

REPORTING ON THE HIGH STAKES 31- COUNTRY FIGHT OVER FLATTERING THE WORLD'S MOST VOLATILE NARCISSIST

WaPo had an exceptionally good summary of what happened in the European leaders' meeting with President Trump yesterday. In just the first three paragraphs, it described the speed, the unity, the goal, and the outcome – effectively, to make it clear Putin remains the obstacle to peace.

In hurried D.C. summit, Europeans try to bend Trump away from Kremlin

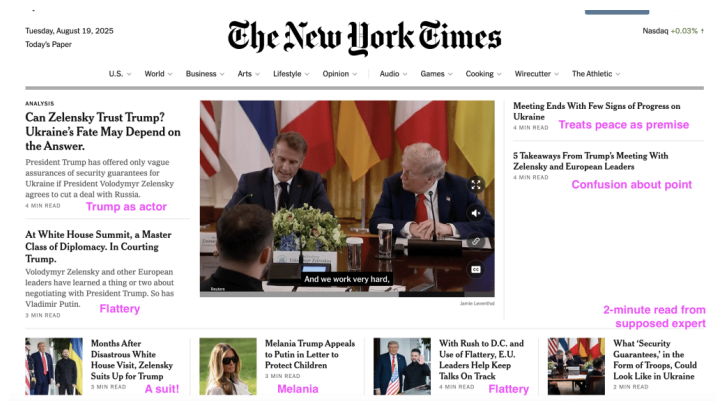
Leaders of European and NATO countries presented a united front Monday with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, after racing to Washington hoping to steer President Donald Trump away from some of the concessions he appeared ready to grant the Kremlin to end the war in Ukraine.

After several hours of meetings, sharp differences remained evident between the leaders and Trump, who declared that Russian President Vladimir Putin is ready for peace, even as he has continued his bombardment of Ukraine and demanded that Kyiv make sweeping, painful concessions to stop the war.

But Ukrainian and European leaders appeared encouraged by Trump's openness to security guarantees for Ukraine,

which Putin might not accept. That could make the Kremlin the obstacle to Trump's peace deal, insulating Ukraine from having to choose between untenable concessions of territory and inviting Trump's ire.

Over eight articles, that was more than the NYT could muster.



In addition to an article on Volodymyr Zelenskyy's suit (which WaPo matched) and an entire article on a letter attributed to Melania Trump shared with Putin, barely updated with mention of Olena Zelenska's letter to Melania, NYT had two separate articles on flattery, one professional, one from MoDo's protégé, Shawn McCreesh. (WaPo did dedicate an article on how many times Europeans thanked Trump.) What feels like NYT's main story on the meeting – bylined by Maggie Haberman, David Sanger, and Jim Tankersley – measured the meeting in terms of a peace deal (that is, Trump's perspective), not Ukrainian security; it was placed in the upper right corner of the front page, not where a main story would be. The top-left story, in that lead position, instead focused on whether Zelenskyy could trust Trump, still making Trump the hero of the story. Sanger also wrote a short article on what it would take for a military force to be credible. Then there's the Five Takeaways article that seemed to understand none of the dynamic laid out in WaPo's first three paragraphs.

Yet even the professional NYT story on the effort to use flattery, by Neil MacFarquhar, still missed several dynamics of the effort. It focused on the immediate, apparently successful, stalling of Trump's capitulation to Putin.

But there is a larger goal to the flattery and it's not just to help Trump achieve a *meaningful* peace deal (as distinct from a political win). As WaPo described in ¶12, this is about the security of all of Europe.

Monday's unusual group meeting at the White House continued an extraordinary sequence of diplomacy that could shape security in Europe for a generation, with European leaders fearing that Putin was getting the upper hand in the breakneck peace effort. Trump reveled at Monday's tableau, saying that the White House had never seen such a collection of prime ministers and presidents, all of whom dropped what they were doing to rush to Washington to try to salvage Ukraine's security.

The goal was to prevent Trump from capitulating to Russia *and in the process* leaving Europe vulnerable to follow-on attacks. The goal of flattering Trump was, presumably, if not to persuade him (for example, that the cease fire idea he abandoned because Putin told him to, is necessary), then to present the unanimous commitment to the things Steve Witkoff naively claimed Russia also backed, starting with security guarantees.

Along the way, Zelenskyy and the others made asks – for powerful US weapons to use to fend off Russian attacks, for troops (presumably including troops from NATO countries, along with Ireland) in Ukraine to guarantee the peace, for a face-to-face meeting that would position Zelenskyy as Putin's equal – that will be impossible for Putin to accept. The last of those, a face-to-face meeting, is one of the things Trump discussed when he spoke with Putin

during the meeting, like calling for a lifeline; as WSJ reports, Russia is already equivocating on that goal.

There are several possible outcomes of publicly celebrating goals that Witkoff (whom Michael Weiss has dubbed “Dim Philby”) claims Russia wants, too. Most immediately, it might get Trump to sour on Putin again, and demand Putin make some concessions or face sanctions. Barring that, it would help create the perception that Trump’s capitulation is just that, an embrace of Putin’s plan that doesn’t offer what Trump wants to claim it does, which will make Trump’s capitulation more politically costly for him. And if that happens, it matters that both the leader of the EU and of NATO were in DC backing Ukraine: Those are the alliances that Trump would need to snub to make that capitulation, with all the significance it holds.

Trump wanted to do this for free. Putin wanted Trump to do this for free. It was part of the point, for Putin. The visit thwarted that plan.

Perhaps my favorite moment in the public events of the day came when Trump invited Alexander Stubb, Finland’s President, to speak. Stubb golfs with Trump and so is chummy with him (which didn’t prevent Trump from not recognizing him), but his country is among those that Russia would target if Trump were to enable follow-up attacks. Stubb labeled Russia’s invasion as a war of aggression but reminded that even small countries can withstand such invasions, as Finland did after WWII.

Some of the international media might wonder, “Why is the President of Finland here?” I think the reason is probably that we might come from a small country, but we have a long border with Russia, over 800 miles. We’ve our own historical experience with Russia from World War II, the Winter War, the War of Continuation. And if I look at the silver lining of where we stand right

now, we found a solution in 1944, I'm sure that we'll be able to find a solution in 2025 to end Russia's war of aggression. The situation is very difficult but that's why we're here.

A Finn, from a country with the lived experience of facing down Russia, promised that "we" – which might include Trump or not – will find "a solution to end Russia's war of aggression," a war that extends far beyond Ukraine.

Sure, Donald Trump didn't give the Europeans the sycophantic treatment he accorded Putin.

But because they played to his narcissism, it provided a platform to make the case that most American journalists won't make, one which most of Trump's handlers are incompetent to make: That if Trump does capitulate, it will not serve peace.

Here's what NYT doesn't seem to understand, for its flood of flattering portrayals of Trump as the hero of all things.

Other people, when they rush to play to the man's narcissism, do so with specific goals and a clear sense of how his narcissism makes him easy to manipulate.

A man so easily swayed by flattery as Trump is, is weak, not the hero of all things the NYT portrays him as. And only if you understand that can you make such flattery useful.

Update: NYT has since added this analysis, which is far better at describing the state of play.