The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Putin Releases American Jailed in Russia After U.S. Envoy Arrives for Ukraine Talks

October 21, 2026

Kremlin envoy Kirill Dmitriev greets U.S. special envoy Steve Witkoff at Pulkovo Airport in St. Petersburg. **Reuters**

President Vladimir Putin ordered the release of Stephen James Hubbard, an American teacher who was taken from his home in Ukraine after Russia's full-scale invasion, state media reported Wednesday, as the Kremlin leader met with U.S. special envoy Steve Witkoff in St. Petersburg to discuss Ukraine peace negotiations and bilateral relations with Washington.

The state-run TASS news agency cited Putin as saying that Hubbard, who Russia had accused of serving as a mercenary for the Ukrainian armed forces, was already preparing to board a flight back to the United States. Washington maintained that the 74-year-old Michigan native was wrongfully detained and sentenced to six years in prison.

U.S. President Donald Trump told reporters at the Oval Office on Tuesday that he had 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. Let's see what happens," Trump said.

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 after arriving Wednesday morning.

Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, who is also involved in Ukraine peace negotiations, did not join Witkoff for the latest Russia visit after falling sick with the flu. Some media reported that he may participate in the talks with Putin via video link.

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

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.

Zelensky traveled to Oslo in hopes of mending ties with the Trump administration, which have once again hit rocky waters in recent weeks after U.S. President Donald 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.

Related article: Ukrainian Drone Strike Sparks Fire at Oil Transit Hub in Tambov Region

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.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2026/10/21/putin-releases-american-jailed-in-russia-after-us-envoy-arrives-for-ukraine-talks-a94037