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U.S. Special Envoy to Meet Zelensky, European Leaders in Berlin This Weekend

By AFP

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U.S. President Donald Trump's special envoy will meet with Volodymyr Zelensky and other European leaders in Berlin this weekend, the White House said, as Washington presses for a plan to end Russia's war with Ukraine.

Ahead of the meetings, Zelensky warned on Saturday that Russia "still aims to destroy" Ukraine, as Kyiv said "massive" Russian strikes on energy facilities overnight had left thousands without power across the country.

Russia said it had hit Ukrainian facilities with hypersonic ballistic missiles, in what it called retaliation for Ukrainian attacks.

"It is important that everyone now sees what Russia is doing — every step they take in terror

against our people... for this is clearly not about ending the war. They still aim to destroy our state and inflict maximum pain on our people," the Ukrainian president said on X.

An 80-year-old woman was killed when a Russian shell hit a residential building in Ukraine's northeastern Sumy region, the regional governor said.

Trump has been stepping up pressure on Kyiv to reach an agreement since revealing a plan to end the war last month that was criticized as echoing Moscow's demands, including Ukraine ceding crucial territory.

The 28-point proposal has triggered a flurry of diplomacy between the United States and Ukraine's European allies, with Kyiv officials recently saying they had sent Washington a revised version.

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Full details on the updated plan have not been released.

A White House official confirmed to AFP on Friday that Trump's envoy Steve Witkoff will meet with Zelensky and European leaders over the weekend to discuss the status of peace negotiations.

Germany's government has said Berlin will host the leaders, including the heads of the European Union and NATO, next Monday in the hours after Zelensky attends a German-Ukrainian business forum with Chancellor Friedrich Merz.

The idea of a speedy accession by Ukraine into the European Union — a move opposed by Moscow — is included in the latest version of the U.S.-led plan.

Europeans and Ukrainians are also asking the United States to provide them with "security guarantees" before Ukraine negotiates any territorial concessions, France said Friday.

EU membership

Under the latest U.S. plan, Ukraine would join the EU as early as January 2027, a senior official familiar with the matter told AFP on Friday on condition of anonymity.

The complicated EU accession process usually takes years and requires a unanimous vote from all 27 members of the bloc.

Some countries, notably Hungary, have consistently voiced opposition to Ukraine joining.

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Trump can use "various levers of influence" to convince leaders opposed to Ukraine's membership to change their stance, Zelensky told journalists on Thursday.

Kyiv has long striven for EU membership, but has struggled to eradicate endemic corruption

— a core prerequisite for joining the bloc.

'Long process'

Moscow indicated Friday it was suspicious of efforts to amend the U.S. plan, for which it has signaled support.

"We have an impression that this version... will be worsened," Kremlin foreign policy aide Yury Ushakov told the Kommersant business daily.

"It'll be a long process," he added, saying Moscow had not seen an updated version since discussions between Russian President Vladimir Putin and U.S. envoys Witkoff and Jared Kushner in Moscow last week.

Zelensky said Thursday Washington wants only Ukraine, not Russia, to withdraw its troops from parts of the eastern Donetsk region, where a demilitarized "free economic zone" would be installed as a buffer between the two armies.

On Friday evening, an adviser to French President Emmanuel Macron said Ukraine was "not considering" a deal on the territories or a demilitarized zone.

Russia, which has the numerical advantage in manpower and weapons, has been grinding forward on the battlefield for months.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, a key regional power broker, said Saturday that "peace is not far away" — but called for a halt to strikes in the Black Sea, which have rattled the key shipping route in recent weeks.

"The Black Sea should not be seen as an area of confrontation. This would not benefit Russia or Ukraine. Everyone needs safe navigation in the Black Sea," Erdoğan said, according to Turkish state-run news agency Anadolu.

A Russian air strike damaged a Turkish-owned vessel in a port in Ukraine's Black Sea region of Odesa, Kyiv and the operator said Friday.

The attack came hours after Erdoğan met Putin on the sidelines of a summit in Turkmenistan, where the Turkish leader called for a "limited ceasefire" covering attacks on ports and energy facilities, according to his office.

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