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Ukrainian leader calls for revamp of peace process to end Donbas war

***Український лідер закликає до відновлення мирного процесу з метою
припинення війни на Донбасі***

*В інтерв'ю Президент України Володимир Зеленський говорить про
необхідність зміни мінського формату, додавання інших країн до обговорення
ситуації на сході України.*

<https://www.ft.com/content/ed40d675-16b3-4a35-a157-b9bf0078b507>

Ukraine's president Volodymyr Zelensky has called for a revamp of the 2015 accord intended to bring peace to the war-torn Donbas region with a bigger diplomatic role for the US, UK and Canada in ending the conflict. In an interview with the Financial Times as Russia began pulling back its forces from the border with Ukraine, Zelensky urged the west to back changes to the so-called Minsk II agreement between Kyiv and Moscow. The accord was supposed to end the war between Ukrainian and Russian-led forces in breakaway regions of eastern Ukraine, but has become deadlocked. "I'm now participating in the process that was designed before my time," said the former comic actor who was elected in 2019 on a promise to end the war. "The Minsk process should be more flexible in this situation. It should serve the purposes of today not of the past." Europe Express newsletter Sign up here to receive Europe Express, your essential guide to what happens in Europe, sent straight to your inbox every weekday. Zelensky was speaking a day after Russia began to withdraw some forces from a massive military build-up along Ukraine's eastern border and on the Crimean peninsula. Moscow has in recent weeks amassed about 110,000 troops in the region, alarming Kyiv and its western allies about a possible military offensive by the Kremlin. Zelensky welcomed the partial troop withdrawal, describing the de-escalation as a "small victory" for Kyiv and its allies. It was, he said a "step away from the emotional state, towards some pragmatic solution that we would expect here for the Donbas area". But he cautioned the situation remained dangerous, while taking care throughout the interview to avoid inflammatory rhetoric or the anti-Moscow bombast of his predecessor, Petro Poroshenko. "There is a persistent threat, of course, because we are having a war, especially in the Donbas area, and the Russian army, we all know it, is a very powerful force. So we have it continuously at our borders. And this particular case is a case of psychological pressure. We are ready here for some unpleasant surprises. We'll try to avoid them. Our military is very strong and we are prepared to deter any kind of threat of aggression." After annexing Crimea in 2014, the Kremlin

orchestrated a war against the Ukrainian government by pro-Russian separatists with support from Russian forces. With the Ukrainian military suffering heavy losses in early 2015, Kyiv negotiated a peace deal with Moscow. But the so-called Minsk II agreement was never implemented, with the two sides at loggerheads over the meaning and sequencing of their commitments. Ukrainian soldiers on the frontline near the city of Marinka, Donetsk © Stringer/AFP via Getty Initially eager to strike a compromise with Russian president Vladimir Putin — to the point of being accused of naivety by his domestic critics — Zelensky has since balked at Russian demands. The Ukrainian leader's popularity has evaporated as he has struggled to bring peace, reform the economy and tackle corruption. Kyiv has been reluctant to give the Russian-occupied breakaway regions autonomy in Ukraine's constitution — fearing it will become a permanent vector of Russian influence — while Moscow has refused to hand back control over the Ukrainian border before local elections and a handover of power to local officials in the Donbas. More than 14,000 people have been killed in the fighting. A July 2020 ceasefire broke down earlier this year. Talks overseen by the so-called Normandy format — France, Germany, Ukraine and Russia — are deadlocked. Analysts and diplomats say Russia's massive show of military force at Ukraine's borders may have been an attempt to intimidate Kyiv into making concessions. Zelensky said it was time to change diplomatic approach with a bigger role for Washington. A destroyed building in the small town of Krasnohorivka, Donetsk © Aleksey Filippov/AFP via Getty “There are two options: we can change the Minsk format, adjust it. Or we can use some other format. The speed matters. The pace of this process matters because we are losing people every day.” It took two years to negotiate a troop disengagement from a short section of the 400km line of contact between Ukrainian and Russian-backed forces and it would take a lifetime to implement the Minsk agreement, he said. The president called for the Normandy group to be “extended and expanded”, saying it was not just up to the US to reboot the grouping but that the UK and Canada should also participate. Zelensky welcomed the prospect of a meeting between Putin and Joe Biden after the US president invited his Russian counterpart to talks earlier this month. “I’m sure they cannot come out of the meeting empty-handed, because if the summit happens there will be some kind of result, however small.”

Recommended News in-depth Ukraine conflict Russian brinkmanship leaves clear message for Ukraine and allies The Ukrainian leader said he wanted his own bilateral meeting with Putin, adding “we don’t care about the venue, it’s about the content”. But he would not agree to the Russian leader’s demand that he first hold talks with the Donbas separatist leaders. “I have no intention of talking to terrorists and it is just impossible for me in my position.” Western powers condemned Russia’s huge military build-up on Ukraine’s borders and expressed support for Ukrainian territorial integrity but they stopped short of threatening tougher economic sanctions against Moscow and

Kyiv's renewed call for a Nato membership action plan fell on deaf ears. Asked whether he was disappointed by the western response, Zelensky said: "My dad taught me to be grateful for any kind of help." "If you ask me whether I want more, of course, I can frankly tell you I do," he said. But the lesson of the 2014 conflict was that Ukraine had to be able to stand on its own two feet. "The message is we have to learn to be strong."