



Peter Trubowitz

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After Trump's tense meeting with Zelensky, Europe now faces a tough decision on Ukraine



*Last week, Donald Trump met with Ukraine's President, Volodymyr Zelensky, in a tense Oval Office exchange which led to the cutting short of further discussions of a peace plan with Russia. In this short Q&A Phelan US Centre Director, **Professor Peter Trubowitz**, writes on why Trump is interested in closer relations with Russia, and what this may mean for European defense commitments for Ukraine and more widely.*

Why is Trump so keen on a rapprochement with Russian President, Vladimir Putin?

This is a topic of endless speculation with explanations ranging from gaining strategic leverage over Beijing to being controlled by Putin. In my view, the explanation lies elsewhere. The main target is Europe, and Putin is a means to that end, not an end in himself. For Trump, a rapprochement with Putin makes it easier to exploit Europe's dependence on the US for its security – to force it to make concessions to the US. It reminds me a bit of Richard Nixon's shakedown of America's allies back in the 1970s when he **threatened** to slash America's troop presence, if they didn't start spending more on defense. Of course, back then, there wasn't an active war on Europe's doorstep!

Who stands to win the most from the Trump-Zelensky fiasco?

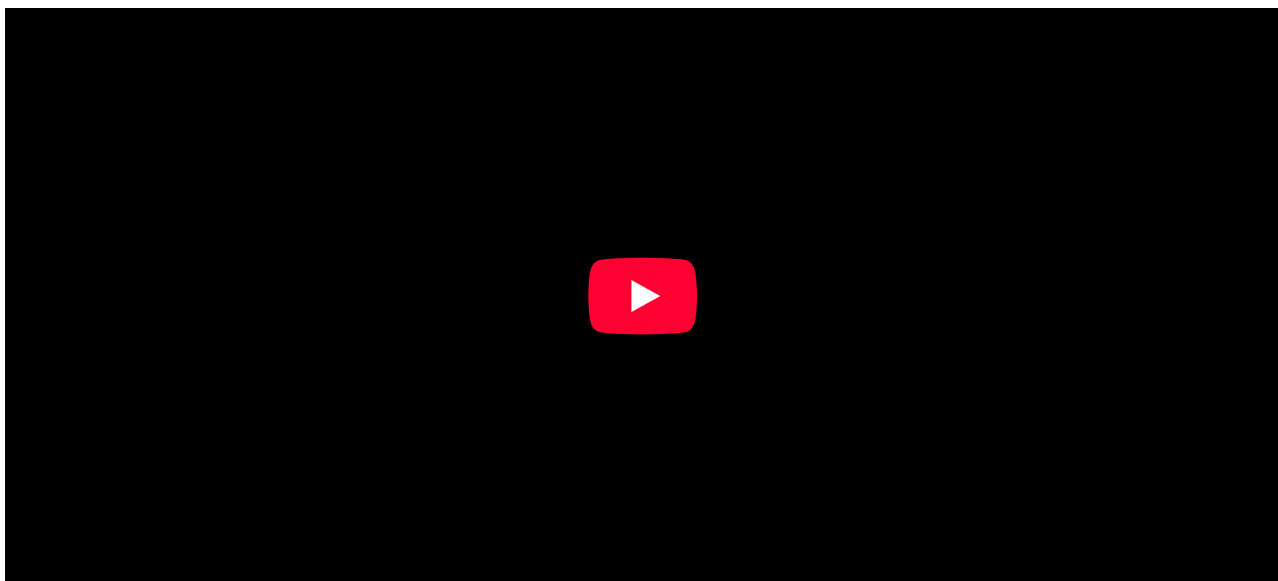
Putin without a doubt. Friday's fiasco in the Oval Office made it crystal clear for anyone that didn't already realize it that Trump does not have Kyiv's back. He is prepared to force Europe to put up or shut up when it comes to defending Ukraine. The ball is now in Europe's court. Will it seize the 200 billion euros in frozen Russian assets sitting mostly in Belgium to bolster Kyiv's defenses? Are the Europeans prepared to put peacekeepers on the ground, in harm's way? Are they willing to do so without a US security guarantee? This is all going to come to a head soon.

Can UK Prime Minister, Kier Starmer forge a “coalition of the willing” to secure Ukraine?

Possibly, but it's anything but a given. That's because any coalition is likely to be a coalition of the unwilling rather than the willing. The crux of the problem is that European leaders do not want to put boots on the ground as part of a peacekeeping force without a US security backstop in the form of aircraft, anti-missile batteries, and intelligence data. Trump thus far has been unwilling to publicly commit to such a backstop. Complicating matters, Putin has ruled out a European peacekeeping presence in Ukraine. So, if there is an agreement, it will need to avoid or blur these red lines without giving Putin room to strike again today, tomorrow, or three years from now once he has rebuilt his forces.

- *This article is based on an interview with Professor Trubowitz with Bloomberg Surveillance on 3 March 2025.*
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Watch Professor Trubowitz's interview with Bloomberg Surveillance (from 53:30)



About the author



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Peter Trubowitz is Professor of International Relations, and Director of the LSE's Phelan US Centre. His main research interests are in the fields of international security and comparative foreign policy, with special focus on American grand strategy and foreign policy. He also writes and comments frequently on US party politics and elections and how they shape and are shaped by America's changing place in the world.

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