

## Russia–US talks: no breakthrough, no concessions

Witold Rodkiewicz

On 21 October, Vladimir Putin held three hours of talks in St Petersburg with Steve Witkoff, President Donald Trump's special envoy. The meeting was also attended by Putin's foreign policy adviser Yuri Ushakov and the Russian leader's special envoy for international investment cooperation Kirill Dmitriev. Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner joined the meeting remotely.

According to the Kremlin spokesman, the talks were substantive, but no arrangements were made for further meetings. Witkoff briefed Putin on his talks in Oslo with the presidents of Ukraine and Finland and the Norwegian prime minister, which he described as constructive. He also presented written proposals outlining elements of a potential peace agreement between Russia and Ukraine. In addition, Witkoff conveyed President Trump's thanks for the release of US citizen Stephen Hubbard, who had been sentenced to seven years in prison in Russia on charges of allegedly serving as a mercenary for Ukraine. Trump also expressed his gratitude for lifting the ban on diesel exports and the resumption of supplies to the US market.

Putin expressed his willingness to resume trilateral talks between Russia, Ukraine and the US, as proposed by Witkoff, but insisted that they should not begin before mid-November. He also sought to limit their scope to 'building a security framework for Russia and Ukraine after the conflict ends'. Putin offered to help resolve the conflict between Iran and the US and expressed his readiness to meet Trump at the APEC summit in China.

Despite feigning a willingness to negotiate, Russia continues to pursue its maximalist objectives towards Ukraine and the West. Moscow remains intent on establishing full political control over Ukraine and maintains its December 2021 demands for the dismantling of the European security architecture. It is using its dialogue with Washington to manipulate the Trump administration and exert pressure on Ukraine through the US.

### Commentary

- **The talks in St Petersburg are unlikely to have improved the prospects for a ceasefire.** Although Moscow has signalled its readiness to engage in trilateral negotiations, it wants to delay their start until President Trump's political standing becomes clearer following the US congressional midterm elections on 3 November. The Kremlin has also framed the agenda for further talks in a way that makes their failure all but inevitable. Its proposals suggest a return to Russia's ultimatum-style demands on European security from December 2021. In any event, negotiations without the participation of NATO's European members cannot produce binding agreements. In recent days, the Kremlin has

also reiterated that Russia's objectives go beyond territorial annexations and include imposing conditions that would effectively turn Ukraine into a Russian protectorate. There is no indication that Moscow is prepared to end the war without achieving these objectives.

- **Russia will therefore use further talks – or even mere declarations of its willingness to engage – primarily as tools of manipulation and influence.** The aim is to sustain the illusion among President Trump and his inner circle that the Kremlin is prepared to accept a compromise settlement to end the invasion of Ukraine. Moscow hopes to deter Washington from providing assistance to Kyiv, let alone increasing it, and to encourage the US to pressure Ukraine into halting attacks on Russian territory so as not to undermine the peace process. This approach was recently evident in US pressure on Kyiv to stop striking Russian oil refineries.
- **The *diesel supply agreement negotiated by Trump and Putin* is another way for Moscow to create the impression that it is engaging constructively with Washington.** Russia's announcement that the first tanker carrying diesel had departed for the US on 22 October amounts to a favour to Trump, making it easier for him to portray his administration as taking active steps to lower domestic fuel prices. However, even if the volumes of Russian diesel announced by Trump are delivered, they will be too small to have any meaningful impact on global prices. Nor will the shipments help his administration in the congressional midterm elections, as the tanker will not reach its destination before 3 November. More broadly, Russia's offers to expand economic cooperation are intended to create the impression that normalising relations would benefit both sides and that the war is the only obstacle. The Kremlin would benefit most from a scenario in which economic cooperation deepens despite the lack of progress in peace talks, significantly weakening the tools available to the US and, by extension, the West to exert pressure on Russia.