

Trump's frustration with Putin boils over with no Ukraine peace deal in sight

The U.S. president lashed out at the Kremlin on Tuesday as the White House continued to consider increasing sanctions against Russia.

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President Donald Trump lashed out at the Kremlin on Tuesday for its unwillingness to negotiate a ceasefire with Ukraine as he continued to consider increased sanctions against Russia, an escalation from his previously friendly tone toward Vladimir Putin that came as the president appeared to grow gloomier about his ability to broker peace in Ukraine.

In perhaps his harshest rhetoric yet against Putin, Trump declared that Putin is “playing with fire” — a reference to Russia’s escalating bombardment of Ukraine in recent days despite the U.S. president’s efforts to broker a peace agreement between Kyiv and Moscow.

Trump has offered mixed messages about Putin, oscillating between praise of a leader with whom he has said he believes he can do business and frustration about his inability to bring Russia to the bargaining table.

The frustration appears to have boiled over this week. On Tuesday, he suggested that he had been shielding Putin from tough consequences related to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

“What Vladimir Putin doesn’t realize is that if it weren’t for me, lots of really bad things would have already happened to Russia, and I mean REALLY BAD. He’s playing with fire!” Trump posted on Truth Social.

The post followed Trump’s suggestion Sunday that he might be open to sanctions against Russia, a significant shift after months in which he had been so cautious about pressuring Putin that he even exempted the country from tariffs that he imposed on most of the rest of the world.

“This war is Joe Biden’s fault, and President Trump has been clear he wants to see a negotiated peace deal. President Trump has also smartly kept all options on the table,” White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said Tuesday.

But it was still unclear whether Trump was truly prepared to impose more sanctions, and he has kept quiet about whether he supports a bipartisan effort in Congress to bolster them. Russia has faced years of U.S. sanctions, although experts say they could be tightened against its energy and banking sector.

The State and Treasury departments have each been drafting potential sanctions packages against Russia that would focus on those sectors, one diplomat familiar with the discussions said. The same teams have also been assessing the effectiveness of the current sanctions regime and contemplating the rollback of certain existing sanctions, said the diplomat, who, like others, spoke on the condition of anonymity to speak frankly about closed-door talks.

But any shift would depend on the personal preference of Trump, who has made clear that he alone is the arbiter of U.S. policy. For now, there has been no action either to pressure Putin or boost Ukraine, which is still receiving the final tranches of military aid approved during the Biden administration. That assistance is due to run out in the coming months, and Trump has not signaled plans to revive or extend it, putting Kyiv in an uncertain strategic position.

“There is a choice facing the current administration, which is to authorize additional security assistance for Ukraine so they continue to receive the weapons they need to defend their country,” said David Shimer, the former Ukraine director on President Joe Biden’s National Security Council. “Or to chart a different course, which is to let U.S. security assistance wind down, which would disadvantage Ukraine, play to Russia’s advantage, and ultimately embolden and incentivize Russia to keep this war going.”

For years, Trump has heralded his close relationship with Putin, described the trust he believes exists between the two and downplayed the role of Russian aggression in the war in Ukraine. He has blamed Ukraine for getting invaded and blasted Biden for allowing it — all while minimizing Putin’s central role in the violence. Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine began in early 2022 and has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives, according to intelligence estimates.

On the campaign trail, Trump declared his intention to resolve the war within “24 hours,” even before coming to office — though he said in March that he was being “a little bit sarcastic.”

Through it all, Trump has been solicitous toward the Russian leader, lauding last week his “good conversation with a nice gentleman named Vladimir Putin” in which “the tone and spirit of the conversation were excellent.”

Trump made plain his desire to move beyond the war to revive U.S.-Russia trade ties, despite Putin’s spurning the U.S. president’s demand for an immediate ceasefire, which Ukraine has embraced. In a call with European leaders after the conversation with Putin, Trump said that the Russian leader did not appear ready for peace, a second diplomat said.

As he did Tuesday, Trump has occasionally flared his frustration with Putin’s continued assault on Ukraine — though he has taken no steps to do anything about it.

In late April, the same day that he met with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky at the funeral of Pope Francis in Rome, Trump aired a wide range of grievances around the state of peace negotiations and the media’s portrayal of his efforts to bring a ceasefire to Ukraine. He also criticized Putin’s commitment to the process.

“There was no reason for Putin to be shooting missiles into civilian areas, cities and towns, over the last few days,” Trump said. “It makes me think that maybe he doesn’t want to stop the war, he’s just tapping me along, and has to be dealt with differently, through ‘Banking’ or ‘Secondary Sanctions?’ Too many people are dying!!!”

Ukraine experts say that the absence of concrete pushback from Washington has given Moscow a green light to continue the war.

“We’ve seen statements coming from the president and others around him that he’s frustrated, that he’s pissed off,” said William Taylor, a former ambassador to Ukraine. “All those kinds of statements have had zero effect. It’s almost a calling of the bluff by the Russians. Putin doesn’t take these statements seriously. What can cause Putin to take us seriously is actual steps.”

Taylor said that increased sanctions on Russia, renewed military support for Ukraine and an encouragement to Europeans to use \$300 billion in frozen

Russian sovereign assets to help Kyiv could all serve to flip Putin's calculus about coming to the bargaining table.

Some in the Trump administration have been lukewarm about the measures until now.

"If you start threatening sanctions, the Russians will stop talking," Secretary of State Marco Rubio told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee last week.

"And there is value in us being able to talk to them and to drive them to get to the table."

The concern stands in stark contradiction to Trump's strategy on economic coercion, which he has embraced as a negotiating tactic in almost every other circumstance: against the European Union, China, Harvard and law firms he views as critical of his actions.

Sanctions experts say that there are measures that could be tightened beyond Biden-era efforts.

"When we're talking about increasing sanctions on Russia, there's actually quite a bit of low-hanging fruit," said Edward Fishman, who helped design Russia sanctions during the Obama administration and is the author of the book "Chokepoints: American Power in the Age of Economic Warfare."

While U.S. sanctions have targeted several high-profile Russians banks and a number of individuals in Putin's circles, there are still plenty of legal ways that U.S. dollars continue to flow into Russia, Fishman said. Russia's state-owned oil and gas companies, for example, have escaped full U.S. sanctions so far.

"Actually just cutting off individual Russian companies and banks from the U.S. financial system, freezing their assets, blocking their ability to transact in dollars — like, there are still targets that are there," Fishman said.

Biden held back from unleashing the full blast of sanctions on Russian energy — for example, by targeting buyers of Russian oil and gas — because he was concerned it would drive up global energy prices and rebound against U.S. voters.

Trump — who is far less sympathetic to Kyiv — may be unlikely to cross Biden's line on that front, though gas prices are lower now than they were during the peak of Biden-era inflation, giving the White House somewhat more room to maneuver, Fishman said.

“Do I think it will deliver some sort of quick result — where, like, you impose the sanctions and a week later you get a ceasefire? No, I don’t,” Fishman acknowledged. “But I think that it’s a really important step to get Putin off of his current thought process that time is on his side.”