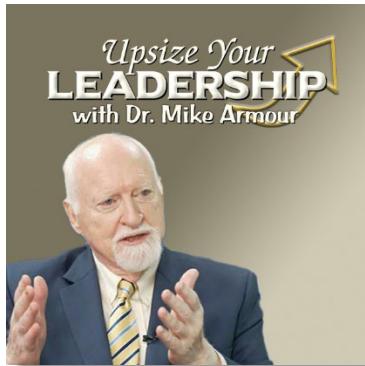


The Flawed Assumption in Trump's Peace Plan

Hosted by Dr. Mike Armour

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Longtime followers of this podcast know that I've periodically used it to offer commentary on the Russia-Ukraine war.

In fact, the day before Putin invaded Ukraine, I posted a podcast that challenged the consensus thinking worldwide that Russia would overwhelm Ukraine completely in a matter of days.

I offered a contrary prediction. I had worked in Ukraine enough years to know their ingenuity, innovative mindset, and their passion for their recently achieved independence. I predicted that the Ukrainians no doubt were going to surprise the

Russians and everyone else with the fierce resistance they put up.

Events have certainly proven me right in that regard. Now, these years later, peace proposals are floating back-and-forth between the belligerents and world leaders. The most widely publicized is Trump's plan.

Although I'm generally a supporter of Trump's foreign policy, I believe his Administration is making some grave miscalculations in the positions that they have taken on Ukraine. I base this on my years of running operations in Donbas, the centerpiece of the fighting. The U.S. government is making some assumptions about the people of this region that don't square with the experiences that I've had with them. And if these assumptions do indeed prove invalid, the Trump agenda may bring about a temporary ceasefire, but not an end to unrest in the region.

Before I get to the heart of my remarks today, I need to offer a word of background for those who do not know me personally or have not followed this podcast long-term. I'm not a mere sideline commentator on the Russia-Ukraine war. I know the landscape firsthand.

In post-Soviet Europe, I was CEO of an international humanitarian organization operating in all former nations of the Soviet Union. In Russia we operated primarily from centers in St. Petersburg, Rostov-on-Don, and Barnaul and other cities along the Ob River in western Siberia.

In Ukraine, our offices were in downtown Donetsk, although our activities stretched from the Carpathian Mountains in the west to Crimea in the south. In both Russia and Ukraine, books that I wrote became textbooks in schools and universities. I traveled extensively in both

countries and escorted dignitaries from both nations – including cabinet members – on their visits to the U.S.

In country, however, I worked as often with coal miners and poor teachers from rural villages as with university professors and people in seats of power. In short, I got to know the outlook of Russian and Ukrainian societies from top to bottom.

I have dear friends in both countries, and we have had many long, far-ranging conversations about relationships between the two, years before this war got underway.

In both nations, when you associate with common people who trust you enough to be open and straightforward about their thinking, you immediately sense how differently the populace of the two nations think.

And nowhere is this more apparent than with the people who have historically populated the Donbas region and Crimea. They speak Russian, to be sure. But the vast majority with whom I've dealt in these sectors are bitterly anti-Russia.

Negotiators in the Trump administration don't seem to grasp the depth of this anti-Russian sentiment. It's no surprise. The Russians themselves underestimated it.

The American negotiators make statements routinely that betray a simplistic understanding of eastern Ukraine. Because the people there speak Russian, it's assumed that they are more aligned with Moscow than Kiev. But that's like saying that French-speaking Canadians are more aligned with Paris than with Ottawa. The language people speak and the national loyalty that they hold are not always congruent.

The American peace proposals since the first of the year have basically turned on giving Russia the areas that they already control, which is almost exclusively the Russian-speaking portion of Ukraine. But not all of it.

The Ukrainians have either successfully defended or even recaptured large swaths of the Russian-speaking territory in the east. Yet, the Trump administration has gone so far as to float proposals to give all Russian-speaking territory in Ukraine to Russia, even the parts that are under Ukrainian control.

Again, the assumption behind such proposals appears to be that Ukrainians who speak Russian are more aligned with Russia than with central and western Ukraine. But in my experience, that's hardly the case. That's why millions of refugees, including dozens of my friends and close associates, poured out of eastern Ukraine as soon as the Russians moved in. They were not just fleeing the fighting. They were fleeing Russian rule.

A primary reason for Russia's failure to steamroller over eastern Ukraine is that so many who did not flee have formed insurrectionist cells who have harassed the Russian army and have continually supplied critical intelligence to the Ukrainian forces and have collaborated with them on military attacks.

If the final peace settlement simply cordons off this region behind Russian control, this insurgency will not disappear. It will simply make itself less visible. They will continue to stage disruptive and even deadly sabotage attacks on Russian authorities both military and civilian, not to mention critical installations.

My prediction, knowing the Russians as I do, is that they will not tolerate this rebelliousness. They will move decisively to stamp it out ruthlessly, as they have done with insurrection for centuries. Their propaganda machine, I predict, will then take up the line that the Ukrainian government is fomenting this unrest, giving them reason to attack Ukrainian military and civilian installations. In a word, the fighting will not stop. It will simply take on another form.

Now, as an intelligence analyst for 25 years, much of that time focused on eastern Europe, I don't minimize the difficulty of finding a permanent resolution of the conflict underway. In an upcoming podcast, I plan to analyze the mindsets on both sides of this war that make a purely diplomatic solution almost beyond reach. But a workable plan cannot ignore the realities on the ground, and some of the Administration's positions seem to do that.

So, why take a podcast on leadership to talk about the ramifications of a peace settlement in Ukraine? In part, because the negotiations underway are a textbook study in leaders failing to understand the full lay of the land when they take strategic positions. As the proverb says, "The devil is in the details." And in this case, there's a devil in the details that could easily plague Europe for years to come.

Dr. Mike Armour is the founder and principal of Strategic Leadership Development International, which he founded in Dallas in 2001. Learn more about his leadership development services at www.LeaderPerfect.com.

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