

The E3 and Ukraine: continued pressure on Russia and direct talks with the Kremlin

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On 7 June, the leaders of the E3 countries – President Emmanuel Macron, Chancellor Friedrich Merz and Prime Minister Keir Starmer – met President Volodymyr Zelensky in London to coordinate further support for Ukraine and discuss the prospects for peace talks with Russia, particularly the role that Europe should play in any future negotiations. They stressed that both Europe and the United States must be actively involved in the process. The leaders outlined five key elements of a potential settlement: an immediate ceasefire; the current front line as the basis for negotiations; binding security guarantees for Kyiv, including the deployment of an international peacekeeping mission in Ukraine; the continued freezing of Russian assets until the invasion ends and compensation is paid to Ukraine; and the protection of European security interests. According to earlier reporting by *Die Welt*, foreign and security policy advisers to the leaders of France, Germany and the United Kingdom (the E3) are expected to meet Yuri Ushakov, Vladimir Putin's foreign policy adviser, at a 'neutral location' in the coming months.

The London meeting followed an open letter sent by Zelensky to Putin on 4 June, in which he proposed a summit in Switzerland, Turkey or an Arab country, with the participation of European states – described as "states capable of influencing the situation" – and the United States. The proposed meeting would initiate discussions on ending the war, to be preceded by a ceasefire along the current front line. Zelensky argued that the talks were necessary in light of Russia's economic difficulties and the increasing effectiveness of Ukrainian air strikes against targets on Russian territory.

Commenting on Zelensky's letter during a speech at the St Petersburg Economic Forum on 5 June, Putin dismissed it as rude and accused the Ukrainian president of trying to derail any prospect of negotiations. He also reiterated his refusal to meet Zelensky, once again questioning his political legitimacy. At the same time, Putin called on the Russian Armed Forces to "get to work", signalling that he still expects the conflict to be resolved through military victory rather than diplomacy.

The E3's support for direct engagement with the Kremlin stems from a desire to retain a leading role in European security affairs and from concerns that Europe could be marginalised should Moscow and Washington pursue bilateral arrangements. This approach aligns with Kyiv's own interests. Ukraine hopes to secure a ceasefire before the onset of winter and is seeking to increase pressure on the Kremlin through increasingly effective strikes deep within Russian territory. However, there is little indication that

Moscow is prepared to compromise. Instead, the Kremlin is likely to interpret any European outreach as a sign of weakness, reinforcing its belief that the continued invasion can produce further gains.

Commentary

- **The E3's support for direct talks with Russia is driven by a desire to retain a leading role in shaping European security policy at a time when political support for sustaining large-scale financial assistance to Ukraine is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain.** Until recently, Berlin, London and Paris held differing views on the value of engagement with the Kremlin. Macron had been advocating the opening of talks since autumn 2025, while Merz and Starmer had remained more cautious. A common position became easier to achieve owing to Zelensky's backing for the initiative and growing concerns, shared by Kyiv, that the United States could seek to redefine its relationship with Russia without giving sufficient consideration to European security interests. A further factor is the uncertainty surrounding the long-term financing of military assistance to Ukraine, alongside the need for European NATO members to accelerate the development of their own defence capabilities. NATO allies have so far failed to reach an agreement on the Secretary General's proposal to allocate 0.25% of GDP to support Ukraine. At the same time, Germany's proposal for an additional €90 billion EU support package has been met with scepticism from several member states, including France and Italy. The debate is also taking place against the backdrop of months of inconclusive discussions over the possible appointment of an EU envoy tasked with maintaining contacts with Russia.
- **The assertive tone of Zelensky's letter reflects Kyiv's growing confidence vis-à-vis Russia.** This confidence is rooted in the belief that Ukraine is gradually gaining the upper hand by inflicting significant losses on Russian forces and conducting increasingly effective strikes deep inside Russian territory. The conditions set out in the letter largely reflect Kyiv's longstanding negotiating position: no withdrawal from those parts of Donbas remaining under Ukrainian control, no negotiations before a ceasefire, and the provision of credible Western security guarantees. The letter also sends a message to Washington: unlike Moscow, Kyiv and its European partners are presenting themselves as willing to engage in negotiations while rejecting the concessions that Russia continues to demand. With the so-called peace process effectively stalled, partly as a result of increasing US engagement in the conflict in the Persian Gulf, Ukraine is seeking to ensure the long-term involvement of key European states in any future negotiations and to strengthen their political, military and financial support.
- **Kyiv hopes to secure a ceasefire before the onset of winter.** Ukrainian officials are increasingly concerned that a sustained Russian air campaign could inflict an even greater crisis than during the previous winter. Although Ukraine has strengthened its drone capabilities, shortages of missiles for Patriot air defence systems remain a serious challenge. As the only systems capable of reliably intercepting ballistic missiles, Patriots represent a critical component of Ukraine's air defence network and currently have no effective substitute.

- **Although Moscow continues to claim that it is open to discussions on a peace settlement, this largely serves as a political tactic aimed at weakening Western support for Ukraine and easing sanctions pressure.** Despite Russia's mounting economic and military challenges, the Kremlin remains unwilling to freeze the conflict on terms acceptable to Kyiv. Signals of openness to talks with Europe and Ukraine are primarily intended to test whether the opposing side has become sufficiently weakened to accept the majority of Russia's demands, which would, in practice, amount to Ukrainian capitulation. Moscow believes that Western willingness and capacity to support Ukraine are gradually diminishing, while Ukraine itself is facing growing internal difficulties that could undermine its ability to resist Russian aggression. At the same time, the Kremlin seeks to portray Kyiv as responsible for the lack of progress towards a peace settlement, with the aim of weakening support for Ukraine within the Trump administration. It is also seeking to sustain European expectations that negotiations remain possible, calculating that this could hinder efforts to tighten sanctions and bolster those increasingly influential political forces in Europe that favour a modus vivendi with Russia or even a return to broader cooperation. More broadly, Moscow seeks to deepen divisions both among Western allies and between Ukraine and its partners. At the same time, it continues to exert pressure on European governments through threats of further escalation in Ukraine and through the expansion of hybrid activities directed against European states.
- **Russia stands to benefit from attempts by European leaders and Ukraine to engage in dialogue.** Such initiatives would strengthen the Putin regime's standing within the Russian elite. They are also likely to harden Moscow's position on the terms of any future settlement. These contacts could further reinforce the Kremlin's belief that both Europe and Ukraine remain dependent on the United States. The prospect of negotiations may also make it more difficult to expand Western military assistance to Kyiv or intensify sanctions pressure on Russia. Finally, renewed diplomatic engagement creates additional opportunities for Moscow to exploit divisions among Western allies and between Ukraine and its partners.