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AIR DESK RETAINER · WEEKLY BRIEF · SAMPLE

Week to 22 October 2026: talks without text, a hybrid flank, a quiet Belarus

Covers 15–22 Oct 2026 Cut-off: 22 Oct, about 12:00 Vilnius Horizon: 31 Jan 2027

The week in one line. The talks moved, from Oslo on 20 Oct to St Petersburg on 21 Oct, and Moscow named a date for technical talks around 10 Nov. Nothing was signed. On the flank we saw hybrid incidents but no forces moving.

1 What changed this week

	What happened	Why it matters
Talks	Witkoff held talks in Oslo with Zelensky, Støre and Stubb (20 Oct), then met Putin in St Petersburg for nearly three hours (21 Oct). Russia released US citizen Stephen Hubbard. Ushakov says Russia is "in principle" ready for technical trilateral talks "around 10 Nov".	A dated process, but the date is Moscow's alone so far: Washington and Kyiv have not confirmed it. Still no text.
US levers	EO 14436 (16 Oct, published 21 Oct) waived the Graham Act's new Russia duties and sanctions, open-ended. Novak says the first Russian diesel tanker for the US sails on 22 Oct.	Tariff pressure on Moscow is parked. The diesel cargo is announced, not yet confirmed.
Strike war	Ukraine resumed refinery strikes on 15 Oct and a large raid hit St Petersburg on 18 Oct. Peskov (21 Oct): Russia "needs peace, not a ceasefire".	The 11 Oct energy "ceasefire" is gone. The fighting is hotter inside a frozen front.
US–Ukraine	Trump wrote on 18 Oct that Zelensky "doesn't want to end this war". Zelensky says US early-warning intelligence resumed after a three-day gap; Rubio denies any pause.	Friction, but contact continues: Zelensky spoke with Witkoff and Kushner the same day.
Flank	Romanian F-16s shot down two Geran-family unmanned aircraft over Romanian waters off Sulina (17 Oct). Attempted arson at a Vilnius firm storing Starlink equipment (18 Oct); the Lithuanian government blames Russia, and no evidence is public. An unmanned aircraft came down in northern Lithuania (18 Oct); Vilnius says it was Ukrainian.	The hybrid pattern we expect. None of these yet meets our bar of formal attribution to Russia or Belarus.
Belarus	An alert of an air assault unit in Brest (19 Oct) rests on a single source. Belousov is in Minsk for the annual joint defence board (22 Oct); the outcome is not published.	Routine activity. The board's outcome is next week's first check.
Humanitarian	Pope Leo spoke with Putin (16 Oct) and with Zelensky (19 Oct) about aid for Oleshky. The Kremlin says it "agreed to cooperate".	No aid convoy, evacuation or pause confirmed yet.

No new confirmed item this week: a Putin–Xi meeting or call; an in-person Lukashenko–Putin meeting; a Trump–Zelensky meeting; US–China truce changes; a public "top 5" list of buyers of Russian oil; a new prisoner release from Belarus.

2 Our numbers vs baseline

Where the war stands on 31 Jan 2027	Baseline (22 Oct)	Change
Frozen war, talks continue	63%	—
Partial ceasefire on paper	19%	—
Talks collapse, war intensifies	12%	—
Something else breaks	6%	—
Separate yes/no questions: chance of "yes" by 31 Jan 2027		
Hybrid pressure on NATO (provisional)	55%	—
The Belarus Factor	5%	—
US–China bargain decides	10%	—
Threat to the Baltic states	1%	—

OUR ASSESSMENT, NOT A FORECAST

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This week on the map, 15–22 Oct 2026

Events from 'What changed this week' with a town-level location in our data



1 Off Sulina: two unmanned aircraft shot down - 2 Vilnius: attempted arson
3 N. Lithuania: aircraft came down - 4 St Petersburg: raid; Witkoff–Putin
5 Brest: unit alert (single source) - 6 Oslo: talks - 7 Minsk: defence board
Not mapped: Washington (waiver), refinery strikes (no town named), papal calls, Oleshky (no coordinate).

Source: NSAIT Forces map layers, open sources as of 22 Oct 2026.
Points at town level; illustrative.

SAMPLE – illustrative AIR deliverable,
built from open sources as of 22 Oct 2026

No change to report. The baseline was set this week, on 22 Oct, under our new structure with written criteria. There is no earlier number on the same footing to compare against, so we show none. Our earlier six-way format is retired, and its numbers are not comparable. The first real comparison comes in next week's brief. *Hybrid pressure on NATO* is provisional: we are checking it against a count of qualifying incidents since 1 July and will report the result.

3 Watch list for next week (23–30 Oct)

- Minsk defence board outcome.** Any new Union military documents, or decisions on air defence or a regional grouping of forces, would be an early warning for *The Belarus Factor*. It takes forces moving to change the number.
- First diesel tanker.** Is a sailing or an arrival at a named US port confirmed independently, beyond Novak's statement?
- Trilateral confirmation.** Do Washington and Kyiv confirm the talks "around 10 Nov", with a venue? (Abu Dhabi is ISW's reading only.)
- A Witkoff and Kushner trip to Moscow.** So far an unnamed TASS source only.
- Formal attribution on the flank.** Does any NATO member issue charges, an expulsion or a protest note naming Russia or Belarus? That is what counts toward *Hybrid pressure on NATO*.
- Oleshky.** Is any aid delivered or a pause agreed after the papal calls?
- Further ahead:** US midterms on 3 Nov; Lithuania's NATO consultation on engaging unmanned aircraft on radar alone (~mid-Nov); APEC Shenzhen on 18–19 Nov.

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