

Putin Seeks to Prolong Ukraine Peace Talks to His Advantage, Experts Say

By [Moscow Times Reporter](#)

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A painting titled "Peace" by artist Alexei Sergienko in St. Petersburg. [Olga Maltseva / AFP](#)

President Vladimir Putin will seek to drag out talks on ending his country's war on Ukraine for as long as possible as he believes he currently has the upper hand in the conflict, U.S. experts told The Moscow Times ahead of Tuesday's [expected call](#) between Putin and U.S. counterpart Donald Trump.

As the Trump administration [cuts the portfolio of its Russia-Ukraine special envoy](#) while working toward a peace deal in Ukraine, experts agreed that a delay in any agreement would be helpful to Putin, who is set to benefit from further territorial gains.

"Putin's aim is to take effective political control of Ukraine. He can't do this if his control is stabilized from where he is on the ground," said John Herbst, a former U.S. ambassador to Ukraine and a senior director at the Atlantic Council.

“Preventing Putin from taking control of Ukraine is critical for American interests,” Herbst told The Moscow Times.

Putin likely believes he can coax Trump into shaping a deal he sees as favorable if he handles Washington’s proposed 30-day ceasefire correctly, Herbst added, convincing Trump to drop aspects of any longer-term agreement that the Kremlin finds unacceptable.

“Putin has made strategic errors, but he is good at reading people and manipulating them,” Herbst said.

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Any ceasefire will take time to establish since Putin is not eager to reach an agreement, said Maria Snegovaya, a senior fellow on Russia and Eurasia at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

“Even if there is a freeze, the war will not end. Many people believe it won’t end as long as Putin is in power,” said Snegovaya.

Moscow is currently in a stronger position than Kyiv and successfully taking back Ukrainian-held territory in Russia’s Kursk region, although at a deadly cost, she said. The pause in U.S. intelligence sharing was damaging to Ukraine.

“The U.S. is using a mixed carrot-and-stick approach. Trump’s job is like herding cats with Ukraine and Russia. He wants to apply pressure on all sides,” Snegovaya said.

For example, the Trump administration this month [allowed](#) the lapse of General License 8L, which had permitted Russian banks to use the U.S. payment system for energy transactions, set up to prevent a spike in oil prices.

In addition, the U.S. is expected to resume shipping Ground-Launched Small Diameter Bombs (GLSDB) to Ukraine after Trump agreed to resume [supplying military aid and intelligence sharing](#) with Kyiv following talks in Saudi Arabia on March 11.

According to Herbst, Putin is testing the tactics he honed at the KGB on a U.S. president he knows is mercurial. These tactics include praising a ceasefire proposal as a concept and praising the concept’s author as genius, while at the same time pointing out a few “issues” with any proposed agreement.

At the same time, Putin is [worried](#) about crossing Trump after having witnessed the U.S. president’s anger with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky at their recent Oval Office meeting, Herbst said.

The prospect of becoming a partner of the U.S. rather than of China, which has been a critical economic lifeline for Russia amid punishing Western sanctions, is a likely incentive for Putin, he said.

“Chinese journalists and historians speak about Vladivostok as a Chinese city,” Herbst said.

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A recent poll by the independent Levada Center poll [said](#) that almost one-third of Russians view the U.S. favorably, roughly double the share from before Trump took office in January.

“Putin’s aggression in Ukraine has taken a terrible toll on Russian prosperity, security and well-being,” said Herbst. “Many people in Russia understand the cost of this war.”

Though Russia’s economy has largely withstood Western economic sanctions imposed in response to the war, the Kremlin’s shift to a wartime economy has increased the risk of stagflation. Many industries have experienced growth due to government investment, including via outsized payments to soldiers who agreed to join the military, Snegovaya said.

“Historically, the tendency of Russian society is to acquiesce. Polls show that people are not excited about the war, but have accepted it. People tend to adjust to whatever the Kremlin is doing. It’s all due to effective crisis management. It’s like when it rains: People don’t like it, but you put up an umbrella,” said Snegovaya.

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Trump’s special envoy to Ukraine and Russia, retired General Keith Kellogg, was conspicuously absent from recent high-level talks about ending the war in Ukraine. Media reports said that Kellogg was [sidelined](#) from talks after the Kremlin disapproved of Kellogg’s involvement in negotiations, saying he was too pro-Ukraine.

On Saturday, Trump [announced](#) on his Truth Social platform that Kellogg had been appointed special envoy to Ukraine — appearing to confirm the downgrade from his initial appointment as special envoy for Ukraine and Russia.

Meanwhile, real estate billionaire and Trump friend Steve Witkoff — technically Trump’s Middle East envoy — has taken on the role of the president’s [personal envoy to](#) Putin. Witkoff has [met twice with Putin](#), including last week in Moscow and in February as part of negotiations that freed American teacher Marc Fogel.

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