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## *Putin's Brief Ceasefire is a Prelude to Further Escalation of this Bitter War*



Photo by [Ahmed Zalabany](#)

President Vladimir Putin ordered his army in Ukraine to observe a 36-hour ceasefire for the Russian Orthodox Christmas holiday this weekend, a move which will raise hopes of a longer-term end to the fighting. It is the first such truce covering the whole battlefield since the Russian invasion 11 months ago and serves Russian interests more than those of Ukraine.

The Russian temporary truce is apparently unconditional and has the propaganda advantage of making it appear that it is Moscow that wants to stop the fighting and Ukraine that wants to continue it.

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Earlier in the day, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan offered to act as a mediator between Russia and Ukraine. But it is difficult to see how a short unilateral truce by Russia would open the way to a ceasefire or a peace agreement. Both Kyiv and Moscow are still making maximalist demands and believe they can improve their positions on the battlefield.

Putin is demanding that Ukraine withdraws from territory which Russia claims to have annexed, and that Kyiv recognises Russian annexation of what it already holds. Kyiv is demanding that Russia withdraws from all of Ukraine.

“Vladimir Putin reaffirmed Russia’s openness to a serious dialogue, provided that the Kiev authorities fulfil the well-known and repeatedly voiced requirements and take into account the new territorial realities,” the Kremlin said.

Given that it is Ukrainian forces which have been advancing since last September, there is no reason for Kyiv to accept the Russian demands and many reasons for them not to. For the moment, Ukraine has the upper hand militarily and will not want to lose momentum or give time for Western support to ebb. On the contrary, President Volodymyr Zelensky is pressing the US and its allies for more and better weapons, enabling Ukraine to resume its counteroffensive.

Earlier in 2022, when Russian armoured columns were still stalled close to Kyiv, Ukraine showed itself more open to Turkish mediation and to compromise over territory. But its military and diplomatic position is now far stronger, and Ukraine and its Western allies suspect that a ceasefire would only serve for Moscow to reorganise and re-equip its forces in order to launch another offensive. The moment may come for an open-ended ceasefire, but not yet.

Russia failed to take Kyiv and topple the Ukrainian government when it invaded with 190,000 troops on 24 February. Almost nothing has gone right for the Kremlin since its initial disastrous miscalculation, which Putin sought for six months to pass off as a “Special Military Operation” which would have little impact on the day -to-day life of the Russian people.

The success of a Ukrainian counteroffensive around Kharkiv in the east of the country, and the Russian withdrawal from Kherson in the south in September and October, produced a partial Russian mobilisation of 300,000 extra troops. But, as with every other aspect of the Russian war effort, the mobilisation was ill-organised and looks unlikely to produce sufficient trained troops to shift the military balance.

The only Russian success in Ukraine so far has been to degrade Ukrainian infrastructure – and the electrical grid in particular – by the use of precision-guided ground-to-ground missiles and drones. It might also use – though for now the chances are remote – tactical nuclear weapons.

Away from Ukraine, Russia has so far had surprising success in limiting the economic damage caused by Western sanctions, while the rest of Europe has suffered severe economic consequences from the rise in oil and gas prices.

The present balance of power might change. Suppose Russian forces suffer more defeats, the Kremlin might become more interested in a ceasefire along current front lines, but this probably would not bring a lasting peace any closer. Ukraine currently has little incentive to quit while it is ahead, and Zelensky would have difficulty in selling any such deal to the Ukrainian public when they feel that they are winning. Only if Ukrainian forces began to suffer serious defeats – and probably not even then – would Kyiv have any incentive to stop the fighting.

Moscow may calculate that, even if Ukraine shows no sign of buckling, its Western backers may begin to put serious pressure on Kyiv to negotiate and accept some form of deal to bring an end to the war. But this would only happen if the Western powers thought that Putin and Russia would do a deal in which Moscow accepted that it had been defeated – and there is no sign of this happening.

In warfare any outcome is possible, but for now escalation still looks a more likely option than a temporary or long-term peace.

*Patrick Cockburn is the author of [War in the Age of Trump](#) (Verso).*

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