



# **PUTIN OFFERS TRUCE IF UKRAINE EXITS RUSSIAN- CLAIMED AREAS AND DROPS NATO BID. KYIV REJECTS IT - ASSOCIATED PRESS**

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*Russian President Vladimir Putin speaks during a meeting at the Russian Foreign Ministry in Moscow, Russia, Friday, June 14, 2024. (AP Photo/Alexander Zemlianichenko)*

Russian President Vladimir Putin promised Friday to “immediately” order a cease-fire in Ukraine and start negotiations if Kyiv began withdrawing troops from the four regions annexed by Moscow in 2022 and renounced plans to join NATO. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy rejected what he called an ultimatum by Putin to surrender more territory.

Putin’s remarks came as Switzerland prepared to host scores of world leaders -- but not from Moscow -- this weekend to try to map out first steps toward peace in Ukraine.

They also coincided with a meeting of leaders of the Group of Seven leading industrialized nations in Italy and after the U.S. and Ukraine this week signed a 10-year security agreement that Russian officials, including Putin, denounced as “null and void.”

Putin blasted the Switzerland conference as “just another ploy to divert everyone’s attention, reverse the cause and effect of the Ukrainian crisis (and) set the discussion on the wrong track.”

His demands came in a speech at the Russian Foreign Ministry and was aimed at what he called a “final resolution” of the conflict rather than “freezing it,” and stressed the Kremlin is “ready to start negotiations

without delay.”

Broader demands for peace that Putin listed included Ukraine's recognition of Crimea as part of Russia, keeping the country's nonnuclear status, restricting its military force and protecting the interests of the Russian-speaking population. All of these should be part of “fundamental international agreements,” and all Western sanctions against Russia should be lifted, Putin said.

“We're urging to turn this tragic page of history and to begin restoring, step-by-step, the unity between Russia and Ukraine and in Europe in general,” he said.

Putin's remarks, made to a group of somber Foreign Ministry officials and some senior lawmakers, represented a rare occasion in which he clearly laid out his conditions for ending the war in Ukraine, but it didn't include any new demands. The Kremlin has said before that Kyiv should recognize its territorial gains and drop its bid to join NATO.

Zelenskyy, in Italy for the G7 meeting, said Putin's proposal was not new and was in the form of an “ultimatum,” comparing it to actions by Adolf Hitler in seizing territory that led to World War II.

“What Putin demands is to give them a part of our territories, those occupied and not occupied, talking about several regions of our country,” he said.

Ukraine's Foreign Ministry called Putin's plan “manipulative,” “absurd” and designed to “mislead the international community, undermine diplomatic efforts aimed at achieving a just peace, and split the unity of the world majority around the goals and principles of the U.N. Charter.”

Besides seeking to join NATO, Ukraine wants Russian forces out of its territory, including the Crimean Peninsula that was illegally annexed in 2014; the restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity; and that Russia be held accountable for war crimes and for Moscow to pay reparations to Kyiv.

Russia launched its a full-scale invasion in February 2022. After Ukrainian forces thwarted a Russian drive to the capital, much of the fighting has focused in the south and east, where Moscow illegally annexed four regions, although it doesn't fully control any of them.

Zelenskyy adviser Mykhailo Podolyak said on social media there was nothing new from Putin and that the Russian leader “voiced only the ‘standard aggressor's set,’ which has been heard many times already.”

“There is no novelty in this, no real peace proposals and no desire to end the war. But there is a desire not to pay for this war and to continue it in new formats. It’s all a complete sham,” Podolyak wrote on X.

U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said at NATO headquarters in Brussels that Putin “has illegally occupied sovereign Ukrainian territory. He is not in any position to dictate to Ukraine what they must do to bring about a peace.”

Austin added that Putin “started this war with no provocation. He could end it today if he chose to do that.”

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg added that “this is not a peace proposal. This is a proposal of more aggression, more occupation, and it demonstrates in a way that that Russia’s aim is to control Ukraine.”

Putin insisted that Kyiv should withdraw from all four annexed regions entirely and essentially cede them to Moscow within their administrative borders. In Zaporizhzhia in the southeast, Russia still doesn’t control the region’s administrative capital with a pre-war population of about 700,000; in the neighboring Kherson region, Moscow withdrew from its biggest city and capital of the same name in November 2022.

Putin said if “Kyiv and Western capitals” reject his offer, “it is their business, their political and moral responsibility for continuing the bloodshed.”

The Kremlin has repeatedly aired its readiness for peace talks with Kyiv and blamed the West for undermining its efforts to end the conflict.

Putin went further Friday and claimed his troops never intended to storm Ukraine’s capital, Kyiv, even though they approached the city.

“In essence, it was nothing other than an operation to force the Ukrainian regime to peace. The troops were there to push the Ukrainian side to negotiate, to try and find an acceptable solution,” he said.

Moscow withdrew from Kyiv in March 2022 and described it a goodwill gesture as peace talks between the two began, but the pullback took place amid fierce Ukrainian resistance that significantly slowed down Russia’s battlefield advances.

Putin also claimed that in that same month, he told a foreign official he wasn’t ruling out withdrawing forces from the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions and ceding occupied parts of them back to Ukraine, as long as Kyiv allowed Russia to have a “strong land connection” to Crimea.

He said the official planned on bringing that proposal to Kyiv — which Moscow “welcomed,” as it generally welcomed “attempts to find a peaceful resolution of the conflict.” But the Kremlin then annexed both regions, along with the Donetsk and Luhansk provinces, citing the results of sham “referendums” it staged there. Putin mentioned those and said, “The matter is closed forever and is no longer up for discussion.”

In Friday’s fighting, Russian defenses shot down 87 Ukrainian drones, the Defense Ministry in Moscow said, most of them launched against the Rostov region, home to Russia’s southern military command, but no deaths or damage were reported in one of the biggest Ukrainian drone barrages of the war.

In Russia’s Belgorod region on the border, part of a residential building collapsed in the town of Shebekino after Ukrainian shelling, Belgorod Gov. Vyacheslav Gladkov said. Three people were injured, he said.

Ukraine’s military has been on the back foot in recent months, with its troops outnumbered by the Kremlin’s forces and running short of ammunition and weaponry due to delays in promised Western military aid.

Russia has battered Ukraine with drones, especially its power grid. It fired 14 missiles and 17 Shahed drones overnight, Ukraine’s air force said. Air defense systems downed all the drones as well as seven missiles, it said.

The attacks injured six people in the Donetsk region, where residential buildings were hit, officials said.

A Russian drone struck a bus near the village of Esman in the northern Sumy region, injuring three women. Authorities say 20 passengers were in the bus at the time.

Also Friday, Russia returned to Ukraine the bodies of 254 of its soldiers, Kyiv said. Once identified, the bodies will be returned to relatives, according to Ukraine’s Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War — Associated Press writers Jim Heintz in Tallinn, Samya Kullab and Illia Novikov in Kyiv, Ukraine, Lorne Cook in Brussels, and Barry Hatton in Lisbon, Portugal, contributed. Follow AP’s coverage of the war in Ukraine at <https://apnews.com/hub/russia-ukraine>