

A business deal vs. a peace deal

By Lev Tsitrin

After last Friday's public blowup in the White House between Zelenski and Vance/Trump, American narrative became: Russia is willing to sell Ukraine peace, but Ukraine refuses to buy it. Hence, to bring the unreasonable (and ungrateful to boot) Zelenski to his senses – and to negotiating table with Russia – US paused all security assistance to Ukraine.

A week later, there is evidence that Russia may not be that eager to negotiate peace after all. This evidence arrived [in the form of a](#) “major aerial assault on Ukraine.” Hence, [a new headline](#): *“Trump threatens to impose ‘large scale’ sanctions on Russia until a peace agreement with Ukraine is reached”*

What is going on? Why the “whiplash” – the word very much in use nowadays when it comes to President Trump's thinking, alternatively blaming, and threatening, both Ukraine and Russia?

Part of the problem, I would argue, is that a peace deal is a very different animal than a business deal – for a very simple reason that in a business deal, parties treat each other as having fundamentally legitimate interests. Yes, the seller wants to squeeze as much money out of the buyer as he can. Yes, the buyer wants to pay as little as he possibly can. But those are normal, natural, legitimate impulses – hence, the “art of the deal” comes down to bridging the price difference by deft cajoling and maneuvering. That's all there is to it – but only because there is no questions of legitimacy: the property is seller's, the money is buyer's – and neither the buyer nor the seller challenges that basic fact.

But where would a “deal” go if the buyer claims that the

seller has no title to the property? Suddenly, the business deal is turned into a court battle – a different thing entirely.

Now, can the Ukraine war be reduced to a business transaction?

Consider positions of the parties that lead to the war. Putin's, in essence, is "why do Ukrainians push *my* Ukraine into *their* NATO?" Clearly, Putin does not see the "Kyiv regime," as he calls Ukrainian government, as legitimate. Ukraine, to him, is an integral part of Russia that temporarily seceded, and needs to be brought back into the fold – by military means if necessary. Ukrainian grievance against Putin is symmetrical: "who is he to tell us, an independent county, what to do?"

This, obviously, is not about price of a piece of a real estate, but a cry for justice – by both parties, Russians and Ukrainians.

How do you bridge that gap when all that parties think of, is getting the advantage on the battlefield, Russians using the halt in US aid as an opportunity to pummel Ukrainians and advance further, and Ukraine trying to use European fear of losing Ukraine as a buffer between Russia and themselves to turn Europe into what America became in WW2 – "the arsenal of democracy," so it could arm Ukraine independently of the US?

Mutual perception of illegitimacy of the opponent is the major stumbling block to treating Russo-Ukrainian war as a business deal. President Trump clearly understands it, to judge by what he said in the now-famous White House meeting with Zelenski when pointing to Zelenski's hate for Putin – his future partner in the deal – as the reason why this would be a very hard deal to attain.

To think of it, this hate is entirely understandable. I was not around when Pearl Harbor happened, but I suspect it engendered plenty of hate; However, I was around when 9/11

happened – in fact, I was only a block away when the second plane hit – and I can testify to the amount of hate that resulted from that attack. So yes, it will be a very hard deal to make. It takes one to start a war – but two to end it, one of those two being filled with rage and hate that makes the neutral and benevolent voices of reason very hard to hear – as we all witnessed in that White House meeting.

It is very clear that Russia is unwilling to agree to ending the war if the price of peace is Ukrainian independence buttressed by a strong Ukrainian army, and firmed up further by a European peacekeeping force. To Putin, mind you, Ukraine is “my” Ukraine – so an outcome that would prevent eventual takeover of Ukraine by Russia is unacceptable.

So, there is a hard road ahead for President Trump as he tries to put this fire out. His greatest motivation is, that so much more is at stake here than in a mere business deal: human lives he is trying to save from destruction. This is a noble motive, and I really hope he succeeds – even if it is very hard to see how.