

TIME

'I Don't Trust Anyone at All.' Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky Speaks Out on Trump, Putin and a Divided Europe



Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky sits for a portrait in Kyiv on Nov. 30, 2019. Paolo Pellegrin—Magnum Photos for TIME

BY **SIMON SHUSTER / KYIV**

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Hardly six months into his tenure as the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky has already learned to temper his expectations. He does not expect his first round of peace talks with Russia, which are **scheduled** to take place in Paris on Dec. 9, to end the war that has been raging along their border for the past five years. Nor does he expect too much from his Western allies

going into these negotiations, Zelensky said in a wide-ranging interview on Saturday.

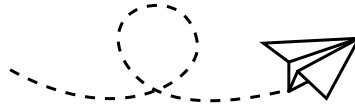
Speaking to reporters from TIME and three of Europe's leading publications, the President explained that, despite getting caught up in the **impeachment inquiry** now unfolding in Washington, D.C., Ukraine still needs the support of the United States.

Otherwise his country does not stand much of a chance, Zelensky said, in its effort to get back the territory Russia seized from Ukraine in 2014, starting with the Crimean Peninsula. Nor can Ukraine rely on steady financial support from abroad if President Donald Trump and his allies continue to signal to the world that Ukraine is corrupt, Zelensky said. "When America says, for instance, that Ukraine is a corrupt country, that is the hardest of signals."

During the interview in his office in Kyiv, the **comedian-turned-president** denied, as he has done in the past, that he and Trump ever discussed a **decision to withhold American aid to Ukraine for nearly two months** in the context of a quid pro quo involving political favors, which are now at the center of the impeachment inquiry in Congress.

But he also pushed back on Trump's **recent claims** about corruption in Ukraine, and questioned the fairness of **Trump's decision** to freeze American aid. "If you're our strategic partner, then you can't go blocking anything for us," he said. "I think that's just about fairness. It's not about a quid pro quo."

Zelensky's focus during the interview, as it has been throughout his time in office, was on the effort to end Ukraine's war against Russia and its proxies, who still control two separatist strongholds in the region of Ukraine known as the Donbass. More than 13,000 Ukrainians have died as a result of that conflict, and more are killed or wounded every week. Yet the European attempts to mediate an end to the fighting have been stalled for over three years.



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For the first time since the fall of 2016, Russian President Vladimir Putin has confirmed that he will attend the talks under what's known as the Normandy format, with the leaders of France and Germany acting as mediators. But without consistent pressure from the U.S., Zelensky is hardly sure the Europeans will deliver on their promises to defend his country's land, its people and its economy.

What follows is a partial transcript of the hourlong interview, which was conducted jointly by TIME, *Le Monde* of France, *Der Spiegel* of Germany and *Gazeta Wyborcza* of Poland. It has been condensed and edited for clarity by TIME.

Interviewer: What are you expecting from the peace talks on Dec. 9?

Zelensky: Experience shows that these meetings go on for many hours. They vary. Often these meetings go in circles, with people repeating the same things

to each other. Here's what I know from studying them: people have come to these meetings intending for nothing to happen.

So in the past the negotiators were just pretending?

That is how I felt. Maybe they came with different goals. Each country has its position. And no doubt Germany and France both did a lot to make these [upcoming] talks happen. That's already a victory. It's a victory when the weapons fall silent and people speak up. That's already the first step.

What are the next steps?

First is a prisoner exchange, a real exchange within a clear timeframe. Second is, I think, very difficult, and that's a ceasefire. It was laid down in all the [previous agreements] as the priority, as the first point, in all the agreements and in all the statements. But we have to understand that, indeed, the shooting slowed down. That's true. But it did not stop. So when we say ceasefire, that's what we have to achieve. These first two points are related to the lives of people. That's why, for me, those are the two most important points.

What about the need to hold elections in the regions held by pro-Russian separatists?

When we talk about elections, we have to understand the third point: before elections, we need a full withdrawal, a full disarming of all illegal formations, military formations, no matter the type, no matter the group, no matter the uniform, no matter what weapons. Resolving these three points will create an understanding that we want to end the war. We definitely want that. But that will create an understanding that Russia is also very strongly intent on this.

So Ukraine will not agree to hold elections in the occupied regions until the withdrawal of forces?

Of course not.

What about the border? When will Ukraine regain control of its border with Russia, including the sections now held by the separatist forces?

Yes, that's the most difficult question. The most difficult. If we even get to it, it will be the most difficult question in these negotiations. But I'll confess to you honestly, I don't support the way this is spelled out in the [previous] agreements. [Under those agreements,] the elections are to happen, and then the control of the borders goes to Ukraine... I don't agree with the sequence of these actions.

And what if the talks achieve nothing?

Look, we are at home here. It is a piece of our land that was taken away. I will not agree to go to war in the Donbass. I know there are a lot of hotheads, especially those who hold rallies and say, 'Let's go fight and win it all back!' But at what price? What is the cost? It's another story of lives and land. And I won't do it. If that doesn't satisfy society, then a new leader will come who will satisfy those demands. But I will never go for that, because my position in life is to be a human being above all. And I cannot send them there. How? How many of them will die? Hundreds of thousands, and then an all-out war will start, an all-out war in Ukraine, and then across Europe.

What are your impressions and expectations from Putin?

We've had three calls with the President of Russia. I think they were productive. We got our sailors back [in a prisoner exchange]. We got back our guys who wound up behind bars under tragic circumstances, our political prisoners. That's very important.

Q: Do you have any trust in Putin going into these talks?

I don't trust anyone at all. I'll tell you honestly. Politics is not an exact science. That's why in school I loved mathematics. Everything in mathematics was clear to me. You can solve an equation with a variable, with one variable. But here it's only variables, including the politicians in our country. I don't know these

people. I can't understand what dough they're made of. That's why I think nobody can have any trust. Everybody just has their interests.

Ukraine has long asked the U.S. to play a greater role in the peace talks between Russia and Ukraine. That's what Kurt Volker, the Trump Administration's special envoy to the peace process , was trying to do...

He tried. He tried hard. That's true. And I think he had a lot of success. I wasn't a witness to everything he did, because I wasn't President at the time. But I saw that in those moments when we met, he really was active in defending our position.

But in the context of the impeachment inquiry, Volker has left his post, as have other officials who supported Ukraine within the Trump Administration. In that context, how do you see the U.S. role in the peace process? How has it changed in the last few months, and how do you see it going forward?

First off, I would never want Ukraine to be a piece on the map, on the chess board of big global players, so that someone could toss us around, use us as cover, as part of some bargain... As for the United States, I would really want – and we feel this, it's true – for them to help us, to understand us, to see that we are a player in our own right, that they cannot make deals about us with anyone behind our backs. Of course they help us, and I'm not just talking about technical help, military aid, financial aid. These are important things, very important things, especially right now, when we are in such a difficult position.

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The United States of America is a signal, for the world, for everyone. When America says, for instance, that Ukraine is a corrupt country, that is the hardest of signals. It might seem like an easy thing to say, that combination of words: Ukraine is a corrupt country. Just to say it and that's it. But it doesn't end there. Everyone hears that signal. Investments, banks, stakeholders, companies, American, European, companies that have international capital in Ukraine, it's a signal to them that says, 'Be careful, don't invest.' Or, 'Get out of there.' This is a hard signal. For me it's very important for the United States, with all they can do for us, for them really to understand that we are a different country, that we are different people. It's not that those things don't exist. They do. All branches of government were corrupted over many years, and we are working to clean that up. But that signal from them is very important.

Yet last week President Trump said on live television that Ukrainians are corrupt, and they steal money. Do you have a plan for changing his mind?

I don't need to change his mind. During my meeting with him, I said that I don't want our country to have this image. For that, all he has to do is come and have a look at what's happening, how we live, what kinds of people we are. I had the sense that he heard me. I had that sense. At least during the meeting, he said, 'Yes, I see, you're young, you're new, and so on.'

What role do you see the U.S. playing in the peace process going forward?

America, first of all, has its direct relations with Russia. To influence Russia, to make everyone see that this [war] is a big tragedy, and that it must end, I think that Mr. Trump can speak directly, and I think they do talk about these things.

Trump and Putin?

Yes. I don't like when others talk about us without us there, in the sense of some benefits for them. But if it's a conversation along the lines of, 'Look, let's make this stop. Ukraine is different now. Ukraine wants to stop it. There is no radicalism. No one is killing and eating anyone in that country. See for yourself. Come on.' Then the whole world would support Ukraine, and America is one of the keys to this happening.

President Emmanuel Macron of France recently said that NATO is experiencing brain death. What do you think about that? And what do you think about the reset of relations he wants with Russia, saying that Russia is part of Europe, and Russia is not a threat? Do you agree with it?

For us, look, it does sound strange. When it comes to Russia, it seems France has different relations now with Russia. I think some of these words are linked with the weakening of sanctions policy. That's what I have seen more deeply now. I understand, because economically, [the sanctions policy] doesn't benefit France and Germany. But when we're talking about human beings, we shouldn't consider benefits. And on this, the European leaders guaranteed to me that the sanctions policy would stay the same until we get all of our territory back.

Does that include Crimea?

That includes Crimea.

Heading into these peace talks, do you feel the right signals from Paris and Berlin? Or do you feel that you'll be somewhat on your own with Putin there?

I'm the type of person who responds to facts. I believe that our European partners must support us, and if they must, then they will. But I will see this in the first half hour. If I see around the table that this is not the case, I will say so straight out. I would like to hope that everyone understands the problem is deeper than fixing economic problems within this or that country.

Even while acting as a mediator in these talks, German Chancellor Angela Merkel has pushed ahead with a new gas pipeline from Russia to Germany, known as Nord Stream 2. That pipeline would bypass Ukraine, costing your government up to \$3 billion per year in income from the transport of natural gas. Do you still see a chance of blocking that pipeline?

I want European leaders to settle on a different result when it comes to Nord Stream, and take different steps. I don't know what else I can say about North Stream 2. We don't have influence over the Europeans' decision. We don't have it, and that's it. I don't have any leverage. I can only count on the strong support that I see on this question from the United States of America.

Is that the only thing that can stop it?

That's the only thing that can stop it. That's it!

When did you first sense that there was a connection between Trump's decision to block military aid to Ukraine this summer and the two investigations that Trump and his allies were asking for? Can you clarify this issue of the quid pro quo?

Look, I never talked to the President from the position of a quid pro quo. That's not my thing. ... I don't want us to look like beggars. But you have to understand. We're at war. If you're our strategic partner, then you can't go

blocking anything for us. I think that's just about fairness. It's not about a quid pro quo. It just goes without saying.

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