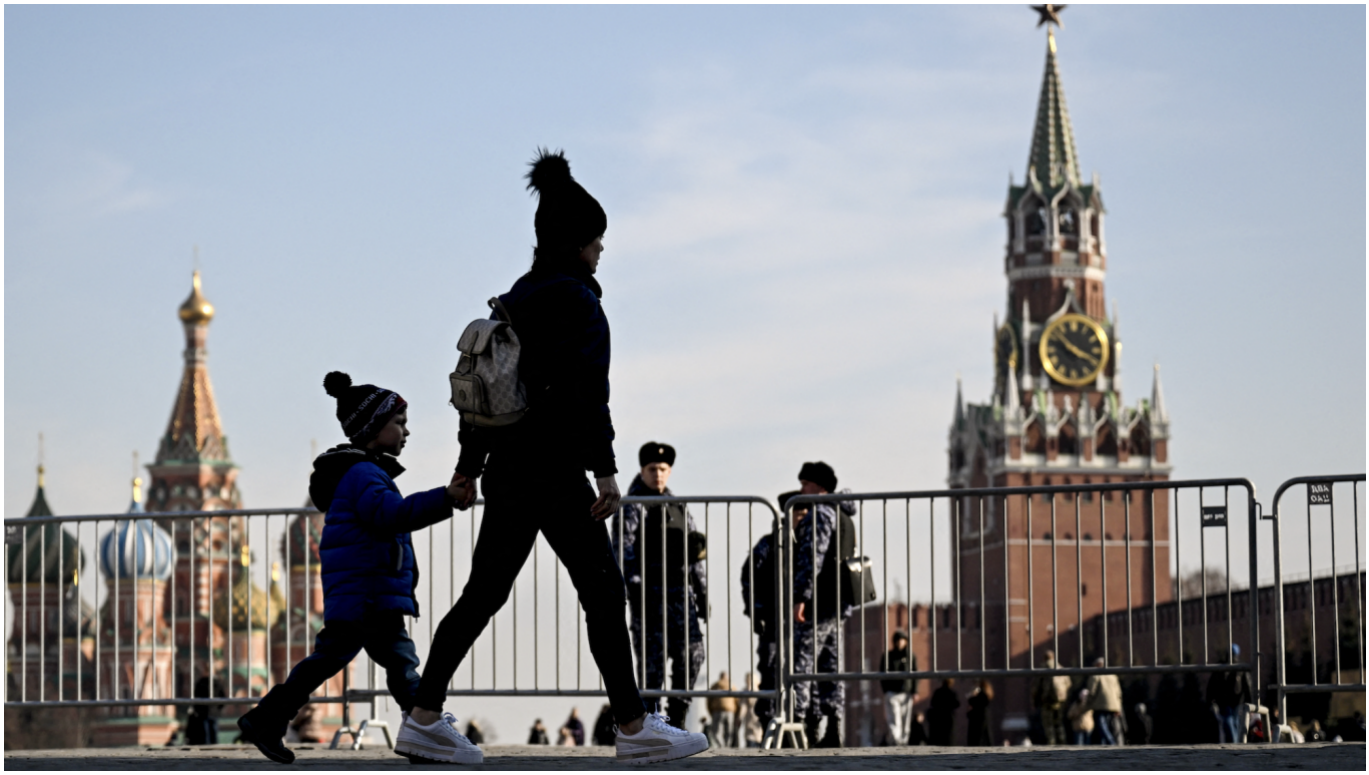
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‘No Reason for Illusions’: Russians Hopeful, But Skeptical on Ukraine Peace Talks

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NATALIA KOLESNIKOVA/AFP

When Presidents Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump agreed to enter peace talks aimed at ending Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russian officials and state propaganda trumpeted what it called a victory for Moscow.

But among ordinary Russians, reactions have been much more mixed, with hopes for an end to the bloodshed but doubts over whether the talks would bring lasting peace or improve life at home.

The question of whether Russians support or oppose the war in Ukraine has been a subject of intense debate since the invasion began in 2022, with public opinion shifting amid the Kremlin’s propaganda, a rising death toll and war fatigue.

“There’s no reason for illusions, but it’s better than nothing,” said one Muscovite in his 60s

when asked by The Moscow Times what he thinks of possible ceasefire negotiations.

He, like others interviewed for this story, spoke on condition of anonymity for safety reasons.

This appeared to be the prevailing sentiment among many people watching the events of the past week from inside Russia.

Although the war has faded into the background for most Russians — except for those in border regions affected by fighting or those with relatives drafted to the front — public opinion shows that Russians want peace talks to begin, while also expressing concerns about what the country will look like after the peace agreement is reached.

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A record-high 61% of Russians say that peace talks should begin immediately, according to a survey published this month by the Levada Center, Russia's last major independent pollster.

"People are hoping [for peace], but it seems that [the hopes] may not be realized," said Karina, a resident of Voronezh — a city located about 200 kilometers from the border and regularly attacked by Ukrainian drones.

"Even if the negotiations take place, it doesn't mean we won't have to deal with the consequences of the war," she said, referring to the Kremlin's diminished standing on the global stage as well as domestic challenges like social stagnation and economic difficulties.

Little is known about what Moscow and Washington plan to bring to the negotiating table or in what exact format the talks will take place.

The Kremlin said on Friday that there was no agreement yet on the timing or location for a face-to-face meeting between Putin and Trump.

Russian state media and pro-Kremlin bloggers celebrated the news of the peace talks, portraying it as a victory for the Kremlin after the previous U.S. administration sought to make Putin an international pariah. But ordinary people who spoke to The Moscow Times expressed more concern about the country's future.

"Of course, I follow the reports about possible negotiations, which I think have been ongoing behind closed doors for a while," said Natalia, 47, a resident of the Belgorod region which borders Ukraine.

"But I believe that without serious security guarantees for Ukraine, the peace will hardly be long-lasting," she said.

Moscow has so far been evasive in response to the question of whether Kyiv would be directly involved in the negotiations, stating that there would be a "bilateral Russian-American track" and a track "connected to Ukraine's involvement."

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said that Kyiv was ready to work on the peace process but insisted during the Munich Security Conference that no decisions should be taken

without Kyiv and Europe. On Sunday, he said he would not accept any peace plan hammered out without Ukraine's involvement.

One of the biggest challenges — for both Moscow and Kyiv — is likely to be the issue of Russian-occupied Ukrainian territories as well as the part of Russia's Kursk region that has been captured by Ukraine.

Moscow, which occupies around 20% of Ukrainian territory and whose Constitution forbids handing over lands it considers its own, already dismissed the idea of swapping the areas — adding, however, that "we would suggest not getting ahead of" negotiations.

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Along with the territorial issue, some people in Russia also express concerns about servicemen returning from the front line, which could lead to arise in violence if former soldiers are not properly reintegrated into society.

"It would be good if the war ends or even if [the conflict] is just frozen," said Altynay, a resident of Russia's republic of Bashkortostan.

"But when all of them [soldiers] return, I think crime will increase, as well as the number of rapes and murders. Unfortunately, we have to admit that any end to this war will be horrible," Altynay said.

The Kremlin said Putin and Trump had not discussed the possibility of lifting sanctions during their first publicized call since Trump returned to the White House. For many Russians, financial difficulties have become one of the most immediate effects of the war.

"The only thing being discussed now is whether this meeting [between Putin and Trump] will affect the ruble exchange rate — everyone is looking at it through the lens of how the negotiations will impact their finances and wages," said one mid-level manager from a public sector organization in Moscow.

"I personally think the result will be nothing — it will be discussed politically for a long time, but the outcome will be zero," she told The Moscow Times.

Senior Russian and U.S. officials are set to meet in Saudi Arabia on Tuesday to pave the way for the peace talks.

Still, the preparations for negotiations could take weeks or months. Meanwhile, on the front line, Russian forces continue to advance in some areas of the Kharkiv and Donetsk regions.

Some people directly affected by the war told The Moscow Times that they had no expectations for the negotiations.

Karina, who moved to Voronezh when the military conflict started in 2014 in her native Luhansk now annexed by Moscow, said that "even if a peace agreement is reached, I have no hope for the long term."

“Over these years, the people of both countries have been too heavily incited against each other for there not to be acts of sabotage or a resurgence of conflict,” she said.

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