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Orthodox Easter Diplomacy: Kremlin and White House Pursue Fast-Tracked Putin-Trump Meeting

After initial contacts on restoring diplomacy, the Kremlin and White House face their toughest challenge: agreeing on a Ukraine ceasefire. If successful, Putin and Trump are likely to meet in April or May, but no later than June.

By Pyotr Kozlov

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U.S. President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin. **Artem Priakhin / Zuma / TASS**

The Kremlin is exploring its options for a potential meeting between President Vladimir Putin and U.S. counterpart Donald Trump in April or May, four current and two former Russian officials familiar with the discussions told The Moscow Times.

All sources spoke on condition of anonymity due to the sensitivity of the matter.

Saudi Arabia, which hosted high-level U.S.-Russia talks last month, is the most likely venue, though other locations in the Middle East are also under consideration.

Ideally, Moscow would prefer to delay the meeting for as long as possible to maximize potential concessions from Washington in exchange for Russia halting military actions in Ukraine.

"Time is on the Kremlin's side," sources told The Moscow Times. However, officials also recognize the need to "seize the moment" and balance Trump's push for a swift ceasefire with broader geopolitical and domestic considerations.

"One scenario under discussion is a meeting around Easter [Orthodox Easter falls on April 20]," a Russian diplomat told The Moscow Times. Another senior Russian official confirmed this possibility.

The summit could be timed to coincide with Trump's planned Middle East visit. Last week, Trump suggested he might travel to Saudi Arabia "within the next month and a half," which would align with the third week of April.

"There are also scenarios for May or even June, but no later than that. To avoid missing the window, the meeting between *nachalnik* ["the boss," a colloquial term for Putin used by Russian officials] and Trump must happen before the summer recess," another Russian diplomat said.

Preparations

Summits between Russian and U.S. presidents typically require months of preparation, involving intensive discussions among diplomats, intelligence officials, military representatives and civilian bureaucrats to negotiate bilateral agreements and set the agenda.

Preparations for the June 2021 meeting between Putin and then-President Joe Biden in Geneva took nearly five months, including a preliminary exchange of position papers and coordination of agreement texts, according to two Russian diplomats directly involved in the process.

"Both we and Washington approached the meeting very seriously and thoroughly at the time," added one of the diplomats.

Initially, Moscow aimed for a similar four-to-five-month preparation period for a Putin-Trump summit. However, developments on the battlefield and shifting political dynamics have forced the Kremlin to accelerate its timeline.

"If this drags on too long, Washington might lose interest. Domestic opposition to engagement with Moscow is already intensifying in the U.S., and European allies are applying pressure. Additionally, Trump faces an even bigger challenge: managing relations with China," a Russian official close to the negotiations explained.

Though Russian officials do not feel urgent pressure to hold the meeting, believing that "things are going well" with Ukrainian forces retreating on the front lines, the situation is nonetheless pushing them to move quickly, two current Russian officials involved in the

negotiations said.

Some Kremlin advisers argue that Moscow should show a greater willingness to compromise, while others insist on standing firm. But ultimately, the decision rests with Putin alone.

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Some in Moscow also believe that Russia should first consolidate its battlefield gains before Putin meets with Trump such as recapturing the Kursk region and securing control over occupied Ukrainian territories up to their administrative borders.

"In any case, the Americans are not our friends and will seek to weaken and coerce Russia. The issue must be resolved by force. Moreover, the more territory we seize, the stronger our position will be, and the more accommodating Kyiv will become," said a high-ranking Russian diplomat who recently retired.

High stakes

The Kremlin is closely watching the Trump administration's stance to ensure Washington remains engaged in a potential deal with Moscow.

Beyond resolving the war in Ukraine and the broader "diplomatic war" between Moscow and Washington, Russia wants to include a range of bilateral issues in the talks, including sanctions relief, U.S. investments in Arctic and Siberian projects, access to critical technologies, arms control and strategic stability.

For this reason, the Oval Office clash between Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky sparked anxiety in Moscow — as it threatened to derail the entire grand bargain.

Disagreements over the summit's timing emerged immediately after Trump's inauguration and his first call with Putin. Trump has repeatedly expressed a desire to meet with Putin "as soon as possible," while the Kremlin has been more cautious, avoiding specific commitments.

"There is definitely a need to organize such a meeting quite promptly," Putin's press secretary, Dmitry Peskov, said on Feb. 13, adding later that "certain nuances remain."

Privately, several Russian diplomats told The Moscow Times in January and February that the dates first suggested by Trump were unrealistic, characterizing his urgency as "signature Trump rhetoric."

Unlike Trump, who favors quick, transactional deals, Russia insists on a broader strategic dialogue. Moscow is also determined to avoid a repeat of the 2018 Helsinki summit, which the Kremlin now views as a failure. While that meeting was cordial, it produced no concrete agreements.

"Both we and Trump need clear wins. Wins only come from well-prepared, documented agreements, and that requires extensive groundwork," a Russian diplomat said.

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Preliminary technical discussions between Russian and U.S. officials have already taken place in Riyadh and Istanbul, where the two sides agreed to lift limitations on diplomatic staff and grant agrément to the new Russian ambassador to Washington.

Now that Washington has secured Kyiv's agreement to a 30-day ceasefire, Moscow faces its biggest challenge: engaging in substantive consultations on ending the war in Ukraine, which may prove to be the toughest issue to negotiate, sources told The Moscow Times.

On Tuesday evening, Trump announced that his envoy, Steve Witkoff, would soon visit Moscow and suggested the possibility of a second call between himself and Putin.

Any ceasefire decision will depend on battlefield conditions. Russian forces are currently attempting to encircle Ukrainian troops in the Kursk region, which has been partially under Kyiv's control for the past seven months.

Moscow has previously said that it will not agree to a ceasefire without a "comprehensive plan for resolving the Ukraine conflict that aligns with the Kremlin's vision of a lasting peace," according to a Telegram post by the Kremlin-affiliated journal Russia in Global Affairs.

"Rejecting a ceasefire risks damaging relations with Trump. Accepting it means making concessions," former Russian diplomat Boris Bondarev wrote on Telegram. "We'll see how they maneuver through this."

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