

# Peace talks are in parallel universe, say Ukraine front-line troops

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**Jonathan Beale**

Defence correspondent, BBC News

Reporting from Eastern Ukraine



Ukrainian soldiers on the battlefield say they don't expect to see the war end any time soon

While Moscow considers a temporary ceasefire, its military machine continues to press its advantage on the front line. Diplomatic negotiations can be slow and difficult. But on the battlefield, they can be measured in lost lives.

At a military hospital in eastern Ukraine, the injured arrive by ambulance in waves. Here, there's an obvious disconnect between diplomacy taking place, far from the fighting, and the brutality of battle – where human bodies are still being smashed, shredded and scarred by bombs and bullets.

We watch another two dozen injured Ukrainian soldiers being loaded on to a bus to be taken to a hospital in Dnipro – some walking wounded, others carried on stretchers. The bus is fitted out with medical equipment to monitor the injured as they're driven fast over potholed roads.

The men on board are the less severely wounded. Most have been hit by shrapnel. The cause is often what's now the most prolific and feared weapon on the front line –

drones.

None of those we talked to believe this war will be ending any time soon. Thirty-year-old Maksym is on a stretcher with an IV drip to relieve some of the pain from several shrapnel wounds across his body. He says he'd heard the talk of a temporary 30-day ceasefire, but adds: "I consider Putin a murderer and murderers don't agree so easily."



Matthew Goddard

Ukrainian soldier Maksym has several shrapnel wounds and is being given painkillers via a drip. Vova, who's sitting up nearby, says: "I don't believe it." He says that near the besieged city of Pokrovsk, they were facing Russian storm attacks every single day. "I doubt there will be a truce," he tells me.

Another soldier named Maksym says this is the second time he has been injured. "I don't believe there will be a ceasefire," he says. "I had a lot of friends who are not with us any more.

"I would like to believe that all will be good. But you can't trust Russia. Never."

The large medical bus is operated by Ukraine's Volunteer Army Medical Battalion – known as the Hospitallers. They transport scores of injured soldiers every day.

Sofia, a 22-year-old medical student, has been working with the team for the last 18 months. She too is sceptical about the chances of a ceasefire: " I cannot believe it, but I really wish it would happen," she says.

She tells me that when she first heard the news that the US and Ukraine had agreed to press for a ceasefire, Russian drones were flying over their base, being engaged by Ukrainian air defences. To her, talk of peace is from a parallel universe.

Sofia says "at least it's good that Ukraine and America are talking again". But as for hopes of any ceasefire, she points to the recent past.

"Looking at all the ceasefire calls that we had in the past, those didn't work. How is this going to work?" she asks.

Her fellow medic, Daniel, joined the Hospitallers from Sweden. He says he understands what it's like when a smaller nation is attacked by its giant neighbour. His grandfather fought for Finland against Russia during World War Two. History counts.

When Daniel first arrived in Ukraine, he used to ask injured soldiers what they would do after the war. He doesn't any more. "No-one wants to answer that," he says, "because they don't want to be disappointed. They don't dare to hope."

Daniel's not ruling out a ceasefire. But he adds: "You can't trust Putin to do anything that's not beneficial to Putin."

Ukraine has plenty of bitter experience of negotiating with Russia. France and Germany brokered ceasefires in 2014 and 2015, when Russian-backed forces first took parts of eastern Ukraine and Crimea. They didn't work. Nor did they deter Russia from carrying out its full-scale invasion of Ukraine eight years later.

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Ivan wears a stars and stripes patch on his uniform

There may be talk of peace, but the men of Ukraine's 68th Jaeger Brigade are still preparing for war. We watch as they rehearse their drills to evacuate an injured soldier under fire. Most have already had to do it for real.

In the distance, we can hear the rumble of artillery. It's just 10 miles to the frontline where they'll soon be returning soon.

They've heard little positive news in recent days. Ukrainian forces are being overrun in Kursk. In August last year, that surprise offensive into Russian territory seemed like a move of tactical brilliance – boosting morale. Now it's in danger of becoming a major strategic setback.

Kursk may soon no longer be a bargaining chip for future negotiations, but a heavy burden, with the loss of prized Ukrainian equipment and life.

One of the few positives is that the US resuming its military support. That matters to the 67th Brigade, who operate American made equipment. They're conducting their

drills with a US-supplied MaxxPro armoured vehicle.

Ivan, the driver, who wears a small American patch on his uniform, says he's relieved the Trump administration has now agreed to reverse the block. His vehicle needs regular repairs. "I would like them to keep helping," he says.

But Ivan is still unsure as to whether President Trump can be trusted.

"I have doubts," he says. As for trusting President Putin, he replies: "No. Never." Here, even a temporary ceasefire feels like a long way off.

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