EK Strategic Communications Center

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Kremlin Exploitation: Weaponizing Negotiation Rhetoric Without Policy Change

Moscow uses peace rhetoric to seek concessions, divide the West, and continue the war unchanged

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EK Strategic Communications Center

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Drawing on 20+ years of experience in media, GR, and PR, and over 12 years in analysis and strategic communications, EK Stratcom is built around a core team of exiled Russian professionals.

Since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, EK Stratcom has served as a key mechanism for real-time disinformation monitoring, analytical reporting, and targeted messaging — reaching millions inside Russia and advising Western governments on Kremlin FIMI operations.

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Executive Summary

Following significant reputational damage from failed support for Venezuela's Maduro, Iranian authorities, and multiple shadow-fleet tanker seizures, the Kremlin launched an aggressive image-rehabilitation campaign.

Putin made a series of theatrical proposals: publicly calculating what the U.S. should pay Denmark for Greenland; offering $1 billion from frozen Russian assets to Trump's "Peace Council" for Gaza reconstruction; and suggesting remaining funds could be used to rebuild Ukraine after the war. These maneuvers coincided with U.S.–Russia Kremlin talks on January 22 and trilateral U.S.–Russia–Ukraine meetings in the UAE on January 23.

Simultaneously, Moscow escalated terror in Ukraine. In 2025, 2,400 Ukrainian civilians were killed — a 30% increase year-on-year. Systematic destruction of energy infrastructure served dual purposes: pressuring the Ukrainian population and signaling threats to Europe.

After weeks of overtly anti-American propaganda, the Kremlin abruptly shifted to maximum complaisance toward Trump. Foreign Minister Lavrov described the U.S. as "the only Western country willing to address root causes." Despite this tonal shift, Putin's June 2024 maximalist "peace" demands remain unchanged. Kremlin sources confirmed there has been no substantive revision of Russia's position, while Peskov declined to comment on claims that negotiations were in their "final stages."

Why it matters

Domestic Objectives: Putin's "Peace Council" proposal and Greenland commentary are primarily domestic propaganda tools, portraying him as a global statesman practicing "political judo" on the world stage. State media framed the frozen-assets gambit as a "grandmaster move": appearing constructive while implicitly demanding the unfreezing of Russian assets.

The proposal creates a no-lose scenario for Moscow. If Washington refuses, Putin appears as a reasonable actor blocked by Western cynicism; if accepted, Russia gains financial access while continuing the war. Propaganda narratives simultaneously exaggerate Ukraine's battlefield weakness and fabricate victories — including repeated false claims of capturing Kupiansk — to reinforce the image that Putin negotiates from a position of strength.

International Strategy: The Kremlin's preferred outcome was articulated clearly by Duma Deputy Speaker Babkov: reach an agreement with Washington and then "impose it on Europe," whose weakness over Greenland allegedly proves that "their voice doesn't carry much weight."

This explains Moscow's selective rhetoric: praising Trump as "the least anti-Russian president since FDR" while openly mocking Europe. The strategy exploits U.S.–EU divisions, aiming to negotiate over Europe's head and determine Ukraine's future without meaningful European or Ukrainian input.

The tanker issue further exposes Kremlin leverage calculations. Two Russian sailors detained aboard the *Marinera* reportedly matter "personally to Putin," according to Kremlin sources. Their release would represent a significant U.S. concession and signal readiness to accommodate Moscow. In contrast, French seizures of Russian shadow-fleet tankers prompted Kremlin threats of "de facto war with Europe," while Moscow maintained deliberate restraint toward Washington. The message is clear: the Kremlin cannot afford confrontation with the U.S. and uses Europe as a pressure valve instead.

Conclusions

1. **Appeasement Strategy Failure:** Despite diplomatic gestures from Washington, Russia continues large-scale terror, escalates pressure on Europe, and mocks the U.S. through domestic propaganda. Concessions have produced escalation, not moderation.
2. **Rhetorical vs. Substantive Change:** While publicly "valuing American efforts," the Kremlin has not altered its June 2024 maximalist demands. Negotiation rhetoric functions as propaganda, not as evidence of policy change. Lavrov's reference to an "early stage" confirms no breakthrough is imminent.
3. **Leverage Inversion:** Putin seeks to negotiate from perceived strength despite real vulnerabilities: tanker seizures, diplomatic isolation, and failed client-state support. Without an immediate ceasefire precondition, talks give Moscow time to consolidate gains while projecting reasonableness.
4. **Transatlantic Wedge Strategy:** The Kremlin explicitly aims for a U.S.–Russia agreement imposed on Europe and Ukraine. Davos-era messaging emphasized a "complete rupture" between the U.S. and EU, while the Greenland narrative was amplified to normalize Russian territorial revisionism.
5. **No Incentive to End the War:** Moscow benefits more from prolonged conflict combined with periodic negotiation theater than from genuine peace. The escalation of terror alongside "peace" rhetoric demonstrates the Kremlin has no intention of stopping the war absent overwhelming pressure.

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