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STORIES

Why Russia is pushing a return to negotiations The Kremlin wants to buy time to prepare for a 'full-scale offensive' in early 2023, sources say

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Since the success of Ukraine's massive counteroffensive in early September, Russian officials have repeatedly raised the possibility of peace talks — even after Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky signed a decree officially ruling out the possibility of Ukraine ever negotiating with Vladimir Putin. Meduza has learned from multiple sources close to the Russian government that the Kremlin has simultaneously been lobbying Western leaders behind closed doors to convince Kyiv to agree to a temporary ceasefire. But according to the sources, Putin has no intention of ending the war; instead, his ceasefire campaign is part of a wider strategy to buy time for training conscripts and replenishing supplies in order to launch a "full-scale offensive" in February or March.

In recent weeks, representatives of the Russian authorities have spoken with increasing frequency about the possibility of negotiations with Ukraine or with Western countries. On October 14, for example, Foreign Intelligence Service director Sergey Naryshkin said that negotiations are possible, but only “under certain conditions” — though he then didn’t specify what those conditions were. A week earlier, on October 6, Federation Council Speaker Valentina Matvienko proposed that negotiations for a “peaceful resolution” begin “this very day” — but only under “the conditions offered by Russia.”

Vladimir Putin himself raised the topic of negotiations in a similar vein in mid-September, saying, “We’re going to do everything to ensure this ends as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, only the opposing side, the Ukrainian leadership, has declared its refusal to negotiate, has declared that it wants to achieve its goals by military means, as they say, on the battlefield.”

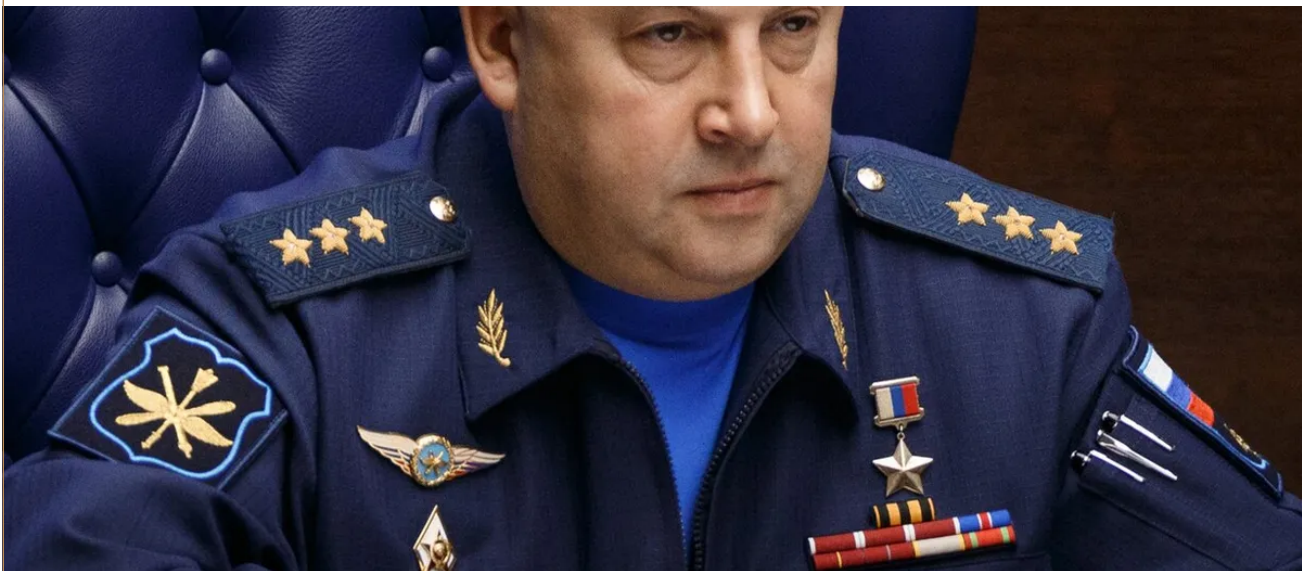
The Ukrainian side has rejected the possibility of negotiating with Putin multiple times in recent months. And in early October, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky signed a decree officially stating the “impossibility of negotiations with Russian President Vladimir Putin.” The order was adopted in response to the “referendums” held by the Russian authorities as a step towards annexing Ukrainian territories.

As Meduza has previously reported, Putin really is considering the possibility of resuming the negotiations that stalled in spring 2022. At the same time, the president wants Russia to maintain control of the occupied

Donbas territories — and “doesn’t even want to discuss Crimea.”

According to two sources close to the Kremlin and one source close to the Russian government who spoke to Meduza, Putin’s positions haven’t changed. However, the sources said, the Russian authorities have developed a new “tactical option.” In this scenario, rather than getting Ukraine to agree to a full-fledged peace treaty, the Kremlin would seek a temporary ceasefire. Russia’s leaders believe this could be arranged through negotiations between Russian and Ukrainian troops — without the involvement of either country’s president.

SEEING WHAT STICKS



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Meduza’s sources close to the Kremlin also said that Russia would likely be willing to withdraw its troops from at least part of the occupied section of Ukraine’s Kherson region.

Kirill Stremousov, the deputy head of the Russian-backed occupation

authorities in Ukraine's Kherson region, has already said that “residents may want to go to different regions of Russia that are a safe distance away from combat operations [so as] not to impede military maneuverability.” Russian Deputy Prime Minister Marat Khusnullin has announced that the government will help residents of Russian-controlled parts of the Kherson region move elsewhere and will provide them with free housing.

“It’s very hard to hold Kherson right now, and the withdrawal of troops from the region could be done as a gesture of goodwill and a step forward towards Ukraine,” one source close to the Kremlin said.

According to Meduza’s sources, the Kremlin has been trying to “influence Western leaders” and Turkish President Recep Erdoğan to “convince” Ukraine to return to negotiations with Russia. Meduza’s sources claim that Russia is using a “simple argument” in its communications with foreign leaders: “Civilian casualties must be avoided.” These talks have been going on amid the widespread shelling of Ukrainian cities that Russia launched after the explosion on the Crimean Bridge on October 8 and Ukraine’s successful counteroffensive in September.

At the same time, Meduza’s sources emphasized that Vladimir Putin has no plans to end the war, and that he hopes to use the prospective ceasefire to prepare for a new offensive. As Putin sees it, the truce would allow the Russian army to train newly mobilized soldiers for war and replenish its equipment. Russian Presidential Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov did not respond to Meduza’s questions.

Under the Kremlin’s plan, according to Meduza’s sources, the “new full-scale offensive” might start in approximately February or March of 2023. This would mirror the strategy the Ukrainian army used when it spent several months preparing mobilized soldiers before conducting a successful counteroffensive in the Kharkiv and Kherson regions.

RUSSIA GOES BEYOND THE BATTLEFIELD



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At the same time, as far as we know, Kyiv's official position regarding any negotiations with Moscow remains unchanged. "We'll be ready for negotiations with Russia, though not with Putin, but with his replacement," a source from Volodymyr Zelensky's office told Meduza. He then called on Russians to do their part to make the negotiations happen sooner: "Bring down that delusional Putin of yours."

The source added that Ukraine has long been distrustful of any statements — and "gestures of goodwill" — from Russia: "He keeps lying, Putin does. He talks about how he's reading for negotiations, then he launches missile strikes on civilians. I don't think there will be any ceasefire until our territories are de-occupied, until they're liberated."

Zelensky Advisor Mykhailo Podolyak echoed the sentiment, telling Meduza:

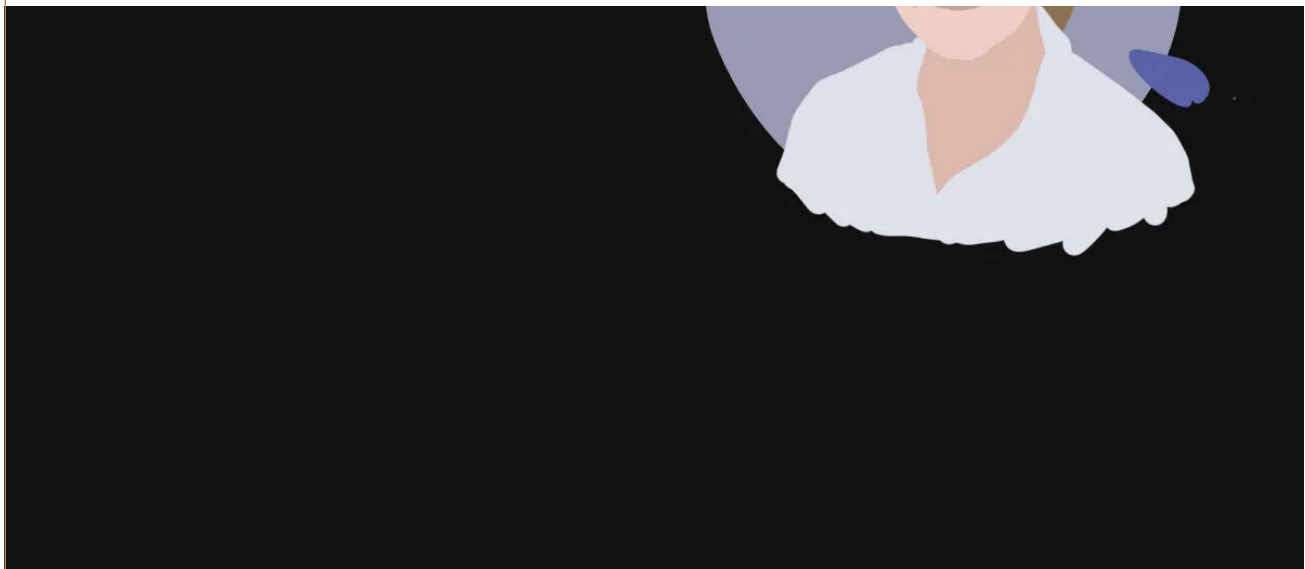
What does a ceasefire give Ukraine, in the Russian scenario? A chance to fix a de facto new line of separation and hastily dig up Russians in the

temporarily occupied territories? Can they really believe we're going to agree to that? Especially against the backdrop of the counteroffensive...

A clear operational pause for the brutally battered Russian units, so they can at least train a few hastily mobilized soldiers and send a new quantity of death-bound men to the battlefield? What would we want that for?

According to Podolyak, "this scenario is absolutely not in Ukraine's interests, so these proposals — whether or not they're made publicly — are out of the question." Podolyok stressed that Ukraine is "extremely interested" in defeating Russia militarily: "Because that's the only thing that will allow us to truly end the war, gain the opportunity to brutally punish the war criminals through legal channels, and indirectly facilitate the launch of a scenario in which the Russian political system of Russia itself is transformed."

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