

US: Trump won't trade Putin Ukraine for Venezuela

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President Trump won't cut support for Ukraine in exchange for Russia doing the same with Venezuela, U.S. officials said as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo prepared to meet Russian President Vladimir Putin.

“There is no equivalence between Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the international community’s efforts to support Venezuelan democracy and the Venezuelan people,” a senior administration official told the *Washington Examiner*. “The United States is giving no consideration to any such preposterous proposal.”

The contours of such a proposal have been leaking out of Moscow in recent weeks. The United States has struggled to aid opposition leader Juan Guaidó in ousting Venezuelan strongman Nicolás Maduro, who is being propped up by Putin. Pompeo accused the Kremlin earlier this month of telling Maduro to stay put when he was about to relinquish power and flee the country in the face of widespread protests. Putin, meanwhile, has sought to undermine Western opposition to his invasion of eastern Ukraine, begun in 2014, and implement a peace deal that would leave him with substantial influence within the country.



“I don't think they really want the territory, and they don't want to see it as independent,” Kurt Volker, the State Department's top diplomat for the Ukraine crisis, told the *Washington Examiner*. “I think what Russia wants is to use eastern Ukraine as a pressure point on the rest of Ukraine and try to influence politics inside Ukraine.”

Russian officials thought they achieved that goal during [the Minsk cease-fire talks](#) between the Ukrainian government and Russian-backed separatists in 2015. The warring sides agreed to rewrite the Ukrainian constitution in a way the Kremlin believed would allow its proxies to block any effort by Ukraine to join NATO. But [Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko refused to agree](#) to a constitution that would give semi-autonomous, pro-Russian forces veto power over Ukrainian foreign policy.

So Putin has been looking at Venezuela as a valuable bargaining chip. “For Moscow, a deal of equals on Venezuela where Russia helps the U.S. [defuse] the crisis by engineering a constitutional transition, should involve an equally significant concession by the U.S.,” a Moscow Times columnist [wrote](#) in outlining Putin's position. “Withdrawing Russian military support for Maduro should also be matched by the withdrawal of U.S. military assistance to Ukraine.”

That's not going to happen, Trump administration officials say. The Kremlin's dream scenario isn't even feasible, one U.S. official familiar with the Ukraine negotiations added.

“Ukraine has a big say in this. They are not our client, they don't do what we tell them,” the official said on condition of anonymity. “Then you have France and Germany and the European Union involved, and all of these players are not going to act on some behind-the-door, Trump-Putin secret deal — and I'm not even saying that that's what our president would do.” The official added that “even if the president wanted to do that, he couldn't.”

The same goes for Western military assistance to Ukraine. “The Ukrainian military has gotten a lot better because of NATO support,” as opposed simply to U.S. assistance, the official said. And the additional U.S. aid is “set by Congress, and that's not going to change.”

So the stalemates could continue far longer than outside observers anticipated. Trump's national security team hasn't been able to deliver “an easy off-ramp for Maduro, as some would have hoped,” a senior State Department official [acknowledged](#) in March. And Putin recently announced a plan [to grant Russian passports](#) to some eastern Ukrainians, a provocative move that suggests he has no intention to yield in any negotiations with newly elected Volodymyr Zelensky, who's about to take office as Ukraine's president.

“I don't think that we can flip a switch and just have the Russians say, ‘Oh, OK, we'll get out,’” Volker said.

Instead, U.S. officials hope Russia will eventually tire of the sanctions imposed in response to the Ukraine invasion, especially if Moscow concludes that the “frozen conflict” is driving Ukrainians into Western arms.

“You don't push Russia around and say, ‘OK, this is it,’” Volker added. “We create a position that we think is going to be successful, and I think we can all see that — I mean a successful Ukraine — and then they'll have to adjust.”