TA Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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Ukraine Stays Open to Russia Talks, but Doubts Linger Amid Putin's Stalling Tactics

Ukraine will continue talks with Russia, President Zelenskyy's Office says — but Ukrainians remain focused on constructive and realistic outcomes, both in terms of format and potential results.

"Our American partners are the ones pushing for this," Mykhailo Podolyak, a close advisor to President Zelenskyy and his chief of staff, told me. "There are basic positions from which we'll have to start to move towards resolving the war — a ceasefire and the frameworks for that ceasefire. These include humanitarian aspects such as prisoner exchanges — ideally in an 'all-for-all' format — and the return of deported civilians, including children. All of this could help launch a broader process of resolution. But without a political and diplomatic track, that process is impossible."

Meanwhile, only a quarter of Ukrainians believes that the talks in Türkiye will bring peace any closer, according to a poll by the Rating Group conducted after the Istanbul meeting.

While most respondents agree that Ukraine should continue to demonstrate openness to negotiations, 47% say President Zelenskyy could participate — even without Putin at the table.

A theatre of the absurd

In my hometown of Kherson, few took the Istanbul talks seriously — especially since the city was under heavy shelling at the time. "If it was serious, the person who was supposed to be there would have shown up," a woman told me, asking to remain anonymous.

In Kherson, as in many other regions, intense shelling continues daily, claiming lives every single day. In the Kharkiv region, which is also under constant fire, the people I spoke with said they wanted to believe there might be a breakthrough — but quickly became disillusioned by what they described as "a theatre of the absurd."

The same sentiment was echoed in the south-eastern Zaporizhzhia region, which remains under relentless Russian attack.

> Trump is determined to push, push, push for a ceasefire - Kurt Volker

Still, former U.S. Special Representative for Ukraine, Kurt Volker, is convinced that President Donald Trump remains deeply committed to the idea of a ceasefire between Ukraine and Russia.

"Trump is determined to push, push, push for a ceasefire," Volker told me. "This is going to make Putin rather wary of Trump now."

Volker believes Zelenskyy's strategy to "play the game" is the right one — but anticipates that Putin's approach will be more than just predictable: constantly shifting the terms and introducing new conditions to stall real progress.

"He (Putin) wants to complicate things. He is good at coming up with new obstacles for a ceasefire every time."

Negotiations as a smokescreen

The Russians have gotten quite good at using negotiations as a smokescreen to push for sanctions relief. Meanwhile, the U.S. has drafted new sanctions targeting Gazprom and Russian banks.

The proposed legislation includes a 500% tariff on imports from countries that continue to buy Russian oil, gas, or uranium.

It looks like Donald Trump is playing his own game too — pretending he has no sway over the Republican lawmakers who are likely to support the bill.

However, according to my sources, Trump has been consistently working behind the scenes to drive down oil prices — including through negotiations with Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

And that, more than anything else, could strike at the heart of Russia's ability to finance its war.

The Russians are doing everything they can to delay the sanctions that are set to hit them the hardest - Mykhailo Podolyak

The EU is also threatening further sanctions — restricting battlefield tech, adding 75 more individuals to the blacklist, sanctioning 189 additional shadow fleet vessels, and targeting 30 companies involved in sanctions evasion.

Up to this point, much of the shadow fleet — a major source of Russia's wartime income — remains unsanctioned.

"If we expect Russia to enter 'talk-only' negotiations where it sees opportunity — be it informational or diplomatic — but feels no pressure, then of course it will escalate its demands in the process," Podolyak warned. "Talks like that will lead nowhere and certainly won't bring us closer to a fair or meaningful end to this war."

"Right now, the Russians are doing everything they can to delay the sanctions that are set to hit them the hardest — and their willingness to negotiate, as well as the pace of talks, will depend on that," says Anna Kovalenko, former Deputy Head of President Zelenskyy's Office for Defence and Security Affairs, who helped craft Ukraine's defence strategy back in 2019.

In this game, China remains the great unknown. There are growing concerns that new sanction packages against Russia might push Beijing towards supplying more weapons directly.

Putin has begun to set his own deadlines for the U.S.

As for Putin, he still seems confident that he can seize — by military means —the four Ukrainian regions (not mentioning annexed Crimea) he is demanding at the negotiating table.

Although his troops continue to advance from village to village without any major breakthroughs, the summer provides ideal conditions for warfare — no rain, no frost, and terrain that is easier to move through.

According to my sources, Putin has begun to set his own deadlines for the U.S., hinting that if he doesn't secure diplomatic approval for control over these four regions, a new large-scale offensive will begin.

> Negotiations are likely to drag on until the autumn — if not longer

"It's hard to imagine him capturing all four," Kovalenko told me. "He had bet on the development of UAV capabilities of the Russian army, and yet, despite Putin's commitment made in March 2024 to create a "sanitary zone" in the Sumy region, his achievements have been very small and cost incommensurable losses to Russian forces."

Almost all Ukrainian officials and international experts I have spoken to agree that, regardless of developments on the front, negotiations are likely to drag on until the autumn — if not longer. And, as always, much depends on the position of the United States.

Even if President Trump were to "walk away" from the talks but leave sanctions and arms supplies intact, Ukraine could still defend its territorial claims and the global order. But if he walks away and unplugs support — "this is very bad for Ukraine," Volker admitted.