



What Moscow Truly Wants From Kyiv: Total Submission

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These are difficult days for Ukraine. Two years into its war against Russia, Western support for Kyiv's fight against the Kremlin appears to be flagging. In Washington, billions of dollars in much-needed military aid have stalled in Congress. Europe has sought to fill the resulting funding gap, but officials in Brussels are quick to admit that the continent simply doesn't have the resources to sustain Ukraine's defense on its own. As a result, they warn, Ukraine could soon experience what amounts to a dramatic reversal of strategic fortune.

It's no wonder, then, that more world leaders have begun telling Kyiv to sue for peace. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, for instance, has urged Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to acquiesce to peace talks under his government's sponsorship. And in a now-infamous interview recorded earlier this month, Pope Francis counseled Zelensky to surrender, saying that "the strongest is the one who sees the situation, thinks of the people, and has the courage of the white flag, and to negotiate."

There's only one problem. Such calls presuppose that Ukraine is the intransigent party, that Russia is open to compromise and that the only thing required for meaningful peace is for Kyiv to come to the negotiating table. Nothing of the sort is true, however.

Take it from Vladimir Putin himself. In a recent interview with Russia media outlets, the Russian president ruled out near-term talks, now that the tide of battle is turning in Moscow's favor. "It would be ridiculous for us to start negotiating with Ukraine just because it's running out of ammunition," Putin told reporters. Rather, Putin made clear, Russia plans to press its current advantage — and push for a situation that assures its security, that is, a decisive Ukrainian defeat.

Former Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, now the head of Russia's ruling "United Russia" faction, has been even more explicit. In a recent post on social media platform Telegram, he laid out what kind of "peace formula" might be acceptable to Moscow. Medvedev's plan includes things like the complete and unconditional surrender of Ukraine; the "denazification" (that is, the purge) of all of its entire government; financial compensation to the Kremlin for a war that it itself started; and a wholesale absorption of Ukraine into the Russian Federation. Maddeningly, Medvedev depicts such a plan — which would result in the wholesale eradication of Ukraine as an independent nation — as a "soft Russian formula for peace," and a "compromise position."

The Kremlin, in other words, isn't interested in a negotiated settlement that establishes a new *modus vivendi* between Moscow and Kyiv. Instead, more than two years into the current conflict, it's never been clearer that the fight between Russia and Ukraine is a life-or-death struggle over identity, independence and indeed Ukraine's very existence.

That, in a nutshell, is why Russia's other neighbors are so nervous. Countries on Russia's periphery know very well that, should the Kremlin succeed in subjugating Ukraine, it would only be a matter of time until they become targets as well. It's the reason countries like Poland, Lithuania and Finland are rallying to defend Ukraine by all means necessary, and simultaneously leading the charge to build up Europe's defense capacity. Simply put, they understand that, should Kyiv fall, their capitals would likely be next.

But what Baltic, Scandinavian and Eastern European capitals understand doesn't seem to have sunk in in Washington. As a result, America now runs the risk of making an extremely costly mistake. Given Russia's own stated goals, the choice facing Congress isn't simply if it should support Ukraine or spend hard-earned American tax dollars elsewhere (like securing the southern U.S. border). Rather, it is whether to expend some money now to enable Kyiv to successfully halt Russia's advance, or to allocate significantly more later (in the form of treasure and possibly even American blood) to prevent Moscow from making further inroads deeper into Europe.

One can only hope that U.S. policymakers, for all their current political divisions, ultimately choose the cheaper and more prudent path.