

No breakthrough: Russia-US and Ukraine-US talks in Miami

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On 19 December, a Ukrainian delegation led by Rustem Umerov, Secretary of Ukraine's National Security and Defence Council, and General Andrii Hnatov, Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces, began talks with Steve Witkoff, special envoy of President Donald Trump, and the president's son-in-law Jared Kushner. According to Witkoff's account, later confirmed by Umerov, the discussions focused in particular on security guarantees for Ukraine and on the timeline and sequence of further steps aimed at ending the conflict; however, no details were disclosed. On 20 December, President Volodymyr Zelensky stated that 'there is no agreement today' and that Ukraine would not accept peace 'at any price'.

On 20 and 21 December, the Kremlin's special envoy Kirill Dmitriev held talks in Miami with Witkoff, Kushner, and White House official Josh Gruenbaum. Witkoff described the discussions as 'productive and constructive' and expressed confidence that Russia was 'fully committed to achieving peace in Ukraine'. According to the Kremlin's spokesperson Dmitry Peskov, the purpose of the meetings was to inform Moscow about the outcome of talks between Ukraine, European representatives, and the US administration on the conditions of ending the Russo-Ukrainian war. Both Peskov and Yuri Ushakov, Vladimir Putin's foreign policy adviser, stated that the Ukrainian and European proposals were 'rather unconstructive' and thus unacceptable to the Kremlin. Ushakov also ruled out, for the time being, the possibility of holding trilateral Russia-Ukraine-US negotiations.

Moscow's objective remains unchanged: to force Ukraine to surrender on Russian terms, either through US pressure or through the collapse of Ukraine's defences resulting from a suspension of US assistance. The Kremlin is also seeking to pave the way for a revision of the European security architecture, while pushing for the lifting of US sanctions and striving to undermine Western solidarity by drawing Washington into closer cooperation with Russia.

Commentary

- **Russia has not abandoned its maximalist demands towards Ukraine and the West**, including its push for a new European security architecture. On the contrary, during a meeting with the Defence Ministry Board on 17 December, Putin suggested that Russia's territorial claims against its neighbour extend beyond the Donbas and encompass the so-called 'historical lands of Russia' – a term that includes the concept of Novorossiya, which covers Ukraine's entire Black Sea coast. At his annual press conference on 19 December, he also put forward detailed demands related to the holding of elections in Ukraine, which remains one of Russia's conditions for any peace settlement. The Kremlin is likely to reject Ukrainian and European proposals, portraying them as inconsistent with

the terms for ending the war it claims were agreed during the summit in Anchorage between Putin and Donald Trump.

- **Statements from both sides suggest that they remain entrenched in their respective positions and that Russia has even hardened its stance.** There is no indication that the talks have yielded any progress, let alone a breakthrough. Both Russia and Ukraine are seeking to blame the other side for the deadlock in an effort to influence the US approach. Russia's goal is to discredit Europe in Trump's eyes and to negotiate exclusively with the US. The Kremlin hopes that the White House will (a) eventually abandon its position that normalising bilateral relations with Russia must be contingent on ending the war; and (b) withdraw its remaining support for Ukraine, either to exert pressure on it or to disengage from the conflict altogether. At the same time, the Kremlin is deliberately prolonging the talks, calculating that even if they do not lead to Ukraine's capitulation, the Ukrainian armed forces could collapse under Russian military pressure, leading to the downfall of the government in Kyiv – an outcome that would benefit pro-Russian political forces in Ukraine.
- **Ukrainian reactions to the meeting in Miami indicate a lack of any meaningful progress on key issues:** the future status of the Ukrainian-controlled part of the Donbas, the delination of the demarcation line, security guarantees for Ukraine, and the country's post-war reconstruction. The Ukrainian government is also refusing to make any concessions on matters it deems essential to national security and sovereignty, while acknowledging that the two sides may ultimately fail to reach an agreement.
- **Securing credible security guarantees from the United States** and from European countries remains Ukraine's top priority. Its government also wants to prevent Washington from either withdrawing from the negotiation process or halting its military and intelligence support for Ukraine. For this reason, it is willing to engage with any US proposal, aiming to revise it through further discussions with the help of its European partners, in a way that would make it acceptable to Ukraine while allowing Kyiv to place the blame on Russia should the proposal be rejected.