

RUSSIA/UKRAINE: Conflict still not ripe for talks

- The fourth Ukraine peace formula meeting in Davos once again exposed vast differences between Kyiv and Moscow on the format and content of any future negotiations.
- At this point, there is little public and political will in Ukraine to open talks with Russia, but the situation might change later in 2024 given the negative domestic and external trends.
- While Moscow does not rule out talks, it views diplomacy as another way to achieve its war objectives; as a result, the talks with Russia would not guarantee a ceasefire or prevent future aggression.

On 14 January, representatives from more than 80 countries and organizations attended the fourth Ukrainian peace formula meeting held in Davos. The event did not result in any major agreements but marked continued efforts by Kyiv to rally widespread international support behind its proposed ten-point plan aimed at restoring “a just and long-lasting peace”. While the Davos event attracted more participants than the previous three meetings, the absence of China — a country with perhaps the greatest leverage over Russia — was noteworthy. Meanwhile, the Kremlin called Kyiv’s initiative an “absurd process”, an assessment that reflects vast differences between the two sides regarding the format and parameters of any negotiation.

Likelihood of talks still low...

Nonetheless, speculation about potential talks has been intensifying during the past few months. Some international media outlets, citing undisclosed sources, claim that Russian President Vladimir Putin has been signaling interest in ceasefire talks via diplomatic backchannels. Others suggest that following a largely unsuccessful counteroffensive, President Volodymyr Zelensky has been under growing Western pressure to consider a negotiated settlement of the conflict. Although Moscow and Kyiv deny such claims, behind the scenes activities by both sides to test each other’s potential red lines and float various ideas for potential future negotiations cannot be ruled out.

However, at this point, there is little public and political appetite in Ukraine to restart talks with Russia. An opinion poll conducted in December showed that 74% of Ukrainians opposed any territorial concessions in exchange for peace and independence. As a result, the opening of talks with Putin’s Russia would be an extremely unpopular move for Zelensky, potentially triggering public protests and divisions within his party. From the military perspective, Ukraine’s positions on many parts of the frontlines are difficult but not hopeless. Even with reduced Western military support, Ukrainian forces have been holding back the aggressor.

While Moscow does not rule out talks, it views diplomacy as another way to achieve or move closer to its war objectives. As on multiple occasions in the past, Russia would enter any talks with maximalist demands both for Ukraine and, possibly, the wider CEE region. Putin would likely prefer to hold talks not with Ukraine, but with the US and largest European countries, which the Kremlin views as ultimate decisionmakers in Kyiv. Such an arrangement would defy any claims about Russia’s isolation in the international arena and allow the Kremlin to portray Russia as one of the great powers negotiating the future of European security in an increasingly multi-polar world. However, hoping to expand its relative advantage — and improve its potential negotiating position — over Ukraine in the coming months, the Kremlin is unlikely to be the one pushing for talks in the near term.

...but might grow later in 2024

The situation might change later in 2024. The share of the Ukrainian population opposing territorial concessions to Russia has decreased by ten percentage points since May 2023. Another round of large-scale mobilization in Ukraine, currently under consideration by the authorities, might further shift public opinion in favor of concessions. Militarily, Russia’s material advantages are set to expand, which might start translating into new advances on the ground, especially if military support from the US is not renewed. International pressure on Kyiv to start talks might also rise as war fatigue grows, and Western

capitals find it increasingly difficult to pool resources for Ukraine, especially in the absence of a clear and realistic plan of how to reclaim the occupied territories.

However, even at that point, it would be a very difficult political decision for Zelensky to agree to open up talks (direct or indirect) with Moscow, which he openly regards as a terrorist regime led by an international war criminal. Such a decision would likely be preceded by a shift in rhetoric from Zelensky's office and government-aligned media. Still, many in Ukraine and other CEE countries would view any talks with the Putin regime as a defeat for Ukraine and a sign of the West's weakness.

The start of talks between Ukraine and Russia would not guarantee a ceasefire nor prevent future Russian aggression. Conversely, Russia might continue/intensify military action to exert pressure on the other negotiating party, as demonstrated on multiple occasions during the previous Minsk format talks. Even if Moscow agreed to a ceasefire, it would likely use it as an opportunity reconstitute its forces and prepare for future military action while at the same time demanding an end to Western military support for Ukraine.

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