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Putin Offers to Meet Ukraine President in Moscow 'Any Time'

By AFP

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Putin spoke to journalists ahead of negotiations with Belarus strongman Alexander Lukashenko..
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Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Thursday Ukrainian leader Volodymyr Zelensky was welcome in Moscow "any time" but stressed that he should discuss the conflict in eastern Ukraine with separatists directly.

"If we are talking about bilateral relations, then, by all means, we are ready to welcome the president of Ukraine at any time that is convenient for him," the Russian leader said during a meeting with Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenko in Moscow.

Putin's invitation to Zelensky came in response to this week's offer from the Ukrainian president for the two leaders to meet in eastern Ukraine, where an uptick in fighting between Kiev's army and pro-Moscow separatists has raised fears of a return to full-blown war.

Ukraine, the European Union and the United States have recently sounded the alarm over Russian troops massing on the border of the ex-Soviet country.

Moscow has said troops are running military drills in response to NATO maneuvers, and Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu on Thursday ordered the troops to return to their permanent bases by May 1.

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"If President Zelensky wants to start repairing relations, then we of course welcome it," Putin told journalists at the beginning of negotiations with Lukashenko.

But the Russian leader said that if Zelensky hoped to resolve problems stemming from fighting in eastern Ukraine, then he should first meet with leaders of the breakaway regions in Donetsk and Lugansk.

"And only then discuss these issues with representatives of third countries, which in this the case is Russia," Putin said.

Kiev has been battling pro-Russian separatists in the eastern Donetsk and Lugansk regions since 2014, following Moscow's annexation of the Crimean peninsula.

The conflict, which has claimed more than 13,000 lives, has seen around 30 Ukrainian soldiers killed since the start of the year, compared to 50 in all of 2020.

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