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## SPOTLIGHT

### Trump Cuts Off Talks With Zelensky

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During a meeting between the presidents of the United States and Ukraine on 28 February, the planned signing of an agreement on the exploitation by U.S. entities of Ukrainian deposits, including rare earth minerals, did not take place. A dispute between the President Donald Trump and Vice President J.D. Vance and President Volodymyr Zelensky heated up in the Oval Office with media present, raising doubts about whether the U.S. will maintain support for Ukraine.

#### **What was the incident between the U.S. and Ukrainian leaders?**

Initially, the meeting with Trump, Vance, and Zelensky was conducted in a cordial atmosphere. After a series of pointed questions to Zelensky from journalists in the room, Vance began to attack the Ukrainian president, whose answers were met with criticism from Trump. Zelensky repeatedly dismissed the possibility of Ukraine entering into a ceasefire with Russia without clear security guarantees from the U.S. In turn, Trump warned during and after the meeting the possibility of the U.S. withholding military aid to Ukraine, claiming that it is just encouraging Ukraine to continue fighting and not negotiating with Russia.

It cannot be ruled out that the main reason for the incident was some personal animosity between the leaders, rather than a plan to break off talks by either side. At the same time, the U.S. side may have expected the Ukrainians to accept any offer without additional conditions.

#### **Will the U.S. remain interested in further dialogue with Ukraine?**

It is in the interests of the U.S. and Trump personally to conclude the minerals deal with Ukraine. The demand for resources that enable U.S. companies to compete with Chinese players will only increase, so even the unspecified quantity of rare earth minerals available in Ukraine could strengthen the position of U.S. companies and the administration in turn.

One of Trump's election promises was to end the Russian-Ukrainian war "in one day", often verbalised without any indication of how he would do it or whether it would benefit a specific side. His aim first and foremost was to show causality to his voters, who were increasingly anti-Ukrainian during the campaign, by indicating the costs to the U.S. of the support. Trump will still want to feed this sentiment by cutting aid as much as possible or creating the impression that the U.S. is recouping its investment. Continued dialogue with the government in Kyiv will be necessary to achieve this goal. In addition, Trump may see a quick end or halt to the war as a way of warming U.S. relations with Russia to weaken its cooperation with China, which is the stated goal of the Trump administration.

#### **What further steps is Ukraine likely to take?**

For Ukraine, the breakdown of the talks on the minerals deal could lead to a temporary suspension or even termination of U.S. military support. This could range from the halting of deliveries of equipment, arms, and ammunition approved by the Biden administration, to intelligence support or troop training. After the White House incident, the negotiating position and image of the Ukrainian side vis-à-vis the U.S. administration has deteriorated, which will be exploited by the U.S. negotiators. The lack of U.S. support will put Ukraine in a more difficult position in terms of possible talks with Russia.

Ukraine's primary objective at this point is to de-escalate the situation with the U.S. and secure further support. It is also

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important to convince the Trump administration that an unconditional ceasefire, especially without any security guarantees, means *de facto* surrendering the initiative to Russia. Therefore, practically as soon as he left the meeting, President Zelensky tried to calm the situation by, among other things, expressing his gratitude to the American people through media and avoided direct criticism of President Trump. He further declared his readiness to resume talks and conclude the minerals agreement with the U.S.

Ukraine's efforts are now on two tracks: in addition to trying to return to talks with the U.S., they are focused on cooperation with European countries. On 2 March, President Zelensky attended an informal summit in London where the leaders of some European countries, Canada and Turkey, as well as NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, and European Council President Antonio Costa, met. The London meeting outlined the direction of joint action by the partner countries and, in addition to direct assistance to Ukraine, also signalled the U.S. that Europe is ready, on the one hand, to continue to support Ukraine and, on the other, to meet at least some

of the U.S. demands, including involving European troops on a peacekeeping mission to Ukraine.

### **How might the botched meeting affect U.S. negotiations with Russia?**

The Trump administration aims to end the war in Ukraine as soon as possible. On 12 February, when the first telephone conversation between the Russian and U.S. leaders took place, the negotiation process began. However, it does not include Ukraine, so the failure to sign the minerals deal will not affect current U.S.-Russian relations. It does, however, work in favour of Russia, which is trying to discredit President Zelensky by accusing him of, among other things, not wanting to end the war. Maria Zakharova, spokeswoman for the Russian Foreign Ministry, praised the behaviour of President Trump and Vice President Vance while calling the Ukrainian president a "terrorist", among other things. The consequences of the breakdown of the talks, including the potential withholding of U.S. aid to Ukraine, could translate into tensions in cooperation between European countries and the U.S. This will strengthen the position of Russia and stiffen its stance in negotiations.