Brief third round of Russia-Ukraine talks in Istanbul Wednesday

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

On May 16, the Russian and Ukrainian negotiating delegations met in Istanbul and agreed that each side would return to the other side 1,000 prisoners of war over three days on May 23-25. Despite the fact that the war continued both on the ground in eastern Ukraine and the Russian region of Kursk and in the air in the form of nightly Russian missile and drone attacks on Kyiv and other cities in Ukraine, the exchange took place as scheduled. On June 2, in a meeting that lasted only a little more than an hour, the two sides, building on their success in carrying out the three-day exchange of 1,000 prisoners of war, agreed to exchange, on an all-for-all basis, prisoners of war who were seriously wounded or seriously ill or were 18 to 25.

The first sign that there would soon be a third round in the talks came last Friday, when President Putin said he had spoken by telephone with President Erdoğan of Türkiye and had thanked him for his readiness to continue facilitating direct talks between Russia and Ukraine. On Monday evening, after meeting with Rustem Umerov, the former Minister of Defense, current Secretary of Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council, and head of Ukraine's negotiating delegation, President Zelenskyy said, "Today, Rustem Umerov and I discussed preparations for a [prisoner] exchange and another meeting with the Russian side in Turkey. Umerov reported that the meeting is planned for Wednesday."

On the Russian side, Dimitry Peskov, the Presidential Press Secretary, confirmed Russia's interest in holding another round of talks and suggested that it include an exchange of views on the memorandum regarding a potential peace agreement that each side had prepared after the May 16 meeting. Each side's memorandum outlines the principles for a settlement, the timeframe for a possible peace

agreement, and the terms of a potential temporary ceasefire should the necessary agreements be reached.

But Peskov made it very clear that coming to an agreement would be very difficult: “There’s our draft memorandum, and there’s a draft memorandum presented by the Ukrainian side. There’s going to be an exchange of opinions and negotiations on these two drafts, which, so to speak, are absolutely diametrically opposed thus far. A lot of diplomatic work is ahead. Certainly, there’s no reason to expect some miraculous breakthroughs, and this is hardly possible in the current situation. We’re determined to attain our interests.”

On Wednesday, the Russian and Ukrainian negotiating delegations – the Russian delegation headed by Vladimir Medinsky, a former Minister of Culture and currently a presidential aide, the Ukrainian delegation headed by Umerov – met again at the Çirağan Palace in Istanbul. Given the positions of both sides – Russia’s insistence that the five Ukraine regions it has unilaterally annexed (Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, Kherson, and Crimea) remain part of the Russian Federation and that Ukraine never becomes a member of NATO, and Ukraine’s insistence that the five regions remain part of Ukraine and that Ukraine be free to join NATO if it wishes – it’s been obvious for a long time that it will be very difficult for the two sides to reach an agreement on a settlement to the conflict. But there was at least the hope that, given the enormous number of troops killed and wounded on both sides, combined with the enormous damage inflicted on Ukraine and its citizens, there might at least be some movement toward a ceasefire.

But that didn’t happen Wednesday. The meeting, which was chaired by Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan and began around 7 p.m., lasted less than an hour. After the meeting, Umerov said the Ukraine delegation had proposed holding a “summit of leaders” by the end of August: “We proposed to the Russian side that such a meeting at the leaders’ level be held by the end of August. If Russia accepts this proposal, it will clearly show the whole world, including our partners, that it has a constructive approach.” He said Ukraine had proposed a meeting between Presidents Putin and Zelenskyy “because we recognize that it’s only at this level that fundamental issues can be resolved.” He said Ukraine had proposed that the meeting be attended by Presidents Trump and Erdoğan. He reiterated that Ukraine was ready for an unconditional ceasefire, which he said was a necessary condition for substantive negotiations: “It is,” he said, “up to the other side to take steps in this direction. We have emphasized that the ceasefire must be real, it must include a complete cessation of all attacks on civilians and critical infrastructure.” He also said the Ukrainian delegation prioritizes the “humanitarian agenda” of prisoner exchanges and the return of children.

Medinsky said the positions in the draft memorandums prepared by each side regarding the conditions for a ceasefire and an end to the conflict remain “quite far apart from each other.” But, he said, “We have agreed to continue to engage,

both at the delegation level and, we hope, at the level of working groups." He said both sides had agreed to exchange another 1,200 prisoners of war, that an exchange of seriously wounded troops directly between the forces on the front line will continue, and that Russia will return the bodies of 3,000 Ukrainian troops that had been gathered as the Russian forces advanced in eastern Ukraine. He also said that Russia had "fully processed" a list of the surnames of 339 children who had been removed from Ukraine, some of whom have already been returned, and that work in that regard is continuing. Exchanging prisoners of war and the seriously wounded, returning the bodies of those killed, and returning the children who were taken are obviously immensely important. But as important as those humanitarian measures are, hopefully both sides will also agree in the very near future to a ceasefire and a resumption of the peace talks that that briefly took place three years ago.

In a press conference today, President Erdoğan said he plans to speak with Presidents Putin and Trump to discuss whether it might be possible to organize a leaders' summit involving Presidents Putin and Zelenskyy in Istanbul. "This week we will make efforts to hold talks with Putin and Trump and find out whether we can bring these leaders together in Istanbul." Hopefully, those talks will take place this week and result in a ceasefire and the resumption of the peace talks that briefly took place three years ago.

David R. Cameron
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