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Ukraine's Zelensky offers peace concessions – and puts the ball in Putin's court

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Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky signaled new willingness to make concessions on several key negotiating points that have threatened to stall a nascent peace process with Moscow, effectively putting the ball in Russia's court.

In an unusually candid and wide-ranging meeting with reporters Tuesday, Zelensky

and the Russians.” The Ukrainian president also discussed specifics of security guarantees between Ukraine, the United States and European countries that would form a crucial part of any peace deal with Russia.

Zelensky said he expected to receive a response from Moscow Wednesday after the US side engages with the Kremlin.

The draft 20-point agreement represents a slimmed-down version of an original 28-point plan the US previously discussed with the Russian side. In his remarks, Zelensky outlined what the Ukrainian side says would be an acceptable compromise for withdrawing its troops from portions of the Donetsk region of eastern Ukraine that are currently not held by Russian forces.



A man walks next to a damaged building in Kramatorsk, Ukraine, on November 26. (*Anatolii Stepanov/Reuters*)

KRAMATORSK and SLOVIANSK in DONETSK REGION that currently stand in the way of any potential Russian advance deeper into the heart of Ukraine. Russian President Vladimir Putin has said Ukraine must effectively cede all of Donetsk for a peace plan to work.

Detailing his country's position, the Ukrainian president said Russia would have to engage in a withdrawal of its forces equivalent to ground ceded by Ukrainian troops, effectively establishing a demilitarized zone around some of the present front lines.

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“If we establish a free economic zone here, and it envisages a virtually demilitarized zone, – meaning heavy forces are removed from this area – and the distance, for example, is 40 kilometers (it could be five, 10, or 40 kilometers) – then if these two cities, Kramatorsk and Sloviansk, are our free economic zone, the Russians would have to pull back their troops accordingly by five, 10, or 40 kilometers,” Zelensky said.



Data as of December 1, 2025

Notes: "Assessed" means the Institute for the Study of War has received reliable and independently verifiable information to demonstrate Russian control or advances in those areas.

Sources: The Institute for the Study of War with AEI's Critical Threats Project; LandScan HD for Ukraine, Oak Ridge National Laboratory

Graphic: Renée Rigdon and Lou Robinson, CNN

Key points of draft plan

Among the other key points of the draft plan outlined by Zelensky, including proposed revisions by Kyiv:

- An affirmation of Ukraine's sovereignty and a non-aggression agreement between Russia and Ukraine;

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- Security guarantees provided to Ukraine by the United States, NATO, and European states that Zelensky said would “mirror Article 5” – NATO’s cornerstone principle of mutual self-defense. The plan would call for a military response and reinstatement of sanctions on Moscow if Russia invades Ukraine, but the guarantees would be rescinded if Ukraine launches an attack on Russia or opens fire on Russian territory without provocation;
- A development package to support Ukraine’s postwar economic recovery, including establishment of a Ukraine Development Fund to invest in technology, data centers, and artificial intelligence as well as investment in Ukraine’s natural gas sector by US companies. Zelensky estimated the overall economic losses caused by the war to be \$800 billion;
- A compromise proposal for the operation of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, currently held by Russia. Zelensky said Ukraine proposes the plant would be operated by a joint enterprise between the US and Ukraine, with 50% of the electricity output going to Ukraine and the remainder allocated by the US;
- The withdrawal of Russian troops from the Dnipropetrovsk, Mykolaiv, Sumy, and Kharkiv regions of Ukraine;

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- A legally binding agreement, with implementation monitored and guaranteed by a Peace Council chaired by US President Donald Trump; and
- A full ceasefire taking effect immediately once all parties agree to the deal.

Control of territory is the most complex point of any deal, along with the potential sequencing of events. Zelensky also spoke at length about a potential nationwide referendum in Ukraine that would formalize the end of the war.

“People could then choose: does this ending suit us, or does it not?” he said. “That would be the referendum. A referendum requires at least 60 days. And we need a real ceasefire for 60 days; otherwise, we cannot hold it. In other words, the referendum would not be legitimate.

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People living in territories controlled by Russia, Zelensky said, cannot be expected to cast a fair vote.

“But in the territory we control, where a legal and fair referendum can actually be conducted, the voting and preparation process – just as, by the way, with the potential elections our partners talk about – must take place under secure conditions,” he said. “Without security, legitimacy is in question as well. We explain all of this to our partners.”



A member of emergency personnel assists an elderly woman who was inside an apartment building damaged by a Russian drone strike in Kyiv, Ukraine, on Tuesday. *(Thomas Peter/Reuters)*

Ukraine has been under pressure to hold elections as soon as possible after an agreement is signed. Putin has long maintained that the government in Kyiv is not legitimate and that Ukraine must hold elections for a peace deal to work. Zelensky's presidential term expired in 2024, but elections cannot be held under martial law that was imposed after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Those wartime measures have been upheld by the Ukrainian parliament.

The **Trump** administration's peace effort – led by US special envoy Steve Witkoff and US President Donald Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner – has been slowly inching forward in recent weeks. Over the weekend, a Ukrainian delegation led by Ukrainian National Security Secretary Rustem Umerov and Kremlin envoy Kirill Dmitriev met separately with their American counterparts in talks that Witkoff described as “constructive and productive.”

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Speaking to reporters Wednesday on a conference call, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Dmitriev gave Putin “a detailed briefing on the results of his trip to Miami. Based on this information, Moscow will formulate its next steps and continue contacts in the very near future through existing channels.”

Peskov declined to discuss specifics, saying Moscow considered it “counterproductive” to discuss negotiations in the press.



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