

Putin Calls Zelensky the West's Illegitimate Puppet. Can He Talk Peace With Him?

The first and only time Russian President Vladimir Putin, right, met with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, left, was in Paris in 2019.

If Russian President [Vladimir Putin](#) agrees to meet his Ukrainian counterpart, Volodymyr Zelensky, as urged by President Trump, he will come face-to-face with a man he has spent 3½ years excoriating as an illegitimate leader and puppet.

Negotiating directly with Zelensky would run sharply counter to the narrative Putin has carefully constructed and sold to Russians in an effort to justify his 2022 invasion of Ukraine: that the war is part of a broader conflict with the West in which Zelensky and his country are mere pawns.

Trump's call for a meeting puts Putin in a bind. If he declines, he risks angering the U.S. president, who has already threatened him with more sanctions. But sitting down with Zelensky could damage him politically with the Russian elite and the broader public.

Trump said Tuesday that he was working to bring the two leaders together as the next phase in his efforts to forge a lasting peace in Ukraine, but he nodded to the challenge at hand.

President Volodymyr Zelensky and leaders of European powers to discuss a potential path to ending Ukraine's war with Russia. Photo: Presidential Press Service

"They haven't been exactly best friends," he said in an interview with Fox News, adding that Putin and Zelensky will have to iron out details of a possible meeting if they agree to one.

The question of Putin's willingness to meet his Ukrainian counterpart has taken center stage following [a Trump-Putin summit in Alaska](#) and [discussions Monday at the White House](#) between Trump, Zelensky and European leaders.

On Tuesday, Russian officials gave little indication they were working toward such a meeting. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said plans for any contacts between officials should be laid out "with the utmost care." Other Russian officials ridiculed Zelensky as an unserious politician.

Agreement from Putin to meet Zelensky won't likely come quickly—or easily. He has dismissed the Ukrainian leader repeatedly as a servant of the West, and has insisted that various complex issues be solved before the two leaders sit down. He has also questioned Zelensky's legitimacy after he extended his mandate beyond the usual five-year term, citing the problems with holding an election during a war. Putin has questioned his authority to sign any peace agreement.

Putin has said a meeting between the two leaders should come at the end of a peace process—and more as a formality to sign the necessary documents. "I'm ready to meet, but if it's some kind of final stage, so we don't sit there endlessly dividing things up, but bring this to an end," he said in June. "But we will need the signature of the legitimate authorities."

The issues also go far beyond Zelensky. Putin sees the war as part of [a broader Russian push](#) to relitigate grievances the country has felt since the end of the Cold War, analysts say. Putin's engagement with the Trump administration is part of an effort to secure an agreement that goes far beyond territorial concessions in Ukraine and concerns the very makeup of Europe's security architecture.

"For Putin, this is a much wider confrontation with the West. And Ukraine is a battlefield between Russia and the West," said Tatiana Stanovaya, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Russia

Eurasia Center. “In Putin’s eyes, Zelensky is not a player,” she added. “The fact Ukrainians are fighting at all is because of Western support.”

Most important, a meeting with Zelensky could end the delicate dance Putin has performed around Trump’s peace efforts. To avoid more punishing sanctions, the Kremlin leader has professed his desire for peace while escalating offensives have won [Russian troops important gains](#) in the country’s east. A summit with Zelensky could bring an unwelcome moment of truth.

“A meeting could indicate that he’s really willing to negotiate the end of this war, and I don’t think he’s ready,” said Samuel Charap, veteran Russia watcher and senior political analyst at Rand Corporation.

The first and only time Putin met Zelensky was in 2019 at a very different moment in Russian-Ukrainian relations. At the time, Putin appeared to have high hopes for a relationship with his [newly elected counterpart](#) who had made peace with Russia a main campaign priority.

The meeting between Putin and Zelensky was hailed as a step toward peace after Russia had seized Crimea and backed separatists in eastern Ukraine with soldiers and money. But far from being the start of a working relationship, disagreements erupted over the details of a peace deal, including disengagement across the front line. Ties quickly deteriorated thereafter and the two haven’t met since.

The acrimonious relationship between Zelensky and Putin is one of the biggest roadblocks to peace. Mandel Ngan/AFP/Getty Images, Jeenah Moon/Reuters

Since the start of the war, Zelensky has believed that he could make headway in his relationship with Putin if he could sit down face-to-face with the Kremlin leader, but he has also drawn the ire of Moscow by issuing a vaguely worded decree that calls talks with the Kremlin leader impossible.

To satisfy Trump and Zelensky’s own desire to meet, Putin has said he isn’t opposed to talking face-to-face, but that various conditions would need to be met, including signals from Kyiv that it is ready to make serious concessions. Zelensky, for his part, has shown openness to meet without preconditions, most recently abandoning an earlier demand for a cease-fire to facilitate talks.

“If Ukraine begins setting various preconditions for a meeting—including justified ones regarding a cease-fire—then the Russians will present 100 of their own,” he said after his meeting with Trump and European leaders in Washington on Monday. “I think we should meet without conditions and explore what further progress there can be on this path to ending the war.”

Zelensky has successfully used the Kremlin leader’s resistance against him. In May, Trump had expressed his desire for Putin to come to Turkey where he could meet face-to-face with Zelensky. When Putin passed up the chance, Zelensky flew into Turkey and bemoaned how the Kremlin was “too afraid” to meet. This time, however, the political stakes are higher, adding pressure on the Kremlin leader.

With rising demands from Trump and European leaders, Moscow has hinted it will double down on its refusal and continue to paint Zelensky as a dilettante that Putin shouldn’t stoop to meet.

Former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova went on the offensive on Tuesday to level accusations against the Ukrainian leader to justify Putin's own refusal to meet.

Ultimately, analysts say, Putin is likely to pour cold water on the idea of a meeting without actually refusing one outright—a strategy he has previously deployed in response to calls for a cease-fire.

Agreement over maximalist peace terms that Russia handed to Ukraine in Istanbul, according to Stanovaya, is likely to serve as Moscow's precondition for a meeting. Those terms include Ukraine's disarmament, political neutrality, and abandonment of its aspiration to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

"What Putin will say now is 'let's do it,' but first we need to talk about common documents we can finalize in such a meeting," she said. "And we'll find ourselves in the same situation as before the Alaska summit."

Write to Thomas Grove at thomas.grove@wsj.com and Matthew Luxmoore at matthew.luxmoore@wsj.com