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A negotiating table built on illusions

As long as the Kremlin sticks to its maximum demands, Ukraine does not need mediators — but strong allies

It has now become a tradition in the debates surrounding the Russian-Ukrainian war, which has been raging for almost four and a half years: to this day, these discussions still seem to be taking place in a parallel universe. All it takes is a few half-sentences from Kremlin leader Vladimir Putin, who claims that the 'conflict' over Ukraine is drawing to a close, and that of all the potential European representatives, he would prefer to negotiate with Germany — and once again, the illusion is raised in some quarters that a swift resolution to the war is possible. There is already extensive discussion about who might be suitable as a European mediator for talks with Moscow, whilst the Kremlin makes no secret of the fact that serious talks on a ceasefire can only take place once Ukraine has withdrawn from the rest of the Donetsk region and, in effect, from the major cities of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia — areas that Russia incorporated into its own constitution in autumn 2022.

In theory, the call for the European Union to play a stronger diplomatic role is logical and legitimate. After all, the Russian-Ukrainian war concerns the future security architecture of the European continent. That is precisely why it seems reckless to leave the mediation efforts solely in the hands of the erratic US administration under Donald Trump. At first glance, this is correct — and indeed, it is reasonable to assume that Ukraine would officially welcome a diplomatic initiative. After all, Kyiv also supports US attempts, ongoing since early 2025, which in practice have so far done more harm than good. Among other things, Ukraine is obliged to reaffirm its willingness to engage in talks at every turn, so that the US does not halt either arms deliveries or the provision of intelligence data. Yet Vladimir Putin, too, speaks of an imminent end to the war for the benefit of just one listener: Donald Trump.

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Ultimately, therefore, the key question is what Europeans and Russians could possibly negotiate with one another. On paper, it is certainly better to talk to one another than not to talk at all. However, the reality is quite

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different. It is out of the question that this intense phase of the war, which followed the Donbass war that began in 2014, could culminate in a comprehensive peace agreement. Since September 2022, six Ukrainian regions have been included in both the Ukrainian and Russian constitutions — rightly so in the former, but not in the latter. Nevertheless, neither will Ukraine recognise these territories as Russian, nor will Russia relinquish its constitutional claim to them. This renders any discussion of a major peace treaty that would fundamentally end the conflict superfluous.

Consequently, any potential agreement, whenever it might be reached, will largely be limited to a ceasefire deal. To believe that Russia would agree, in the context of such talks, to any form of frontline security provided by European soldiers, i.e. de facto by NATO troops, would be a dangerous illusion and was never a topic for discussion from the outset. The same applies to the virtually non-existent likelihood that Moscow would agree to serious security guarantees for Kyiv. The crucial question is therefore what the EU can actually achieve at a negotiating table where the Trump administration has so far failed catastrophically, despite far-reaching concessions to the Kremlin, which Kyiv, incidentally, has largely accepted.

A bitter reality

That is why talks on a possible ceasefire continue to fail due to Moscow's unrealistic interim political objectives, which, incidentally, are aimed not least at dividing Ukrainian society from within. The longer the war lasts, the more people would accept the loss of the Donbas with a heavy heart, even if they remain clearly in the minority. Realistically, no one knows how this situation could be changed through EU mediation, even though a diplomatic solution would certainly be desirable right now. In fact, the current situation can only be changed by the Ukrainian armed forces and through increased economic pressure on Russia.

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The reality is ultimately as follows, even if this is something European capitals are unlikely to want to hear: if there was political will on the Russian side to reach an acceptable ceasefire, there would actually be no need for extensive mediation to agree on it — quite apart from the fact that talks on the matter should take place in

a state acceptable to both sides. This was demonstrated by the negotiations between Ukraine and Russia at the start of the year, when both sides included high-ranking military and intelligence officials in their delegations. Constructive discussions took place on how a ceasefire could be practically organised and monitored in future. The prisoner and body exchanges to date, which were coordinated at intelligence level, also bear this out.

What is lacking is Russia's political will to back down from its unacceptable demands. For it is highly unlikely that a summit between Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Vladimir Putin will take place. A ceasefire agreement is therefore being negotiated primarily at the level of the intelligence services and the military. And in the current phase in particular, it is clearer than ever: Ukraine needs stronger allies above all, not mediators. For on the one hand, the country is successfully defending itself against Russian aggression and is increasingly putting pressure on Moscow with long-range strikes on Russian oil infrastructure. On the other hand, the international situation has once again shifted in the Kremlin's favour due to the US attack on Iran and rising oil prices on the world market. It would therefore be reckless to believe that Russia would give up hope of ultimately having more resources at its disposal in the long war of attrition against Ukraine and of coming out on top in the end. Neither Angela Merkel nor any other EU mediator will be able to change that.



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