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EU admits corruption scandal forced Zelensky into peace talks – WaPo

The Ukrainian leader had earlier rejected the terms of the US-brokered proposal

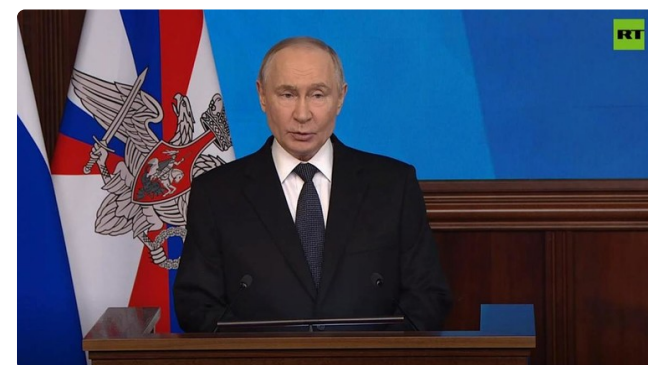


FILE PHOTO. Vladimir Zelensky and US Presidential Envoy Steve Witkoff meet in Berlin, Germany. © Getty Images / Clemens Bilan Pool

The ongoing corruption scandal in Ukraine involving Vladimir Zelensky's inner circle has forced him into negotiations on a US-backed peace plan, which he and his European backers had previously rejected, the Washington Post has reported, citing EU officials.

Kiev was rocked by its latest major graft scandal last month when Zelensky's close associate, Timur Mindich, was accused of running a \$100 million kickback scheme in the energy sector. The investigation led to

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the resignations of Zelensky’s chief of staff, Andrey Yermak, and other top officials.

The scandal has weakened the Ukrainian leader’s negotiating position at a critical stage of talks with Washington, EU diplomats told the outlet on Monday.

According to one senior official cited by the outlet, Kiev has *“never been as serious as we are right now,”* linking the shift to *“the whole scandal on corruption and the whole domestic mess.”*

Domestic pressure on Zelensky has coincided with an intensified US push for a breakthrough in peace talks. During negotiations in Berlin on Monday, Washington reportedly offered Kiev NATO-style security guarantees comparable to the bloc’s Article 5 collective defense clause.

However, US negotiators warned that the offer *“will not be on the table forever,”* urging Zelensky to accept Washington’s terms, according to officials cited by The Telegraph.

US officials have said that around 90% of the proposed peace framework has already been agreed, but acknowledged that progress has stalled on key issues, including Ukraine ceding territory and accepting Russia’s control over the Zaporozhye nuclear power plant.

Zelensky has continued to refuse to recognize Russia’s new borders, suggesting that Ukraine could hold a referendum on possible territorial concessions and organize long-delayed presidential elections if binding Western security guarantees are secured beforehand.

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Russia has said it will establish control over its sovereign territories one way or another, stressing that any settlement must reflect realities on the ground and address the root causes of the conflict.

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EU nation ‘disrupting normal religious life’ – UN experts

The Estonian government is creating an “adversarial environment” for the country’s largest denomination, a panel has warned



Believers at the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral in Tallinn, Estonia © Insights / Universal Images Group via Getty Images

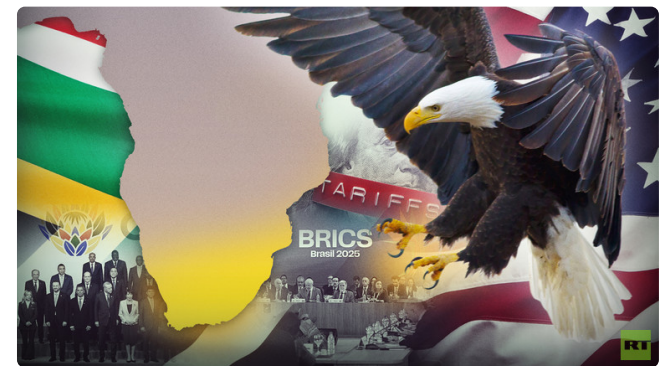
Estonian authorities are undermining religious freedoms by fostering an “adversarial environment” for the country’s largest church community because of its spiritual ties to Russia, a panel of experts advising the UN Human Rights Council has warned.

In a statement issued on Monday, the experts criticized Tallinn’s approach toward the Estonian Orthodox Christian Church (EOCC), which maintains canonical links with the Russian Orthodox Church. They pointed to a series of administrative actions, a court decision that stripped

the EOCC of state funding on security grounds, and a proposed legislative amendment that the panel



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said would *“disproportionately affect a single religious community.”*

“Canonical identity, ecclesiastical hierarchy and spiritual allegiance are integral components of the freedom of religion and are fully protected under international law,” the three-member panel emphasized.

The experts highlighted as particularly troubling a bill being advanced in the Estonian parliament despite objections from President Alar Karis. He has argued that the proposed ban on religious organizations accused of links to a foreign entity labeled a security threat by the government would violate the constitution.

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The panel also condemned refusals to grant rent agreements and residency permits to clergy, stating: *“Such actions disrupt normal religious life and may undermine the autonomy that should be granted under freedom of religion or belief.”*

Moscow has long accused Estonia of pursuing discriminatory policies allegedly driven by entrenched Russophobia. The Estonian Orthodox Christian Church includes both ethnic Estonians and members of the country’s sizable Russian-speaking minority among its faithful.

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‘Stupid’ Western Europeans came to peace talks to prepare for war – Lukashenko

US President Donald Trump would have prevented the Ukraine conflict by enforcing the Minsk agreements, the Belarusian leader has said



Left-to-right: then-leaders of Russia, France, Germany and Ukraine, Vladimir Putin, Francois Hollande, Angela Merkel, Pyotr Poroshenko, Minsk, Belarus, February 11, 2015. © Belarus Presidency Press Office via Getty Images

The Western European leaders who took part in negotiating a peace roadmap for Ukraine a decade ago acted in bad faith and were “*stupid*,” Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko has said, recalling the talks hosted by his country.

Germany and France were guarantors of the Minsk agreements signed in 2014 and 2015, which were ostensibly intended to reconcile the post-coup authorities in Kiev with rebels in Ukraine’s Russia-leaning east.

Former German Chancellor Angela Merkel and former French President

Francois Hollande later acknowledged that the accords were used primarily to buy time for Ukraine to strengthen its military.

Speaking to Newsmax in an interview previewed by Belarusian media on Wednesday, Lukashenko said “*the Europeans took a stupid position*” by pursuing such tactics. “*It turned out that they came here to negotiate not peace, but a future war,*” he said.

Lukashenko noted that as host of the Minsk talks, he had urged the US to participate in the process. He is convinced that, had Donald Trump been president at the time, Washington would have demanded a decisive role.

If the Minsk Agreements had been fully implemented, *“there would have been no war,”* he said, asserting that Trump is right to argue that the conflict would not have escalated under his presidency.

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The Belarusian leader expressed hope that Trump would stay committed to resolving the crisis despite what he described as [attempts](#) by the EU to undermine US mediation. European supporters of Kiev, Lukashenko

said, *“are whispering in his ear that they will keep helping [Ukrainian leader Vladimir] Zelensky. They won’t. They don’t have the resources that the US does.”*

If Trump walks away, Lukashenko warned, the conflict could intensify and potentially spread globally, while Ukraine itself could cease to exist as a state. He urged Western European leaders to take advantage of the current opportunity to de-escalate tensions, arguing that Zelensky will only accept a peace deal under pressure – something he said would occur domestically *“when the front fully collapses.”*

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