

In Russia, a Late Night Call for Peace

by Ekaterina Zolotova - May 12, 2025

In the early morning of May 11, when most Russians were fast asleep, President Vladimir Putin issued a long statement on a resolution to the Ukraine conflict. It didn't matter that they weren't around to hear it – the speech didn't appear on television schedules, and regular programming never cut to it – because its target audience was, in no uncertain terms, the West. The speech was the first of its kind, coming at such an odd hour, and it coincided with the end of the V-Day ceasefire, during which all military operations in Ukraine had been suspended.

The first chunk of the speech summarized the diplomatic work Moscow had done during the ceasefire. Putin noted that from May 7 to May 10, the Kremlin hosted the leaders of China, Venezuela and Vietnam, and it held 20 bilateral meetings with the heads of the Commonwealth of Independent States, Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Europe and Latin America. Putin said the government was pleased with the diplomatic turnout on such an important and widely celebrated holiday.

The **rest of the speech**, however, was dedicated to the resolution of the conflict in Ukraine. It included the following remarks:

- Russia has repeatedly submitted peace initiatives that Ukraine has sabotaged.
- Kyiv has not responded to Russian proposals for a ceasefire at all and, in fact, launched a large attack right after the V-Day ceasefire was announced.
- Russia has never refused to engage in dialogue with Ukraine, and it was Ukraine that broke off negotiations in 2022.
- Despite this, Moscow has asked Kyiv to engage in talks directly with no preconditions. The start date would be May 15, and talks would be held in Istanbul.
- Russia is ready to eliminate the root causes of the conflict and establish a long-term, lasting peace.
- The decision to negotiate is now Ukraine's – and its allies'.

The speech came only a few days after U.S. President Donald Trump demanded a 30-day unconditional ceasefire, warning of possible new sanctions if the agreement was violated. It also follows a report from The New York Times that Washington had approved the transfer of 125 long-

range missiles and 100 Patriot air defense missiles to Ukraine. Meanwhile, on May 10, French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, British Prime Minister Keir Starmer and Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk arrived in Kyiv for a meeting of the so-called coalition of the willing. The Kremlin is concerned that Europe and the U.S. are finalizing a proposal for a 30-day ceasefire, which could have been an ultimatum for Moscow on unfavorable terms. The Kremlin understands that if the U.S. increases its support for Ukraine and imposes more sanctions on Russia, Moscow could lose the advances it has made, on and off the battlefield, and thus lose the war outright.

To be sure, Russia did not agree to a 30-day ceasefire because it would not be in Moscow's interests. But understanding that negotiations were inevitable, the Kremlin is trying to seize the initiative to gain an advantage. It is important for the Kremlin to maintain dialogue with the U.S., and it is even more important to start negotiations on more favorable terms – or, if the negotiations fail, to justify additional military action by showing Kyiv's intransigence. Trump apparently approved of Putin's speech and urged Ukraine to agree to meet with Russia in Turkey on May 15.

The choice of Turkey was not accidental: The Kremlin is interested in reviving the Istanbul talks of 2022, when Russia had an advantage on the battlefield. (Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is also on board.) At the time, portions of the Kyiv, Chernihiv, Sumy, Kharkov and Nikolaev regions were under Russian military control, as was nearly all of Kherson. Russia didn't know it was about to be repelled from the capital, so it believed it was negotiating from a position of strength.

The Istanbul agreements called for Ukraine to adopt a neutral status. This means it would not join NATO, foreign troops would not be deployed to its territory, it would not develop nuclear weapons, and it would not conduct military exercises without the consent of guarantor countries. In return, Kyiv would have international security guarantees similar to NATO's Article 5 collective defense clause. (Crimea and the Russia-controlled parts of Donetsk and Luhansk were excluded from this provision.) Russia has made clear that it does not want to return to these provisions chapter and verse but still supports the principles behind them. In other words, the Kremlin doesn't want to start from scratch; it wants to start from a position of strength, even if the realities on the ground have changed.

For its part, Ukraine demands that Russia declare a full, long-term and reliable ceasefire starting on May 12. Only after that will it be ready to negotiate.

There's reason to believe the Kremlin is pessimistic that talks will succeed, if they take place at all. European leaders also do not expect any major breakthroughs in the next four days. Macron said Putin's proposal for direct talks with Ukraine in Istanbul is "a first step, but not enough," noting that

Russia is “looking for a way out, but still wants to buy time.” Merz said basically the same thing. And they may have a point: Moscow hasn’t ruled out continued military action, but continued military action would look better if Ukraine were the one that appeared unwilling to negotiate. And, as a matter of fact, the airspace above Kapustin Yar, a test launch site for hypersonic missiles, has been cleared of civilian aircraft.

One thing is clear: Russia is not laying down its arms yet, even if it appears to be moving in that direction. Moscow will be watching Kyiv’s reactions in the coming days, hoping to either conclude a truce on its own terms or continue military actions, to create conditions for depriving Ukraine of the necessary assistance to fight back.

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