As Trump & Putin prepare for their Friday meeting, EU leaders say Ukraine should be there

President Putin and U.S. Presidential Envoy Steve Witkoff in Moscow last Wednesday.

Last Wednesday, Steve Witkoff, President Trump's Special Envoy who has met with President Putin in Moscow or St. Petersburg on several occasions since February, met with him again in Moscow for three hours. After the meeting, Witkoff spoke with President Trump, who subsequently said the meeting was "highly productive." In a phone conversation with a number of European leaders, including President Zelenskyy, Trump said he would meet in person with Putin, possibly sometime this week, and would later meet with both Putin and Zelenskyy.

On Friday evening, President Trump posted a message on Truth Social that "the highly anticipated meeting between myself, as President of the United States of America, and President Vladimir Putin, of Russia, will take place next Friday, August 15, 2025, in the Great State of Alaska." Later, in comments to reporters, he suggested there had been some discussion, presumably between Putin and Witkoff, about potentially "swapping" territory as part of a ceasefire agreement: "We're actually looking to get some back and some swapping. It's complicated. It's actually nothing easy. It's very complicated. But we're going to get some back. We're going to get some switched. There'll be some swapping of territories to the betterment of both and…. we'll be talking about that either later or tomorrow or whatever."

On Saturday, Yuri Ushakov, a foreign policy adviser to Putin, posted a comment on Putin's site in which, after noting that "it is in Alaska and in the Arctic that the economic interests of our countries converge and the prospects for implementing large-scale mutually beneficial projects arise," he said "the presidents will undoubtedly focus on discussing ways to reach a sustainable settlement to the Ukraine crisis." And looking

beyond the Friday meeting, he said, “we would naturally expect the next meeting between the presidents to be held on Russia’s territory. An invitation to that effect has already been made to the President of the United States.”

But as Trump and Putin prepare for Friday’s meeting, attention has understandably focused on Trump’s “swapping” comment, which presumably was based on what Putin had said to Witkoff in their meeting last Wednesday and what Witkoff had conveyed to Trump in their phone conversation after the meeting and subsequently reiterated in a phone conversation between Trump, with Witkoff participating, and a number of European leaders, including President Zelenskyy. Putin’s plan, as Witkoff reportedly described it, would involve Ukraine formally turning over to Russia the Donbas area of eastern Ukraine, which consists of the regions of Luhansk and Donetsk, as well as formally accepting Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea. Russia formally annexed the two Donbas regions in September 2022 but still does not control the western portion of the region of Donetsk. In addition, the Russian plan would reportedly also require Ukraine to turn over to Russia the substantial portions of the regions of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia that are currently held by the Russian forces. (Russia formally annexed those two regions as well in 2022.)

Not surprisingly, Ukraine strongly objected to Putin’s plan and to the apparent American acceptance of the plan. In a statement soon after Trump announced next Friday’s meeting, Zelenskyy strenuously objected to the “swapping” proposal, saying “Ukrainians will not give their land to the occupier.” And in a video address, he said, “Any decisions made against us, any decisions made without Ukraine, are at the same time decisions against peace. They will bring nothing. These are dead decisions; they will never work. We will not give Russia any awards for what it has done. And we all need a real, living peace that people will respect.”

On Sunday, Mark Rutte, the Secretary-General of NATO, said, correctly, “Next Friday will be important because it will be about testing Putin, how serious he is on bringing this terrible war to an end…. I do believe that Donald Trump wants to end this. He wants to end the terrible loss of life. He wants to end the terrible damage being done to the infrastructure in Ukraine. So many people losing their lives. So much damage being done.” And he noted, correctly, “It will be about territory. It will be, of course, about security guarantees, but also about the absolute need to acknowledge that Ukraine decides its own future, that Ukraine has to be a sovereign nation, deciding on its own geopolitical future, of course having no limitations to its own military troop levels, and for NATO to have no limits on our presence on the eastern flank in countries like Latvia, Estonia, and Finland.”

Also on Sunday, British Prime Minister Starmer, French President Macron, German Chancellor Merz, Italian Prime Minister Meloni, Polish Prime Minister Tusk, Finnish President Stubb, and European Commission President von der Leyen issued a joint statement that “the path to peace in Ukraine cannot be decided without Ukraine.” The

leaders also said that “international borders must not be changed by force” and that the current frontline should be “the starting point of negotiations.”

And also on Sunday, Kaja Kallas, the EU’s High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and President of the Foreign Affairs Council, said, “President Trump is right that Russia has to end its war against Ukraine. The U.S. has the power to force Russia to negotiate seriously. Any deal between the U.S. and Russia must have Ukraine and the EU included, for it is a matter of Ukraine’s and the whole of Europe’s security. I will convene an extraordinary meeting of the EU foreign ministers Monday to discuss our next steps.” She also said, “As we work towards a sustainable and just peace, international law is clear: All temporarily occupied territories belong to Ukraine.”

On Tuesday morning the EU leaders issued a statement, supported by all except Hungarian Prime Minister Orban, that reiterated the view that a resolution of the conflict cannot be decided without the participation of Ukraine. They said, “We, the Leaders of the European Union, welcome the efforts of President Trump towards ending Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine and achieving a just and lasting peace and security for Ukraine. A just and lasting peace that brings stability and security must respect international law, including the principles of independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity and that international borders must not be changed by force.” Importantly, they also said, “The people of Ukraine must have the freedom to decide their future. The path to peace in Ukraine cannot be decided without Ukraine. Meaningful negotiations can only take place in the context of a ceasefire or reduction of hostilities.”

Yesterday, Chancellor Merz invited President Macron, Prime Minister Starmer, Prime Minister Meloni, Prime Minister Tusk, President Stubb, President Zelenskyy, EU Commission President von der Leyen, European Council President Costa, NATO Secretary General Rutte, President Trump, and Vice President Vance to meet online Wednesday to discuss how to respond to Russia’s demands in regard to the Ukrainian territory it currently holds and ensure that Ukraine’s future security is guaranteed, including through membership in NATO. Merz said the talks would focus on ways to put pressure on Russia to accept a ceasefire and move toward peace talks and would also focus also on territorial claims and security guarantees. There will reportedly be three separate videoconferences. The first, at 2 p.m., German time, is projected to last about an hour and will bring together the European leaders, the EU leaders, Rutte, and Zelenskyy. At 3 p.m., there will be a separate meeting of Trump, Vance, Zelenskyy and the EU leaders. And at 4:30 p.m., there will be joint call, chaired by Merz, Macron, and Starmer, of the leaders of the states participating in the Coalition of the Willing.

On Sunday? it was announced that Presidents Trump and Zelenskyy will meet virtually with the EU leaders in an emergency meeting on Wednesday. The meeting, organized by German Chancellor Merz, will focus on how to respond collectively to Russia’s demands in regard to the Ukrainian territory it currently holds and to Ukraine’s demands for future security guarantees including future membership in NATO. Merz

and the other European leaders believe Putin must first agree to a ceasefire before there can be any discussion of peace talks and the territorial issues, and they have made it clear, repeatedly, that any territorial exchanges must be agreed by Ukraine. Merz and other European leaders insist that Putin agree to a ceasefire before any peace talks between Russia and Ukraine take place. They have also made it clear, as their statement today indicates, that any potential territorial exchanges must be agreed with Kyiv, and that Ukraine should receive firm security guarantees to protect it against further aggression. In a broadcast last night, Merz said, "We cannot accept that territorial issues between Russia and America are discussed or even decided over the heads of the Europeans, over the heads of the Ukrainians." According to a tentative schedule, the online meeting will begin at 2 p.m. German time Wednesday with a discussion that includes the leaders of Germany, France, the UK, Italy, Poland, and perhaps other EU states as well, President Zelenskyy, NATO Secretary General Rutte, European Council President Costa, and European Commission President von der Leyen, after which, at 3 p.m. German time (9 a.m. U.S. time), there will be a one-hour online meeting between the EU leaders and President Trump and Vice President Vance. And following that meeting, there will be online meeting at 4:30 p.m., German time, of the leaders of the states participating in the Coalition of the Willing, the members of which have developed extensive plans for safeguarding the territory controlled by Ukraine after a ceasefire has been agreed by Ukraine and Russia.

After today's meeting, Kallas said, "The Foreign Affairs Council discussed recent developments ahead of President Trump's planned meeting with President Putin. On Ukraine, transatlantic unity, support to Ukraine, and pressure on Russia is how we will end this war and prevent future Russian aggression in Europe. EU Foreign Ministers expressed support for U.S. steps that will lead to a just peace. Meanwhile, we work on more sanctions against Russia, more military support for Ukraine and more support for Ukraine's budgetary needs and accession process to join the EU." And in an obvious message to the U.S. before Friday's meeting in Alaska, she warned against any concessions to Russia: "As far as Russia has not agreed to a full and unconditional ceasefire, we should not even discuss any concessions. The sequencing of the steps is important. First an unconditional ceasefire with a strong monitoring system and ironclad security guarantees."

Today in a press conference, President Trump said he was going to try to get some territory back for Ukraine: "Russia's occupied a big portion of Ukraine. They occupied prime territory. We're going to try to get some of that territory back for Ukraine." But he again said there would be "some swapping, changes in land," which, of course, implies that the Ukrainian forces have taken some Russian territory, which is of course not true (unless, like Putin, one regards as Russian the territory in the Ukrainian regions of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia, which Russia unilaterally annexed in September 2022). Trump said he would let the European leaders know if Putin proposed a "fair deal," adding that he'd call Zlenskyy first: "I'll call him first, out of respect: I'll call him first…I'll call him after, and I may say, 'lots of luck, keep fighting,' or I may

say, ‘we can make a deal.” But he used again the term that is so objectionable to Ukraine, saying there would be also said once again, as if he doesn’t understand how objectionable the term is to Ukraine, there might be “some swapping, changes in land,” between Russia and Ukraine.

David R. Cameron
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