The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Putin Agrees for Europe to Join Ukraine Peace Talks, Witkoff Says

By Reuters

November 13, 2026



Kremlin special envoy Kirill Dmitriev greets U.S. special envoys Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner.
REUTERS

President Vladimir Putin agreed on Thursday to let European representatives join the next round of Ukraine peace talks, a U.S. envoy said, though the Russian leader said Washington must work with its European allies to understand if they want peace or war in Ukraine.

The move to give Europe a seat at the negotiating table at the next round of talks, which U.S. envoy Steve Witkoff announced after the talks, could mark a breakthrough. But Putin's comments underlined how difficult the negotiations could become, given sharp differences between Moscow and European capitals over the way the war should end.

"The Europeans will join at the next meeting, which we consider to be a very important moment because they are our partners and it's important to us that they take part," Witkoff told Russian state TV after meeting Putin in the Kremlin.

Witkoff and fellow U.S. presidential envoy Jared Kushner later flew to Ireland and met Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, who said he was pleased at the prospect of further sets of talks and European participation in them.

There were, however, signs of renewed tensions, with Zelensky saying new restrictions were affecting the U.S.-made satellite communications Kyiv uses on the battlefield, and that he found the U.S. approach of discussing a new European security order with Russia "a bit strange."

EU role in talks?

During the Kremlin talks, Kushner told Putin that Washington had detected what he called "a big change" on the European side and was confident that expanding peace talks to include the Europeans would not hinder progress.

Putin said Moscow had always been open to talking to the EU about Ukraine, but signalled serious outstanding differences.

"As far as the Europeans are concerned, we have never been opposed to engaging in dialogue with Europe, and we have never broken off that dialogue. It was they who broke off the dialogue with the Russian Federation," he said.

He then warned that the European idea of sending Western troops into Ukraine once a peace deal was concluded would trigger a resumption of the war because Russia would see that as a threat to its own security.

"We would very much like you, gentlemen, and the U.S. administration as a whole, to work with your European allies so that they can finally make up their minds as to what they want: peace or war in Ukraine," said Putin.

In a briefing after the talks, Kremlin aide Yury Ushakov did not confirm that the Europeans would join the next round of peace talks and said their current stance on Ukraine amounted to "a recipe for endless war."

After Zelensky's brief discussions with the two U.S. envoys in Ireland, the Ukrainian president welcomed news that Europeans would be present at the next round of peace talks and expressed hope that the agenda would include steps towards a ceasefire and de-escalating the conflict.

"It's important that everything is unblocked," Zelensky said, after meeting the envoys whilst in Dublin to attend a European summit.

"We decided that we will work on an agenda about any kind of de-escalation, some kind of ceasefires... I hope that we will have such agenda. Yes, this is important."

The two days of trilateral talks in Abu Dhabi this week were the first direct U.S.-mediated negotiations between Russia and Ukraine in nine months.

Kyiv and Moscow said there had been some progress but that major differences remained, including on territorial issues. Russia holds about one-fifth of Ukraine and Kyiv refuses to

give up the rest of the Donbas region in its east.

Earlier on Thursday, Zelensky said disruptions to the Starshield satellite communications service were significant, affecting the entire front line and Russian-controlled parts of Ukraine. Starshield is the military version of SpaceX's Starlink satellite communications service, and Ukraine suffered similar disruptions last month.

"So far we know very little [on the Starshield restrictions]. But some things are already clear: if someone in America is making decisions that basically treat Ukrainian territory as if it is not Ukrainian, then it tells us where things are going," he said.

In a post on Telegram, he said that systemic restrictions were limiting the speed at which Starshield could be used. SpaceX declined to comment.

Proposed aid mission

In Moscow, Putin told the U.S. envoys that Russia was proposing a joint Russian-Ukrainian humanitarian mission to Kostiantynivka in eastern Ukraine, which he said Moscow controlled, an assertion Ukraine has taken issue with in the past, saying it retains a presence there.

Putin said the mission could be modeled on an initiative that allowed residents to leave the Russian-controlled town of Oleshky in southern Ukraine at the end of last month and for aid to be brought in for those who chose to remain.

Russia needed five days to clear the area near Kostiantynivka of mines, Putin said, saying there were 400 to 500 city residents who were still there. The mission would allow the world to understand who controlled the city, he added.

Ushakov, the Kremlin aide, said the U.S. envoys had welcomed Putin's idea and would be in touch with Russia about it.

Kyiv has expressed concerns that Moscow might wish to use ceasefires for such missions to enable its military to regroup.

Moscow has not made major territorial gains this year, but has heavily attacked Ukrainian infrastructure and Kyiv has frequently struck Russian oil refineries with drones, causing fuel shortages over the summer, a problem which has resurfaced in some regions this week, according to local officials.

Putin has shown no signs of being ready to moderate his territorial demands, which include a buffer zone in parts of Ukraine which Russia has not formally claimed as its own.

He said on Thursday that what Russia considers its state border should be the only meaningful demarcation point with Ukraine, in comments which appeared to signal his determination to pursue his aim of taking full control of all four Ukrainian regions that Moscow says it annexed in 2022.

Original url:
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koff-says-a94236