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A feint from the Kremlin: Russian initiative for peace talks with Ukraine

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On the morning of 10 May, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk, French President Emmanuel Macron, UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer, and German Chancellor Friedrich Merz met in Kyiv with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. Following a 'constructive' phone call with US President Donald Trump, they issued an 'ultimatum' to the Kremlin, demanding a full and unconditional ceasefire for at least 30 days starting on 12 May. If Russia rejects the proposal, the West should impose tougher sanctions on its energy and banking sectors.

Overnight from 10-11 May, in a statement to the media in Moscow, Vladimir Putin proposed launching direct Russian-Ukrainian peace talks in Istanbul starting on 15 May. He blamed Ukraine for violating previous short-term ceasefires – specifically, a one-month moratorium on attacks against parts of the energy infrastructure and a brief Easter truce and the 80th anniversary commemorations of the victory over Nazi Germany. Putin described the planned talks as a continuation of the 2022 Russian-Ukrainian negotiations and announced that a Russian delegation would travel to Istanbul.

On 11 May, Donald Trump called on Kyiv to participate in the talks with Russia in Istanbul, stating that this would help determine whether a settlement is possible. If not, the European leaders and the US would then be able to 'proceed accordingly'. Volodymyr Zelensky confirmed his attendance in Turkey and called on Vladimir Putin to meet him in person.

The Russian initiative is a direct response to the declaration made by the leaders of Ukraine and key European states (members of the Western 'coalition of the willing'). It is a feigned display of the Kremlin's willingness to engage in peace dialogue, aimed at achieving two short-term objectives: shifting the blame for continued hostilities onto Kyiv and preventing the imposition of new Western – particularly US – sanctions against Russia. Ukraine agreed to Putin's proposal following Trump's public call, motivated by its desire to keep the US engaged in the conflict resolution process and to demonstrate that it is Moscow, not Kyiv, that is acting unconstructively, obstructing the talks and showing little interest in a peace settlement.

Commentary

- **Putin has effectively rejected the initiative put forward by Ukraine and European leaders calling for an unconditional 30-day ceasefire starting on 12 May** as a prerequisite for peace talks. This reflects Russia's consistent strategy of feigning its readiness for peace while continuing its aggression aimed at expanding the territory it occupies and forcing a

future settlement on terms favourable to Moscow.

- **Russia is signalling that it has not abandoned any of its far-reaching conditions for ending the war.** It has expressed its readiness to 'continue' talks with Ukraine in Istanbul, framing them as a resumption of the spring 2022 negotiations and blaming Kyiv for their collapse. Those earlier talks were essentially focused on the terms of Ukraine's capitulation. Russia's demands at the time included the legalisation of its annexation of Crimea (now extended to include four additional Ukrainian regions), Ukraine's demilitarisation and 'denazification', its neutral non-aligned status, a ban on foreign military support, and numerous restrictions on military activity near Russia's (see ' *Winning the war with Russia (is still possible). The West's counter-strategy towards Moscow*'). Fulfilling these demands would violate Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty, while also imposing significant military restrictions on NATO's eastern flank.
- **Moscow's initiative is intended to undermine the emerging consensus between Kyiv, key European powers, and the United States that, if there is an absence of genuine goodwill from the Kremlin, then increased pressure – specifically in the form of economic sanctions – is necessary.** Putin is betting that the mere prospect of direct Russian-Ukrainian peace talks, and especially their launch, could deter the US from supporting new sanctions targeting Russia's energy and financial sectors – measures that could severely impact Russia's already strained economy (weakened by falling oil prices). This move could also complicate the adoption and/or reduce the effectiveness of additional sanctions proposed by other members of the Western coalition, including the EU and the United Kingdom.
- **The Kremlin's objective is to discourage the Trump administration from supporting Kyiv and to decouple a potential US–Russia reset from a resolution of the conflict in Ukraine.** Moscow is well aware that its peace terms are unacceptable to Kyiv and to most Western governments. However, it believes that a complete halt in US support – and its only partial replacement by other Western countries – will, over time, lead to significant Ukrainian defeats on the battlefield and eventually force a peace settlement on Russian terms. Russia also assumes that Trump and some of his aides are motivated by the potential business benefits of cooperation with Moscow (particularly in the energy sector) and would be willing to lift most of the sanctions to pursue them. Consequently, the Kremlin's strategy is to shift the Ukrainian conflict resolution process primarily to the Russian-Ukrainian negotiation track, where talks are expected to stall due to major differences. This deadlock would gradually reduce Trump's interest in the issue. Meanwhile, Russian-American talks would focus on cooperation plans, especially joint business initiatives, thereby incentivising the US president to ease or lift the sanctions.
- **Trump's call for Ukraine to send a delegation to the talks with Russia in Istanbul undermined the strategy set by Zelensky and the four European leaders.** Their plan aimed to expose Russia's unconstructive stance by highlighting its (anticipated) refusal to agree to a 30-day ceasefire, to strengthen coordinated sanctions pressure with Washington, and to make Kyiv's willingness to negotiate conditional on the implementation of the ceasefire. Zelensky accepted Moscow's offer to meet in Istanbul to signal (primarily to the United States) his openness to dialogue, while being fully aware that the talks would not yield a breakthrough due to the fundamental incompatibility of

both sides' positions. By announcing his personal attendance in Turkey and expressing an expectation for Putin to do the same, Zelensky raised the stakes. This is a PR move aimed at projecting the image of Ukraine's commitment to peace while anticipating that Putin will not show up, thus allowing Kyiv to reinforce the narrative that it is the Kremlin, and not Ukraine, that is unwilling to pursue peace.