

WORLD • WAR IN UKRAINE

Ukrainians in shock after Trump's virulent attacks on Zelensky

The US president accused Kyiv of being behind the war and called him a 'dictator.' This escalation stunned the population and the authorities alike and plunged the country a little further into the unknown.

By Thomas d'Istria (Kyiv, correspondent)

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The American envoy to Ukraine, Keith Kellogg (left), and the head of the Ukrainian presidential office, Andriy Yermak, at a meeting in Kyiv on February 19, 2025. SERVICE DE PRESSE DE LA PRÉSIDENTIE UKRAINIENNE / AP

Everything changed in just one week. During this time, American diplomatic efforts to strengthen ties with Russia and President Donald Trump's thunderous declarations put Ukraine in a state of shock. Suddenly, pressure mounted from the United States, bitter statements were made by the

Ukrainian authorities and on Wednesday, February 19, Trump, Kyiv's most crucial ally, accused the Ukrainian president of being a "dictator without elections."

This new situation has completely overshadowed the visit, awaited for weeks, of General Keith Kellogg, the US special envoy for Ukraine and Russia. Kellogg arrived at Kyiv station on Wednesday morning and is due to meet the Ukrainian president on Thursday. "It is very important for us that the meeting and our work with America in general be constructive," said Volodymyr Zelensky on Wednesday, without mentioning Trump. "Together with America and Europe, peace can be more reliable, and this is our goal."

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Tensions between the Ukrainian and American heads of state exploded a week after the first confirmed phone call between Trump and his Russian counterpart. Since then, not a day has gone by without a statement or meeting hinting at the possibility of a deal unfavorable to Kyiv.

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After months of pandering to Trump, Zelensky's mistake has been to simply defend his country's interests. First, he said that Ukraine would not accept a peace agreement resulting from discussions to which it had not been invited. Second, he refused to sign a pre-agreement delivering Ukrainian natural resources to the US. This deal, highly detrimental to Kyiv and devoid of any security counterparts, was presented by Trump as a "repayment" for US financial aid to Ukraine.

A few months earlier, the Zelensky administration had put forward access to certain minerals essential for new technologies, hoping to convince Trump to support Ukraine and obtain security guarantees, but without specifying a legal framework. At a press conference on Wednesday morning, the Ukrainian president said he was ready for a new "serious" agreement that included security guarantees. "I defend Ukraine, I can't sell our country," he said.

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But the Ukrainian president's refusal to sign the agreement provoked the fury of the US president: "Think about it, a modestly successful comedian, Volodymyr Zelensky, talked the United States of America into spending \$350 Billion Dollars to go into a War that couldn't be won, that never had to start, but a War that he, without the U.S. and 'TRUMP'," he declared in a virulent statement riddled with misinformation, starting with the amount of US aid, actually estimated at \$114.2 billion since 2022 by the Kiel Economic Institute (IfW).

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"A Dictator without Elections, Zelenskyy better move fast or he is not going to have a Country left," the US president went on. This was in addition to the previous day's outburst when he falsely claimed that the Ukrainian leader only had a "4%" approval rating.



Flags of the European Union, Ukraine and the United States, Kyiv, February 18, 2025.
RAFAEL YAGHOBZADEH FOR « LE MONDE »

These statements about Zelensky's supposed illegitimacy, coupled with the beginning of a rapprochement between Russia and the US, have given rise to a feeling in the country that there will be a before and an after, giving the impression of entering a new, even more uncertain period just a few days before the 3rd anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. With Ukraine's military heavily reliant on Washington for arms and intelligence, Ukraine now fears the worst. "We will resist," said Kyrylo Budanov, head of Ukraine's military intelligence service (HUR), on Telegram. "Nobody can force Ukraine to give up. We will defend our right to exist," asserted Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha on X.

Russian language

Trump's attack on Zelensky also aroused the indignation of a section of the population. Although the head of state's term of office, due to end in May 2024, has been extended indefinitely, and criticism of him is growing within the country, few Ukrainians question his legitimacy. The vast majority accept the postponement of elections until the end of the war, given what is at stake at the moment – the survival of the nation, especially in a country cut off by a front line, with millions of displaced people.

"Only Ukraine will decide when and how to hold elections and whether or not to re-elect Zelensky. All other countries can either accept it respectfully, or fuck off," reacted armed forces veteran Max Kolesnikov on Facebook. "I have only one explanation" for Trump's statements, said Ukrainian journalist Yaroslava Gres, wryly: "Trump wants Ukrainians to stop fighting each other, to feel the unity of February 2022 again, and for Zelensky to win the election with 73%. There's incredible progress on all three points."

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Recent events have severely dented Ukrainians' image of the Trump administration. Just after his election in November 2024, many had hoped that Trump's unpredictability might work in Ukraine's favor – expecting that frustration with Putin could push him to increase support. But his latest statements, echoing Russian rhetoric, have been a shock. Since the start of the week, experts and public figures have been parading on TV sets and in the media, trying to make sense of the latest developments and headlines that seemed unimaginable just a week ago: "Trump has given Europe to Putin"; "Trump is falling for the Russian trap"; "Trump's new slogan: 'Make Russia Great Again?'" "Putin doesn't need to visit the US. He's already in the White House," summed up highly regarded journalist Sergiy Sydorenko, editor-in-chief of *European Pravda*.

"We're all a bit troubled," said political scientist Oleksiy Haran euphemistically. "We can see that Trump wants to end the war quickly. But why is Trump making such concessions before negotiations have even begun? We understand that we won't regain our 1991 borders or join NATO for the time being. But aren't negotiations about keeping all the cards to yourself and then making adjustments? Trump, on the other hand, rules everything out, right now, publicly." On Wednesday evening, the American president declared that the Russians "have the cards a little bit."

Fear of a forced peace

While concern is palpable in everyone's statements, it is not felt in the streets of Kyiv or in the rest of the country, hit day and night by Russian missiles and drones. On the front line too, soldiers continue to fight without respite. For three years now, the daily lives of Ukrainians have been punctuated by bombings, funerals, the destruction of infrastructure and nuclear threats.

On Kyiv's Independence Square, caught in afternoon traffic as yet another air alert blared, several passers-by admitted on Wednesday that they hadn't kept up with the latest news from Washington. Among them was a young convalescent soldier, accompanied by his wife, who defended himself with an embarrassed pout for not having an opinion on Trump. "Sorry, I've got to go find some guys," he finally said, slightly annoyed, gesturing to the nearby war memorial, topped with thousands of flags in tribute to every soldier killed. The same goes for Maria, 35, who had just arrived from the town of Dnipro to seek medical treatment for her young son with a heart condition. "Everyone I know says Trump isn't going to do anything good for Ukraine," she eventually said. Before adding that, in her opinion, "the war will continue for another year or two."

On the sidewalk outside a music conservatory, where clusters of students were smoking cigarettes, only one teenager, Kyrylo, spoke out: "The US wants our minerals, but they're not giving anything in exchange," he said timidly, referring to Trump's proposed pre-contract on natural resources. "They are our partners, even today, because they support us with their weapons, but everything can change for the worse," he continued. Not far away, Iryna, a supermarket cashier in her fifties, is waiting for the doors to reopen at the shopping center where she works – it closed during the alert. Does she think the war will end? "Anything is possible, but we don't know what to do after all these deaths, all these lost territories... Everyone wants the war to stop. But, on the other hand, where are the guarantees that Russia will stop?"



A target of Russian Federation president Vladimir Putin, at a shooting range, Kyiv, February 17, 2025. RAFAEL YAGHOBZADEH FOR LE MONDE

Over and above Trump's bluster, the rapprochement between the Americans and the Russians has led to fears of a forced peace, with no security guarantees for the country. Yet Ukrainians, such as former foreign minister Dmytro Kuleba, in an interview with the BBC, believe that Moscow's aim is not just to seize a few regions: "[Putin] didn't come for just a piece of land – he came for Ukraine itself." The Kremlin spokesman's announcement on Tuesday that Putin would be willing to negotiate directly with Zelensky has university lecturer and former businessman Valeriy Pekar shrugging his shoulders. "It doesn't mean a thing," he said. "Why should the Russians stop fighting when they're in a position

of strength?"

"Putin wants to dismember Ukraine. And his goal hasn't changed," said Vitaliy Deynega, former deputy defense minister. "It's likely that Putin and Trump will meet and agree on something. But it will never be more than a new Minsk," he added, referring to the Minsk agreements signed in 2014 and 2015, which were supposed to put an end to the conflict in the Donbas, but were repeatedly violated. Like many Ukrainians, Deynega raised the issue of the reaction of European countries. "I have the impression that they are sufficiently motivated to increase their support for Ukraine and their military budgets," he believed. "But I don't think this support will be enough to cover all the American aid."

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