

**After Witkoff & Putin talk in Moscow and Trump & Zelenskyy talk at the Vatican, Russia & Ukraine are closer to a ceasefire**



U.S. Presidential Envoy Witkoff and President Putin in Moscow on Friday.



President Trump and President Zelenskyy at the Vatican on Saturday.

The two images above capture two of the most important conversations that took place last week in the continuing effort to persuade Russia and Ukraine to agree to a ceasefire in the war in Ukraine – U.S. Presidential Envoy Steve Witkoff’s three-hour conversation Friday with President Putin in Moscow and President Trump’s brief but nevertheless important conversation Saturday with President Zelenskyy at the Vatican before the funeral for Pope Francis. Those two conversations, taken together, may have increased the likelihood of a ceasefire in the war.

On April 17, Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Witkoff met with French President Macron and other French, German, British and Ukrainian officials in a series of meetings at the Elysée Palace in Paris that were prompted by Russia's continued refusal to agree to a ceasefire in its war against Ukraine and the conditions Putin conveyed to Witkoff in their five-hour meeting at the Presidential Library in St. Petersburg on April 11 that had to be satisfied in order for Russia to agree to a ceasefire.

At the April 17 meeting, U.S. officials gave the Ukrainian officials a one-page document that summarized the Russian conditions for agreeing to a ceasefire. They included: 1) De jure recognition by the U.S. of Russian control of Crimea, formally incorporated into the Russian Federation in 2014; 2) De facto recognition of the Russian occupation of nearly all of Luhansk oblast (region) and the occupied parts of Donetsk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts, all four of which were formally annexed by Russia in 2022; 3) A promise that Ukraine will not join NATO; 4) A lifting of the sanctions against Russia that have been in place since the annexation of Crimea in 2014; and 5) Increased economic cooperation with the U.S., including in the energy and industrial sectors. The document also proposed that Ukraine receive: 1) A "robust security guarantee" involving a special group of European and potentially non-European like-minded countries; 2) The return of a small part of Kharkiv oblast occupied by Russia; 3) Unhindered navigation along the Dnipro River in areas where it runs along the line of contact; and 4) Compensation and assistance for reconstruction. The document also proposed that the U.S. assume responsibility for the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant and provide electricity from it to both Ukraine and Russia.

Not surprisingly, when President Zelenskyy was informed about the Russian conditions for a ceasefire, he and the Ukrainian officials at the Paris meeting objected strenuously to the conditions and made it clear that Ukraine wouldn't agree to any of them. Zelenskyy later said, "Ukraine will not legally recognize the occupation of Crimea. There is nothing to talk about here. This violates our Constitution. This is our territory, the territory of Ukraine. It is our land, the land of the Ukrainian people."

A follow-up meeting of foreign ministers and officials had been scheduled for last Wednesday in London, but on Tuesday Rubio cancelled his planned participation and the UK Foreign Office announced the ministerial-level talks, which were to be chaired by Foreign Secretary Lammy, had been postponed, although the talks of officials would take place as scheduled. Also on Tuesday, Yury Ushakov, Putin's foreign policy adviser, said Putin would meet again with Witkoff later in the week. Karoline Leavitt, the White House Press Secretary, confirmed the meeting, and on Friday Witkoff and Putin met for three hours in Moscow and continued their discussion of the terms of a possible ceasefire. Ushakov as well as Kirill Dmitriev, the Special Presidential Representative for Investment and Economic Cooperation with Foreign Countries, also attended the meeting.

Following the meeting, Ushakov said the discussion, which went on for three hours, was “constructive and very useful. This conversation allowed the Russian and U.S. positions to be further brought closer together, not only on Ukraine, but also on a number of other international issues.” He also said that part of the discussion considered the possibility of direct talks between Kyiv and Moscow: “As for the Ukrainian crisis itself, the discussion was, in particular, about the possibility of resuming negotiations between representatives of the Russian Federation and Ukraine.”

On Thursday, after Russia’s largest and deadliest air strikes on Kyiv, which involved 76 missiles and 150 drone attacks that killed 12 and injured at least 90, Trump said in a post on Truth Social, “I am not happy with the Russian strikes on KYIV. Not necessary, and very bad timing Vladimir, STOP! 5,000 soldiers a week are dying. Let’s get the Peace Deal DONE!” And after his meeting with Zelenskyy at the Vatican in a conversation that, by all accounts, went well and in which there was an important change in tone from Trump’s angry words in their conversation in the White House on Feb. 28, Trump reiterated in a post on Truth Social what he had said in the earlier post: “There is no reason for Putin to be shooting missiles into civilian areas, cities and towns, over the last few days. It makes me think that maybe he doesn’t want to stop the war, he’s just tapping me along, and has to be dealt with differently, through ‘Banking’ or ‘Secondary Sanctions’? Too many people are dying!!!”

Both conversations were important and may foreshadow a possible ceasefire in the war. Yesterday, on NBC’s “Meet the Press,” when asked if Russia and Ukraine were closer to a deal in the wake of the Saturday conversation between Trump and Zelenskyy at the Vatican, Rubio said, “Well, I think they’re closer in general than they’ve been any time in the last three years, but it’s still not there....and it needs to start happening. We need to start – I think this is going to be a critical week. This week is going to be a really important week in which we have to make a determination about whether this is an endeavor that we want to continue to be involved in, or it it’s time to sort of focus on some other issue...But we want to see it happen. There are reasons to be optimistic, but there are reasons to be realistic of course as well. We’re close, but we’re not close enough.”

Meanwhile, in an interview on CBS, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov said in regard to Trump’s proposal for a 30-day ceasefire, “President Putin immediately supported President Trump’s proposal a few weeks ago to establish a 30-day ceasefire, provided we do not repeat mistakes of the last 10 years, when deals were signed and then Ukraine would violate those deals with the support and with encouragement from the Biden administration and from European countries.” When pressed about that, Lavrov said, “So President Putin said: ‘Ceasefire, yes, but we want the guarantees that the ceasefire would not be used again to beef up the Ukrainian military and that the support of arms should stop. No, it is not a precondition. It is the lessons learned after at least three times a deal similar to the one we are discussing now failed.”

Russia still has not agreed to the 30-day ceasefire. But today, the Kremlin announced there would be a three-day ceasefire from the start of May 8 to the end of May 10, coinciding with the celebration marking the end of World War II. In a statement announcing the ceasefire, the Kremlin said, “Russia believes that the Ukrainian side should follow this example. In the event of violations of the ceasefire by the Ukrainian

side, the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation will give an adequate and effective response. The Russian side once again declares its readiness for peace talks without preconditions, aimed at eliminating the root causes of the Ukrainian crisis, and constructive interaction with international partners.”

A three-day ceasefire is obviously not a 30-day ceasefire, but it’s better than no ceasefire at all. However, the three-day ceasefire on May 8-10 means, of course, that until May 8, and after May 10, Russia’s war will continue to bring, as it does today, destruction, devastation, and death to Ukraine and its people.

David R. Cameron

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