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Dispute over peace: Ukraine between US pressure and Russian demands

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During a press briefing on 11 December, President Volodymyr Zelensky provided an update on the current state of negotiations over the US-backed peace plan. It is currently based on a 20-point agreement designed to address the key issues: territorial matters, security guarantees, and post-war reconstruction. The most critical aspects will be further detailed in separate documents. Following consultations with European partners, Ukraine has submitted its response to the plan that the United States has been negotiating with Russia. Washington and Moscow reportedly believe that a ceasefire should only take effect after an agreement is signed. Ukraine, for its part, maintains that a ceasefire must precede any peace deal.

Zelensky stated that **the most challenging issue concerns the future of the Donbas**, which Russia seeks to occupy in its entirety. Ukraine has rejected this demand, seeking to freeze the conflict along the existing front lines; its forces currently control approximately 20% of this region. The United States has proposed a 'compromise' under which Ukrainian forces would withdraw from the remaining, unoccupied part of the Donbas – Ukraine's last major defensive line in the area – but Russian troops would not enter to replace them. However, it remains unclear who would administer this territory, described either as a 'free economic zone' or a 'demilitarised zone'. Ukraine insists that if its forces are to withdraw from their positions in the Donbas, Russian troops must also pull back by an equal distance. It also demands that the demilitarised zone be overseen by third countries; otherwise, it warns, Russia's full takeover of the region will be only a matter of time. Zelensky asserted that the future of these territories should be decided by the Ukrainian people 'through elections or a referendum'. The document also reportedly provides for a Russian withdrawal from the currently occupied areas of the Kharkiv, Sumy, and Dnipro regions.

The Ukrainian president added that **security guarantees for Ukraine** must be 'really effective' in order to prevent a third Russian invasion, although he did not provide any further details. However, he announced that Ukraine and the United States would sign an agreement on security guarantees simultaneously with **an agreement on the economy and reconstruction**.

Washington has proposed **a joint management framework for the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant**, which is currently under Russian control, with its surrounding area to be demilitarised. The United States would participate in overseeing the facility as part of a consortium whose terms of operation are still under negotiation. Moreover, there is

reportedly a draft of a **bilateral US-Russia agreement** in which the United States pledges not to allow Ukraine into NATO, not to deploy NATO forces on Ukrainian territory, and to mediate between the Alliance and Russia to 'resolve all security issues and create conditions for de-escalation in order to ensure global security.'

On the evening of 11 December, the White House Press Secretary stated that **President Donald Trump was 'extremely frustrated' with the positions adopted by both Russia and Ukraine**, adding that he was 'sick of meetings just for the sake of meeting' and that he 'does not want any more talk, he wants action.'

On 11 December, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov commented on several provisions of the peace plan the US has been negotiating with Ukraine and its European partners. He categorically rejected any provisions for Western security guarantees for Ukraine intended to protect it from future Russian aggression. He also dismissed as unacceptable both the potential deployment of Western peacekeeping forces in Ukraine and the use of frozen Russian assets to finance its reconstruction. According to Lavrov, security provisions in any peace agreement must be based on Russia's proposals of December 2021. He further warned European countries that, should they fail to accept Russia's logic–which entails the creation of a *de facto* Russian security buffer zone in Eastern and Central Europe, 'the outcome will be grave'. Accepting these demands, he added, constitutes 'the last chance to preserve the achievements in European security that we have and that the West is now trying to trample on, along with the OSCE itself.'

Commentary

- **Zelensky's position demonstrates Ukraine's willingness to make concessions on the Donbas,** but only under strict conditions: a Russian withdrawal from the current line of contact, the establishment of international monitoring over the demilitarised zone, meaningful security guarantees from the United States and the coalition of the willing, and a broad economic and reconstruction package linked to Ukraine's European integration.
- **In their current form, Ukrainian concessions remain unacceptable to the Kremlin**, which continues to adhere to its maximalist demands and will persist in pushing for a complete withdrawal of Ukrainian forces from the Donbas, using the United States to exert pressure on Ukraine over this issue. Russia consistently seeks to link any peace settlement in Ukraine to the imposition of a new European security architecture, that would be detrimental to the security interests of Poland and other European NATO members. Moreover, instituting regime change in Kyiv remains a core objective of the Kremlin's policy. Russia is not prepared to sign any peace agreement or to end hostilities as long as pro-Western political forces remain in power in Ukraine. Consequently, the Kremlin regards peace negotiations in purely instrumental terms – as a means of reducing (or ideally, terminating) US assistance to Ukraine, while maintaining the illusion in European capitals and societies that a compromise-based end to the war remains still possible.
- Zelensky stated explicitly that **Ukraine is bracing for the possible failure of the talks and the continuation of the war**. His government is aware that an unconditional withdrawal of Ukrainian forces from the Donbas would not be accepted by politically engaged

segments of society and, most likely, by sections of the armed forces. Agreeing to Russian and US terms would destabilise the political situation in Ukraine, enabling Russia to pursue its objectives through renewed aggression.

- Zelensky's insistence on holding a referendum regarding territorial concessions to Russia is not motivated only by constitutional considerations stemming from Article 73 of the Ukrainian Constitution. It is also a ploy to justify **a rejection of the proposed terms of a peace agreement**. According to the results of a public opinion poll published on 11 December, 62.3% of Ukrainian people oppose any territorial concessions or restrictions on Ukraine's sovereignty with respect to its integration into Western institutions. Only 8.1% and 10.1% of respondents, respectively, support such concessions in exchange for an end to the war. Moreover, the results of a separate poll conducted in November indicated that more than half of Ukrainians (51.4%) are prepared to take part in protests should the government accept a settlement regarded as unfavourable to Ukraine.
- **For Ukraine, Europe remains an indispensable partner in the negotiations with the United States.** Kyiv needs political support, progress on the country's path to European integration, and a decision on the future use of frozen Russian assets. The Ukrainian government believes that if the peace plan establishes a timeline for Ukraine's accession to the EU, the United States will exert pressure on the Union's member states not to obstruct this process.