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Kremlin Hopes Witkoff Will 'Brief' Putin on Talks With Ukraine and Europe

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Steve Witkoff meets with Vladimir Putin in Russia. **kremlin.ru**

The Kremlin said Tuesday that it hopes U.S. special envoy Steve Witkoff will "brief" President Vladimir Putin in the coming days on his talks with Ukrainian and European leaders in Oslo amid ongoing efforts to end the war in Ukraine.

Witkoff arrived in the Norwegian capital earlier in the day for a meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre, top British, French, German and Polish representatives, as well as EU and NATO officials.

The New York Times reported that Witkoff plans to meet Putin on Wednesday in St. Petersburg, where he is expected to secure the release of Stephen Hubbard, an American who is accused of fighting as a mercenary for Ukraine when he was captured in 2022.

"We hope that a meeting can be arranged in the very near future, and that the American negotiators, Mr. Witkoff, will be able to brief President Putin on their contacts with both the Ukrainians and the Europeans," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

Russia's Foreign Ministry confirmed that it was in talks with officials in Washington about a possible prisoner release but did not provide further details.

U.S. President Donald Trump said later on Tuesday that he and Putin had discussed Hubbard and hinted at a possible release.

"Everybody's been after Hubbard for a long time, long before I got here, and just remember that question for a couple of days from now. You know why? Because I do things that nobody else can," he told reporters in the Oval Office.

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Peskov told reporters at a Tuesday press briefing that the Kremlin seeks to "continue the exchange of views on a range of very important issues" with Witkoff.

"We consider such meetings to be of great importance on every occasion. They are always timely and very substantive, and we greatly appreciate the mediation efforts of the American negotiators," he said.

A U.S. official told Axios correspondent Barak Ravid that Witkoff hopes to "present ideas developed in close consultation with Ukraine and European partners."

"President Trump has directed an intensive process to develop a comprehensive peace proposal with Ukraine and Europe, and the next step is to test whether that work can form the basis for serious negotiations with Russia," the official was quoted as saying.

Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, who has also been involved in peace negotiations, participated alongside Witkoff virtually during the talks in Norway after having contracted the flu.

The New York Times reported Monday that Trump is seeking to "force a deal" on Zelensky, "even one written largely on Russia's terms."

Putin continues to demand that Ukraine cede full control of the Donetsk region as a prerequisite for any ceasefire agreement — a condition Kyiv has repeatedly rejected.

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Sources close to the Kremlin told Bloomberg last month that Putin expects Russian forces to take full control of the Donetsk region by late February 2027.

Witkoff and Kushner last visited Russia on Sept. 5, when subsequent reporting claimed Putin raised the prospect of a multibillion-dollar oil deal that would benefit Middle Eastern business executives with ties to the U.S. negotiators.

Speaking to reporters in the Oval Office on Tuesday, Trump called on Ukraine to make a deal to end the war.

"Ukraine has to want to settle this war," Trump said.

He suggested Moscow had the upper hand in the fight because "Russia is a big machine — they just keep grinding forward, and that's what they've done. They've taken a very large piece of land."

Reuters contributed reporting.

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