

Trump's False and Misleading Ukraine Claims

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After U.S. and Russian officials met in Saudi Arabia to discuss an end to Russia's war in Ukraine, President Donald Trump made several false and misleading statements about the conflict and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

- Trump falsely claimed that Ukraine had “started” the war with Russia, saying the country could have made a “deal.” Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.
- He inflated the amount of U.S. aid for Ukraine and wrongly said the U.S. gave “\$200 billion more than Europe.” Aid from Europe is higher than that from the U.S.
- Trump distorted comments Zelenskyy made to claim that the Ukrainian president “admits that half of the money that we sent them is missing.” A Trump administration official has said the U.S. tracks the money.
- Trump called Zelenskyy a “dictator” and misleadingly said that he “refuses” to have elections. Because of the war, the country is under martial law and can't have an election, according to Ukrainian law.

The talks between the U.S. and Russia in Saudi Arabia, led by U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, [were held Feb. 18](#). Ukraine wasn't included in the meeting. Trump [made his claims](#) about Ukraine late in the afternoon on Feb. 18 and reiterated them the following day in [a post on Truth Social](#) and [remarks at a summit in Miami](#).

Zelenskyy [told reporters](#) on Feb. 19 that Trump was “caught in a web of disinformation.”

[Russia, Not Ukraine, 'Started' the War](#)

In remarks from Mar-a-Lago on Feb. 18, Trump [claimed](#) that Ukraine had “started” the war with Russia by not making a “deal.” The war started on Feb. 24, 2022, when Russia [launched a full-scale invasion](#), two days after Russia [recognized](#) two separatist territories in eastern Ukraine as independent states and sent Russian troops into Ukraine's Donbas region.



Ukrainian

service members look for unexploded shells after fighting a Russian raiding group in the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv on Feb. 26, 2022, according to Ukrainian service personnel at the scene. Photo by Sergei Supinsky / AFP via Getty Images.

As we [wrote](#) in 2022, for months before the invasion, Russian President Vladimir Putin and other Russian officials had repeatedly denied plans to invade Ukraine even as Russia built up troops on the border.

In his remarks, Trump suggested that Ukraine could have avoided the conflict by giving up some of its land. “You should have never started it,” Trump [said](#). “You could have made a deal. I could have made a deal for Ukraine that would have given them almost all of the land, everything, almost all of the land and no people would have been killed and no city would have been demolished and not one dome would have been knocked down, but they chose not to do it that way.”

In remarks before the invasion, Putin gave “a long list of grievances” to justify the attack, Jeffrey Mankoff, a senior associate with the Europe, Russia, and Eurasia Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, [wrote](#) in an April 2022 report. But the “fundamental issue” was “the legitimacy of Ukrainian identity and statehood.”

“Putin has long claimed that Russians and Ukrainians comprise ‘one people’ whose common history implies that they should also share a common political fate today,” Mankoff said.

Trump’s vice president during his first term, Mike Pence, spoke out against Trump’s claim. “Mr. President, Ukraine did not ‘start’ this war,” Pence [wrote](#) in a post on X. “Russia launched an unprovoked and brutal invasion claiming hundreds of thousands of lives.”

Still Wrong on U.S./European Aid

The U.S. has allocated billions to aid Ukraine since the start of the war in February 2022, but Trump has repeatedly inflated the amount — and made false comparisons with the amount of aid from European countries.

[Three times](#) this week, Trump said that the U.S. had given Ukraine “\$350 billion,” about double the actual amount of U.S. aid for the country. And he wrongly [said](#) the U.S. gave “\$200 billion more than Europe.” Europe outpaces the U.S., not the other way around.

Since 2022, Congress has appropriated about \$174.2 billion in aid for Ukraine, according to [a report](#) by the Congressional Research Service, last updated on Jan. 13. The Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, a budget watchdog group, similarly [puts](#) the total since the last congressional appropriation at \$174.8 billion.

For a comparison with Europe, we turn to the Kiel Institute for the World Economy, a German research group that publishes the [Ukraine Support Tracker](#). As of Dec. 31, Europe had allocated 132.3 billion euros for Ukraine, while the U.S. had allocated a bit less: 114.2 billion euros. (At today’s exchange rate a dollar is worth .95 euro.)

The U.S. is ahead of Europe in military aid, but only by 2 billion euros. “In total, Europe has allocated EUR 70 billion in financial and humanitarian aid as well as EUR 62 billion in military aid,” the Kiel Institute [said](#) in a Feb. 14 report. “This compares to EUR 64 billion in military aid from the US as well as EUR 50 billion in financial and humanitarian allocations.”

The Kiel Institute’s figures are lower than what the U.S. Congress has appropriated because the institute only includes [direct, bilateral aid](#).

We last [wrote](#) about this a year ago, when Trump was using different figures but still inflating U.S. aid.

Misleading Claim About ‘Missing’ Aid Money

Trump also repeatedly and [misleadingly claimed](#) that Zelenskyy “admits that half of the money that we sent them is missing.”

That’s a distortion of [comments](#) Zelenskyy made to the Associated Press on Feb. 2. According to a [translation](#) from Ukrainska Pravda, a Ukrainian online news site, Zelenskyy took issue with the idea that the U.S. had provided nearly \$200 billion to support the Ukraine army.

“As the president of a nation at war, I can tell you – we’ve received more than US\$75 billion,” Zelenskyy said. “So, when people talk about US\$177 billion or even US\$200 billion, we’ve never received that. We’re talking about tangible things because this aid didn’t come as cash but rather as weapons, which amounted to about US\$70 billion.

“But when it’s said that Ukraine received US\$200 billion to support the army during the war – that’s not true,” Zelenskyy said. “I don’t know where all that money went. Perhaps it’s true on paper with hundreds of different programmes – I won’t argue, and we’re immensely grateful for everything. But in reality, we received about US\$76 billion. It’s significant aid, but it’s not US\$200 billion.”

This is how Trump spun those words at the [Miami summit](#): “Zelenskyy admits that half of the money that we sent them is missing. They don’t know where the money is. He said, ‘Well, we don’t know where half of it is.’”

In his Feb. 18 comments, Trump added that much of the aid the U.S. has sent to Ukraine is unaccounted for, raising the specter of corruption or malfeasance.

“I believe President Zelenskyy said last week that he doesn’t know where half of the money is that we gave him,” Trump [said](#). “Well, we gave them, I believe \$350 billion, but let’s say it’s something less than that. ... But where is all the money that’s been given? Where is it going? And I’ve never seen an accounting of it. We give hundreds of billions of dollars. I don’t see any accounting.”

That is contradicted by comments retired Lt. Gen. Keith Kellogg, Trump’s special envoy for Ukraine and Russia, made in a [Newsmax interview](#) on Feb. 5 when asked about Zelenskyy’s comments.

Kellogg said the U.S. had, in fact, provided “over \$174 billion” to Ukraine, but, he said, “we have put inspector generals on the ground in Ukraine and here to track that money. So we have a pretty good accounting of where it’s going.”

[Mark Cancian](#), a senior adviser with the Center for Strategic and International Studies and a retired Marine colonel, posted [an article](#) on Feb. 11 pushing back on the idea that Zelenskyy was suggesting that aid to Ukraine was lost or stolen.

Cancian said Zelenskyy appeared to be referring to the amount in military equipment provided, or committed, to Ukraine.

“Regardless of how Zelenskyy did the math, the bottom line is the same: no money is missing,” Cancian wrote.

“The funds went (mostly) to activities that arose because of the war, and all are accounted for. Some paid for sending equipment and funds directly to Ukraine. A large part went to activities that arose because of the war but were not spent in Ukraine,” he said.

“Only part of the aid goes through Ukrainian control,” Cancian explained. “A large part pays for activities as a result of the war but not to Ukraine directly. These include the United States training of Ukrainian forces, global humanitarian assistance, additional costs of U.S. surge forces in Europe, and intelligence support for both NATO and Ukraine.”

Cancian also [noted](#) that about 90% of Ukraine military aid is spent in the U.S.

As Kellogg explained, when the U.S. sends Ukraine military equipment from its stockpiles, the U.S. government pays to “backfill” or replace that equipment so “that’s why we have to buy it here in the United States.”

Indeed, Cancian wrote, “most of the money is not delivered directly to Ukraine but handled by trusted agencies, mostly the U.S. military, the Department of State/USAID, and the World Bank. The image of pallets of cash being sent to Ukraine is inaccurate.”

The issue of how much the U.S. has spent to support Ukraine’s defense has also taken on added interest due to Trump’s recent demands that Ukraine pay the U.S. back with some of the country’s mineral wealth.

“You can’t call [U.S. aid to Ukraine] 500 billion and ask us to return 500 billion in minerals or something else. This is not a serious conversation,” Zelenskyy [said](#) in a Feb. 19 press conference, citing the amount Trump [has said](#) he wanted.

Not a ‘Dictator’

On [Truth Social](#) and [in Miami](#), Trump called Zelenskyy a “dictator without elections” and criticized the Ukrainian president, who he said “refuses to have Elections.” That’s misleading.

Zelenskyy was duly elected to serve a five-year term as president of Ukraine in 2019. He would have been due for reelection in the spring of 2024, but on Feb. 24, 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine, Zelenskyy [imposed](#) martial law, which has continued to the present.

“This can be expected from a country fighting for its very [existence](#), where significant portions of its territory are occupied,” Lee Reaney and Joel Wasserman, who are based in Ukraine, [wrote](#) for Foreign Policy in July 2023. “Martial law is established as a concept in the Ukrainian Constitution and last updated by the national legislature in 2015, before Zelensky entered politics.”

“Article 19 of Ukraine’s [martial law legislation](#) specifically forbids conducting national elections,” Reaney and Wasserman, who have both observed past elections in Ukraine, wrote. “Thus, for Ukraine to conduct elections while under martial law would be a violation of legal norms that predate Zelensky and the full-scale Russian invasion.”

According to the [official website](#) of Ukraine, there are numerous “practical and security issues” that would hinder a fair election.

Nearly a fifth of the country is occupied by Russian troops; millions of Ukrainians have fled the country, and hundreds of thousands are serving in the military, the site notes. There are also cost concerns with conducting an election while the country is under siege, the site says.

Kellogg, Trump's special envoy for Ukraine and Russia, [acknowledged](#) the martial law constraint on a presidential election, but he noted that the U.S. has held elections while at war.

"Now, they can't [hold an election] right now because it's in their Constitution that Ukrainians not have it until the cessation of hostilities," Kellogg said. "But they're going to reach a point where they're going to have to have elections. And that's a sign of a healthy democracy. ... The sign of a healthy democracy is the willingness and the ability to have an election, even in a time of war."

Trump, meanwhile, suggested Zelenskyy "[refuses to have Elections](#)" because he "is very low in Ukrainian Polls." On Feb. 18, Trump made the dubious [claim](#) that Zelenskyy is "down at 4% approval rating."

A [survey](#) conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology in early February found that 57% said they "trust" Zelenskyy. That's up a bit from 52% in late December, which was the low point under Zelenskyy since the Russian invasion.

In [a post](#) on X on Feb. 20, Elon Musk criticized the survey as "a Zelensky-controlled poll" and linked to a post that said the poll is "run by a VERY patriotic Ukrainian named Anton Hrushetskyi." The post also claimed, without proving any support that "US intel community estimates [Zelenskyy's] support at around 4%." Musk, who is overseeing Trump's new Department of Government Efficiency, went on to comment that Zelenskyy is "despised by the people of Ukraine, which is why he has refused to hold an election."

We can't speak to the validity of the KIIS survey, but we note that in an October [story](#) in Ukrainska Pravda, Hrushetskyi, executive director of KIIS, cited "a slow downward trend of support" for Zelenskyy and said that support for Valerii Zaluzhnyi, currently Ukraine's ambassador to the United Kingdom, "is rising rapidly." That doesn't sound like Hrushetskyi is a shill for Zelenskyy.

Another [poll](#) conducted by the University of Manchester put Zelenskyy's approval rating at 63%.