

## Talks between Russia & Ukraine resume today in Istanbul



Russian and Ukrainian negotiators at today's meeting in Istanbul.

In their meeting in Istanbul on May 16, the Russian and Ukrainian delegations agreed that each side would return to the other side 1,000 prisoners of war over three days from Friday, May 23, through Sunday, May 25. Despite the fact that the war continued both on the ground in eastern Ukraine and in the air, in the form of missiles and drones, the exchange took place as scheduled. With the exchange completed, attention turned to the preparation of a memorandum pertaining to a possible future peace agreement that President Putin mentioned after his two-hour phone conversation with President Trump on May 19.

In speaking with reporters after the phone conversation, Putin said he had agreed that "Russia would propose and is ready to engage with the Ukrainian side on drafting a memorandum regarding a potential future peace agreement. This would include outlining a range of provisions, such as the principles for settlement, the timeframe for a possible peace deal, and other matters, including a potential temporary ceasefire, should the necessary agreements be reached. Contacts among participants of the Istanbul meeting and talks have resumed, which gives reason to believe that we are on the right track overall."

On May 23, speaking after four days in which he said Ukraine had launched almost 800 combat drones against civilian targets, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said, "We are witnessing a clear attempt to derail peace talks and disrupt the process that began in Istanbul following an agreement between President Vladimir Putin and President Donald Trump which included a 1,000 for 1,000 prisoner exchange and further work on documents setting out specific conditions and requirements that are necessary to reach an agreement." Russia, it might be noted, responded in kind to the drone attacks Lavrov mentioned. On Friday, Saturday, and Sunday nights of May 23-25, Russia launched a total of 903

Shahed drones and 92 ballistic missiles, the heaviest barrage of the war, against civilian and military targets in Ukraine – 250 drones and 14 missiles on Friday night, 298 drones and 69 missiles on Saturday night, and 355 drones and 9 missiles on Sunday night.

When asked if Russia remained committed to a peaceful settlement, Lavrov said, “Yes, we remain committed to a peaceful resolution. We remain open to talks. President Putin has confirmed this many times publicly and in his conversations with foreign leaders... To reiterate, we are committed to the agreements recently reached by the Russian and Ukrainian delegations in Istanbul.... We are also working hard on the second part of the agreement, which involves each party preparing a draft document outlining the terms for achieving a durable, lasting, and comprehensive resolution. Once the prisoner exchange is completed, we will be ready to present our draft to the Ukrainian side. The Russian side is in the process of finalizing this document... I am not sure about the other party. But our work is at an advanced stage. In any case, we are going to give the memorandum to the Ukrainians, as agreed. We expect them to do the same. At present, the paramount task is to prepare a robust peace treaty that ensures a long-term, stable, and equitable peace – one that creates no security threats to any party. In this instance, our concern is the Russian Federation. It must preclude any encroachment on the rights of Russians and Russian speakers in violation of the UN Charter, which prohibits discrimination on religious or linguistic grounds.”

On Wednesday, Lavrov announced that Russia had drafted a memorandum setting out its views in regard to a potential peace agreement and would present it to the Ukrainian representatives in a new round of talks in Istanbul beginning on Monday: “As agreed, the Russian side promptly drafted a memorandum that sets out our views on all aspects of reliably overcoming the root causes of the crisis. Our delegation, led by Vladimir Medinsky, is ready to present this memorandum to the Ukrainian delegation and provide the necessary clarifications during a second round of resumed direct talks in Istanbul next Monday, June 2. I would like to once again express my gratitude to our Turkish partners for providing a hospitable venue for the talks, which Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan confirmed yesterday during his visit to Moscow. We hope that all parties that are genuinely interested in the success of the peace process rather than just claim to be in favor of the initiative will support the new round of direct Russian-Ukrainian talks in Istanbul. We are grateful for Türkiye’s readiness to continue facilitating these talks and the entire peace settlement. Our position is well-known. President of Russia Vladimir Putin has recently reiterated it during his public addresses. This implies that the success of the talks will directly depend on our ability to eliminate the well-known root causes of the conflict during these talks.” The Russian foreign ministry subsequently issued a statement that Lavrov had informed U.S. Secretary of State Rubio that Russia had implemented the May 19 agreement between Putin and Trump.

Putin’s statement after his phone call with Trump suggested the preparation of the memorandum would begin with a Russian proposal, after which the two sides

would engage in drafting the memorandum. Ukraine has said it provided Russia with its proposed language for the memorandum, but Russia had not provided *its* proposed language. On Wednesday, Ukrainian Defense Minister Rustem Umerov, who led the Ukrainian delegation in the May 16 meeting in Istanbul and will lead it again on Monday, said in a post on X: “Following up on the meeting in Türkiye on May 16, the world expected the Russian side to formulate and deliver to Ukraine and its partners a “memorandum” outlining their vision for steps toward a ceasefire. Unfortunately, the Russian side attempted to delay this process. But pressure worked. After firm statements from President Trump, European leaders, and President Zelenskyy – demonstrating that the world is united around the goal of peace for Ukraine – the Russians finally informed us they had finished drafting their “memorandum.” However, they continue to delay the delivery of the document. I handed over our document to the head of the Russian delegation, which reflects the Ukrainian position. They received this document. We reaffirm Ukraine’s readiness for a full and unconditional ceasefire and continued diplomatic engagement. We are not opposed to further meetings with the Russians and are awaiting their “memorandum,” so that the meeting won’t be empty and can truly move us closer to ending the war. The Russian side has at least four more days before their departure to provide us with their document for review. Ukraine has always been, and will always remain, as constructive as possible. Meetings between the sides must produce results. That’s why each meeting must be properly prepared. The Russian side promised to hand over the “memorandum” immediately after the exchange. We call on them to fulfill that promise without delay and stop trying to turn the meeting into a destructive one. Diplomacy must be substantive, and the next meeting must yield results.”

Lavrov has said that Russia “promptly drafted a corresponding memorandum, which lays out our position on all aspects of reliably overcoming the root causes of the crisis.” But he also made it clear that Russia won’t make its position known until Monday’s meeting in Istanbul: The Russian delegation, he said, was “ready to present a memorandum to the Ukrainian delegation and provide the necessary explanations during a second round of direct talks in Istanbul on Monday, 2 June.” On Friday, in a press conference in Kyiv with Türkiye’s Foreign Minister Fidan, Ukraine’s Foreign Minister Andriy Sybiha said, “Ukraine has already conveyed to the Russian side its vision of further steps, its vision of our further peace efforts – in particular, regarding the parameters of the future ceasefire. We are also waiting for the memorandum from the Russian side, as it was announced. We are waiting in advance, this was also promised to the American side...In order for the next planned meeting to be substantive and objective, it is important to receive the document in advance, so that the delegation that will take place has the authority to discuss the relevant positions.”

In the meantime, the war has continued both on the ground in eastern Ukraine and the Russian region of Kursk and in the air. Over the past week from last Sunday through Saturday, the Ukrainian General Staff reported a total of 1,301 Russian attacks against the Ukrainian forces defending the cities and towns in eastern

Ukraine or holding territory in Kursk. As in previous weeks, the greatest number of Russian attacks last week – 411 – were directed against the Ukrainian forces defending Pokrovsk and the territory around that city, which if taken would open a pathway toward the western portion of Donetsk region that is still held by Ukraine. But the Russian forces also conducted a large number of attacks last week – 209 – against the Ukrainian forces that continue to hold a portion of Kursk and a large number of attacks as well – 153 – against the Ukrainian forces defending Lyman in the northern portion of Donetsk region..

And the war continues in the air as well. The Ukrainian military reported that on Saturday night Russia fired 472 Shahed drones – the largest number in a single day since the war began – along with three ballistic missiles and seven cruise missiles at targets in Ukraine. In response, yesterday Ukraine attacked several Russian airbases, including one in Irkutsk and another near Murmansk, and damaged or destroyed more than 40 strategic bombers with drones that had been smuggled into Russia by Ukraine's Security Service, the SBU, and hidden in locations from which they could be fired remotely. Russia will no doubt respond to the attack, but when and how remains to be seen.

Notwithstanding Russia's continued refusal to provide Ukraine with its memorandum pertaining to a peace agreement, the mutual escalation in the air war, and the continuing war on the ground, the two negotiating teams met again today in Istanbul. Whether they will make any progress toward a potential temporary ceasefire and future peace agreement remains to be seen..

David R. Cameron  
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