The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Explained: Roman Abramovich's Behind-the-Scenes Role in Russia-Ukraine Peace Talks

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June 08, 2026



Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich. **Ozan Kose / AFP**

Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich has once again emerged as an intermediary between Moscow and Kyiv in efforts to end the war in Ukraine.

Abramovich, the former owner of Chelsea FC who remains under Western sanctions, previously acted as a mediator during failed negotiations in the early weeks of Russia's 2022 invasion.

This time, the billionaire, one of Russia's richest men who once served as governor of Russia's Chukotka region, traveled to Ukraine carrying messages between the two sides.

Trip to Kyiv

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky confirmed that he met privately with Abramovich in Kyiv last month, using the backchannel to notify President Vladimir Putin that Ukraine will never surrender its eastern Donbas region like the Kremlin leader demands.

The acknowledgment came days after Putin revealed that an unidentified Russian businessman had told him that Zelensky had invited him to travel to Ukraine.

While Putin did not identify the businessman, Abramovich is known to have met with Putin in person and spoken with him by phone multiple times since the war began.

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Speaking at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum on Friday, Putin said that "three weeks ago, one of the representatives of our business circles called me and asked a question," adding that the businessman had been invited to Kyiv.

"I said: please go," Putin said.

He recalled telling the businessman: "I cannot authorize you to do anything. This must be handled by serious, specially trained people — the Foreign Ministry, the Defense Ministry and other services."

Putin said he met the businessman after his return from Kyiv and that it was held the day before a deadly Ukrainian strike on a vocational college in the Russian-occupied town of Starobilsk in eastern Ukraine.

"The most important thing," Putin said the businessman told him, was that "Zelensky requested a meeting."

He reiterated that he would only meet Zelensky if the two sides were ready to sign a settlement agreement.

"I do not see the point in meeting. The only purpose for the Ukrainian side would be to stop the advance of our Armed Forces. We need agreements not for six months or three months, but for a long-term historical perspective," Putin said.

In an interview with Sky News broadcast Sunday, Zelensky said Abramovich visited Kyiv to gauge what Ukraine was "ready to do" to initiate peace talks.

Zelensky said the meeting was "not a secret," though Abramovich had initially asked that his role remain confidential.

"I said to [Abramovich] about Donbas, and it was the key message: 'I said we will not leave and we will not go out from our territory'," Zelensky said. "No, we will not give you a victory in such a way. And you will not get it."

Istanbul negotiations

Abramovich's role as a mediator reportedly began shortly after the full-scale invasion, following a late-night phone call from filmmaker Alexander Rodnyansky, an acquaintance of his whose son advised the Ukrainian president, according to The Wall Street Journal.

Rodnyansky reportedly told Abramovich that Ukraine needed someone capable of delivering the unvarnished truth to Putin.

Putin appeared to allude to that relationship in his remarks on Friday, describing the businessman as someone he had known "for a very long time."

"We do not have close contacts, but I trust him — he is an honest person," Putin said.

Abramovich was involved in failed peace talks when Turkey hosted talks between Russia and Ukraine in spring 2022.

"Abramovich participated in the negotiations as a member of the Russian delegation," Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said at the time, adding that his presence indicated that he was "trusted" by Moscow.

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Then-Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu said Abramovich had been making "sincere" efforts to advance peace since the first days of the war and had made a "positive" contribution to diplomatic efforts.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said at that time that Abramovich was not an official member of the delegation, but was involved in "ensuring certain contacts" between the two sides with the approval of both Moscow and Kyiv.

Humanitarian efforts

While the 2022 peace talks failed to produce a settlement, Abramovich also became involved in several humanitarian and economic initiatives.

According to The Wall Street Journal, Abramovich served as a backchannel between sides during negotiations over the 2022 Black Sea grain deal brokered by the United Nations, which allowed Ukrainian agricultural exports to resume despite the war.

Bloomberg reported that Abramovich met Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Riyadh in August 2023 to discuss a prisoner-of-war exchange between Moscow and Kyiv.

While it is unclear whether the talks directly led to an agreement, Russia and Ukraine subsequently carried out a high-profile prisoner swap involving pro-Russian Ukrainian politician Viktor Medvedchuk and several foreign nationals.

Moscow also handed over 215 prisoners, many of whom had been involved in the defense of Ukraine's Azovstal steel plant in Mariupol in the early stages of the invasion.

The Financial Times reported Sunday that Abramovich's role has become less prominent since Russia began negotiating directly with the U.S. last year, but he remains involved in prisoner exchanges and other talks with Kyiv, including discussions related to elements of a stalled U.S.-backed peace initiative.

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