# Prisoner exchange offers relief but masks stalled peace talks between Russia and Ukraine



The recent prisoner exchange between Russia and Ukraine, involving the release of 390 Ukrainian prisoners of war, has undeniably brought a wave of relief to the families affected, highlighting both personal triumph and the broader humanitarian imperative to secure captives' freedom. Each returnee is a testament to resilience amid the harrowing backdrop of conflict; however, analysts caution against interpreting this moment as a prelude to genuine peace.

Historically, negotiations between the two nations have been marred by a pattern of tactical exchanges rather than transformative dialogue. For over eight years, during the Minsk agreement process, periodic prisoner releases often gave rise to false hopes. These gestures allowed Russia to present itself as a negotiator willing to cooperate, all while intensifying its demands and consolidating territorial gains. Each returned prisoner, while a welcome sight, often came at a cost of further entrenchment of Russian positions and escalating rhetoric from Moscow’s proxies regarding Ukraine's territories.

As this latest exchange unfolds—bringing home a mix of soldiers and civilians—from Chernihiv to a charged frontline stretching across a thousand kilometres, the stakes could not be higher. While Western leaders, including U.S. President Trump, herald the swap as a potential breakthrough, the underlying realities paint a more complex picture. The region remains embroiled in violence, with Russian forces maintaining lethal capabilities and executing strikes in areas like Odesa and Kherson.

The current administration in the U.S. is navigating particularly intricate waters, as experience with Russian negotiating tactics remains contentious. The Biden administration's openness to dialogue risks miscalculation, reminiscent of past interactions where Russia exploited perceived diplomatic openings to further its ambitions. Although the exchange has drawn attention to the plight of those languishing in captivity, it does not necessarily signal any substantial shift toward lasting peace. The broader negotiating table remains fraught with conflicting expectations, with Russia demanding Ukrainian withdrawal from territories it has annexed—an ultimatum Kyiv, backed by its Western allies, vehemently rejects.

Subsequent discussions in Istanbul highlighted the obstacles to a ceasefire, each nation standing firm on its terms, reflecting a cyclical pattern of dialogue marred by maximalist demands. While Turkish mediators have deemed the prisoner exchange a step towards establishing trust, the fact remains that substantive negotiations are still stalled. Russia's insistence on a peace proposal that addresses what it frames as the underlying issues of the conflict reveals a lack of genuine intent for compromise.

This return of prisoners is more than a mere moment of familial reunion; it serves as a stark reminder of the continued suffering and the poignant reality that many families are still awaiting news of their loved ones. The emotional reunions seen in Chernihiv underscore the profound need for resolution, yet they simultaneously warn of the deceptive nature of negotiating tactics employed throughout this conflict.

As Ukraine navigates its arduous path to securing sovereignty and peace, critical indicators will not reside in the frequency of prisoner exchanges but in the cessation of hostilities, the withdrawal of Russian forces, and a verifiable commitment to respecting Ukraine’s territorial integrity. Until these benchmarks are achieved, the international community must remain vigilant, eschewing the comfort of humanitarian gestures for the clarity of strategic objectives. The past has shown that conflating these exchanges with substantive progress can lead to dire consequences, with Ukraine bearing the brunt of such misinterpretations.

While the return of Ukrainians incarcerated in Russia deserves to be met with joy and support, it also necessitates a sober reminder that lasting peace remains a complex and challenging pursuit. The lessons learned from history must compel Ukraine and its allies to approach future negotiations with clear-eyed realism, ensuring that the echoes of past errors do not resonate into the present.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://euromaidanpress.com/2025/05/24/russia-just-released-390-pows-heres-why-that-doesnt-mean-peace-is-coming/), [[2]](https://apnews.com/article/8b745966e2f9a484d80ed89fb70d5648)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://euromaidanpress.com/2025/05/24/russia-just-released-390-pows-heres-why-that-doesnt-mean-peace-is-coming/), [[3]](https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/trump-says-major-prisoners-swap-completed-between-russia-ukraine-2025-05-23/), [[6]](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/opinion/article/2024/08/02/russia-us-prisoner-exchange-is-a-diplomatic-tour-de-force-but-not-the-dawn-of-a-new-d%C3%A9tente_6707669_23.html)
* Paragraph 3 – [[2]](https://apnews.com/article/8b745966e2f9a484d80ed89fb70d5648), [[4]](https://www.ft.com/content/efd4a71e-6b6d-468a-98f2-6653144963ce)
* Paragraph 4 – [[3]](https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/trump-says-major-prisoners-swap-completed-between-russia-ukraine-2025-05-23/), [[5]](https://time.com/7286136/russia-ukraine-prisoner-swap/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://euromaidanpress.com/2025/05/24/russia-just-released-390-pows-heres-why-that-doesnt-mean-peace-is-coming/), [[2]](https://apnews.com/article/8b745966e2f9a484d80ed89fb70d5648)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://euromaidanpress.com/2025/05/24/russia-just-released-390-pows-heres-why-that-doesnt-mean-peace-is-coming/), [[6]](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/opinion/article/2024/08/02/russia-us-prisoner-exchange-is-a-diplomatic-tour-de-force-but-not-the-dawn-of-a-new-d%C3%A9tente_6707669_23.html)
* Paragraph 7 – [[5]](https://time.com/7286136/russia-ukraine-prisoner-swap/)
* Paragraph 8 – [[1]](https://euromaidanpress.com/2025/05/24/russia-just-released-390-pows-heres-why-that-doesnt-mean-peace-is-coming/), [[4]](https://www.ft.com/content/efd4a71e-6b6d-468a-98f2-6653144963ce)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://euromaidanpress.com/2025/05/24/russia-just-released-390-pows-heres-why-that-doesnt-mean-peace-is-coming/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://apnews.com/article/8b745966e2f9a484d80ed89fb70d5648> - On May 23, 2025, Russia and Ukraine conducted the first phase of a major prisoner exchange, each releasing 390 detainees, including soldiers and civilians. This marks the largest swap of the three-year-old war and a rare moment of cooperation amid stalled ceasefire efforts. The exchange took place at the Belarus-Ukraine border, with returning Ukrainians welcomed with emotional reunions in Chernihiv. Despite this humanitarian gesture, hostilities persist along a 1,000-kilometer frontline, with Russia launching deadly missile and drone attacks on Ukrainian regions, including Odesa and Kherson. The exchange followed brief peace talks in Istanbul, which yielded no substantial progress. Russia and Ukraine still differ significantly on ceasefire terms. Moscow demands Ukraine withdraw from annexed territories and halt mobilization efforts, while Kyiv, backed by Western allies, insists on a ceasefire and continuation of arms support. Russia proposed to send its draft of a long-term peace agreement after the prisoner exchanges conclude. While Turkish officials view the swap as a confidence-building measure, further negotiations lack an agreed venue. Emotional scenes greeted released POWs, but many families are still waiting for news of their loved ones. U.S. President Trump acknowledged the swap publicly, hinting it might prompt further diplomatic developments.
3. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/trump-says-major-prisoners-swap-completed-between-russia-ukraine-2025-05-23/> - Russia and Ukraine have initiated the largest prisoner swap of their ongoing conflict, each releasing 390 prisoners—270 soldiers and 120 civilians—with plans to free more in the following days. The exchange marks the first significant step toward peace after three years, following recent direct talks. The total agreement includes the exchange of 1,000 prisoners each, although a ceasefire was not achieved during the negotiations. Freed Ukrainian prisoners arrived in the Chernihiv region, expressing profound emotional relief after years in captivity. Released Russians were transported to Belarus, where they received assistance. The swap included civilians captured during a Ukrainian incursion into Russia's Kursk region. U.S. President Donald Trump, having encouraged the negotiations, praised the swap and hinted at potential for progress. Ukraine reiterated its readiness for a 30-day ceasefire, while Russia maintained it would only pause if its demands were met—conditions Ukraine deemed unacceptable. Ukrainian Defence Minister Rustem Umerov emphasized hopes for further progress and U.S. support, while Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov promised a draft peace proposal following the exchange. Families of unaccounted soldiers gathered near the hospital, seeking information about missing loved ones, embodying the hope and continued suffering endured through the war.
4. <https://www.ft.com/content/efd4a71e-6b6d-468a-98f2-6653144963ce> - Ukraine and Russia have initiated their largest prisoner exchange since the beginning of their war, following initial peace talks held in Istanbul—the first in three years. The agreement involves the exchange of 2,000 prisoners, split equally between the two sides, occurring in three phases over three days. The first phase saw the return of 270 Russian military personnel and 120 civilians, with Ukraine receiving 390 of its captured individuals. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy confirmed the initial swap and noted further exchanges planned over the weekend. While this development marks rare cooperation, broader peace talks remain stalled due to Russia’s maximalist demands, including Ukrainian recognition of Russian-annexed territories and a commitment to neutrality. Zelenskyy has rejected these terms, viewing them as a threat to Ukraine’s sovereignty. Meanwhile, US President Donald Trump, who advocates a 30-day ceasefire, has expressed optimism, though Ukrainian officials remain cautious, feeling increasingly isolated as Trump’s support appears wavering. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov indicated that Moscow is preparing a peace memorandum, but stressed it would be based on addressing what Russia considers the 'root causes' of the war, highlighting the significant challenge to future negotiations.
5. <https://time.com/7286136/russia-ukraine-prisoner-swap/> - On May 16, 2025, Russia and Ukraine agreed to exchange 1,000 prisoners of war each during peace talks in Istanbul, marking the largest prisoner swap of the ongoing conflict. Mediated by Turkey, these discussions were the first direct negotiations between the two nations since the war began. Ukrainian Defense Minister Rustem Umerov and Russian presidential aide Vladimir Medinsky confirmed the deal, although broader peace goals such as a cease-fire or presidential summit remain uncertain. The negotiations were influenced by U.S. pressure, particularly from President Donald Trump, who has called for an end to the war. Despite the agreement, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky criticized Russia for sending a low-level delegation and refusing a direct meeting. Prisoner exchanges have remained one of the few consistent diplomatic engagements throughout the war, with previous high-profile swaps including the release of the Azovstal defenders in September 2022. Though symbolically significant, such exchanges have historically occurred during intense combat periods and have not necessarily led to broader peace progress.
6. <https://www.lemonde.fr/en/opinion/article/2024/08/02/russia-us-prisoner-exchange-is-a-diplomatic-tour-de-force-but-not-the-dawn-of-a-new-d%C3%A9tente_6707669_23.html> - The recent Russia-US prisoner exchange, hailed as a significant diplomatic achievement by President Joe Biden, saw the release of 16 Western hostages and Russian political prisoners, including American journalists Evan Gershkovich and Alsu Kurmasheva. This marks the largest prisoner swap since the Cold War, negotiated secretly amidst the Ukraine conflict, involving the CIA, State Department, and allied governments. Key to the negotiation was the release of Vadim Krasikov, a Russian agent imprisoned in Germany for political murder, which required significant diplomatic persuasion with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz. Despite the success, the exchange highlights the continued perils of 'hostage diplomacy,' where foreigners are detained and used as negotiating pawns by countries like Russia and Iran. This development does not signify a new era of improved relations between the West and Moscow.
7. <https://www.axios.com/2025/02/12/marc-fogel-russia-prisoner-swap-trump-putin> - Alexander Vinnik, the co-founder of a bitcoin exchange, has been returned to Russia as part of a prisoner swap that also freed American teacher Marc Fogel. President Trump has praised the exchange as a 'fair deal,' though in the past he has been critical of prisoner swaps with Russia. The Kremlin confirmed the occurrence of the swap without initially naming Vinnik. Marc Fogel, a 63-year-old teacher from the Pittsburgh area, taught at the Anglo-American School of Moscow. This event is part of Trump's ongoing efforts to secure the release of American detainees, having overseen at least four prisoner swaps and some successful negotiations without exchanges during his first term.