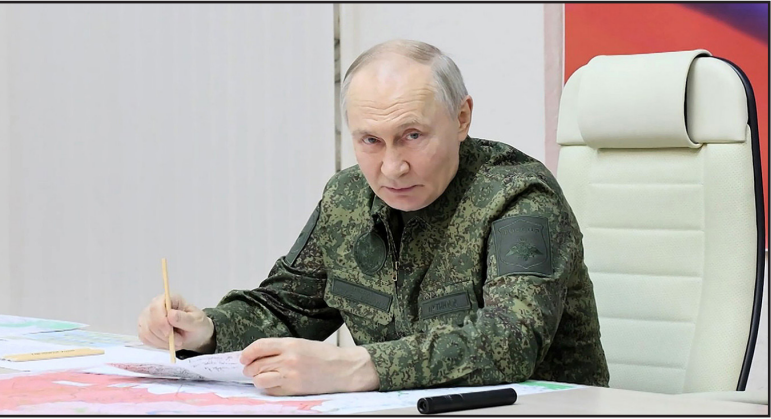


Report: Putin Wants End to NATO Expansion, Sanctions Relief for Peace



Russia's President Vladimir Putin

MOSCOW (Dispatches) - President Vladimir Putin's conditions for ending the war in Ukraine include a demand that Western leaders pledge in writing to stop enlarging NATO eastwards and lift a chunk of sanctions on Russia, according to three Russian sources with knowledge of the negotiations.

U.S. President Donald Trump has repeatedly said he wants to end the deadliest European conflict since World War Two and has shown increasing frustration with Putin in recent days, warning on Tuesday the Russian leader was "playing with fire" by refusing to engage in ceasefire talks with Kyiv as his forces made gains on the battlefield.

After speaking to Trump for more than two hours last week, Putin said that he had agreed to work with Ukraine on a memorandum that would establish the contours of a peace accord, including the timing of a ceasefire. Russia says it is currently drafting its version of the memorandum and cannot estimate how long that will take.

Kyiv and European governments have accused Moscow of stalling while its troops advance in eastern Ukraine.

"Putin is ready to make peace but not at any

price," said one senior Russian source with knowledge of top-level Kremlin thinking, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

The three Russian sources said Putin wants a "written" pledge by major Western powers not to enlarge the U.S.-led NATO alliance eastwards - shorthand for formally ruling out membership to Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova and other former Soviet republics.

Russia also wants Ukraine to be neutral, some Western sanctions lifted, a resolution of the issue of frozen Russian sovereign assets in the West, and protection for Russian speakers in Ukraine, the three sources said.

The first source said that, if Putin realizes he is unable to reach a peace deal on his own terms, he will seek to show the Ukrainians and the Europeans by military victories that "peace tomorrow will be even more painful".

Putin and Russian officials have repeatedly said any peace deal must address the "root causes" of the conflict - Russian shorthand for the issue of NATO enlargement and Western support for Ukraine.

Kyiv has repeatedly said that Russia should not be granted veto power over its aspirations

to join the NATO alliance. Ukraine says it needs the West to give it a strong security guarantee with teeth to deter any future Russian attack.

President Volodymyr Zelenskii's administration did not respond to a request for comment.

NATO has also in the past said that it will not change its "open door" policy just because Moscow demands it. A spokesperson for the 32-member alliance did not respond to Reuters' questions.

Putin ordered tens of thousands of troops into Ukraine in February 2022 after eight years of fighting in eastern Ukraine between Russian-backed separatists and Ukrainian troops.

Russia currently controls just under one fifth of the country. Though Russian advances have accelerated over the past year, the war is costing both Russia and Ukraine dearly in terms of casualties and military spending.

On Wednesday, a Turkish Foreign Ministry source said Türkiye's foreign minister will travel to Kyiv on Thursday for a two-day visit after discussing peace efforts to end Russia's war in Ukraine in Moscow earlier this week.

Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan held talks in Moscow on Monday and Tuesday, meeting Russian President Vladimir Putin and other Russian officials, including Moscow's top negotiator at talks in Istanbul earlier this month aimed at ending the three-year war.

In Kyiv, Fidan is expected to meet with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal, his Ukrainian counterpart Andrii Sybaha, and Defense Minister Rustem Umerov, who is also Kyiv's top negotiator with Russia, the source said.

During the talks, Fidan will repeat an offer to host further peace talks between Russia and Ukraine, the source added.

Delegates from Moscow and Kyiv did not agree on a ceasefire in Istanbul this month, but agreed to trade 1,000 prisoners of war and deliver, in writing, their conditions for a possible ceasefire.

NATO to Ask Berlin for Seven More Brigades Under New Targets, Sources Say



The NATO alliance is dramatically increasing its military capability targets

BERLIN (Reuters) - NATO will ask Germany to provide seven more brigades, or some 40,000 troops, for the alliance's defense, three sources told Reuters, under new targets for weapons and troop numbers that its members' defense ministers are set to agree on next week.

Exact figures for NATO's targets - either overall or country by country - are hard to verify as the information is highly classified.

One senior military official who, like the other sources spoke on condition of anonymity, said the target for the total number of brigades that NATO allies would have to provide in future will be raised to between 120 and 130.

This would mean a hike of some 50% from the current target of around 80 brigades, the source said. A government source put the target at 130 brigades for all of NATO.

Neither the German defiance ministry nor NATO responded immediately to requests for comment.

In 2021, Germany agreed to provide 10 brigades - units usually comprising around 5,000 troops - for NATO by 2030. It currently has eight brigades and is building up a ninth in Lithuania to be ready from 2027.

Providing a further 40,000 active troops will be a big challenge for Berlin, however. The Bundeswehr has not yet met a target of 203,000 troops set in 2018, and is currently short-staffed by some 20,000 regular troops, according to defiance ministry data.

Last year, Reuters reported that NATO would need 35 to 50 extra brigades to fully realize its new plans to defend against an attack from Russia and that Germany alone would have to quadruple its air defense capabilities.

Furthermore, the new NATO targets do not yet reflect any provisions for a drawdown of U.S. troops in Europe, sources said, the prospect of which has rattled Europeans due to NATO's defense plans that rely heavily on U.S. assets.

Washington has said it will start discussing its reduction plans with allies later this year. U.S. President Donald Trump's administration has told Europeans that the United States can no longer be primarily focused on European security.

During the Cold War, Germany maintained 500,000 troops and 800,000 reserve forces. Today, alongside Poland, it is tasked by NATO with providing the bulk of ground forces that would be first responders to any Russian attack on the alliance's eastern flank.

NATO members have massively increased defense spending since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and have been urged to go further by Trump, who has threatened not to defend countries lagging behind on defense spending.

At a summit in The Hague next month, the alliance's head Mark Rutte will seek an agreement from national leaders to more than double their current spending target from 2% of GDP to 5% - with 3.5% for defense and 1.5% for more broadly defined security-related spending.

In a historic shift, Germany recently loosened its constitutional debt brake so that it can raise defense spending, and it has backed Rutte's 5% target.

German Chief of Defense Carsten Breuer has ordered his country's forces to be fully equipped by 2029, by which time the alliance expects Moscow to have reconstituted its military forces sufficiently to attack NATO territory.

News in Brief

PARIS (AFP) - A 74-year-old pedophile and former surgeon who raped hundreds of victims over a period spanning more than two decades was given a maximum 20-year prison sentence by a French court. Joël Le Scourarnec was found guilty of raping and sexually assaulting 299 children. Judges followed the public prosecutor's recommendations regarding the length of the sentence and the criminal court of Morbihan ordered that Le Scourarnec should serve at least two-thirds of the sentence before he can be eligible for release. Most of the victims were unconscious or sedated hospital patients at the time of the assaults. The average age was 11. Among the victims were 158 boys and 141 girls.

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - U.S. President Donald Trump's administration has ordered its missions abroad to stop scheduling new appointments for student and exchange visitor visa applicants as the State Department prepares to expand social media vetting of foreign students, according to an internal cable seen by Reuters. U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio said in the cable that the department plans to issue updated guidance on social media vetting of student and exchange visitor applicants after a review is completed and advised consular sections to halt the scheduling of such visa appointments. The move comes as the Trump administration has sought to ramp up deportations and revoke student visas as part of its wide-ranging efforts to fulfill its hardline immigration agenda.

CARACAS (Reuters) - Venezuela's ruling Great Patriotic Pole coalition secured over 83 percent of the votes in regional and parliamentary elections, the National Electoral Council (CNE) said Tuesday. With nearly all ballots counted and a voter turnout of 43 percent, the pro-government coalition won 5 million votes, accounting for 83.42 percent of the total, for the National Assembly, said CNE Vice-President Carlos Quintero. Opposition coalitions trailed far behind, with the Democratic Alliance receiving 6 percent and the UNTC-Unica alliance garnering 5 percent. In terms of seats, the ruling bloc claimed 253 out of 267 in the new National Assembly. The coalition also won 23 out of the 24 governorships and 235 of 260 seats in regional legislatures.

WASHINGTON (AP) - SpaceX's prototype Starship exploded over the Indian Ocean, capping another bumpy test flight for the rocket central to billionaire Elon Musk's dream of colonizing Mars. The biggest and most powerful launch vehicle ever built lifted off around 6:36pm (2336 GMT) from the company's Starbase facility, near a southern Texas village that earlier this month voted to become a city - also named Starbase. Excitement ran high among SpaceX engineers and spectators alike, after the last two outings ended with the upper stage disintegrating in fiery cascades over the Caribbean.

MADRID (AFP) - Four women and three girls died after their migrant boat capsized shortly before reaching safety in Spain's Canary Islands on Wednesday, emergency services said, the latest tragedy on the perilous route. Emergency services in the Atlantic archipelago said rescuers supported by a helicopter were working to save people in the port of La Restinga on the island of El Hierro. Red Cross spokesman Alexis Ramos told RTVE there could be "more than 100 people" on the boat but was unable to provide a figure for the number of missing. Public broadcaster RTVE aired footage of rescuers throwing lifebuoys to people clinging onto an overturned boat and treading water off El Hierro.

French Taxi Driver Protests to Continue for Rest of Week



Taxis are seen as French driver gathers for a strike protesting over proposed government cuts.

PARIS (Reuters) - French taxi drivers are protesting regularly over proposed government cuts to cash for ferrying patients to and from medical appointments, highlighting the challenge Prime Minister Francois Bayrou faces as he seeks to slash next year's budget.

Bayrou is hoping to push through a 40 billion euro (\$45 billion) budget squeeze in 2026, positioning the collective belt-tightening as an act of civic duty to correct the country's gaping deficit.

After pensions, health spending is the single biggest drain on the budget. As part of efforts to rein it in, the government hopes to make 150 million euros in savings on the 6 billion euros it shells out annually to private taxi and ambulance firms

ferrying patients back and forth.

Cabbies from across France, many of whom rely on the state fares for a sizeable chunk of their income, have descended on Paris since mid-May for angry protests that have led to dozens of arrests.

Some out-of-town drivers have slept in their cars while others have tried to block access to Paris' airports and have threatened to do the same to the French Open tennis tournament taking place on the outskirts of the capital.

Sandra Vialatte, who heads a taxi firm in the Loiret region south of Paris, said the government was not listening to the industry's proposals to lower costs.

"We understand that savings need to be made, we have solutions to save money,

we try to propose them but they close the door to discussions," she said during a protest last week.

France has a long history of flouting EU overspending rules and currently is running the biggest public sector deficit in the euro zone at an estimated 5.4% of economic output this year.

The government's planned 40 billion euros in budget savings is necessary if France is to have any hope of meeting its deficit target next year of 4.6%, which it says is a vital first step towards reaching an EU ceiling of 3% by 2029.

France's budget woes are undermining its efforts to ramp up defense spending to counter potential Russian aggression, and are also drawing unwelcome scrutiny from ratings agencies. Meanwhile, U.S. President Donald Trump's tariff threats threaten the country's economic growth.

The independent public audit office warned on Monday that the social welfare and health systems' finances were "out of control" in part due to the soaring costs of services like medical transport.

Bayrou, a long-term debt hawk, has promised to deliver a blueprint in early July to share the pain broadly as he tries to hammer home the idea that France will never get a grip on its public spending without a collective effort - and sacrifices.

"All French people will have to make an effort," Bayrou said on BFM TV on Tuesday, adding that he wouldn't "target any category of French people at the expense of another."

Italian Catholic Church Reports Higher Number of Abuse Cases in 2023-2024

ROME (Reuters) - Italy's Catholic Church on Wednesday reported a rise in the number of suspected victims of abuse, mostly at the hands of priests, with 115 cases over the course of 2023-2024.

The figure, which includes as many as 21 children under 10 and 35 "vulnerable adults," compares with 89 alleged victims reported for 2020-2021 and 54 for the year 2022.

The suspected cases were linked to 67 alleged perpetrators, including 44 priests, 15 members of religious orders and eight laypersons, a report by the Italian Bishops' Conference (CEI) showed.

The global Catholic Church has been shaken for decades by scandals involv-

ing paedophile priests and the covering up of their crimes, triggering a crisis that is among the major challenges facing newly elected Pope Leo XIV.

Italy is one of the countries whose local bishops have been more reluctant to confront the issue, compared to other churches in Europe and North America.

The CEI has published reports on abuse since 2022, limited to the period from 2020. Other national churches, and even a single Italian diocese, have published research stretching back decades.

Italian bishops collect data on abuse from listening centers they have set up across the country, where people can flag cases involving themselves or oth-

ers, obtain psychological or spiritual help, or ask for information.

But out of 103 such centers covered by Wednesday's report, around two-thirds had zero people reaching out to them during 2023-2024, suggesting a reluctance to turn to them.

Among the alleged cases reported, CEI said, there were 36 instances of inappropriate behaviour or language, 25 of inappropriate touching, 19 of sexual harassment, 11 involving sex, and three of grooming via social media or the internet.

The Italian church also said that just over half of the alleged abuse cases that were reported to its centres were committed in 2023-2024, with the rest dating from further back in time.

UN Says Strong Chance Average Warming Will Top 1.5C in Next 4 Years



GENEVA (AFP) - The United Nations warned on Wednesday that there is a 70 percent chance that average warming from 2025 to 2029 would exceed the 1.5 degrees Celsius international benchmark.

The planet is therefore expected to remain at historic levels of warming after the two hottest years ever recorded in 2023 and 2024, according to an annual climate report published by the World Meteorological Organization, the UN's weather and climate agency.

"We have just experienced the 10 warmest years on record," said the WMO's deputy secretary-general Ko Barrett.

"Unfortunately, this WMO report provides no sign of respite over the coming years, and this means that

there will be a growing negative impact on our economies, our daily lives, our ecosystems and our planet."

The 2015 Paris climate accords aimed to limit global warming to well below 2C above pre-industrial levels - and to pursue efforts to peg it at 1.5C.

The targets are calculated relative to the 1850-1900 average, before humanity began industrially burning coal, oil and gas, which emit carbon dioxide (CO2) - the greenhouse gas largely responsible for climate change.

The more optimistic 1.5C target is one that growing numbers of climate scientists now consider impossible to achieve, as CO2 emissions are still increasing.