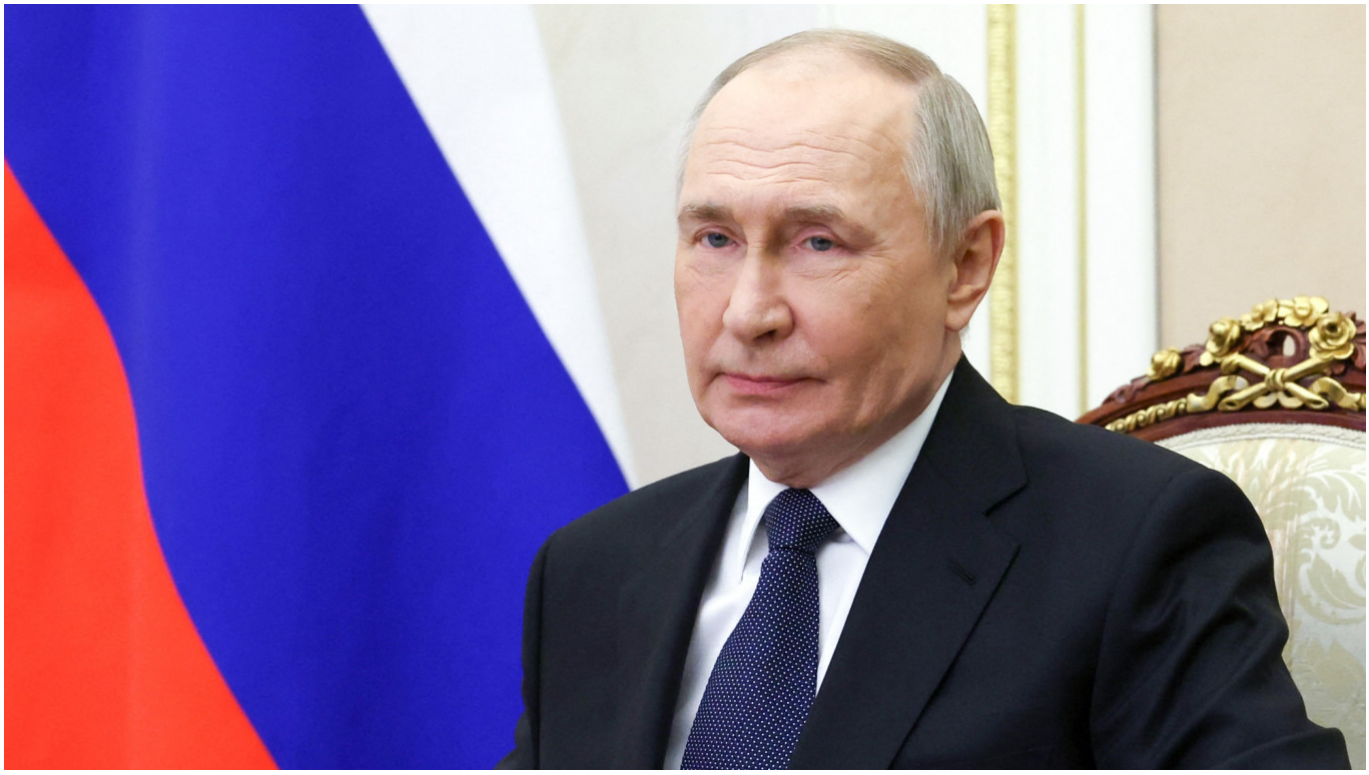
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Putin Calls for Zelensky's Removal, 'Finish Off' Ukrainian Troops

By AFP

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Russia's President Vladimir Putin chairs a Security Council meeting via videoconference at the Kremlin in Moscow on March 28, 2025. **Sergei ILYIN / POOL / AFP**

Russian President Vladimir Putin called Friday for a "transitional administration" to be installed in Ukraine, vowing that his army would "finish off" Ukrainian troops, in hardline remarks as U.S. President Donald Trump pushes for a ceasefire.

A rapprochement between Washington and Moscow since Trump's return to office and the U.S. leader's threats to stop supporting Kyiv have bolstered Putin's confidence more than three years into the war.

The renewed call to essentially topple Ukrainian leader Volodymyr Zelensky was the latest demonstration of the Kremlin leader's long-standing desire to install a more Moscow-friendly regime in Kyiv.

Zelensky dismissed Putin's call for a UN-run administration as the Russian leader's latest ploy to delay a peace deal.

Speaking on the sidelines of an Arctic forum in the early hours of Friday, Putin said Russia could discuss with the United States, Europe and Moscow's allies, "under the auspices of the UN, the possibility of establishing a transitional administration in Ukraine."

"What for? To organize a democratic presidential election that would result in the coming to power of a competent government that would have the confidence of the people, and then begin negotiations with these authorities on a peace agreement and sign legitimate documents," Putin added.

When launching its offensive in 2022, Moscow aimed to take Kyiv in a matter of days, but was repelled by Ukraine's smaller army.

Putin also issued a public call for Ukraine's generals to topple Zelensky, whom Putin has repeatedly denigrated, without providing any evidence, as a neo-Nazi and drug addict.

Moscow has also questioned Zelensky's "legitimacy" as Ukrainian president, after his initial five-year mandate ended in May 2024.

Under Ukrainian law, elections are suspended during times of major military conflict, and Zelensky's domestic opponents have all said no ballots should be held until after the conflict.

Putin, in power for 25 years and repeatedly elected in votes with no competition, has throughout the conflict accused Ukraine of not being a democracy.

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At a press conference in Kyiv, Zelensky said that "everything" Putin does "delays any possibility, any steps towards ending the war."

Asked about Putin's remarks later on Friday, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said it was motivated by what Moscow sees as the Ukrainian leadership's "total lack of control" over the army, which he accused of trying to attack Russian energy sites "on a daily basis."

He said that "at the moment" Russia was sticking to a commitment not to target Ukrainian energy facilities — despite multiple claims by Kyiv, including on Friday, that Russia has attacked them.

Ukraine has accused Russia of breaching its self-imposed order not to hit energy targets on multiple occasions.

Its air force reported Friday that Russia had fired 163 drones in an overnight aerial barrage, triggering fires at infrastructure and agricultural sites in the south of the country.

On the battlefield, Russia's Defense Ministry claimed fresh advances, saying its troops had seized a village in Ukraine's northeastern Kharkiv region and retaken a border settlement in its own Kursk region.

The latest territorial gains came after Putin urged his troops to press their advantage in manpower and weapons.

"I was saying not so long ago: 'We will get them.' There are reasons to believe that we will finish them off, too," Putin said.

In a sign of the high cost of the war, Kyiv said Friday it had received 909 bodies of Ukrainian soldiers killed in battle — the largest number yet.

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Putin previously rejected a joint U.S.-Ukrainian proposal for an unconditional and full ceasefire and has been accused by Ukraine of dragging out talks with Washington with no intention of halting its offensive.

The Kremlin, meanwhile, has begun targeting Europe, casting its leaders as blocking progress between Russia and the United States over a possible halt to the fighting.

Peskov on Friday slammed the EU's refusal to consider removing sanctions on a Russian agricultural bank as a precondition to restoring a deal over safe passage in the Black Sea.

"If European countries don't want to go down this path, it means they don't want to go down the path of peace in unison with the efforts shown in Moscow and Washington," Peskov said.

Separately, Zelensky said Friday that Kyiv had formally received a new minerals deal proposal from the United States, giving the U.S. access to Ukrainian natural resources in exchange for further military support.

Zelensky said that his government needed to review the text of the draft agreement it received Friday with lawyers.

Ukraine once hoped to get security guarantees in exchange for access to mineral resources, but initial drafts included little protection, and Washington has rejected sending any peacekeeping forces to Ukraine.

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