

Too Much, Too Late? The Impact of Secrecy on Efforts to Mediate an End to the Russia-Ukraine War

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After Donald Trump's reelection as U.S. president in November 2024, his team quietly [reached out](#) to Russia (and even more quietly to Ukraine) to explore an end to the Russia-Ukraine war. The mediation effort was initially kept entirely behind the scenes. By late spring 2025, however, it could no longer be concealed, emerging as a major focus of U.S. foreign policy and signaling confidence that clinching a peace deal required just a final, high-level push.

In August 2025, the United States moved its effort completely into the open. At a summit in Alaska with Vladimir Putin (followed by consultations with Volodymyr Zelensky), Trump [hailed](#) "private" progress—even predicting a Russia-Ukraine summit soon—yet each side gave different accounts of the talks, and Putin's public stance remained unchanged. The Kremlin swiftly ruled out a near-term summit with Ukraine and offered no concrete concessions. Notably, it [withdrew](#) a previously floated proposal—swapping occupied southern Ukraine for unoccupied parts of the Donbas. That trial balloon drew a [positive response](#) from Ukraine and some European partners, before bursting once the discussion came to light. While voicing maximalist demands, the Kremlin has since continued to [insist](#) on keeping under wraps the content of its negotiations with Washington on Ukraine and asking that the United States also avoid any disclosures.

These demands highlight the core dilemma of secrecy in mediation. On the one hand, closed-door negotiations create flexibility conducive to deal-making. On the other hand, secrecy lets parties backtrack with impunity and can leave mediators looking naïve or compromised if things go awry. The 2025 trends in negotiations to end the Russia-Ukraine war raise the question: Under what conditions should a mediator reveal a peace effort started in private?

The Case for Closed-Door Negotiations

In conflict mediation, some secrecy is often essential. We can distinguish two types: concealing that talks are happening at all; and acknowledging them but keeping their content hidden. Both approaches give adversaries a safe space to explore compromise,

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away from prying eyes and pressure from hardliners. Negotiators favor back-channel talks for several reasons, all related to minimizing outside interference that could derail what is a fragile process.

First, leaders face “two-level” pressures: They negotiate both with their adversary internationally and with their own constituents at home. Keeping talks secret buys them the freedom to discuss options that might be unpopular domestically, with the hope of later framing any agreement as the best possible outcome. For example, in 1978 U.S. President Jimmy Carter secluded Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin at Camp David to escape media attention and domestic pressure until a peace framework was reached.

Second, negotiating without publicity allows parties to test ideas candidly without being confined to a public stance. When every trial balloon is subject to media commentary and nationalist reaction, leaders become inflexible. In private, they can float hypothetical trade-offs and gauge reactions. If a promising idea is rejected, it can be quietly dropped with no loss of face. Secrecy thus encourages creativity over rigidity.

Third, secret negotiations provide protection from spoilers intent on sabotaging progress. In all protracted conflicts, influential factions on each side prefer continued war to a compromise peace. If details of potential concessions leak, hardliners—whether politicians, militant groups, or rival states—may denounce leaders as traitors, incite public protests, or even resort to violence to derail talks. Keeping talks under wraps buys time for moderates to finalize a deal before opponents can rally. For instance, in 1993 the Israelis and Palestinians negotiated secretly in Oslo, aware that any public hint of territorial compromise would provoke outrage. They announced the Oslo Accords only after they were signed—too late for extremists on either side to torpedo them.

Fourth, secrecy enables high-level engagement because it signals genuine intent to come to an agreement. When top leaders or senior envoys get involved behind closed doors, it serves as a weighty sign of commitment, building trust. A president or prime minister has more to lose if clandestine talks fail or leak, so their personal involvement reassures the other side that the initiative is real. In the case of the August 2025 Alaska summit, the very fact of the one-on-one Trump-Putin meeting, seen as functioning as a high-level back channel, indicated seriousness on both sides.

In sum, closed-door negotiations expand the bargaining space by shielding talks from immediate political backlash. They allow for trust-building, along with frank discussion of taboo issues, delaying public scrutiny until a final product is ready to be presented as a political victory representing the best path to peace—and crucially as a *fait accompli* so as to minimize blowback.

Trump’s 2025 mediation strategy followed this logic. His team believed that keeping negotiations under wraps until a final solution was ready would prevent spoilers in Kyiv,

Moscow, and Ukraine-allied capitals from derailing the process. Trump's aides saw Ukrainian domestic politics as a key obstacle: Trump has [complained](#) that the Ukrainian parliament and European states were pressuring Zelensky not to compromise, while Putin had nationalist hardliners to appease as well. In theory, a comprehensive deal reached in secret could then be presented as a done deal, rallying moderates around peace and leaving opponents no time to pick the actual arrangement apart.

The Downsides of Secrecy

Secrecy, however, comes with serious risks. A deal crafted in the dark may not survive exposure to the light of day if it diverges too much from what domestic audiences expect and ignores key stakeholders.

In Northern Ireland, mostly secret talks produced the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, which voters overwhelmingly endorsed once it was put to a vote; by contrast, Colombia's quietly negotiated 2016 peace agreement with the FARC paramilitary group was rejected in a referendum as many citizens were dissatisfied with what they saw as lenient proposed terms for the rebels. This contrast begs the question: Can a secretly brokered agreement secure domestic buy-in if key players are kept in the dark until the end? The collapse of the 1973 Paris Peace Accords to end the Vietnam War underscores the danger: When the terms of that deal—negotiated in semi-secrecy—emerged, South Vietnam felt betrayed and U.S. public support evaporated, leading to the accords falling apart within two years.

Partial secrecy is especially risky when one side negotiates in bad faith, using talks to stall or gain advantage with no intent to compromise. In that scenario, negotiators engage with an opponent's maximalist demands but, owing to confidentiality, cannot expose the farce. In the meantime, a malign actor can use prolonged secret talks to demobilize its opponent's domestic supporters and international backers—lulling everyone into expecting peace when, in reality, there is nothing of the sort on offer. This may be exactly what the Kremlin has sought to do in 2025: By entering quiet negotiations and insisting on strict secrecy, Moscow, without offering real concessions, could keep the West at bay amid false hopes for a deal (and even get the West to ease support for Ukraine).

Stakes for a Mediator

From the perspective of a mediator, secret or semisecret talks are a mixed bag. If covert mediation collapses, the mediator is an easy scapegoat. Norway's failed peace bid in Sri Lanka is telling: After Oslo's secret contacts with the Sri Lankan government and Tamil rebels became public in 2002, the process collapsed amid accusations of bias, which dented Oslo's reputation as a neutral mediator.

Acting as a go-between in semisecret negotiations can be even riskier than mediating fully in secret. Parties often insist that mediators keep their positions hidden so they do not

appear weak to constituents or allies. Negotiators invoke the mantra of “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed,” claiming that leaks of concessions will spark backlash from those lacking the full context.

Such secrecy can constrain the mediator, which, if progress stalls because one side is stonewalling, cannot call it out without breaching confidentiality. As talks drag on with no visible result, outside observers lose patience, and the mediator absorbs the blame for the impasse, left to appeal for more time constantly. Even a powerful mediator finds its leverage limited amid strict secrecy: Any overt pressure on an obstructive party risks angering one side and blowing up the talks. The parties can also renege on confidential promises, sowing confusion and making the mediator appear too weak to enforce any arrangement.

Overreliance on secrecy can further impede progress. Staying in the shadows too long may simply postpone hard compromises and prolong the conflict. In addition, the longer talks remain hidden, the greater the likelihood of disruptive leaks. A leak—usually presented without context—can ignite controversy and empower opponents of diplomacy. In Trump’s mediation on Ukraine, for instance, in early August 2025 a [leak](#) of a Russian proposal to cede all of Ukraine’s Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions in exchange for the Donbas embarrassed the U.S. side and fueled public speculation around the talks. Each such incident forces defensive clarifications and erodes trust in the process, [undercutting](#) the mediator’s authority.

How a Mediator Hedges Its Bets

How can mediators mitigate these risks and keep a peace process on track? One way is to demand politically costly signals of goodwill from the parties—tangible indicators of commitment that outsiders can see. For example, a mediator might press each side to hint publicly at one possible concession (even if the potential concession is presented publicly as being conditional on reciprocity). Even a small reciprocal step helps put the parties onto a path of compromise.

Options for partial disclosure of information about talks include issuing a joint statement of principles or taking interim steps that can be acknowledged openly. For instance, Russia and Ukraine could announce a broad formula like “territory for Russia/strong security guarantees for Ukraine” as a foundation for talks. Implementing a brief ceasefire is another powerful signal—breaking it carries a high political cost. If one or more parties insist on total secrecy with no signs of progress, the mediator’s credibility will erode as the fighting drags on.

Extracting even modest public concessions often requires pressure. When everything is confidential, mediators struggle to use sticks and carrots without appearing biased. It is hard to punish an obstructive negotiator in private when the reason for punishment cannot be made public, yet any overt pressure risks angering one side and derailing the talks.

Overall, the mediator must be firm behind closed doors while also managing perceptions outside of the room.

“Selective transparency” with third parties is another way to strike a balance. Mediators can discreetly brief key allies on the progress of talks so they are not blindsided by a sudden agreement. In addition, they can prepare public opinion for compromise by underscoring the high costs of continued war and the benefits of peace. These cues make audiences more likely to accept a deal when it emerges, even if the details were kept quiet during negotiations.

Trump’s summer 2025 mediation of the Israel-Iran standoff and the Thailand-Cambodia border crisis showed that swift, discreet diplomacy can succeed in smaller conflicts—deals were brokered quietly and announced only after the fact. However, Russia’s war in Ukraine presents a far tougher challenge. Russia is a major global power, and unlike the abovementioned cases, here one side (Ukraine) is being pressed to sacrifice core national interests—such as giving up its sovereign territory and forswearing membership in defense alliances. Threats of sanctions or isolation, while impactful, appear unlikely to force rapid real concessions from the Kremlin.

This makes a “minimum openness requirement” all the more important. Ukraine has already signaled some compromises it is willing to consider for peace; it is crucial to push Moscow to do the same—to indicate publicly at least a single compromise it is prepared to make (beyond Moscow’s “agreement” not to seek the full occupation of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions, or a ceasefire). If Russia can be coaxed into offering even one modest concession out loud, it would lock Moscow into a more constructive negotiation track. Such a move would both improve the chances of reaching an interim settlement and give mediators more leeway to help craft a durable agreement. Equally important, “reciprocal openness” means actors share the political risk of working toward peace, making any eventual agreement more credible at home for the conflicting sides and for the mediator.

Conclusion

For a mediator, the ideal outcome is a swift, comprehensive settlement delivered before outsiders lose faith. However, when semisecret talks drag on, and each side accuses the other of obstruction, total confidentiality becomes counterproductive. In such cases of stalemate, the mediator is the first to lose: It faces mounting public-relations and credibility costs for failing to deliver results.

From a theoretical standpoint, these dynamics underscore the two-level nature of negotiations, as well as the importance of the costs related to the perception of various audiences. Leaders ignore domestic opinion at their peril, so overt signals of commitment to reaching an agreement greatly enhance a deal’s credibility with the public and elites. The policy lesson, therefore, is that mediators can improve peace efforts by leveraging

selective transparency. By pushing the parties to make public at least some potential concessions or to take visible goodwill steps (like implementing ceasefires or putting out joint principles), or both, the mediator creates accountability and shapes public expectations. This openness deters backtracking, bolsters the mediator's credibility, and improves the odds of a durable, mutually acceptable settlement.