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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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03.04.2025

## *So close to a ceasefire*

*How the failed peace negotiations in Istanbul 2022 and the "Bucha massacre" are connected (Part 1 of 2)*



At the end of March 2022, the Russian army withdrew from the suburbs of Kyiv. It was driven out, as was enthusiastically reported locally and in the West, by the heroically fighting Ukrainian army. A few days later, images and videos appeared in the media of corpses lying on the street in the suburb of Bucha or apparently executed in a basement. Many of the murdered had their hands tied behind their backs. The blame was immediately clear in the West: the Russian army had quickly murdered a large number of civilians during its retreat. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky expressed his horror and told the cameras that Russia was committing genocide and wanted to destroy "us." He called on the German government to show more resolve and recalled that 14 years earlier, at the NATO summit in Bucharest, Germany and France had prevented Ukraine from joining the alliance. German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock also spoke on X on April 3: "The images from Bucha are unbearable. Putin's unrestrained violence is wiping out innocent families and knows no bounds. Those responsible for these war crimes must be held accountable. We will

tighten sanctions against Russia and support Ukraine even more strongly in its defense." The background to the incident was unknown to the general public in the West at the time. However, Russian-language and other media outlets had already reported on some important facts.

### **Compromise within reach**

The background is as follows: Immediately after the Russian invasion of Ukraine began in February 2022, direct negotiations between the two countries took place, first in Belarus and Geneva, and then in Istanbul. At a meeting of EU foreign and defense ministers in Brussels on March 21, 2022, government representatives initially refrained from imposing further sanctions against Russia and expressed cautious optimism about the negotiations. Indeed, there had been astonishing progress in these peace negotiations by the end of the month.

[According to the negotiating documents](#) published by the *New York Times* in June 2024, it was agreed that Ukraine would be a neutral and sovereign state in the future, without foreign troops on its territory. It would not belong to any military bloc. The country's security would be guaranteed by the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, who would act as guarantor powers. While Moscow also wanted to appoint Belarus as a guarantor power, Kyiv demanded this for Turkey. At that time, the exact ceilings for the individual Ukrainian military branches and the precise mechanism under which the guarantor powers would act were still disputed. The issue of Crimea and the People's Republics in the east was to be frozen and resolved politically through talks within ten to 15 years.

On March 29, the head of the Russian delegation, Vladimir Medinsky, expressed optimism about the negotiations in Istanbul, describing the Ukrainian proposals as "constructive." The Russian side also stated that it intends to reduce its military activities toward Kyiv and Chernihiv "drastically and in a variety of ways" in order to strengthen mutual trust and create the necessary conditions for further negotiations.

In the weeks prior, the Russian army had occupied the northern outskirts of the capital. The Ukrainian government had retreated to the city of Ivano-Frankivsk near the Polish border. At the same time, at the end of March, Russia announced its intention to intensify military operations in eastern Ukraine. In any case, it is doubtful whether the Russian army's true goal was to occupy Kyiv, a city of one million inhabitants. How could that be achieved – without a huge troop deployment and without getting bogged down in endless and bloody street battles? Instead, it can be assumed that the Russian advance to Kyiv's city limits had two functions: first, to put pressure on the Kyiv government and force a split in the Ukrainian

army; and second, to build on this, to consolidate and long-term expand its position in the Donbass and the southeast. Russia has succeeded in both.

### **Agreement sabotaged**

The talks in Istanbul were thus on the right track; it seemed as if the war could be ended within a few weeks. Mikhailo Podoliak, the Ukrainian presidential advisor and Kyiv's chief negotiator in Istanbul, also declared at the time: "The Russian delegation is constructive. But that doesn't mean the negotiations are easy. They are difficult." Peace seemed within reach, and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was already holding out the prospect of a meeting between the two countries' foreign ministers. The puppet masters in the West were horrified and alarmed. The spiral of confrontation with Russia, which had been painstakingly and systematically built over the course of twenty years and whose essential element was the Westernization of Ukraine and its integration into the Western military alliance, seemed to have reached its limits after just a few weeks of war. Something had to be done. How could such a peace be prevented?

Much of the development described here was unknown to the general public at the time. Established media outlets such as the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* reported on it sporadically, but only sporadically and often in a distorted and relativizing manner. The few reports that did occur were lost in the flood of malicious and anti-Russian reporting, in the depiction of all possible atrocities and the degradation of Russia. Above all, the far-reaching significance and impact of the Istanbul negotiations and the (intermediate) results achieved up to that point were thoughtfully and meticulously downplayed by the major Western media or withheld from the public entirely. Immediately after the results became known, the negotiations were called into question. "Experts" were called in to ask whether Russia was even serious about the talks. Rumors had already surfaced that the Ukrainian delegation at the talks might be about to be poisoned. And so it went on.

On March 30, 2022, the Russian army withdrew from the suburbs of Bucha and Irpin, northwest of the capital, as announced the day before, as a sign of goodwill. The following day, Anatoly Fedoruk, the mayor of Bucha, released a video in which he happily announced that the city was now "liberated." He made no mention of corpses. However, he urged the population that had fled the small town in the weeks before not to return to the city yet. On April 2, the police also announced that a "cleansing operation" was currently underway by a special paramilitary unit (Safari). The area still had to be "cleansed" of Russia's "saboteurs" and "accomplices." A film was even released showing the unit driving through the empty streets. Here, too, no corpses can be seen. Many of the images and videos released at the time

are no longer accessible. At the same time or immediately after the special unit, the fascist "Azov" battalion entered Bucha, as can be seen in pictures and a report in the *New York Times* . On the evening of the same day, the first pictures and videos appeared of corpses scattered on the streets.