



**The Brookings Institution  
*The Current* podcast**

**“Behind the negotiating table to end the Russia-Ukraine war”**

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*Episode Summary:*

A recent flurry of negotiations among American, Russian, Ukrainian, and European officials to find a diplomatic solution to end the Russia-Ukraine war has, so far, been unsuccessful. To discuss Putin’s negotiation tactics, the reality on the battlefield, and how Ukraine can best position itself moving forward, Fiona Hill and Thomas Wright, two Brookings Foreign Policy senior fellows, join *The Current*.

**HILL:** We need to have, for the stability of Europe and frankly for global security, some ironclad agreement that Russia is not going to continue this war and that wouldn't revert back to trying to have a military solution to issues that it feels is unresolved if there is some kind of peace deal.

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**WRIGHT:** This is *The Current*, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. My name is Tom Wright. I'm a senior fellow with the Talbott Center for Strategy, Security, and Technology at the Brookings Institution.

I am speaking today with my colleague Fiona Hill, who is a senior fellow at the Center for the U.S. and Europe at the Brookings Institution, and previously was deputy assistant to the president and senior director for Europe and Russia. And today we're talking about Ukraine, Russia, Ukraine, and the recent negotiations.

So Fiona, you've a long career in research but also in addition to your time at the NSC, you were at the National Intelligence Council as the NIO for Russia. What could you tell us about how Russians negotiate, and particularly how Vladimir Putin negotiates? How, how would Putin be thinking about this moment and what's his negotiating style?

[1:14]

**HILL:** Well, the style for Putin and for those people around him is really to try to tease out what other people are willing to offer, and then to see if he can get to make them go further in terms of what they're putting on the table for any kind of resolution of any issue, and really not show your hands at all. Trying to perhaps, let's just say give the impression that you're willing to compromise or that you're willing to change your mind or that you're willing to come forward with some inducements or incentives yourself. But really being extremely vague about that.

So it's a basically a case of Putin trying to get everybody else to show their hand while keeping his somewhat concealed.

**WRIGHT:** And if we come to the recent sort of diplomacy on negotiations, who is Kirill Dmitriev? What is he up to? Is this a Russian plan? How should we sort of interpret the Russian side of this? And then when we look at the U.S. side and Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner, you know, going to Moscow, that seems to most of us to be quite unusual. You know, it's not the secretary of state. The focus is more on business, you know, opportunities. But presumably some substance, you know as well. What do you make of that? And is there any real prospect of success here?

[2:32]

**HILL:** Well, Tom, I mean you yourself have been in government and have written some really good pieces about what you would do if you were laying out a a diplomatic solution to this conflict, the various things that you would have to take into consideration.

But what we're looking at here is not really a diplomatic approach to this. In the sense of of of course that there are diplomats involved, at least certainly on the

Russian side that we see in the mix-- people around Sergey Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, they appear from time to time. Yuri Ushakov, who is the equivalent of the National Security Advisor to President Putin. You know, he's often on display in some of these meetings, we see him on the various screens during all of them. And, you know, we occasionally get an appearance from the U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio, but he's obviously not the person who is leading these negotiations.

So there's a patina there, if, if one might put it that way of the actual officials of the state involved in some degree. But what we're really seeing is envoys and emissaries of the individual presidents.

Kirill Dmitriev, he's the head of the Russian Sovereign Wealth Fund, he's somebody who's worked in a number of western businesses, including famously Goldman Sachs. He's done a lot of his education in the United States, including at Harvard, Harvard Business School. I mean, he's somebody who is a fixer, a deal maker, somebody who looks at various things from the point of view of an investor. His wife is very close to one of Putin's daughters. So you see a kind of pattern here of emerging of personal contacts and ties of Vladimir Putin himself. And Putin obviously of often does use emissaries.

We've gotta remember about Putin as well, that he was somebody in the KGB, that's where he got his training. He likes to see about how he can find people's vulnerabilities or actually things that people might be attracted by, somewhere that he can reel people in.

And what he has done, when we flip to the the U.S. side of things, is understand completely that President Trump is a business dealmaker. He wants to do business. He's selected someone who's a close confident and friend of his in the business environment as Witkoff, Steve Witkoff, who is somebody who is, you know, basically a real estate mogul like Trump himself, somebody who's more renowned for building condominiums, or he's developing condominiums, than finding a kind of a condominium in the sense that one might think about in diplomacy.

And so, Kirill Dmitriev is very well suited to this role in Putin's mind of engaging on business terms. Somebody who speaks excellent English and can approach Trump and Witkoff as a businessperson.

Putin's always thinking about what's the angle here? How do I approach somebody? He's got the number of President Trump, he knows he wants to make a deal, and he's emphasizing this, and all the context is business, not really as diplomacy.

**WRIGHT:** So, you know, just going to the battlefield for a second, you know, because if Putin got a deal and brought the war to a close on relatively favorable terms, you know, he could say that he had taken a significant part of, you know, Ukraine. We would see what the terms of the deal would be on security guarantees and, you know, Ukraine's sovereignty.

But the alternative is to continue fighting the war. And he's made some territorial gains, but they've been very small, especially this year, very incremental. And the price he's paid is very, very high. It's still about 1,500 casualties a day on the

Russian side, supposedly over 1.2 million since the war began on the Russian side alone. And those casualties have actually increased this year, not decreased.

So, is he facing any domestic pressure? Is this something that he can sustain and keep doing sort of indefinitely? And, you know, if it is the latter, how ultimately can this war be brought to an end?

[6:16]

**HILL:** Well, I think getting to the latter point that you've just raised there about indefinitely, it's hard to imagine how anybody can do something like this at the kind of scale of loss that you've already laid out indefinitely. Eventually there will be some pressures that build up. But what Putin is betting on, this is his gambit rather than just a gamble, because he actually thinks that there's a fair basis for him to make these kinds of conclusions, is that really the the West will fold first.

And again, he's got this reading of Trump and the people around him. He knows that Trump wants to see this resolved. Trump's got his own interest for the war to end. It's not just about the casualties, although I think President Trump genuinely is shocked by the fact that not just so many Ukrainians are being slaughtered, but that Putin is willing to preside over the mass slaughter of his own people as well, or grievous injury to so many soldiers in those numbers that you put out there.

For Putin, he thinks that this is a price worth paying, but he doesn't think he's going to have to pay it for that long. And I think that that is part of the issue. Putin thinks that he can have it solved as a deal, as a business deal. He's confident that he can actually offer some things to the United States and to Trump. This is why there's all this talk about investment and all kinds of benefits that there could be to U.S. businesspeople, not to the U.S. per se. And it's, you know, being talked about at the expense of Ukraine.

Putin's not really thinking that he's going to get a long-term solution here in which there's an ironclad agreement in which there is, you know, some partition of Ukraine, and then, you know, Russia goes off and kind of forgets about all of this.

But that's really the crux of the matter that you and others have written about. We need to have for the stability of Europe and frankly for global security, some ironclad agreement that Russia is not going to continue this war and that wouldn't revert back to trying to have a military solution to issues that it feels is unresolved if there is some kind of peace deal.

And that's really the dilemma because I don't think we're going to basically reach that by this kind of haggling and talking about opening up all kinds of business opportunities for U.S. energy companies or, you know, other investors in Russia. That's not where we're going to find a solution to this conflict.

**WRIGHT:** I want to come to that in a second but let me just first go to Ukraine because you also dealt with the Ukrainians in your time at the NSC. You know, they're in a difficult position. They've actually moved a little bit this year. At the start of the year, they were not in favor of an immediate cessation to the war without security guarantees. They had moved toward that in in March. There's been really no

change at all as far as I can tell on the Russian side. But the Ukrainians have been somewhat flexible. But they're in a tough spot now because, you know, the Trump administration is pressuring them to make additional concessions, including on territory.

What's your read of where they are at in terms of the negotiations? And if the war were to continue, not through their own doing, but because Russia wouldn't compromise, you know, what what is Ukraine's sort of best strategy to ultimately be in the strongest possible position on the battlefield so they can have a successful negotiation?

[9:18]

**HILL:** Well, this is punishing for Ukraine, let's be honest about it. And it's very hard to, you know, imagine how they're going to sustain this for a long period of time. But their best strategy is really to blunt the Russian offensive and to make it impossible for Putin to move any further forward, and to try to, you know, work to put pressures on Russia in various ways with allies and partners that constrain Putin's ability to pursue the war.

One of the main things that enables Putin to pursue the war is of course revenues that come into the Russian state coffers. And those coming through oil and, you know, other exports. We've had a very hard time of limiting Russia's ability to sell oil to the international markets.

And, and that is important not just because of the cost of weaponry, but it's also because Russia is paying contract payments to the people at the front. One of the reasons you're not getting the backlash that lots of people have predicted in Russia itself to the war is because people are being paid to fight. And that's actually bringing in revenue for families of servicemen in remote areas. It's not just, you know, places like Moscow, St. Petersburg, the usual big cities. In fact, that's not the places where those revenues are going from the front; there's jobs being generated, all the rest of it.

This war is actually shockingly profitable despite all of the the consequences of it for people inside of Russia. So you've got to basically make it very difficult for those revenues to come in and for Putin to be able to keep paying for war. He's willing to pay this price, but you have to basically take that money away.

So it's not just on the battlefield where you have to have the weaponry and the manpower and the, you know, the sustainability of your ability to lead and, you know, this means, you know, the, the, the organization of the battlefront and have the people in place to be able to do that. It's also about how do you constrain Russia?

So Russia's, again, as I said, exportability, but that means that Ukraine has to have allies and partners to help it think not just through the security guarantees, but also about how do you deprive Russia of that wherewithal.

And that's really the challenge. Because if the U.S. is not on Ukraine's side and seems to be leaning towards more Russia and Russia's interest, which is what we see so far, that makes it more unlikely that Ukraine's going to be able to pull that off.

**WRIGHT:** Yeah, no, no, great point. And let me come to the last question, which is broadening out a little bit to Europe. I mean, let's say that the U.S. did get and impose a deal to end the war and then it immediately, the administration immediately proceeded to lift all sanctions and tuck some of these sovereign assets as they want to fund joint, you know, Russia-U.S. projects, investment projects, and we saw a general thaw in relations between this administration and Vladimir Putin, that would presumably make European allies very, very nervous.

Russia's unlikely to sort of dramatically moderate its behavior globally in some way. So how would all of that play out? I mean, both in Europe, in sort of the U.S.-Russia relationship, how would it affect, you know, Putin's calculations and behavior?

[12:13]

**HILL:** Well, look, I mean, that would lead to quite a rift, I think, with Europe. The talk so far about using the frozen assets has been about reconstruction for Ukraine. And to really make sure that, I mean, Ukraine's never going to be made whole, but certainly to address that issue of, you know, how you would build a Ukraine to position itself for the future together with, European allies, as Ukraine becomes more part of Europe, not just in in a people's mental maps, but actually in reality.

And what Putin has been positing, and the United States seems quite eager, you know, to talk at least, let's just say Trump, Witkoff, and others, about is really them cashing in and a bonanza. It's not kind of clear would Russia really participate in the reconstruction of Ukraine in the the territory that still belongs to Ukraine? Or are we talking about the occupied territories of Ukraine that, that Russia has, Mariupol and, you know, other places, Donbas, Crimea, for example.

All of that discussion seems to be really about how U.S. and Russian businesspeople who, you know, don't represent also on the U.S. side, you know, the whole totality of the U.S. economy, would cash in on this. And that's a a discussion that I think would really precipitate and provide more of an impulse for a lot of Europeans deciding that, you know, really now is the time to have more, much more independence economically and financially from the United States, not just in terms of the defense sector, which, you know, I think all of us see this high time that Europe was doing much more for its defense.

But I think this would lead to some degree of a political rift as well, which of course would for for Putin would be delightful. I mean that for him would be great. I mean, this then becomes the U.S. and Russia dealing over the heads not just of Ukraine, but also of Europe and really kind of then putting Europe on the back foot.

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**WRIGHT:** Great. Fiona, this is wonderful. Thank you very much. If you would like to learn more about Fiona's work or Brookings' work in general on Russia, Ukraine, you can find it on our website, [www dot Brookings dot edu](http://www.brookings.edu).

This is Tom Wright and thank you for listening.