Trump & Zelenskyy meet online with EU leaders prior to Trump-Putin meeting in Anchorage

President Zelenskyy and Chancellor Merz at Wednesday's video meeting with European leaders and President Trump.

Last Wednesday, Steve Witkoff, President Trump's Special Envoy who has met with President Putin 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.

Last Friday evening, 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 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 today's 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 prepared for today's meeting, which will take place at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson in Anchorage, attention understandably focused on Trump's "swapping" comment, which presumably was based on what Putin had said to Witkoff in their meeting last week, Witkoff had subsequently reported to Trump after the meeting, and Trump had repeated in his subsequent phone conversations with a number of European leaders, including President Zelenskyy. Putin's plan, Witkoff had said, involved Ukraine formally accepting Russia's annexation of the Donbas area of eastern Ukraine, which consists of the regions of Luhansk and Donetsk, as well as its 2014 annexation of Crimea. Russia annexed the two Donbas regions in September 2022 but still doesn't control the western portion of the region of Donetsk. In addition, the Russian plan reportedly also requires Ukraine to relinquish the portions of the regions of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia that are currently held by the Russian forces. (Russia formally annexed both 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 strongly 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, "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…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 in which they said, "the path to peace in Ukraine cannot be decided without Ukraine." They also said, "international borders must not be changed by force" and the

current frontline should be “the starting point of negotiations.” Kaja Kallas, the EU’s High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and President of the EU Foreign Affairs Council, likewise made it clear that Ukraine must be involved in any resolution of the conflict: “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.” But, she added, “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. As we work towards a sustainable and just peace, international law is clear: All temporarily occupied territories belong to Ukraine.”

In a broadcast Sunday evening, Merz announced he would invite the EU leaders to meet online in an emergency meeting Wednesday in which they would be joined by Presidents Trump and Zelenskyy. The meeting, he said, would focus on how to respond collectively to Russia’s demands in regard to the Ukrainian territory it currently holds and to Ukraine’s need for future security guarantees, including future membership in NATO. He made it clear that he and the other European leaders believe that Putin must first agree to a ceasefire before there can be any discussion of peace talks and territorial issues. And he made it clear that he and the other European leaders strongly object to Russia and the U.S. even discussing, much less deciding, territorial issues about Europe without the Europeans: “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.”

On Monday, 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 participate in one or more of three online meetings 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. 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. The three video conferences were scheduled for Wednesday afternoon. The first, at 2 p.m. German time and projected to last about an hour, would bring together the European leaders, the EU leaders, Rutte and Zelenskyy. The second, at 3 p.m. German time and projected to last about an hour, would include Trump, Vance, Zelenskyy and the EU leaders. And the third, at 4:30 p.m. German time and chaired by Merz, Macron, and Starmer, would include the leaders of the states participating in the Coalition of the Willing.

Also on Monday, the EU Foreign Affairs Council, which consists of the foreign ministers of the member states, met informally online, after which 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. in regard to today'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."

Meanwhile, in a press conference Monday, Trump, obviously aware of the uproar created by his "swapping" comments, 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 not true (unless, like Putin, one regards as Russian the territory in the Ukrainian regions of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia that Russia unilaterally annexed in September 2022). Trump said he would let the European leaders know if Putin proposed a "fair deal," adding that he will call Zelenskyy 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 might be "some swapping, changes in land," between Russia and Ukraine.

On Tuesday, the EU leaders issued a statement supported by 26 of the 27 leaders (all but Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán) 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."

On Wednesday, in the first of the three online meetings arranged by Merz, the leaders of Germany, France, the UK, Italy, Poland, and Finland; European Council President Costa, European Commission President von der Leyen, NATO Secretary General Rutte, and President Zelenskyy met. In the second online meeting, those leaders were joined by President Trump and Vice President Vance. Following that meeting, a third meeting took place involving the leaders of the states participating in the Coalition of the

Willing, which has developed extensive plans, including the provision of a "reassurance force" to safeguard the territory controlled by Ukraine if and when there is a ceasefire.

Following the online meetings, Merz said, "We had a truly exceptionally constructive and good conversation" with Trump. He said, "there is hope that something is moving." He made it clear that any negotiations must follow a "correct order" and must be preceded by a ceasefire and then a framework agreement, with the current contact line between the forces serving as the starting point in the discussion, and with Ukraine receiving robust security guarantees. He said there was a mutual agreement that immediately after the Putin-Trump meeting Trump will brief Zelenskyy and then the European leaders on his meeting with Putin. He also said Trump had agreed to five key points: First, that Ukraine will participate in any meetings after a ceasefire. Second, that there will be no discussion of territory until there is a ceasefire and no decisions in regard to territory without Ukraine's approval. Third, that there will be no recognition of Russia's annexation of the Ukrainian regions. Fourth, that Ukraine will receive security guarantees, including the right to join NATO. And fifth, that there will be increased economic pressure on Russia if there is no ceasefire and peace agreement.

Trump likewise thought it was a good meeting: "We had a very good call. I would rate it a 10. Very friendly." He said he'll call Zelenskyy after the Alaska meeting. And he said there will be "very serious consequences" for Russia if Putin doesn't agree to a ceasefire after the Friday meeting. He also said it was not his choice to exclude Zelenskyy from the Anchorage meeting and that he wants to see a meeting between Putin and Zelenskyy, with himself if necessary: "There's a very good chance that we're going to have a second meeting, which will be more productive than the first, because the first is – I'm going to find out where we are and what we're doing." But he made it clear that a second meeting with Putin would depend on how the first meeting goes: "Now, there may be no second meeting because if I feel that it's not appropriate to have it because I didn't get the answers that we have to have, then we're not going to have a second meeting."

Zelenskyy, for his part, said, "We talked about the meeting in Alaska. We hope that the central topic of the meeting will be a ceasefire – an immediate ceasefire. The U.S. president has repeatedly said this. He suggested to me that after the meeting in Alaska we will have contact. And we will discuss all the results, if there are any. And we will determine the next mutual steps." He also made it clear that he should be included in a future meeting for an obvious reason: It's "impossible to solve this without Ukraine."

Following the online meeting of some of the leaders of the states participating in the "Coalition of the Willing," the Co-chairs of the Coalition, President Macron, Prime Minister Starmer, and Chancellor Merz, issued the following statement: "President Macron, Prime Minister Starmer and Chancellor Merz today co-chaired a virtual meeting of a grouping of 'Coalition of the Willing' Leaders and with the participation of President Zelenskyy and Vice-President Vance, ahead of President Trump's meeting with President Putin in Alaska. The leaders welcomed President Trump's efforts to stop

the killing in Ukraine, end Russia's war of aggression, and achieve just and lasting peace. They welcomed the open discussions with President Trump earlier that day. They were clear that the path to peace in Ukraine cannot be decided without Ukraine. It was necessary to continue an approach that combined active diplomacy, support to Ukraine and pressure on Russia. A diplomatic solution must protect Ukraine's and Europe's vital security interests."

"They also reiterated that: First, meaningful negotiations can only take place in the context of a ceasefire or a lasting and significant cessation of hostilities. Second, sanctions and wider economic measures to put pressure on Russia's war economy should be strengthened if Russia does not agree to a ceasefire in Alaska. Third, international borders must not be changed by force. Fourth, Ukraine must have robust and credible security guarantees to effectively defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity. The Coalition of the Willing is ready to play an active role, including through plans by those willing to deploy a reassurance force once hostilities have ceased. No limitations should be placed on Ukraine's armed forces or on its cooperation with third countries. Russia could not have a veto against Ukraine's pathway to EU and NATO. They confirmed they would continue to cooperate closely with President Trump and with the United States of America, and with President Zelenskyy and the people of Ukraine, for a just and lasting peace in Ukraine."

All four points in the Co-chairs' statement are important and worth underscoring: first, that there can't be meaningful negotiations without a ceasefire or a lasting and significant cessation of hostilities; second, that sanctions and economic measures should be strengthened if Russia doesn't agree to a ceasefire; third, that international borders can't be changed by force; and fourth, that Ukraine must have robust and credible security guarantees. Hopefully, President Trump will keep those points in mind when he meets with Putin today in Anchorage. The meeting begins at 11:30 a.m. local time, 3:30 p.m. ET.

David R. Cameron
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