

The Kremlin and Kyiv Agree to New Ceasefire in Ukraine

Featuring Mason Clark and George Barros



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Russia is offering rare support for a new ceasefire in Ukraine's eastern region of Donbas by not blaming Ukraine for recent ceasefire violations, despite derailing several similar ceasefires in the past. The ceasefire began on July 27 and represents an important new development in the now six-year-old conflict between the Ukrainian government and Russian-backed proxy forces in eastern Ukraine. In this episode of Overwatch, Mason Clark and George Barros explain the significance of the ceasefire and what Ukraine and Russia hope to achieve from it.

Jacob Taylor:

This is Overwatch, a podcast presented by the Institute for the Study of War. I'm Jacob Taylor. Russia and Ukraine agreed to a new comprehensive ceasefire in Ukraine's Eastern region of Donbas. The ceasefire began on July 27th and represents an important new development in the now six year old conflict between the Ukrainian government and Russian backed separatists in Eastern Ukraine. Today, I'm with Mason Clark and George Barros. ISW's Russia Team who will explain the significance of the ceasefire and what Ukraine and Russia hope to achieve from it. Mason, George, thanks for joining.

George Barros:

Thank you, Jacob.

Jacob:

Could one of you give us a quick overview of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine?

George:

The Kremlin intervened militarily in Ukraine in February 2014 after pro-Western protests forced out Ukraine's former pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich. Since then, the Kremlin has illegally occupied Crimea and maintained proxy militias in Eastern Ukraine's Donbas region. Russia and Ukraine brokered a tenuous ceasefire in Minsk, in Belarus, in 2015, which has made the past five years of war a frozen conflict.

While territory control in Donbas has largely not changed, the ceasefire overall has not ended the violence, with ceasefire violations occurring daily. Today, we will discuss the new measures that Ukraine and Russia agreed to in July to try to strengthen this tenuous ceasefire.

Jacob:

Thanks, George. So yeah, let's get into it. What are the terms of this new ceasefire?

Mason Clark:

So the new ceasefire measures, and the methods to enforce them, were negotiated by an organization or body known as the Trilateral Contact Group, which is a negotiation format between Russia, Ukraine, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, known as the OSCE, which covers the war in Donbas. After a couple of days of negotiation, they agreed to a new comprehensive ceasefire on July 23rd, scheduled to begin at midnight on July 27th. Russia and Ukraine agreed on a complete ban on offensive and sabotage actions, firing any weapons, including sniper and small arms fire, the use of drones, and the deployment of weapons in populated areas.

While, as George stated, major fighting in Ukraine has ceased since the 2015 Minsk Agreements, daily, sporadic

fire continues. And on average, the last two years, there's been one Ukrainian casualty every two to three days. Ukraine also gave the Kremlin a list of persons for a potential prisoner exchange as part of this new ceasefire agreement, which is a key priority of Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyi.

Jacob:

So it's been a little over a week. How is the ceasefire holding up?

George:

In terms of reducing the fighting, it's been moderately successful as there's been no Ukrainian serviceman killed in action as of today, August 4th. However, as Mason stated, the Kremlin's proxies continue to violate the ceasefire. For example, the ceasefire entered into effect at midnight on July 27th. The Kremlin's proxies and the Donetsk People's Republic actually violated it with shelling within the ceasefires very first hour, in the wee minutes of the first hour after midnight. The OSCE also reported over 200 ceasefire violations between July 27th and 31st. This is not really a surprise to anyone who's been watching this conflict as Russia and Ukraine have agreed to numerous similar ceasefires in the past six years of war. And almost all of these have collapsed, usually after the Kremlin has exploited them for a political benefit in the peace talks with Ukraine or for tactical operational advantages on the ground in Donbas.

Jacob:

Speaking of the Kremlin and its political machinations, how is Moscow framing these immediate ceasefire violations?

Mason:

That's the really key thing about this new ceasefire. In a quite stark change in rhetoric, the Kremlin did not claim the Ukraine violated the ceasefire in July 28th in the first day after it was implemented and has maintained positive rhetoric around the ceasefire as a step forwards to building trust and advancing negotiations. The Kremlin typically blames Ukraine for all ceasefire violations, which is actually helped by the fact that the OSCE only records ceasefire violations and not which side they came from, even when the Kremlin's proxies are blatantly at fault. And after the start of previous ceasefires, the Kremlin has generally taken any opportunity to allege that Ukraine is not adhering to the ceasefire, is launching sporadic attacks, that sort of thing. This time, however, the Kremlin has said that the ceasefire agreement deserves high praise for both sides' actions and is signaling that there is now a pathway to renewed peace talks after stating the Normandy process, a negotiation format including Russia, Ukraine, France, and Germany, had completely stalled due to Ukraine as recently as mid-July, which George will discuss shortly.

Crucially, Putin's presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov stated the ceasefire showed the control and willingness for peace of the DNR and LNR, the Kremlin's military and political entities in Donbas that it, in fact, directly controls despite claims otherwise. Kiev has so far refused to negotiate with these proxies and has set stringent restrictions on dealings with Donbas as long as they're in place and armed. The Kremlin is continuing to attempt to try and legitimize the DNR and LNR as independent entities as it continues its false framing that Russia is not a party in the war. Peskov additionally stated, interestingly, that Russia cannot guarantee the ceasefire because it is not involved in the war in Donbas, which is not true. They trust that the DNR and LNR will comply, showing their forbearance. This is likely a rhetorical tool to try and legitimize the DNR and LNR as responsible actors, potentially to try and coerce Ukraine to negotiate with them directly.

Jacob:

Got it. So why the sudden rhetoric change? Is the Kremlin seeking to resume peace talks?

George:

As Mason just said, we assess that the Kremlin more recently has actually not been pushing for peace talks. And really this all goes back to the Kremlin's strategic objectives in Ukraine, which is to regain control over Ukraine's politics and decision-making. Back in July, on July 15th, Ukraine made a decision to not include the occupied regions of Donbas that are controlled by the Russians' proxies in Ukraine's local elections. Every five years, Ukraine holds local elections. And one of the Kremlin's objectives was to have those elections be held in the Russian-controlled territories of Ukraine in order to in part legitimize those proxies and therefore create this permanent mechanism of influence on Ukraine's politics. And also to legitimize Russia's military intervention in the first place. But when the Ukrainian parliament decided to not do that, the Kremlin actually reacted very badly. The Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov, on July 21st, actually said that there were no grounds for holding new peace talks and the Kremlin overall was very frustrated with this decision.

Two days later, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyi and Russian president Vladimir Putin had a phone call in which they likely discussed the terms of this new peace talk. And there was also a Trilateral Contact Group meeting between Russia, Ukraine, and the OSCE, which resulted with the ceasefire. And as Mason said, immediately following the ceasefire, their implementation on July 27th, the Kremlin all of the sudden did a 180 on its position and has been praising the ceasefire and signaling opportunities or openness to new peace talks. And this is a really interesting direction where the Kremlin has made a shift and a stark change in its posturing.

Jacob:

This strikes me as kind of a confusing situation. So hopefully, one of you can unspool this a little more for me. If the Kremlin was recently upset by Ukraine's unwillingness to consider peace talks with Russian proxies, then why did the Kremlin agree to this ceasefire and signal possibility for peace talks? You also mentioned that the Kremlin typically undermines these ceasefires. So why are they suddenly promoting this one in a positive manner?

Mason:

Yeah, that's a great question. So we currently have two main hypotheses on what the Kremlin could be trying to get out of this ceasefire. First, is it tempting to use the ceasefire to argue the reliability of the Kremlin's proxies in Donbas, which I briefly alluded to, as an avenue to erode Zelenskyi's position that no elections can occur in Donbas with Russian proxy forces present. The timeline is actually pretty constrained on the Kremlin here. The local elections are scheduled for October 25th. So there's not that much time to attempt to erode Zelenskyi's position, which has been very resolutely that no elections can take place in Donbas until Ukrainian forces have complete control of the original and continuing Ukrainian border with Russia. So likely, what the Kremlin is trying to do here is erode that position and show that its proxies don't need to completely demilitarize or withdraw. Demonstrating that they won't attack, which hasn't really occurred, in an attempt to show that they can be a peaceful part of these elections.

Alternatively, the Kremlin could be seeking to gain some other concession from Zelenskyi by leveraging reduced casualties in Donbas and this peace process that is something that Zelenskyi has wanted for a long time. And George can talk about a few of those now.

George:

Thanks Mason. For example, these enhanced ceasefire measures could be an early indicator of some sort of Kremlin-led negotiation with Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyi. For example, one possible trade that the Kremlin may be seeking is to fix its water supply issue with Crimea. The Kremlin is facing acute water shortages in occupied Crimea due in large part because Ukrainian authorities blocked the main water canal that provided more than 80% of Crimea's fresh water supply in 2014. Russian occupational authorities have been challenged to

overcome these shortages and actually directly petitioned the Kremlin for help with the water this June. Earlier this spring, the Ukrainian officials were talking very loosely about the potentiality of resuming Ukraine's water supply to Crimea, but this issue was dropped due to domestic backlash.

Now, that whole episode could have indicated that the Kremlin was potentially angling or pressuring the Zelenskiy government to resume sending water. This could be one of the potential items on the table, which would be a major victory for the Kremlin. It would also have an additional benefit of intensifying domestic frictions within Ukraine. Other items that the Kremlin might be trying to extract from Ukraine could be things like increased withdrawals of Ukrainian military fortifications on the frontline in Donbas, renewed peace talks that advance the Kremlin's objectives of legitimizing its proxies in Eastern Ukraine, and other such actions.

Jacob:

Okay. So with regard to that water issue in Crimea, that strikes me as a very resource-centric issue. And I know that ISW's Russia Team has assessed, and will be assessing, in some upcoming reports that Putin and the Kremlin have somewhat limited resources and may be forced to reduce some of their activities as a result. I bring this up because I just want to ask directly, does the Kremlin appear interested in obtaining a peace settlement from Ukraine so that it can withdraw from the conflict there?

George:

That's a really good question, Jacob. To make it absolutely clear, and not to sound like a pessimist, but the Kremlin is not interested strictly for peace's interest in Ukraine. The Kremlin seeks to regain control over Ukraine's politics and legitimize its military intervention, and it uses these peace talks to achieve these ends. This is because, inside Ukraine where there's been a significant growing war fatigue, peace talks and the processes that lead towards peace talks are politically popular. That was one of Zelenskiy's initial campaign promises when he became president was to end the war in Donbas and restore peace. So when the Kremlin wants something from Zelenskiy, it either uses pressure, such as political, economic, or direct military pressure against Ukraine, or positive incentives, such as peace talks, ceasefires, and prisoner exchanges that are politically popular inside Ukraine. It's through these two mechanisms that the Kremlin has been using peace processes to string Zelenskiy along since he became Ukraine's president in May 2019.

Mason:

Exactly. And there's a big risk of Zelenskiy being drawn into making further concessions to the Kremlin through this new ceasefire as part of this running Kremlin pattern throughout the conflict of regulating the level of fighting in Donbas in sort of a carrot and stick approach to negotiations with Kiev. Zelenskiy is, of course, not in any way pro-Russian, but he has shown himself, unfortunately, to be very open to falling into these Kremlin traps where Putin will make "concessions" that don't really actually affect the Kremlin that much, and then get something in return that the Kremlin actually wants, such as water in Crimea or legitimization of these proxies in local elections from Zelenskiy. ISW has followed this campaign in detail over the last few years and will continue to provide updates on the ceasefire and the Kremlin's ongoing campaign in Ukraine.

Jacob:

And I doubt we're anywhere close to running out of material on this front to cover on Overwatch. I want to thank you both for being here today. Thank you for sharing your insight and your expertise.

Mason:

Thanks Jacob.

Kim Kagan:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Overwatch. We look forward to your feedback on this episode and previous ones. Visit www.understandingmore.org to learn about ISW's work and to sign up for our mailing list.

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