

Trump Ballroom Commissioner Held Diplomatic Talks With Kremlin Officials – FT

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Rodney Mims Cook Jr. at SPIEF 2026. **Olga Maltseva / AFP**

The head of the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, Rodney Mims Cook Jr., who is the key official overseeing President Donald Trump's controversial White House ballroom extension, held private diplomatic talks with Kremlin officials during his visit to Russia for the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum this summer, the Financial Times reported Tuesday, citing sources familiar with the matter.

Cook made [headlines](#) in June when he became the first U.S. official to attend Russia's annual flagship economic conference since 2017, when former U.S. Ambassador John Tefft made an appearance during Trump's first term in office.

Hundreds of American corporate executives and business leaders used to attend SPIEF until Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine triggered a Western boycott.

At this year's forum, Cook — whose connection to Russia includes previous cultural exchanges, such as a 2017 speech at the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg and various lectures across the country — was a keynote speaker at a session titled “Russia-U.S.: A Dialogue of Cultures.”

Anonymous sources [told](#) the FT that Cook's visit to Russia extended beyond cultural discussions and that one of the officials he met with was Anton Kobaykov, a senior aide to President Vladimir Putin. The newspaper did not specify what the two men discussed, but sources said White House officials “hoped unlikely envoys such as Cook could help break the diplomatic deadlock” in Ukraine peace talks.

Kobaykov, a relatively low-profile Kremlin official, is not known to have previously been involved in negotiations to end the war in Ukraine, which have so far been led by presidential aide Vladimir Medinsky. Kobaykov does, however, head the [organizing committee](#) of SPIEF, which would make his reported meeting with Cook unsurprising.

Asked to comment on the FT report, Kremlin foreign policy adviser Yuri Ushakov [told](#) Russian state media on Tuesday that “diplomacy is always conducted quietly.”

Since returning to office, Trump has vowed to broker an end to Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine. However, the American president has struggled to bring Moscow and Kyiv toward a compromise, as both sides ramp up airstrikes deep inside each other's territory.

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