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Ukraine Rejects Kremlin's Signal on 'Neutrality' Compromise

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Russia's lead negotiator Vladimir Medinsky. **Alexander Avilov / Moskva News Agency**

The Kremlin confirmed Russian negotiators' assertions Wednesday that it was considering Ukrainian neutrality modeled after Austria and Sweden as a compromise in grinding peace talks aimed at ending the three-week war.

But Kyiv immediately rejected the proposal.

Russia's chief negotiator Vladimir Medinsky said earlier Wednesday that Kyiv had proposed the Austrian and Swedish models of a "neutral and demilitarized state, albeit with its own army and navy."

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"All these issues are being discussed at the level of Russian and Ukrainian defense ministry chiefs," Medinsky was quoted as saying by state-run news agencies.

President Vladimir Putin’s spokesman Dmitry Peskov signaled that Moscow would accept that off-ramp as Russian troops continued bombarding Ukrainian cities on the third week of Russia’s stalled invasion of Ukraine.

“This option, which is indeed being discussed now, can be seen as a certain compromise,” Russia’s state-run TASS news agency quoted Peskov as telling reporters.

“The situation around Ukraine can be improved by reaching agreements in negotiations between the Russian and Ukrainian delegations,” Peskov said.

Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov echoed cautious optimism toward reaching a compromise in talks that would involve “concrete formulas” of Ukraine’s neutral status with security guarantees.

But Ukraine’s top negotiator Mikhailo Podolyak rejected the Austrian-Swedish neutrality model, saying talks with Moscow to end fighting should focus on "security guarantees.”

"Ukraine is now in a direct state of war with Russia. Consequently, the model can only be 'Ukrainian' and only on legally verified security guarantees," Podolyak said in comments published by President Volodymyr Zelenskiy's office.

On Tuesday, Zelenskiy acknowledged that Ukraine would unlikely reach its constitutionally enshrined goal of joining NATO.

Putin has cited Ukraine’s NATO ambitions as one of the reasons for his orders to invade the democratically elected neighbor on Feb. 24.

AFP contributed reporting.

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