

Russia is hoodwinking the West about peace negotiations with Ukraine

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The Kremlin has published excerpts from talks between the leaders of Russia and Belarus, Vladimir Putin and Alyaksandr Lukashenka, which were held on 11 April in Moscow. They concerned the subject of possible negotiations which could lead to a 'peaceful' resolution of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Putin emphasised that Russia always was and continues to be ready to accept this solution, albeit "not in the format of any schemes being imposed that have nothing to do with reality". Alongside this, he commented on the conference that the Swiss government is organising to promote Ukrainian peace proposals in dismissive terms, emphasising that Russia has not been invited to participate – which, in light of the statements made by the Swiss government, is not a true statement of affairs.

Lukashenka announced his readiness to cooperate in efforts to make these talks happen, and suggested that the basis for the talks should involve the draft agreement which the Russian and Ukrainian delegations had been negotiating at the end of March 2022 in Istanbul. Putin supported this proposal, and his press secretary Dmitry Peskov said that the Kremlin "did not rule out" considering the Istanbul document as a basis for the negotiations, although he expressed the reservation that certain modifications would need to be made, resulting, for example, from Russia's formal annexation of four Ukrainian oblasts. Russia's foreign minister Sergey Lavrov, for his part, explained that Moscow did not intend to consider any particular document which was drawn up "in a different reality" as a starting point for the talks, but rather it wants to refer to the rules "for conducting dialogue" reflected in this document.

Commentary

- These declarations from Putin have been the strongest signal thus far suggesting that in the Kremlin's view the time has come to launch negotiations which could reduce the cost to Russia of attaining its political goals for Ukraine. The suggestion that the results of the Istanbul talks in 2022 could form the basis for the negotiations was shared on 3 April by Russia's defence minister Sergei Shoigu in a telephone conversation with his French counterpart Sébastien Lecornu. The signals the Kremlin has been sending that it is ready to negotiate do not indicate that Russia is experiencing war fatigue, or that it is ready to reach a genuine compromise and abandon its maximal goals towards Ukraine. On the contrary, Moscow seems to believe that it has gained a sufficient advantage in the psychological-political sphere. This advantage involves the initiative on the battlefield, signs of weariness at the conflict and a reluctance on the part of some Western states to

continue bearing its cost, as well as the deadlock regarding the adoption of the Ukraine aid package by the US Congress and Ukraine's problems with mobilisation. The Kremlin seems to be hoping that should the West become involved in the negotiation process, Russia could count on negotiating the outcome which it has so far failed to obtain by military means.

- Moscow would probably prefer to avoid the need to launch a politically and economically costly armed offensive, because it may not necessarily translate into a success for Russia in the coming months. In addition, the Kremlin seems to assume that its rivals (in particular the Biden administration and Berlin), who are now facing two clear alternatives – a negotiated agreement on the one hand, and an escalation of the conflict on the other (another Russian military offensive is expected in the summer) – will embark on a path of concessions. In this context, the latest series of statements by Russian officials over recent weeks, in which they raised the spectre of an escalation of the conflict (in response to a statement by President Emmanuel Macron), combined with the increased intensity of attacks on Ukrainian energy generation facilities, may be interpreted as one element of this communication strategy. Moreover, it cannot be ruled out that, when it starts its summer offensive, the Kremlin wants to have communication channels open so it can quickly and effectively translate its success on the front into legally binding treaty obligations.
- It is no coincidence that Moscow is referring to the political talks which were held between the delegations of Ukraine and Russia between late February and the end of March 2022 in Belarus and Turkey (and for a further month on-line) when Russia held the military advantage. The draft of the Russian-Ukrainian agreement which was discussed in spring 2022 has never been revealed. Contrary to Putin's statements, the parties never agreed on its wording. Unofficial reports suggest that Russia demanded that Ukraine should assume the status of a neutral state and should be banned from joining military alliances, hosting foreign military bases on its territory and organising drills with the participation of other states, and that it should be demilitarised (which would involve a radical reduction in its armed forces, the introduction of limits on its weapons and military equipment, and a ban on deploying rocket systems and weapons of mass destruction on its territory). Furthermore, Russia demanded that the Russian language should be given equal status with the Ukrainian language, as well as the process of so-called 'de-Nazification' (meaning the adoption of legislative solutions to ban the activity of individuals and organisations which Russia views as hostile towards it). When presenting their demands, the Russians expressed a reservation that should Ukraine obtain security guarantees, these would not apply to Crimea and the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (within the administrative borders of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts), and that Kyiv would be required to formally accept these regions' annexation by Russia (Crimea) or their nominal independence (Donetsk and Luhansk). The document also envisaged that a ceasefire would be followed by a gradual withdrawal of Russian troops from the territories which they have occupied since 24 February 2022 (with the exception of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts). If Ukraine yielded to these demands, that would effectively equate to it losing its sovereignty, the right to pursue its independent foreign and security policy (as well as its domestic policy), and its ability to

successfully defend itself.

- Russia's most recent statements, for example by FM Lavrov, seem to contain a clear announcement that during these potential negotiations Russia's demands would go beyond the decisions adopted in the Istanbul document. The Russian side has announced that a precondition for the talks would involve Kyiv also recognising the annexation of the Zaporizhzhia and Kherson oblasts, and the creation of a 'cordon sanitaire' (a demilitarised zone) on the Ukrainian side of the border with the Russian Federation. Just like during the talks in Istanbul, Moscow will undoubtedly demand that the West and Ukraine should lift all their sanctions against Russia. It should also be expected that should talks be launched, the Russian side would be negotiating from a position of strength, and thus would escalate its demands and attempt to combine them with those linked with a fundamental revision of the European security order, as contained in the draft documents Russia presented to the US and NATO in December 2021 (see '[Russia's blackmail of the West](#)'). These suggestions have been made in previous statements by Russian officials. Alongside this, Russia may use the very fact of Western politicians launching their preliminary talks with Moscow to sow distrust and provoke tensions between the Western states and Kyiv, as well as within the Western community.
- By sending a signal suggesting its readiness to negotiate, Russia is also pursuing a short-term goal, namely to undermine the political significance of the conference Switzerland is preparing to promote the Ukrainian-endorsed conditions for a peaceful resolution of the conflict. Russia is working to uphold its reputation among the states of the Global South, which mainly see the Russian-Ukrainian war in terms of its possible negative consequences for them (the destabilisation of food markets; disruptions to international trade; the West's reduced interest in funding economic assistance). Thus, Moscow is attempting to neutralise Western diplomacy's efforts to persuade the states of the Global South that Russia's aggressive behaviour towards its neighbours is the main reason why the conflict is still ongoing. By manifesting its readiness to negotiate in an increasingly clear and specific manner, the Kremlin also intends to ultimately dissuade Beijing from attending the Swiss conference, because so far Russia has failed to convince China to distance itself explicitly and publicly from this initiative.