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Zelensky Will Only Meet With Putin in Istanbul, Aide Says

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Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. **president.gov.ua**

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky intends to meet only with Russian President Vladimir Putin when he travels to Turkey this week for potential peace talks, not with lower-level Russian officials, a top Ukrainian official said Tuesday.

Zelensky accepted Putin's surprise proposal for direct negotiations in Istanbul on Thursday, challenging the Russian leader to a face-to-face meeting.

Putin had floated the meeting as a counteroffer to a Western-backed call for a 30-day ceasefire, though the Kremlin, seemingly caught off guard by Zelensky's decision to attend in person, has not confirmed whether the Russian leader will travel to Turkey.

U.S. President Donald Trump, who is visiting the Middle East this week, told reporters Monday that he would join the possible talks in Istanbul "if he thought it would be helpful." An anonymous White House official told CNN that his attendance would depend on whether Putin goes.

“This is not a presidential-level meeting,” if Putin doesn’t show up, Zelensky’s adviser Mykhaylo Podolyak told exiled Russian journalist Alexander Plyushchev in a YouTube interview. “There is one decision-maker on Ukraine’s side… and one decision-maker in Russia.”

“Everything else is just formalities without results,” he added.

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Podolyak said a lower-level “technical meeting” could take place if Putin declines to attend, but noted that doing so would signal Russia’s unwillingness to end the war through direct talks.

“If Russia isn’t represented at the highest level, it means they’re not ready to stop the war or negotiate without intermediaries,” he told Plyushchev.

Zelensky’s Chief of Staff Andriy Yermak said the Ukrainian president’s plan to visit Turkey shows that Kyiv was ready for talks, but repeated Ukraine’s position that any negotiations must come after a ceasefire.

“Our position is very principled and very strong,” Yermak told a conference in Copenhagen.

The meeting, if it goes through, would mark the first face-to-face contact between the two sides since the Istanbul peace talks in March 2022, which failed to produce an agreement to end the war.

Later on Tuesday, sources told Reuters that Trump envoys Steve Witkoff and Keith Kellogg are planning to travel to Istanbul for the possible negotiations.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said this week that he is ready to host the latest talks and urged both parties to seize a “window of opportunity” for peace. China, a key Russian ally, also backed the push for a “binding peace agreement” acceptable to all parties.

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Putin has said direct talks should focus on the “root causes” of the conflict and did not rule out a potential ceasefire emerging from the Istanbul meeting. He has insisted that Ukraine give up regions under Russian occupation and abandon its pursuit to join NATO.

Russia’s Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov told state media on Tuesday that Moscow hopes to use the possible negotiations in Istanbul as a platform to discuss the “denazification of the Kyiv regime,” as well as recognition of Russian control over Ukrainian territories.

Officials in Moscow have long claimed that neo-Nazis rule Ukraine, and Putin declared both the “denazification” and “demilitarization” of the country as key war aims when he launched the full-scale invasion in February 2022.

AFP and Reuters contributed reporting.

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