Witkoff and Putin talk again in St. Petersburg

U.S. Presidential Envoy Steve Witkoff and President Putin
Friday at the Presidential Library in St. Petersburg.

On Friday, Steve Witkoff, President Trump's envoy, met with Russian President Putin at the Presidential Library in St. Petersburg. It was the third time in the last two months that Witkoff has met with Putin in Russia. In February, after he met with him, Marc Fogel, an American teacher who had been arrested on drug charges in 2021 and was sentenced to 14 years in prison in 2022, was released and returned to the U.S. on Witkoff's plane. A month later, after the U.S. and Ukraine had agreed in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, on the terms of a proposed ceasefire in the war in Ukraine, conditional on Russia's agreement, Witkoff met again with Putin in Moscow, after which Trump and Putin spoke by phone, agreed on talks, and agreed that the movement toward peace would begin with an energy and infrastructure ceasefire, technical negotiations on the implementation of a maritime ceasefire in the Black Sea, and eventually a full ceasefire.

Following the Trump-Putin phone conversation, talks between Russian, Ukrainian, and American officials in Riyadh on March 23-25 produced four identical agreements between the Ukrainian and American officials, on one hand, and the Russian and American officials, on the other (meaning, of course, that the Russian and Ukrainian officials didn't negotiate directly with each other). Both pairs of officials agreed to ensure safe navigation, eliminate the use of force, and prevent the use of commercial vessels for military purposes in the Black Sea; agreed to develop measures for implementing the presidents' agreement to ban strikes against energy facilities; said they welcomed the good offices of third countries with a view toward supporting the implementation of the energy and maritime agreements, and agreed they would continue to work toward achieving a durable and lasting peace. The American and Russian officials also agreed the

U.S. would help restore Russia's access to the world market for agricultural and fertilizer exports, lower maritime insurance costs, and enhance its access to ports and payment systems for such transactions. And the American and Ukrainian officials also agreed the U.S. would continue to help in the exchange of prisoners of war, release of civilian detainees, and return of forcibly transferred Ukrainian children.

But Putin immediately said the agreement in regard to the Black Sea Initiative would take effect only after the sanctions imposed on the Russian Agricultural Bank and other Russian financial institutions were removed; they were able to reconnect with SWIFT [Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication], the system for facilitating interbank transactions; and all other restrictions and sanctions on financial institutions were removed. The EU immediately made it clear that none of those sanctions will be lifted until Russia ends its unprovoked and unjustified aggression in Ukraine and unconditionally withdraws all Russian forces from Ukraine. Putin further complicated the issue a few days later by calling for a "transitional administration" in Ukraine that would organize a democratic presidential election that would produce a "competent government" that could negotiate a peace agreement.

Witkoff's meeting with Putin on Friday lasted for more than four hours. Putin's presidential site subsequently said only that, "The meeting is focused on the aspects of the Ukraine crisis settlement." Kirill Dmitriev, the head of Russia's sovereign wealth fund and a presidential envoy who had met with Secretary of State Rubio and Witkoff in Washington two weeks ago, met with Witkoff again Friday in St. Petersburg prior to the meeting with Putin, and participated in the meeting with Putin along with Yuri Ushakov, Putin's foreign policy adviser. After the meeting, Dmitriev described the talks as "productive."

In his earlier visit to Washington, Dmitriev had reportedly told Witkoff that the easiest way to end the war was to let Russia keep the four Ukrainian regions it has formally annexed – Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson. Witkoff dutifully passed that message on to Trump. But neither he, nor Trump, nor anyone else, believes Ukraine should and would agree to that. But there is an open question about what would happen to the portions of those regions that are currently controlled by Russia. Witkoff has made it clear that he believes the forces of the Coalition of the Willing currently being organized by the UK and France should be deployed in the portions of those areas that aren't controlled by Russia to ensure that the Russian forces don't take advantage of a ceasefire to extend their control of the territory of those regions. But the key question that must be resolved at some point, obviously, is what will happen to the portions of those territories that are now controlled by Russia. For Ukraine, the answer is obvious; they must be returned to Ukraine. For Russia, the answer also is obvious; they should remain, as they are now, regions of the Russian Federation.

Prior to Witkoff's meeting with Putin, Dmitry Peskov, the Kremlin press secretary, said there was "no need to expect breakthroughs" as the "process of

normalizing relations is ongoing." And when asked whether the discussions might involve setting a date for a Putin-Trump meeting, Peskov said, "Let's see. It depends on what Witkoff has come with."

On Friday, as Witkoff was meeting with Putin, Trump was writing on Truth Social, "Russia has to get moving. Too many people are DYING, thousands a week, in a terrible and senseless war – A war that should have never happened." He's right: It's a terrible war, it never should have happened, and it should end. There should be a ceasefire today. But there won't be one today – and indeed probably won't be one until there is an agreement about the territory.

David R. Cameron
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