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Putin Releases American Jailed in Russia, Agrees to Trilateral Peace Talks as Witkoff Visits

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U.S. special envoy Steve Witkoff meets with Vladimir Putin in St. Petersburg on Oct. 21, 2026. **Kremlin.ru**

President Vladimir Putin on Wednesday announced the release of Stephen James Hubbard, an American teacher who was taken from his home in Ukraine after Russia's full-scale invasion, as the Kremlin leader met with U.S. special envoy Steve Witkoff in St. Petersburg to discuss restarting negotiations to end the war in Ukraine.

Putin told Witkoff that Hubbard, convicted in Russia on allegations of serving as a mercenary for the Ukrainian military, was already preparing to board a flight back to the United States. Washington had maintained that the 74-year-old Michigan native and former teacher was wrongfully detained and sentenced to six years in prison.

U.S. President Donald Trump told reporters at the Oval Office earlier in the week that he had personally asked Putin to release Hubbard ahead of Witkoff's trip to St. Petersburg. "I've been talking to him at length. I've asked him to release him," Trump said.

Trump, writing on Truth Social following Hubbard's release, said the U.S. was "not required to give anything in return," as he sought to quell speculation that Moscow and Washington had agreed to conduct another tit-for-tat prisoner exchange.

"This major return should have taken place long ago through the Biden Administration, which got nowhere in its negotiations with the Kremlin," Trump wrote in a post. "Stephen is on his way back home."

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Witkoff, who has engaged in a frenzy of shuttle diplomacy on both the wars in Ukraine and Iran in recent months, was met by Putin's investment envoy Kirill Dmitriev at Pulkovo International Airport before meeting with Putin at the lavish Constantine Palace on Wednesday afternoon.

Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, who is also a key mediator in Ukraine peace negotiations, did not join Witkoff for the latest Russia trip after falling sick with the flu. Witkoff confirmed that Kushner would participate in the talks with Putin via video link.

Putin told Witkoff in St. Petersburg that he was grateful to Trump for the "attention paid to the settlement of the Ukrainian crisis," referring to the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. "I know that President Trump attaches special importance to this, most importantly due to humanitarian concerns."

Witkoff said that he hoped Wednesday's meeting would help to restart trilateral talks between the United States, Russia and Ukraine that have been stalled since February, when Trump ordered attacks against Iran.

"I'm hoping that you might consider that as a next step in the peace process, so that we can begin to have technical teams discuss what are those next steps," the U.S. envoy told Putin. "Even if we don't have resolution today... I think that will be important. And I think the world is waiting to hear that.

Earlier, a U.S. official told Reuters that Witkoff held "constructive" talks with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky during a meeting in Oslo, Norway, on Tuesday.

The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said Ukraine brought forward new ideas and proposals to the talks in Oslo, which also involved the leaders of Norway and Finland, as well as European and NATO representatives, and that participants made "meaningful progress" toward a coordinated approach to engaging Russia.

Those talks were said to have covered "key elements of a comprehensive peace framework," including security guarantees for Ukraine, a post-war economic plan and a broader European security architecture.

Witkoff would aim to "create a pathway toward direct trilateral and broader multilateral negotiations," the U.S. official said.

Speaking to the U.S. envoy in St. Petersburg on Wednesday, Putin said he was "curious to learn

about the outcomes" of the discussions in Norway.

The Russian president also offered to help Trump in dealing with Iran, saying Russia had a decades-long relationship with Tehran which it has repeatedly offered to leverage to address U.S. concerns about Iran's nuclear program.

In addition, Russia could supply large quantities of fertilizer to the United States to help American farmers, Putin told Witkoff, adding he wanted to discuss a potential meeting in China next month with Trump, which the Kremlin has suggested could also include Chinese President Xi Jinping.

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The Kremlin later said renewed peace talks, which would be at a technical level, could take place in Abu Dhabi and would be focused on how to guarantee the security of Ukraine and Russia once the war ended.

The Kremlin was less upbeat, however, about the outcome of talks Witkoff had held a day earlier in Oslo.

"These nuances, so to speak, do not entirely satisfy us," Kremlin aide Yuri Ushakov told reporters after the St Petersburg meeting, which lasted nearly three hours.

Zelensky traveled to Oslo this week in hopes of mending ties with the Trump administration, which have once again hit rocky waters in recent weeks after Trump blamed Ukrainian attacks on Russian oil refineries for soaring diesel costs in the United States, though analysts say the U.S.-Israeli war against Iran is the main cause of high energy prices globally.

Trump announced an "energy ceasefire" between Russia and Ukraine earlier this month, which neither side said they had agreed to beforehand. That apparent pause in strikes collapsed immediately as the Russian army continued its attacks against Ukraine's power grid.

Ukraine had accused the United States in recent days of withholding critical military support and intelligence amid the renewed attacks on Russian refineries.

However, Zelensky told a news conference after the Oslo meeting and an earlier phone call with U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio that Ukraine was again receiving early warnings of Russian missile attacks.

"Now it works, it's great," he said, adding he and Rubio had discussed supplies of Patriot missile interceptors, as well as the satellite-based Starlink system, which Kyiv said had stopped working when mounted on fast-moving objects such as drones.

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Norway's Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre said that the Oslo meeting had been constructive. Similarly, Finnish President Alexander Stubb said he believed Ukraine peace talks were "back

on track."

On Tuesday, Trump, who has leveled increasingly harsh criticism at Zelensky, called on Ukraine to make a deal to settle the war and claimed Putin was interested in signing a peace agreement. "Ukraine has to want to settle this war," he told reporters.

Trump also suggested Russia had the upper hand on the battlefield since "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."

Zelensky so far has resisted pressure from the White House to turn over his country's land in exchange for peace with Russia, arguing that doing so would only encourage further Russian aggression.

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

Reuters contributed reporting.

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