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Kremlin Rules Out Returning Annexed Ukrainian Regions in Future Peace Talks

By AFP

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The abandoned city of Marinka in Ukraine's partially occupied Donetsk region. **Dmitry Yagodkin / TASS**

The Kremlin on Thursday ruled out relinquishing control of Ukrainian regions it claims to have annexed, setting a major red line as Russian and U.S. officials met in Istanbul for talks aimed at normalizing relations.

"The territories that have become subjects of the Russian Federation, which are inscribed in our country's constitution, are an inseparable part of our country," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters.

"This is undeniable and non-negotiable," he said during a daily briefing.

Months after launching its full-scale invasion in February 2022, Russia declared the annexation of four Ukrainian regions — Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson. It also annexed the Crimean Peninsula in 2014.

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Ukraine and most international observers have dismissed the annexations as illegal, a position Kyiv reiterated in response to Peskov's remarks.

"Ukraine has its internationally recognized borders," Ukrainian Foreign Ministry spokesman Georgiy Tykhy said.

"It's really laughable to see them referring to their constitution" to justify the annexations, he added.

Russian forces control most of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions but only parts of Zaporizhzhia and Kherson. Moscow also occupies part of Ukraine's northeastern Kharkiv region.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has acknowledged that his army lacks the resources to reclaim all occupied territories by force but has suggested that some land could be returned through diplomacy.

Meanwhile, Russian and U.S. officials met in Istanbul on Thursday to discuss embassy-related issues as part of efforts to stabilize ties.

The talks, held at the U.S. consul general's residence, followed this month's first high-level meeting between the two nuclear powers since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

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