Ukraine's expense. Zelensky's remarks about Moscow being an unreliable partner that repeatedly breaks its commitments were perceived in the US as a challenge to the administration's entire approach to ending the war.

The public clash with Trump will likely push Kyiv to intensify pressure on European states to increase their support for Ukraine. This message has been evident since the Munich Security Conference, where Zelensky called on Europe to intensify efforts to contain Vladimir Putin. The Ukrainian president will also seek to repair relations with his counterpart in Washington, though the channels and format for such an attempt remain uncertain. The minimum objective will be to maintain US military assistance, as its withdrawal would negatively affect Ukraine's ability to hold the front line. Kyiv is particularly reliant on Patriot air defence missiles, ATACMS missiles for HIMARS rocket systems, as well as intelligence and satellite support. The loss of these capabilities would significantly undermine Ukraine's defensive potential, especially since European countries cannot fully replace them.

Zelensky's stance has been met with a positive response in Ukraine. Trump and Vance's accusations were widely perceived as a false and unjustified attack on both the Ukrainian president and the country, as well as an attempt to serve Russia's interests. Many saw Zelensky's actions as an effort to uphold dignity and counter manipulation, particularly regarding the scale of US aid and the extent of war damage. His approach was praised by most opinion leaders and public figures, while the opposition had little room for criticism.

Petro Poroshenko, leader of the largest opposition party, stated that he would not criticise Zelensky and called for unity in support of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. General Valerii Zaluzhnyi, the former commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine and the country's most popular public figure, echoed this sentiment. At the same time, Zelensky's reaction was seen as overly emotional, and his English skills and fact-checking – particularly regarding the US domestic context and Trump's foreign policy goals – were criticised as inadequate. However, given his support at home and backing from European leaders, the Ukrainian president could feel justified in continuing his assertive approach towards Washington. Evidence of this includes his refusal to apologise to the US president and his insistence that Ukraine be treated with dignity, as expressed during a press conference in London.

**Europe: mediation and developing a support plan for Kyiv**

Following the failed talks in the White House, European states that firmly support Ukraine have intensified consultations. A growing consensus has emerged within these states that they should engage in negotiations as mediators between the US and Ukraine. At the same time, they regard the renewal of dialogue between Kyiv and Washington and continued US support for ending the war as essential. The United Kingdom and France are seeking to take a leadership role in this process while maintaining strong ties with the US. The leaders of both countries held separate talks with Trump last week. After the emergency summit in Paris on 17 February, Prime Minister Keir Starmer invited an expanded group of European, NATO, and EU leaders to London on 2 March. The stated aim of the meeting was to coordinate a European-Ukrainian plan to halt hostilities, which would then be aligned with US efforts.

The plan, presented after the London summit, includes the following elements: 1) maintaining military aid to Kyiv and economic pressure on Moscow; 2) ensuring Ukraine's security and sovereignty, with its participation in negotiations; 3) continuing to strengthen Ukraine's defensive capabilities to deter future Russian aggression in the event of a ceasefire; 4) forming a coalition of willing states to participate in a stabilisation mission in Ukraine, aimed at guaranteeing peace and initiating operational planning; 5) holding further meetings to continue consultations on the plan. According to President Emmanuel Macron, the proposal includes a one-month cessation of hostilities "in the air, at sea, and against energy infrastructure". Compliance with this partial ceasefire would then extend to ground combat, after which coalition forces would be deployed in Ukraine. However, this aspect has not been confirmed by the British prime minister.

At the same time, Europe is discussing ways to increase its support for Kyiv. The EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Kaja Kallas, has announced the launch of a special funding package based on contributions from member states, proportional to their GDP, and revenues generated from frozen Russian assets. The aim is to raise approximately €25 billion. To circumvent a Hungarian veto, Article 20 of the EU Treaty could be invoked, permitting 'enhanced cooperation' among at least nine member states. However, this mechanism still requires unanimous approval from the EU Council. While Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico has pledged to respect the majority decision, Budapest may still make attempts to obstruct the process.

Discussions are also underway on increasing defence spending. After months of debate, the UK Prime Minister has announced that defence expenditure will rise to 2.5% of GDP from April 2027 (up from 2.33% of GDP in 2024, or approximately $82 billion, according to NATO estimates). The government aims to allocate 3% of GDP to defence after 2029. In France, the budget is set to exceed the targets outlined in the Military Planning Law, which currently projects an increase to €68 billion by 2030 (from 2.06% of GDP in 2024, or around $64 billion). However, implementation may be challenging due to budgetary constraints and high national debt. President Macron has urged European allies to agree on a new NATO defence spending target of 3% or even 3.5% of GDP. Germany is debating an additional €400 billion for the special fund dedicated to Bundeswehr modernisation, which would ensure defence spending remains at around 2% of GDP in the coming years (from 2.12% of GDP in 2024, or approximately $77 billion). This would require an amendment to the Basic Law, which is expected to pass before the new Bundestag is constituted. Additional EU funding for European military capabilities and the defence industry is also anticipated. No concrete decisions have been made yet, but the options under consideration include politically challenging joint borrowing, using frozen Russian assets, creating a new fund financed by GDP-linked member state contributions, reallocating unused NextGenerationEU (post-pandemic recovery) funds, or even tapping into cohesion funds.