

Trump says Ukraine started the war that's killing its citizens. What are the facts?

By Justin Spike, AP Press, Updated 12:37 PM CST, February 21, 2025

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — President Donald Trump [this week](#) falsely blamed Ukraine [for starting the war](#) that has cost tens of thousands of Ukrainian lives, causing outrage and alarm in a country that has spent nearly three years fighting back a much larger Russian military.

Trump called Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy “[a dictator](#) without elections” and claimed his support among voters was near rock-bottom.

Zelenskyy said Wednesday that the disinformation is coming from Russia, and some of what Trump has said does echo Russia's own narrative of the conflict.

Here's a look at some of Trump's statements:

Ukraine ‘should have never started it’



Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky gives a press conference in Kyiv, Wednesday, Feb. 19, 2025. (Tetiana Dzhafarova/Pool Photo via AP)



Rescuers and volunteers are working at Ohmatdyt Children's Hospital that was strongly damaged during a Russian missile strike in Kyiv, Ukraine, on July 08, 2024, amid the Russian invasion. Russia is massively attacking Ukraine with missiles on July 08. (Photo by Maxym Marusenko/NurPhoto via AP)

WHAT TRUMP SAID: "You've been there for three years. You should have ended it. ... You should have never started it. You could have made a deal."

THE FACTS: Russia's army crossed the border on Feb. 24, 2022, in an all-out invasion that [Putin sought to justify](#) by falsely saying it was needed to protect Russian-speaking civilians in eastern Ukraine and prevent the country from joining NATO.

But Russia's aggression against Ukraine didn't start then. In 2014, Russian President Vladimir Putin saw signs that Ukraine was pulling away from Russia's sphere of influence, seeking alliances with western European nations.

Putin illegally annexed the Crimean Peninsula and started an armed aggression in the eastern Ukrainian region of Donbas that grew into a long-running conflict that left thousands dead.

That conflict simmered until 2022, when Putin ordered what he called military exercises along Ukraine's borders. He told the world that the roughly 150,000 soldiers that he had amassed would not be used to invade Ukraine. But in the early hours of Feb. 24, Russia launched widespread airstrikes and soldiers began [pouring over the border](#).

Ukraine should hold elections

WHAT TRUMP SAID: “We have a situation where we haven't had elections in Ukraine, where we have martial law,” Trump said in Mar-a-Lago, adding on Wednesday in a post on social media: “A Dictator without Elections, Zelenskyy better move fast or he is not going to have a Country left.”

THE FACTS: Zelenskyy was elected to a five-year term in 2019, and the next presidential elections had been scheduled for spring 2024. But Ukrainian law prohibits parliamentary or presidential elections during a state of martial law, so Zelenskyy has remained in office. He has said he believes elections will be held in Ukraine after martial law is lifted. The country would need to amend the law if it decided to hold a vote.

There are numerous factors that, [according to Ukraine's government](#), “would render it literally impossible to ensure a fair electoral process in the circumstances of a total war.”

According to the United Nations' refugee agency, some 6.9 million Ukrainian refugees have been registered worldwide since February 2022. Of those, millions remain outside the country due to the war. It would be nearly impossible for all of those who have been displaced to participate in an election, potentially robbing millions of their right to vote.

Furthermore, around 800,000 soldiers are currently serving in the Ukrainian Armed Forces as they struggle to contain Russian advances. An election would necessitate pulling soldiers off the front lines to vote, weakening Ukraine's military position. Additionally, those fighting would be unable to run for office, a right that is guaranteed to them by Ukrainian law.

Many Ukrainians are living in areas under Russian occupation, essentially precluding their participation in any electoral process. And since Russia continues to regularly strike both military and civilian targets across the country, packing millions of citizens into crowded polling places could create additional danger.

Zelenskyy's support at rock bottom?

WHAT TRUMP SAID: “The leader in Ukraine, I mean, I hate to say it, but he's down at 4% approval rating.”

THE FACTS: Zelenskyy “retains a fairly high level of public trust” — about 57 percent - according to a report released Wednesday by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology.

Speaking in Kyiv on Wednesday, Zelenskyy said the number given by Trump, for which the president cited no sources, was “disinformation” that originated in Russia, and that the president “unfortunately lives in this disinformation space.”

Zelenskyy said he will ask pollsters in the coming weeks to conduct surveys on the public’s trust in him and share the results with the Trump administration.

Millions of deaths



Oleksii Yukov’s team members offload the bodies of Russian soldiers they’ve collected from the frontline in the Sloviansk region, Ukraine, Tuesday, Oct. 24, 2023. Yukov and his team retrieve bodies from the frontline to barter for Ukrainian bodies in periodic exchanges of war dead. (AP Photo/Bram Janssen)

WHAT TRUMP SAID: “When you see what’s taken place in Ukraine with millions of people killed, including the soldiers, millions of people killed, a big percentage of their cities knocked down to the ground, I don’t know how anybody even lives there.”

THE FACTS: No estimates by any reputable analysis place deaths near the millions.

While exact figures of the number of deaths are unknown, Zelenskyy said earlier this month that over 46,000 Ukrainian soldiers had been killed since the start of the full-scale war in February

2022. He has also said that “tens of thousands of civilians” had been killed in occupied areas of Ukraine, but that no exact figures would be available until the war was over. The most recent data from the Russian Defense Ministry, published in January 2023, pointed to just over 6,000 military deaths, although reports from U.S. and U.K. officials put that number significantly higher.

Missing U.S. aid?

WHAT TRUMP SAID:

“President Zelenskyy said last week that he doesn’t know where half of the money is that we gave him. Well, we gave them, I believe, \$350 billion.”

THE FACTS:

According to a U.S. interagency oversight group that tracks aid to Ukraine, the U.S. Congress has appropriated around \$183 billion in assistance to Kyiv since the start of Russia’s invasion on Feb. 24, 2022 — a little more than half of Trump’s claim of \$350 billion.

In an [interview with The Associated Press](#) on Feb. 1, Zelenskyy said some \$70 billion worth of military aid had been delivered to Ukraine, and that another \$6 billion had come in the form of things like training programs, humanitarian relief and economic and infrastructure recovery.

As for the rest of the assistance approved by the U.S. Congress, Zelenskyy said it never reached Ukraine. “I don’t know where all this money is,” he said.

Zelenskyy’s statement led to a flurry of spurious claims in some news media, amplified by Trump and Elon Musk, that some \$100 billion of U.S. assistance had disappeared somewhere in Ukraine.

But crucially, aid appropriations aren’t necessarily spent in the country they target. Much of the Ukraine aid approved by Congress is spent in the U.S. to boost the domestic defense industry by replacing old equipment given to Ukraine. It’s also used to supply Kyiv with new U.S.-manufactured weaponry.

According to a paper from the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington-based bipartisan, nonprofit policy research organization, other funds have financed a surge of U.S. troops into allied countries in Europe in response to Russia’s invasion. Still others have gone to assisting Ukrainian refugees or enforcing sanctions against Russia — all uses that would never see funding cross over Ukraine’s borders.

Trump’s own envoy for Russia and Ukraine, Keith Kellogg, said in an interview with broadcaster Newsmax in early February that U.S. officials keep careful tabs on how and where aid appropriations are used.

