



## U.S. Conducts Shuttle Diplomacy with Ukraine and Russia in Riyadh

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Another round of negotiations on ending the Russian aggression against Ukraine took place in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on 23-25 March. Once again, however, they confirmed Russia's unwillingness to cease military operations and its intention to prolong the talks.

### Under what conditions did the talks take place?

U.S. President Donald Trump's telephone conversation with Russian leader Vladimir Putin on 18 March [did not produce any tangible results and did not move the negotiation process forward](#). Russia rejected the American proposal for a comprehensive ceasefire and maintained its demands regarding the demilitarisation of Ukraine, trying once again to blame it for the war. Putin made a complete ceasefire conditional on the end of mobilisation in Ukraine and the cessation of Western aid to the country. Russia tentatively accepted the idea of halting attacks on energy facilities, but conditioned its implementation on the development of verification mechanisms. However, the conversation itself was a signal of the end of Putin's political isolation by the United States. It also indicated the openness of the American administration to rapprochement with Russia, including the initiation of talks on ending sanctions.

### What was agreed in Riyadh?

The talks were held in "shuttle" mode, in which U.S. representatives met alternately with the Ukrainian side and then with the Russian side, and again with the Ukrainian side. The U.S. delegation included Special Presidential Envoy for Ukraine Keith Kellogg and National Security Advisor Mike Waltz, while the Russian delegation included Grigory Karasin, chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Federation Council, and Advisor to the Director of the FSB Sergei Beseda. Ukraine was represented by Minister of Defence Rustem Umerov, Pavlo Palisa from the Office of the

President, and Deputy Minister of Energy Mykola Kolisnyk, among others. Ukraine and Russia, in separate declarations, expressed their desire to ensure Black Sea security, non-use of force, and to prevent the use of commercial vessels for military purposes in the Black Sea. The parties also agreed to develop verification mechanisms on the prohibition of attacks on energy facilities. The U.S., in turn, pledged to engage on the issues of a prisoner exchange and the return of Ukrainian children removed from the country by Russia, and pledged to help restore Russia's access to the global market for agricultural and fertiliser exports, including lifting sanctions on some financial institutions (including Rosselkhozbank, the Russian Agricultural Bank) and on payments in the sector. After the meeting, Russia stated that it would be ready for a truce in the Black Sea only after the sanctions imposed on it related to the agricultural sector were lifted. In turn, Umerov indicated that Ukraine will reserve the right of self-defence in the event of Russian ships leaving the eastern Black Sea.

### What are the negotiating tactics from the Russian side?

Russia has not changed its strategic goals of subjugating Ukraine and changing the security architecture in Europe. Since it has not achieved them militarily in more than three years of full-scale war, it is trying to [prolong the negotiations](#) in order to bring about a situation that, in particular, involves the weakening of Ukraine, the reduction of Western support for that country, and waning U.S. interest in security issues in Europe. If this occurs, Russia will have an open path to further steps towards the eventual revision of the European

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security architecture. A Russian demonstrative withdrawal from the talks would send a direct signal to the U.S. that it is not interested in ending the war, which could trigger a strong reaction from the Trump administration. Therefore, Russia makes it appear that it will accept concessions, such as a potential ceasefire in the Black Sea, treating it though as an instrument to weaken Ukraine.

## **How does Russia want to weaken Ukraine by declaring its desire for a ceasefire in the Black Sea?**

While undertaking talks on trade security in the Black Sea and declaring its willingness to return to the [Black Sea Grain Initiative](#), Russia is simultaneously trying to loosen the sanctions regime and hit the Ukrainian economy. The 2022 grain corridor agreement was used by Russia to restrict Ukrainian export opportunities. Following Russia's [withdrawal from the grain deal in July 2023](#), Ukraine took a number of effective military measures that guaranteed free operation in the Black Sea trade corridor. As a result, exports via this route included not only agricultural products but also iron ore and metallurgical products, among others. Russia is currently not in a position to blockade Ukrainian ports, as it did in 2022. It therefore is trying to influence a backdoor reduction in the volume of Ukrainian exports by reintroducing prolonged inspections of commercial vessels under the pretext of checking whether they are used for military purposes.

## **What is Ukraine's approach to the latest negotiations?**

Negotiations through the U.S. offer Ukraine the chance to maintain sovereign statehood and end Russian aggression.

However, to achieve this it needs U.S. support, both politically and militarily. Moreover, the consequences of the [failure of the White House talks](#)—the temporary suspension of arms supplies and intelligence exchanges—have led Ukraine to seek to avoid tensions in its relations with the U.S. It is accepting of the terms of a truce that is unfavourable to it, hoping above all that Russia will break the agreement or that the Russian stance in the negotiations will be so tough as to trigger a firm American response. It is also important for Ukraine to avoid further accusations of unwillingness to end the war, as Trump asserted after the White House meeting.

## **How might the course of the recent talks affect further negotiations?**

The Riyadh talks once again demonstrate that Russia is not prepared to make real concessions. This means that, looking ahead to the coming weeks, there will probably be further U.S.-Russia meetings in which the Russians will try to set tougher conditions for an end to the war. These will go beyond issues directly related to Ukraine and concern the European security architecture, probably including the issue of the U.S. military presence on NATO's Eastern Flank. At the same time, Russia will pose the possibility of concessions by agreeing to elements of the talks that are less important from their point of view, such as prisoner exchanges. It is also likely that there will be a show of a handover of an insignificant number of [removed Ukrainian children currently in the Russian care system](#). Waltz has said that the return of children to their homeland would be a confidence-building step in the U.S.-Russia talks.