The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Ukrainian Delegation En Route to Istanbul for First Direct Peace Talks With Russia Since 2022

May 15, 2025



Journalists in Istanbul waiting for the Russia-Ukraine peace talks to begin. **Alexander Ryumin / TASS**

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said he had sent a team to Istanbul for the first direct peace talks with Russia in three years, but played down expectations of a breakthrough, saying Moscow was "not serious" about ending the war.

President Vladimir Putin rejected Zelensky's bold offer to meet with him in person during the negotiations, instead tapping his aide and former culture minister Vladimir Medinsky to lead the talks. Medinsky also headed the ill-fated 2022 peace talks with Ukraine shortly after the full-scale invasion.

As the team of Russian negotiators arrived in Istanbul on Thursday morning, Russia's Foreign Ministry said that the officials were ready for "ready for serious work," even as details about the discussions remained unclear just hours before they were supposed to begin.

Zelensky confirmed after a meeting with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Ankara on Thursday that Ukraine would send a delegation headed by Ukrainian Defense Minister Rustem Umerov, but said he would not travel to Istanbul for the talks because Putin decided not to participate in the discussions.

Earlier, Zelensky had dismissed the makeup of Russia's negotiating team.

"Nothing has been confirmed officially, but from what we've observed, it looks more like a theater prop than a serious one," he was quoted as saying by The Guardian. "What we do know for certain is who actually makes decisions on the Russian side."

Joining Medinsky in Istanbul are Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Galuzin, Deputy Defense Minister Alexander Fomin and Igor Kostyukov, the head of Russia's GRU military intelligence agency. A group of expert advisers, including senior officials from the Foreign and Defense Ministries and the presidential administration, will also attend, according to the Kremlin.

The Kremlin released a video showing Putin meeting with the negotiation group late Wednesday. Several other top officials were seen present at that meeting, including Defense Minister Andrei Belousov, chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov, Security Council Secretary Sergei Shoigu and Federal Security Service (FSB) Director Alexander Bortnikov.

Medinsky told state television ahead of the talks that Russia was "ready for possible compromises and discussing them." Addressing the press later in the day, he said Moscow views the discussions as a "continuation" of peace negotiations that collapsed in April 2022.

Related article: Behind the Diplomatic Curtain: Why Putin Refused to Meet Zelensky in Istanbul

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andriy Sybiha was in the Turkish city of Antalya on Thursday to attend a NATO meeting, where he met with U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Republican Senator Lindsey Graham.

Rubio said at the NATO meeting that Washington was growing "impatient" amid stalled efforts to strike a peace deal between Russia and Ukraine, and now willing to consider "virtually any mechanism" to reach a lasting end to the war.

"Obviously, we're in a very difficult spot right now, and we hope that we can find the steps forward that provide for the end of this war in a negotiated way and the prevention of any war in the future," the secretary of state said.

In Istanbul, dozens of reporters gathered outside Dolmabahçe Palace, where the talks are rumored to be taking place. Turkish officials have not confirmed where the discussions will take place, while Russia's Foreign Ministry said they will begin sometime in the afternoon or evening on Thursday.

Both Ukraine and Russia are trying to show U.S. President Donald Trump, who has called for a quick end to the war, that they are committed to finding a diplomatic solution to resolving the conflict.

However, after months of U.S.-led shuttle diplomacy and several rounds of mediated negotiations, the two warring sides do not appear any closer to reaching a peace settlement than they did before Trump took office in January.

Trump, who is touring the Middle East this week, said early Thursday that he was still considering whether to attend the talks in Turkey. "I was thinking about going, but it is very tough," he told a business breakfast in Qatar. Yet he appeared to walk back on those comments later in the day as he headed to Dubai, saying that "nothing's going to happen until Putin and I get together."

Putin proposed direct negotiations with Kyiv during a surprise conference at the Kremlin early Sunday, effectively rejecting a Western-backed 30-day ceasefire in Ukraine that was supposed to begin on Monday. European leaders had threatened Russia with a new round of sanctions if it refused to back the truce.

Zelensky initially appeared to catch Moscow off guard when he agreed to the talks and then raised the stakes by challenging the Kremlin leader to meet with him face-to-face in Istanbul, an idea that Trump supported.

Related article: Putin Won't Attend Istanbul Talks, Taps Kremlin Aide Medinsky to Lead Delegation

Nevertheless, Russian officials told The Moscow Times this week that Putin did not plan on accepting Zelensky's offer for an in-person meeting at this stage in the talks, saying that he does not see the Ukrainian leader as his equal and will only agree to meet him in the event of his "public capitulation."

"Zelensky is only suitable for signing a capitulation. Period," a Russian diplomat said on condition of anonymity.

Putin and Zelensky have met only once, during the Normandy Four summit in Paris in 2019, as the two countries sought to find a way to end what had then been five years of fighting in eastern Ukraine.

Those talks, attended by French President Emmanuel Macron and former German Chancellor Angela Merkel, failed to deliver any breakthroughs.

Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russian officials have accused Ukraine of being run by a "neo-Nazi" regime and have called for the country "denazification" and "demilitarization," often envoking World War II history as a way to justify its current war goals.

Putin has repeatedly said that Zelensky is an illegitimate leader. In March, he called for Zelensky to be removed from power and suggested a UN-backed transitional government should be established in Ukraine.

AFP and Reuters contributed reporting.

Original url:

https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2025/05/15/ukrainian-delegation-en-route-to-istanbul-for-first-direct-peace-talks-with-russia-since-2022-a89087