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No Sign of Compromise as Russia and Ukraine Head Into Abu Dhabi Talks

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Vladimir Putin greets Steve Witkoff at the Kremlin on Jan. 22, 2025. **kremlin.ru**

President Vladimir Putin met late Thursday with an American delegation led by White House special envoy Steve Witkoff to discuss the latest developments in talks aimed at ending the war in Ukraine, a day before planned trilateral discussions in Abu Dhabi.

“The talks lasted around four hours and were highly substantive and constructive. I would also say they were extremely frank and conducted in a spirit of trust,” Kremlin foreign policy advisor Yuri Ushakov said in a statement.

Witkoff was joined for a second time by U.S. President Donald Trump’s son-in-law, Jared Kushner. The two arrived in Moscow from the World Economic Forum in Davos, where Witkoff said this week that he believed Russia and Ukraine could be nearing an agreement.

Ushakov said the meeting at the Kremlin focused largely on conveying the results of recent U.S. discussions with Ukraine and its European allies as part of negotiations on an American-backed peace framework first presented in November.

He said the sides agreed that "without a decision on the issue of territory... one should not expect to achieve a long-term settlement," signaling that the Kremlin remains unwilling to compromise, at least publicly for now, on its key demand for control over all of Ukraine's eastern Donbas region.

"We are sincerely interested in resolving the Ukrainian crisis by political and diplomatic means," Ushakov said. "But until that happens, Russia will continue to pursue its objectives... on the battlefield where Russian forces have a strategic advantage."

His comments have become a familiar refrain from Russian officials amid months of stalled attempts by the Trump administration to negotiate an end to the full-scale war in Ukraine, which is approaching its fourth anniversary. Putin has insisted that Ukraine hand over the Donbas despite not controlling all of the territory, while Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has rejected the idea outright.

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Ushakov also confirmed that Russian, Ukrainian and American officials were expected to hold their first trilateral meeting in Abu Dhabi on Friday. Witkoff and Kirill Dmitriev, the CEO of the Russian Direct Investment Fund and a key Kremlin negotiator, are set to attend, along with Igor Kostyukov, the head of Russia's GRU military intelligence agency.

He added that the meeting also touched on Trump's invitation for Russia to join the "Board of Peace" initiative, as well as tensions surrounding Trump's stated interest in asserting control over Greenland due to alleged threats from Russia and China in the Arctic.

Ushakov reiterated Putin's position that Russia would be prepared to contribute the $1 billion required for permanent membership in the "Board of Peace," provided the funds could come from Russian assets frozen in the United States after the invasion of Ukraine. The remaining frozen assets, he said, could be used for post-war reconstruction in Ukraine.

Notably, the meeting on Thursday marked the first time that Federal Acquisition Service Commissioner Josh Gruenbaum attended talks in Russia alongside Witkoff and Kushner. In a video released by the Kremlin, Witkoff is heard introducing him to Putin, saying, "This is Josh."

Gruenbaum, whose background is in private equity and investment banking, has recently attended high-level negotiations related to Ukraine and Gaza, including a meeting in Paris earlier this month with European and Ukrainian officials to discuss Trump's peace plan.

He still holds his top procurement position at the General Services Administration, which does not play any role in U.S. foreign policy. Former officials involved with procurement at GSA said it was "unusual" for somone in that position to be engaged in high-level talks on foreign conflicts.

Gruenbaum's involvement, alongside that of Witkoff and Kushner — both real estate investors — suggests the ongoing negotiations extend beyond diplomacy and likely involve potential business arrangements between the United States and Russia.

Sources told The Moscow Times last year that the Kremlin ordered major Russian corporations to prepare proposals for economic cooperation with Washington following Trump's election last year. According to those sources, Moscow has sought to link business deals to Ukraine peace talks as a way to push Trump toward a settlement more favorable to Russia.

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