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Can US-Russia Talks End the War in Ukraine? Risks and Opportunities for the EU

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The ongoing war in Ukraine is shaping Europe's geopolitical landscape. After the end of the Cold War, this conflict became the biggest challenge to European security and stability. Almost three decades of negligence of military capabilities and the complete outsourcing of European security arrangements to the U.S. have resulted in the fact that, despite economic superiority, none of the EU member states, nor the EU as an institution, possesses the military capacity to defend its strategic and geopolitical interests.

Recent talks between Russia and the United States have revealed the abovementioned reality once again. Despite the fact that the war is fought on European soil and it represents a clear and imminent threat to broader European security, the EU was left aside. This raised many questions among European politicians. While, theoretically, US-Russia talks could lead to a ceasefire, there exists a significant difference between US and EU approaches. While President Trump's administration is striving for the ceasefire agreement at "any costs", for the EU, peace settlement in Ukraine must uphold the country's sovereignty and ensure long-term security guarantees. Moreover, taking into account Russia's history of violating international agreements and using frozen conflicts to maintain influence over neighbouring states, European leaders want to prevent Russia from using current negotiations as a chance to regroup and prepare for future aggression.

At the same time, the outcome of the war in Ukraine will have profound implications for European security, its relations with NATO and its immediate neighbours, as well as on the EU enlargement processes - particularly concerning Moldova and Georgia but also Armenia.

The Prospects of U.S.-Russia Talks

The latest round of talks in Riyadh between Russia and the US has shown surprising changes in Russia's negotiating team. Previously, alongside high-profile diplomats like Sergei Lavrov and Yuri Ushakov, the delegation included the head of the Russian Direct Investment Fund, Kirill Dmitriev - a person known for his Western ties. However, for the recent round of negotiations, the Kremlin has replaced him with Senator Grigory Karasin, a former diplomat, who is well known to Georgians as an informal contact person in the Russian government for the issues connected to the occupied Georgian regions and General Sergei Beseda, a senior FSB officer.

Beseda's presence in talks is particularly notable. As head of the FSB's Fifth Service (also referred to as the "Operational Information and International Relations Service, " which is responsible for operations in the territories of the former Soviet Union), Beseda played a key role in Russia's covert operations in Ukraine. Arrested in early 2022 for allegedly providing misleading intelligence about Ukraine's surrender and released shortly. His return suggests a shift towards a more intelligence-driven approach to diplomacy, away from economic incentives. This shake-up reflects that Moscow's priority in these talks is less about finding peace and more about asserting control over the negotiations.

Multiple scenarios could evolve from these talks:

- **A Ceasefire Without Guarantees:** If a ceasefire is agreed without clear implementation mechanisms, it could allow Russia to consolidate its territorial gains, mirroring the frozen conflicts in Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) and Moldova (Transnistria). This would be unacceptable for Ukraine and its European allies.
- **Pressure on Ukraine to give up Territories:** Any U.S.-Russia deal that pressures Ukraine to surrender occupied regions would set a dangerous precedent, undermining international law,

which will embolden aggressors elsewhere. The EU has firmly supported Ukraine's territorial integrity and will likely resist any agreement that legitimises Russian annexations.

- **A Security Agreement for Ukraine:** A workable outcome for the EU would be only that one, which involve long-term security guarantees for Ukraine, potentially including NATO-style assurances, further EU integration, and continued military support. However, through statements made by Russian officials before and after talks, Russia will oppose Ukraine's Western alignment, making such a deal difficult or even impossible to achieve.
- **Lifting of Sanctions:** In its turn, Russia demanded the lifting of Western sanctions in exchange for de-escalation. The EU, having imposed on of the harshest sanctions on Russia in its history, most likely will not agree to lift it if there are no clear, verifiable steps toward a just and long-standing peace. Such a scenario seems less probable under Putin's regime.

The EU's Role: Supporting Ukraine and Ensuring Compliance

The EU has to play its own significant role in ensuring the adherence of the long-lasting peace in case there will be a success in the negotiations progress. If Russia decides to break its commitments, European leaders should be prepared to react with:

- Keeping Sanctions in Place and Expanding Them;
- Increasing Military and Financial Support for Ukraine;
- Starting Legal Action Against Russian Leaders;
- Fortifying NATO's eastern flank, as well;
- Rapidly increasing Europe's military-industrial potential and boosting the EU's Defence Capabilities

These actions will clearly signal that the EU is not going to stand by and let Russia gain from its aggressive behaviour without facing serious, long-term repercussions.

The War's Impact on EU Enlargement: What It Means for Moldova and Georgia

Beyond Ukraine, the results of this conflict will significantly influence the EU's enlargement strategy, notably concerning two candidate countries - Moldova and Georgia- and, in the long term, Armenia as well.

On one hand, a stable Ukraine would increase the EU's readiness to expand further eastward. On another, if the war will protract, or Ukraine will emerge from this war clearly defeated, European leaders might think twice before speeding up enlargement, fairing potential Russian reaction.

Moldova, whose pro-Western government narrowly defeated pro-Russian forces in recent elections, is facing a significant risk of hostility through its Russian-controlled region of Transnistria. A peaceful Ukraine would create a considerable security buffer, enabling Moldova to speed up reforms and make the EU membership process irreversible.

In contrast to Moldova, Georgia, once the frontrunner of the EU integration process, is now facing internal political turmoil and is increasingly moving away from the EU. Despite this, a weakened Russia would allow Georgia to pursue its European goals more freely and eventually can create favourable conditions for peaceful solution of the existing conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, currently occupied by Russian Federation.

Ultimately, the war in Ukraine is a defining factor in the EU's enlargement strategy. A clear Ukrainian victory or a well-enforced peace agreement would strengthen Moldova's and Georgia's EU prospects, while a frozen conflict could leave them in geopolitical limbo.

Conclusion: The EU's Stance

From an EU perspective, U.S.-Russia talks offer both opportunities and risks. While diplomacy is the preferred path to ending the war, any agreement must be structured in a way which will prevent further Russian aggression and ensure Ukraine's full sovereignty. European leaders remain cautious about any deal that does not include strong enforcement mechanisms and long-term security guarantees.

If peace talks fail or Russia violates a settlement, the EU should be prepared to respond with increased sanctions, military aid to Ukraine, and more substantial defence capabilities. It is evident that the war's outcome will shape the future of EU enlargement, and Ukraine's fate will be a precedent for Moldova and Georgia on their European aspirations.

In the end, the EU's priority remains clear: supporting Ukraine, deterring Russian aggression, and securing long-term stability in Europe. The coming months will determine whether these talks bring real progress or if the war continues in a prolonged and unpredictable manner.

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