

War in Ukraine**EU official's outreach to Russia backfires**

Leaders balk at António Costa's attempt to talk to Vladimir Putin



European Council president António Costa, left, and German Chancellor Friedrich Merz at the EU summit in Brussels on Friday © Michael Kappeler/dpa

Henry Foy in Brussels

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A senior EU official's attempt to reopen communication channels with Russia's Vladimir Putin has provoked consternation among the bloc's leaders gathered at a summit in Brussels, leaving the future of the initiative unclear.

Several leaders, including German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, have hit back at European Council president António Costa after his office reached out to the Kremlin to lay the groundwork for potential peace negotiations with Ukraine.

Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov dismissed the bloc's moves as "using diplomacy as a cover for expansionist ambitions" and threatened nuclear retaliation.

The mixed reception to the EU initiative, which one bloc official said was urged by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, comes as Europe struggles to insert itself into previously US-led peace talks that have stalled in recent months.

The so-called E3 countries of France, Germany and the UK have also sought to establish a communication channel with Moscow, with some EU countries advocating for that triad to speak for the continent.

Zelenskyy said on Friday that Ukraine remained “ready for negotiations” with Putin. “But Europe must throw its full weight behind this effort so that we have a strong position.”

Costa's chief of staff Pedro Lourtie held multiple phone calls with a senior Russian official in recent weeks, in what an EU official said were “brief contacts . . . to open communication channels”.

Numerous EU leaders on Thursday evening told Costa they disagreed with his move, according to diplomats briefed on the private discussions, with some requesting that he stop pursuing it. Many governments learnt of the initiative through media reports, they said.

While some leaders agreed that Costa, as the 27-country bloc's political figurehead, was a suitable person to speak on their behalf, they stressed that the time was not right to engage with the Kremlin and that all capitals should have been consulted before such a step was taken.

Austrian Chancellor Christian Stocker told the FT he “supports very much” Costa's initiative, while others, including Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda, registered public disagreement.

Lavrov, in a belligerent essay published on his ministry's website, rejected the E3 effort and said Europe was “a party bent on Russia's defeat” and was re-arming to prepare for conflict with Russia by 2030.

“Dialogue with Europe, therefore, cannot be conducted as though it were an impartial third-party observer,” Lavrov wrote. “The real objective of Europe's leaders, then, is not to negotiate with Russia. It is to shore up the Zelenskyy regime and preserve it as a launch pad for continued confrontation against Russia.”

“This state of affairs poses serious threats to global security,” Lavrov added. “A direct confrontation between Nato and Russia could rapidly escalate into an exchange of nuclear strikes, with catastrophic consequences.”

Costa on Friday defended his effort, telling reporters at the end of the summit: “We cannot rely only on others to interpret Russian messages, and we must be able to convey to Russia our own messages.” But he added that there were no “credible signs” from Moscow that it wanted to engage in “serious negotiations for the time being”.

European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen said that “sooner or later Russia will need to come to the negotiating table . . . and when that comes we need a united European message to President Putin”.

Additional reporting by Fabrice Deprez in Kyiv and Barbara Moens in Brussels

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