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Putin’s Unilateral Easter Truce Was Never Intended to Last

By Alexander Baunov for Carnegie

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Vladimir Putin in a church. **kremlin.ru**

U.S. President Donald Trump stands at a crossroads. With his push for peace in Ukraine faltering, he must either go against his instincts and put pressure on Russian President Vladimir Putin (a negotiating tactic that is likely to end in failure), or he must announce that the United States is giving up on its efforts to reconcile the two warring sides. From the recent statements made by Trump and his Secretary of State Marco Rubio, it seems that Washington would prefer to do the latter.

At the same time, Putin must also make a choice. The Russian leader is not afraid of the United States giving up on its mediation efforts: events on the battlefield would in any case likely continue to develop in Russia’s favor as they have done for many months. But Putin clearly hasn’t decided whether to ditch Trump and his attempts to bring the war to an end, or whether to keep trying to manipulate the U.S. president.

The last-minute announcement by Russia of an Easter truce in Ukraine was symbolic of Putin's indecision. While the Russian truce allowed Putin to postpone a decision on where he stands with Trump, it also means the Kremlin can claim it was genuine about a permanent peace if the negotiations are abandoned and a blame game begins.

Over the past months, Trump had repeatedly floated Easter as a deadline for peace negotiations, so it made sense for Russia to make some sort of gesture. A truce was simultaneously something tangible, and something that did not require any irreversible commitments.

Related article: Putin Wants to Look Like the Good Guy by Proposing Ceasefires. It's a Trap.

The 30-hour pause in the fighting was unveiled with typical Kremlin secrecy. Despite appearing in public many times in the weeks leading up to the announcement, Putin made no mention of his plan. Unlike Russia's proposal for a Christmas truce, which was announced in advance, the Easter truce was clearly supposed to be unilateral.

The suddenness of the announcement was intended to catch both enemies and allies off guard (after all, Easter is a public holiday in most Western countries). And that's exactly what happened: Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's initial reaction was negative, but then he proposed the truce be extended to 30 days. Putin was only too happy to highlight this discrepancy, attributing it to a belated intervention by Kyiv's "Western curators."

It would have been even more to the Kremlin's advantage if Kyiv had rejected the truce outright. That would have freed Russia's hands to pursue further military action and allowed Russian officials to lay the blame for the continuing violence at Ukraine's door. However, the Kremlin was also ready for Kyiv to agree. In that case, Russian officials would simply have accused Kyiv of violating the truce.

Before the election of Trump as U.S. president, Russia and Ukraine were locked in a verbal competition to establish themselves as the victims in this conflict. Moscow went to great lengths to try to counter the obvious fact that Ukraine was the victim of its aggression by putting forward concerns about the suffering of the "people of Donbas," apparent limitations on the rights of Russian speakers in Ukraine, and the possibility of Russia becoming a target of NATO aggression.

Related article: Russian Attacks Ongoing Despite Putin's Easter Truce, Says Zelensky

However, Trump puts a premium on strength, and has turned out to be less interested in establishing who is the "real" victim. As a result, Russia and Ukraine are engaged in a new competition to claim the mantle of the most peace-loving nation. Hence, Putin's Easter truce.

At the same time, a short cessation of hostilities in Ukraine gave the Kremlin an opportunity to test the reaction inside Russia. It would appear officials were particularly interested in the response from the country's ultra-patriots, who are the most vocal backers of the Russian assault on Ukraine. It might seem that the centralization of power and the submissiveness of the security agencies means Putin can impose any decision he likes without consultation. But

a continuation of the fighting does depend on the Kremlin retaining the backing of Russia's pro-war contingent.

While anti-war Russians blame the Kremlin's decision to launch such a suicidal military adventure for the protracted nature of the conflict, the country's ultra-patriots have another explanation. They accuse the authorities of being unable to overcome a weaker foe because they want an agreement, rather than victory on the battlefield.

The reaction to the Easter truce among Russia's ultra-patriots was not uniform and resulted in some intriguing incidents. In one, the notorious state media propagandist Margarita Simonyan was forced to defend her boss from criticism by those opposed to the brief end to hostilities. As for the security forces, it's much easier for them to implement the will of the Kremlin when they do not have any sympathy for those that they are repressing. If those the Kremlin wants eliminated are ultra-patriots (like the late mercenary leader-turned-insurrectionist Yevgeny Prigozhin), the security forces tend to act with less enthusiasm.

When all is said and done, Putin's truce led to a reduction in the fighting in Ukraine — albeit for just 30 hours. It also marked an intensification of Ukraine and Russia's bizarre competition to show Trump they are each keener than the other to achieve a permanent peace deal.

Judging by Russian statements, the Kremlin believes that the Easter truce served its purpose. Either way, as long as a ceasefire in Ukraine is not implemented with obligations on both sides, or as a precondition for further negotiations, the Kremlin will retain the right to violate its terms.

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