Opinion

For Ukrainians like me, a Trump-Putin 'peace deal' is a sickening betrayal
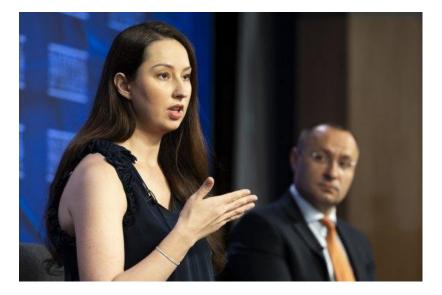
Kateryna Argyrou, Ukrainian-Australian

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Horror has been a constant companion over the past three years for Ukrainians like me in Australia. Sometimes, it arrives with phone calls bearing heartbreaking news of another hospital or school devastated by a Russian missile attack. Often, it strikes in the quiet hours of dawn through messages from friends in Ukraine about loved ones on the frontline or just going about their daily business, injured or lost to Russia's brutal war.

But on Thursday morning, it was not the daily horrors that shook me awake – it was the dawning realisation that Ukraine was being pushed towards a "peace deal" selling it out from the start. News broke that presidents Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin had discussed ending Russia's war against Ukraine with a deal that would strip Ukraine of sovereignty and security guarantees, condemning millions to Russian occupation.

Kateryna Argyrou and Vasyl Myroshnychenko, Ambassador of Ukraine to Australia, at the National Press Club last year.*Credit: Alex Ellinghausen*

This is a betrayal of the values Ukrainians and Australians hold dear: democracy, fairness and self-determination. Trump's proposed deal would force Ukraine to cede 20 per cent of its territory – equivalent to Australia giving up Queensland – and abandon its NATO aspirations. A population the size of Western Australia's would be forsaken. This is capitulation, not peace, and it fails justice. It weakens Ukraine's bargaining power.

For Ukrainians, this is about our people, not just land. Australia has welcomed about 5000 displaced Ukrainians, many from Russian-occupied areas. Displaced Ukrainian Mariia Mykytiuk from Bucha endured Russian atrocities during occupation: her best friend was killed by a sniper, her dog was shot and she lived in constant fear of sexual assault. A Ukrainian soldier who is now in Sydney, Oleksandr Sinetskyi, survived 560 days of Russian captivity, suffering unimaginable torture. A displaced Ukrainian mother, Antonina Tkachuk, lost her only son as he defended Ukraine's freedom.

For those who have heard the news – and President Volodymyr Zelensky's response – the prevailing emotions are shock, horror and disbelief. They refuse to accept any scenario where Putin is rewarded for his illegal war. They fear a world where might equals right. They worry deeply for their children's future, the sacrifices Ukraine may be forced to make for even a fragile peace and the survival of Ukrainian identity and cultural heritage.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky says he "will not accept . . . any bilateral negotiations about Ukraine without us". *Credit:AP*

Above all, there is profound despair based on a dark certainty that Putin will regroup and strike again. Ukrainians know that Putin responds only to strength and pressure. A negotiated peace without justice – and without securing Ukraine's interests – is not peace at all; it is an open invitation for further violence, more land grabs, more lives lost, and more unchecked power.

Ukrainians crave peace – they want this war to be over – but they are clear-eyed about the risks of giving so much to the man who has had the power to stop the bloodshed from day one, a man who has failed to fulfil more than 200 negotiated and agreed commitments struck in the past. This history must be our guide.

Many cannot comprehend Trump's position – does he realise he has surrendered all leverage from the outset? That he risks condemning millions of Ukrainians to a fate worse than death? A life under constant surveillance, suspicion and violence? A life stripped of autonomy, power and rights? A life where children endure brutal re-education programs designed to erase every trace of their Ukrainian identity? Where women – sisters, mothers, daughters, grandmothers – are subjected to systematic sexual violence aimed at breaking their spirit? Where men – fathers, brothers, uncles, grandfathers – are beaten, tortured and executed simply for being Ukrainian? Genocide will continue.

For many, the thought of a "peace deal" that rewards Russia's aggression is unbearable. They have fought too long and sacrificed too much. There is an unspoken fear that this deal sets a dangerous precedent – for a world of great power wheeling and dealing, no matter the human costs – and that other nations may suffer similar fates if such aggression is legitimised here.

That fear is not unfounded. The stories of displaced Ukrainians highlight the brutality of Russian forces and the urgency of accountability. History has shown us, time and time again, that appeasement does not prevent aggression, it emboldens it. Failing to act decisively now risks inviting further destabilisation and human suffering.

Ukrainians worry that their plight will be forgotten, that their fight for democracy will be in vain. Yet, they remain resolute. Their resilience, forged through centuries of struggle, cannot be extinguished.

Australia, a steadfast ally, must continue to support Ukraine's sovereignty. As Australians, we must ask: what shocks await us if the world is carved up into spheres of influence where strongmen decide what they will take, and what suits their political and personal interests? What does this portend for the rules-based order? And what does it mean for the concepts of sovereignty and borders? Which country and peoples are to be subjugated next?

Ukrainians in Australia know too well what is at stake. We are part of both nations, bound by shared values and a deep commitment to peace and justice. Our voices must be heard. We owe it to those fighting on the frontlines, to those displaced by war and to future generations. The fight for Ukraine's freedom is a fight for all of us.

Kateryna Argyrou is the co-chair of the Australian Federation of Ukrainian Organisations.