



**Vatnik Soup** @P\_Kallioniemi

Dec 27, 2025 · 21 tweets · [P\\_Kallioniemi/status/2004927674901221447](https://twitter.com/P_Kallioniemi/status/2004927674901221447)

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In today's Vatnik Soup, we'll introduce an American billionaire, real estate developer, and wannabe diplomat, Steve Witkoff. He's best known for trying to sell Ukraine to Putin and for helping Trump sell this treason and encouragement of genocidal war as "peace".

1/20



Steve studied law and political science at Hofstra University in New York. After law school, he worked as a real estate attorney, which led him into property acquisitions and development. He first met Trump in the 1980s when Trump was a client of his real estate law firm.

2/20



In 1997, Witkoff founded the Witkoff Group, a New York-based real estate development and investment firm. The firm has owned and developed dozens of properties in New York and other major US cities, making Witkoff quite wealthy, with some interesting business connections.

3/20

# Steven Witkoff

**\$2B** Real Time Net Worth  
as of 12/21/25  
#1985 in the world today

**\$2B** 2025 Billionaires Net Worth  
as of 4/1/25

&lt;

**F** | **From the Editor**

- Steven Witkoff is the founder, chairman and CEO of Witkoff Group, a real estate development firm he founded in New York in 1997.
- Witkoff Group's developments include luxury condos, hotels, golf courses and apartment buildings in New York, Los Angeles and Florida.
- Friends with Donald Trump since the early 1990s, Witkoff was appointed as Trump's special envoy to the Middle East in November 2024.
- As Trump's Middle East envoy, Witkoff helped negotiate a ceasefire in Gaza between Israel and Hamas in January 2025.
- Witkoff was a real estate lawyer and then started buying apartments and offices with his former colleague Larry Gluck before going it alone in 1997.

## **Witkoff's New York Empire and Russian-Linked Capital**

**H**aving started in the 1980s at the real estate law firm Dreyer & Traub, where Donald Trump was a client, Witkoff left lawyering in the 1990s and moved into real estate in his own right, establishing the Witkoff Group in 1997. Among his first big-ticket purchases was the iconic Woolworth Building in Manhattan in 1998 for about \$137 million.

At the same time, Len Blavatnik was using his New York-based holding company, Access Industries, to buy up former state assets in Russia being privatised by the Government, in particular accumulating shares in aluminium smelters. In the early 2000s, the sale of the Russian oil company TNK to BP netted him and his co-owners billions of dollars – money that would go on to seek safe Western assets, including prime New York and Florida real estate. Blavatnik's wealth was built in partnership with Viktor Vekselberg's Renova Group – one of Putin's closest oligarchic power blocs – establishing an investment ecosystem that would later overlap with Witkoff's own projects.

Anxious to capitalise on such foreign investment, the Kremlin created the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) in 2011 and Putin installed Kirill Dmitriev as its chief executive. This was not just any fund – it was Russia's sovereign wealth fund, set up to co-invest alongside foreign partners in strategic Russian companies and later described by the US Treasury as a “slush fund” for Vladimir Putin when it sanctioned the fund after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Dmitriev now also serves as Putin's special envoy for investment and economic cooperation – appearing regularly at the President's side at investor summits.

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## **From RDIF to Blackstone to Kushner – and Back to Witkoff**

**B**efore international sanctions bit, Putin's money man Dmitriev could call on a panel of foreign advisers: among them, the New York tycoons Leon Black and Stephen Schwarzman. Their advisory roles did not prevent them from doing business back home. One of those pieces of business would be a substantial refinancing of Steve Witkoff's flagship tower, tying his company directly into the orbit of Dmitriev's former foreign advisers.

Schwarzman, the billionaire chair of Blackstone, sat on the international advisory board of Putin's sovereign wealth fund – the RDIF – from 2011 until 2014. During that period, Blackstone made large loans to Jared Kushner's family firm, eventually becoming one of the Kushner Companies' biggest lenders with more than \$400 million in financing across at least four New York deals. In 2015, his firm's money would also flow into Witkoff's most famous asset.

# The Envoy: How Steve Witkoff's Network Links Trump and the Kremlin



Peter Grant

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25 min read · May 29, 2025



85



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A consensus has emerged among America's liberal commentariat regarding Steven Witkoff, Donald Trump's Special Envoy to the Middle East and his top negotiator in the ongoing war in Ukraine.

It portrays Witkoff as an inexperienced naif who achieved his position solely through his personal relationship with the President, cemented in 1986 when he bought Trump a ham sandwich after a late night of real estate negotiations.

While this caricature may offer cold comfort to a beleaguered establishment, it is an ill-informed underestimation of the man.

## **The Trump Organization's long history with Dreyer & Traub: Civic Corruption and the Shadow of Organized Crime**

Witkoff began his career in the late 1970s as an attorney at Dreyer & Traub, a firm that represented many of New York City's top real estate developers. The firm's relationship with the Trumps dates back to the 1950s, when it represented Fred Trump in a legal dispute with the Federal Housing Administration (FHA).

POLITICS

## Trump's oldest son said a decade ago that a lot of the family's assets came from Russia

By [Brennan Weiss](#)



President Donald Trump speaks with his son Donald Trump Jr. in January 2017. REUTERS/Lucas Jackson

In 2024, Steve's son Zach Witkoff co-founded World Liberty Financial, a cryptocurrency venture, with Trump and others, with Trump's and Witkoff's families owning a large share of it. Both families also have profitable business dealings in the Middle East.

4/20

**CRYPTO WORLD**

# Senators push for probe into Trump-linked crypto firm over token sales tied to North Korea and Russia

PUBLISHED TUE, NOV 18 2025 6:31 AM EST | UPDATED TUE, NOV 18 2025 8:12 AM EST

 Dylan Butts  
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**KEY POINTS**

- Senators Elizabeth Warren and Jack Reed are seeking a probe of a Trump-tied crypto firm over alleged links to illicit actors in North Korea and Russia.
- A watchdog flagged \$WLFI sales to "various highly suspicious entities," raising security concerns.
- The push comes as Congress weighs rules that could limit oversight of governance tokens.

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People walk past an advertisement featuring Donald Trump with Solana, XRP, USDC Bitcoin in Hong Kong.  
May James | Sopa Images | LightRocket | Getty Images

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Two U.S. Senators are pressing the Department of Justice and the Treasury Department to investigate a crypto company closely tied to the family of U.S. President [Donald Trump](#) over alleged links to illicit actors in North Korea and Russia.

In a letter on Tuesday, U.S. Senators Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., and Jack Reed, D-R.I., minority members on the Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs, raised concerns that [World Liberty Financial](#), a crypto firm heavily owned and run by the Trump family, may pose national security risks.

DWF's deal with World Liberty Financial could theoretically help shield it from regulatory scrutiny under the Trump regime. The investment came with the announcement that the firm would soon establish a New York office, a move that it said in a post on X "reflects our deep confidence in the U.S. as a driving force in institutional crypto adoption." The strategic purchase instantly made the DWF the 23rd-largest holder of \$WLFI tokens, which, according to terms and conditions, are "non-transferable and locked indefinitely in a wallet or smart contract." World Liberty further advises investors to "accept the risk that once you've paid the purchase price, your interest in the Token may decline and you have no expectation of resale of the Token." In other words, those who buy \$WLFI can't currently sell it on the open market, and it's not clear if they'll ever have the chance, nor do they know if the tokens will someday have monetary value.

DWF's managing partner is Uzbekistan-born Andrei Grachev, who on the day before the transaction posted to X, "We're making history now," adding, "Stay tuned." The day after the DOJ closed their crypto investigations unit, he posted, "I am enjoying market nowadays, it is freaking volatile, real Wild Wild West," and told a follower "it is a crime szn bro." Grachev formerly led the Moscow-based Russian branch of the crypto exchange Huobi, now HTX, an office that opened in partnership with Russian state-owned bank VEB's digital center for promoting crypto and blockchain tech. He stepped down as CEO of Huobi under a cloud of suspicion around his alleged link to a \$4 billion crypto pyramid scheme and accusations of failing to repay debts totaling more than \$150,000. Before that, he was a vice president at the Russian Association of Cryptoeconomics, Artificial Intelligence and Blockchain (RACIB), a nonprofit closely linked to VEB.



Eric Trump, left, Donald Trump Jr., right, and their World Liberty Financial co-founder Zach Witkoff, behind Don Jr., at the Nasdaq Market in New York in August to celebrate the closing of a deal under which blockchain company Alt5 Sigma raised hundreds of millions of dollars to buy World Liberty Financial tokens, yielding a windfall for the Trump family. REUTERS/Eduardo Munoz

A REUTERS SPECIAL REPORT

## Inside the Trump family's global crypto cash machine

The U.S. president's family raked in more than \$800 million from sales of crypto assets in the first half of 2025 alone, a Reuters examination found, on top of potentially billions more in unrealized "on paper" gains. Much of that cash has come from foreign sources as Donald Trump's sons have touted their business on an international investor roadshow.

By David Gauthier-Villars, Tom Bergin, Michelle Conlin, Lawrence Delevingne and Tom Wilson

October 28, 2025 11:00 AM GMT+1 · Updated October 28, 2025

DUBAI - Eric Trump was in Dubai on family business. Meeting with a Chinese businessman and his associates on the sidelines of a cryptocurrency conference in May this year, the son of U.S. President Donald J. Trump ran through his usual talking points about the inefficiency of traditional banks and his own famous father's run-ins with financiers.

Then came the pitch. Buy at least \$20 million of "governance tokens" in the Trump family's crypto business, World Liberty Financial, and become part of a venture that Eric Trump predicted would soon embody the future of finance in America, according to a person familiar with the meeting.

To some in that small gathering, the technology Eric Trump's team described for World Liberty seemed "rudimentary," the person said. At the time, World Liberty was a fledgling business. It hadn't yet created the cryptocurrency-based finance platform it promised after its September 2024 launch. It still hasn't.

Even so, the pitch apparently worked. On June 26, an obscure entity called Aqua1 Foundation, which said it was based in the United Arab Emirates, announced it was buying \$100 million of cryptocurrency tokens from World Liberty. It was the single largest known purchase of the so-called WLFI tokens at the time.

## Where Mideast Envoy Pitched Peace, His Son Pitched Investors

Steve Witkoff's son recently sought money from Gulf states including Qatar, which has previously invested in Witkoff family projects to win favor with President Trump.



Steve Witkoff and his son Alex. Samantha Nandez/BFA.com

By Debra Kamin and Bradley Hope

Published Sept. 26, 2025 Updated Oct. 5, 2025

As Steve Witkoff, President Trump's envoy to the Middle East, conducted delicate cease-fire negotiations between Israel and Hamas this year, his son Alex was on another mission. He was quietly soliciting billions of dollars from some of the same governments whose representatives were involved in peace talks with his father.

Alex Witkoff pitched Qatar, a mediator in the Gaza talks and a key U.S. ally in the Middle East, on a planned investment fund focused on commercial real estate projects in the United States, according to a spokeswoman for Qatar's sovereign wealth fund.

He later wooed prospective investors by telling them that he had already secured pledges of billions of dollars from government-affiliated funds in Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait, according to people familiar with his pitches who were not authorized to speak publicly.

The real estate fund had the potential to yield hundreds of millions of dollars of revenue for the Witkoff Group, which Steve Witkoff founded in 1997. He remains a partial owner of the company, after selling a portion of his stake this year.

After being elected to his 2nd term in 2024, Trump announced that Witkoff would be his special envoy to the Middle East. Witkoff had no diplomatic experience, no understanding of autocratic regimes, and a risk of conflicts of interest given his business ties in the region.

## Steve Witkoff's real job: make the world safer or make the Trumps richer?

The real estate tycoon is the president's envoy to the Kremlin and the Gulf, while their families build a crypto empire together



Trump's close friend has rocketed from real estate to the front line of politics

Louise Callaghan, New York | Saturday May 31 2025, 6.00pm BST, The Sunday Times

## Already fooled by Hamas once

Witkoff began his tenure on a high note after brokering a major ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hamas. The deal, reached just one day before Trump's inauguration, resulted in a two-month cessation of hostilities and the release of 33 hostages. However, Witkoff's subsequent attempt to extend the ceasefire unraveled quickly.



Witkoff and Donald Trump. (Photo: Reuters)

On March 12, Witkoff left negotiations with Hamas officials in Qatar, believing he had secured a framework for a one-month extension in exchange for the release of five additional hostages in return for a larger group of Palestinian prisoners. But two days later, Hamas countered with a significantly altered proposal: the release of only [one American hostage, Edan Alexander](#), along with the [remains of four deceased captives](#). Witkoff rejected the offer outright, and the [ceasefire collapsed just four days later](#).

"I thought we had a deal," Witkoff told Fox News a week after the breakdown. "I even believed we had Hamas' approval. Maybe I'm the one who feels betrayed. I thought we had reached an agreement—but apparently, we hadn't."

While many Israelis have praised Witkoff's efforts, critics have pointed to his lack of diplomatic experience as a liability in high-stakes negotiations. "His assumption that actors like Hamas or Iran are primarily motivated by a desire to live — and can therefore be reasoned with through direct engagement — reflects a dangerous misunderstanding of their long-term ideological goals," said Shiri Fein-Grossman, former head of regional affairs at the Israel National Security Council. "We have to understand our enemies through their lens, not ours. Hamas and Iran are [autocratic regimes driven by deep-rooted ideologies, not short-term interests](#)."

## Trump's Middle East Envoy Has Prior Ties to Oil-Rich Nations There

Steve Witkoff's involvement with two sovereign wealth funds as he bought and then sold Manhattan's Park Lane Hotel demonstrates the potential conflicts his new role will present.



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Steve Witkoff speaking at the Qatar Economic Forum in Doha in May. He has had a particular interest in the small nation. Christopher Pike/Bloomberg



By **Eric Lipton**  
Reporting from Washington

Nov. 25, 2024

Steven Witkoff, the billionaire New York real estate executive whom President-elect Donald J. Trump has named as his special envoy to the Middle East, was in a jam.

The year was 2018 and Mr. Witkoff's co-investor in a Manhattan hotel project had been [indicted](#) by the Justice Department on fraud charges. A plan to convert the hotel into luxury condominiums was also on hold. But there was a two-part rescue of sorts from the kind of real estate angels that New York property investors have increasingly turned to.

First, Abu Dhabi's sovereign wealth fund expanded its stake in the troubled hotel, Park Lane, which sits at the southern edge of Central Park. Then, in an even more crucial move, the Qatar Investment Authority last year dispatched \$623 million as a leveraged buyout of Mr. Witkoff and his partners.

## Trump aides Sacks and Witkoff could face ethics probe over UAE deals, Semafor reports

By Reuters

December 22, 2025 10:39 AM GMT+1 · Updated December 22, 2025



[1/2] Steve Witkoff, U.S. Special Envoy to the Middle East, speaks during the America Business Forum at Kaseya Center in Miami, Florida, U.S. November 6, 2025. REUTERS/Marco Bello [Purchase Licensing Rights](#) < >

Dec 22 (Reuters) - The U.S State Department's independent watchdog is reviewing a request from two Democratic senators to investigate whether Trump officials Steve Witkoff and David Sacks broke ethics rules in connection with deals involving the United Arab Emirates, Semafor reported on Monday.

It got worse when he became de facto envoy to war criminal, dictator & seasoned KGB agent Putin. Witkoff isn't a diplomat, nor a Russia expert, speaks no Russian, knows nothing about the region, and refused CIA briefings.

His only "qualification"? His admiration for Putin.

6/20

## POPULAR INFORMATION

The Saudi government pays Kushner 1.25% of its investment, or \$25 million annually. Other investors, including the governments of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), pay annual fees of up to 2%. As of September 2024, Affinity Partners had collected \$157 million in fees, mainly from Middle Eastern governments.

Kushner is continuing to collect these fees as he serves in a top foreign policy role for the Trump administration. This is precisely the kind of behavior the Foreign Emoluments Clause was designed to prevent. Kushner was one of two Americans on Tuesday engaged in high-stakes negotiations with Putin. But as the private equity manager for billions of foreign capital, Kushner has a fiduciary duty to advance the financial interests of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and other foreign governments.

In his defense, Kushner might argue he is simply charging Saudi Arabia and other governments “fair market value” for investment services and, therefore, is not accepting an emolument. The OLC and many legal scholars reject this argument, arguing that the Emoluments Clause prohibits payments from foreign governments even if they are part of a “fair market value” transaction.

Regardless, there was nothing standard about the multi-billion dollar Saudi investment in a fledgling private equity firm. The PIF committee that screens investments recommended rejecting Kushner’s proposal, citing “the inexperience of the Affinity Fund management” and “excessive” fees. The committee’s recommendation, however, was overruled by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who heads PIF’s Board of Directors and with whom Kushner had developed a close relationship.

### **Draft Kushner peace plan includes key Saudi priority**

The 28-point peace plan drafted with Kushner’s assistance includes a key priority of the Saudi government.

The 28-point peace plan that the United States and Russia want to impose on Ukraine and Europe is misnamed. It is not a peace plan. It is a proposal that weakens Ukraine and divides America from Europe, preparing the way for a larger war in the future. In the meantime, it benefits unnamed Russian and American investors, at the expense of everyone else.

The plan was negotiated by Steve Witkoff, a real-estate developer with no historical, geographical, or cultural knowledge of Russia or Ukraine, and Kirill Dmitriev, who heads Russia's sovereign-wealth fund and spends most of his time making business deals. The revelation of their plan this week shocked European leaders, who are now paying almost all of the military costs of the war, as well as the Ukrainians, who were not sure whether to take this latest plan seriously until they were told to agree to it by Thanksgiving or lose all further U.S. support. Even if the plan falls apart, this arrogant and confusing ultimatum, coming only days after the State Department authorized the sale of anti-missile technology to Ukraine, will do permanent damage to America's reputation as a reliable ally, not only in Europe but around the world.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Anne Applebaum

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Anne Applebaum is a staff writer at *The Atlantic*.





Trump doesn't seem to understand much about the situation, either: he's promised more than 50 times he would end Russia's war on Ukraine as soon as he wins the election, lying about how well he knew Putin and Zelensky, leading to the Alaska Fiasco:

7/20



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In today's Vatnik Soup, I'll explain the Alaska Fiasco and how it marks the peak of Trump's two-year betrayal of Ukraine. What was sold as "peace talks" turned into a spectacle of weakness, humiliation, empty promises, and photo-ops that handed Putin exactly what he wanted.

1/24



12:32 PM · Aug 18, 2025



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## Fact check: It wasn't 'in jest.' Here are 53 times Trump said he'd end Ukraine war within 24 hours or before taking office

By Daniel Dale, CNN

⌚ 16 min read · Published 5:07 PM EDT, Fri April 25, 2025



Former President Donald Trump speaks to supporters during a political rally while campaigning for the GOP nomination in the 2024 election at Erie Insurance Arena on July 29, 2023 in Erie, Pennsylvania. Jeff Swensen/Getty Images

**Washington (CNN) —** He wasn't joking.

When President Donald Trump was reminded in an [interview with Time magazine this week](#) that he had said he would end the Russian war on Ukraine on "day one," he claimed he hadn't been speaking literally or seriously.

"Well, I said that figuratively, and I said that as an exaggeration, because to make a point, and you know, it gets, of course, by the fake news [unintelligible]. Obviously, people know that when I said that, it was said in jest, but it was also said that it will be ended," Trump said, according to [Time's transcript](#).

This "in jest" claim is a lie.

**☰ TVP WORLD** f LIVE

## Trump's envoy 'misunderstood' Putin's territorial demands as concessions, media report

Michał Woźniak/hw  
09.08.2025, 15:48



Steve Witkoff (L) was apparently confused as to which country's forces should withdraw. Photo by Kremlin Press Office / Handout/Anadolu via Getty Images

**U.S. President Donald Trump's special envoy, Steve Witkoff, "misunderstood" Russian leader Vladimir Putin, German news outlet BILD reported.**

According to the outlet's sources, Witkoff's ceasefire proposal delivered to Putin in recent discussions entailed freezing the conflict along the current lines of control. In return, the Kremlin would see a broad lifting of sanctions and an offer of new economic agreements.

This offer does not satisfy the Russians, however, who still insist on full control of the eastern Luhansk and Donetsk regions and southern Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions, Bild reported.

Russia currently occupies practically all of the Luhansk region and most of the Donetsk region, where its forces have been making creeping advances since the start of the war. These are also the only regions whose capitals are under Russian control, after Ukraine successfully liberated the city of Kherson back in November 2022.

In spite of that, Russia claims ownership of the entirety of the regions' territories based on "referendums" it carried out in areas under its control in late September 2022.

What is more, Witkoff appears to have misinterpreted some statements made by Putin as concessions. One example cited by BILD was the Russian leader's demand for a "peaceful withdrawal" of Ukrainian forces from Russian-claimed territory. Witkoff reportedly understood this as an offer of a "peaceful withdrawal" of Russian forces.

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Witkoff's Kremlin talks  
'constructive' as US sanctions deadline looms  
Politics

# Putin's goal remains the complete surrender of Ukraine – US intelligence

Moscow is not making peace proposals, but issuing ultimatums, according to a member of the US Senate Intelligence Committee



**Mariia Spaliek**  
News editor at LIGA.net

AUGUST 15, 17:59



*Mark Warner (Photo: WILL OLIVER/EPA)*

# US intelligence indicates Putin's war aims in Ukraine are unchanged

By Jonathan Landay, Erin Banco and John Irish

December 22, 2025 10:57 AM GMT+1 · Updated December 22, 2025



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## Summary

- US intelligence reports contradict Putin's denials of being threat to Europe
- Assessments of Russia's intentions similar to those shared by British and other European security services
- US officials plan to meet Russian representatives in Miami this weekend to continue talks

WASHINGTON/PARIS, Dec 19 (Reuters) - U.S. intelligence reports continue to warn that Russian President Vladimir Putin has not abandoned his aims of capturing all of Ukraine and reclaiming parts of Europe that belonged to the former Soviet empire, six sources familiar with U.S. intelligence said, even as negotiators seek an end to the war that would leave Russia with far less territory.

The reports present a starkly different picture from that painted by U.S. President Donald Trump and his Ukraine peace negotiators, who have said Putin wants to end the conflict. The most recent of the reports dates from late September, according to one of the sources.

The intelligence also contradicts the Russian leader's denials that he is a threat to Europe.

The U.S. findings have been consistent since Putin launched his full-scale invasion in 2022. They largely align with the views of European leaders and spy agencies that he covets all of Ukraine and territories of former Soviet bloc states, including members of the NATO alliance, according to the sources.

"The intelligence has always been that Putin wants more," Mike Quigley, a Democratic member of the House Intelligence Committee, said in a Reuters interview. "The Europeans are convinced of it. The Poles are absolutely convinced of it. The Baltics think they're first."

Or was it Witkoff's incompetence? Was the meeting cut short when Trump got bored as Putin explained his imperialist aims to him? Or are they both just playing dumb to stall real sanctions? Trump also ignores intelligence reports: even if it's ignorance, it's deliberate.

## Putin's history rant in Alaska prompted Trump to raise his voice and cancel lunch – FT

YEVHEN KIZILOV — 17 OCTOBER, 14:55



DONALD TRUMP AND VLADIMIR PUTIN IN ALASKA. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES



48540

During his meeting with Donald Trump in Alaska on 15 August, Kremlin leader Vladimir Putin launched into a lengthy historical monologue that angered the US president, forcing him to raise his voice and even threaten to leave.

**Source:** [Financial Times](#), citing Western and Russian officials and diplomats familiar with the matter

**Details:** The FT says Putin began recalling medieval rulers such as Rurik of Novgorod and Yaroslav the Wise, as well as the 17th-century Cossack chieftain Bohdan Khmelnytskyi – figures he frequently invokes to argue that Ukraine and Russia are supposedly "one nation".

A visibly unsettled Trump raised his voice several times and at one point threatened to walk out. He eventually cut the meeting short and cancelled a planned working lunch, during which broader delegations were expected to discuss economic cooperation and trade ties.

The confrontation reportedly followed a proposal by Trump for a deal to end the war in Ukraine, suggesting the lifting of sanctions on Russia in exchange for a ceasefire. Putin rejected the idea, insisting that the war would only end if Ukraine capitulated and ceded more territory in Donbas.

## Trump has sat for only 12 'daily' intelligence briefings since taking office

The scarcity of the President's Daily Briefings comes as he pursues high-stakes diplomacy with America's friends and foes.



The low number of briefings this time around is troubling to many in and around the intelligence community, who were already concerned about Trump's act-first-evaluate-after approach to governing. | Andrew Harnik/Getty Images

By AMY MACKINNON  
05/09/2025 06:00 PM EDT  
Updated: 05/10/2025 09:08 AM EDT



Since President Donald Trump was sworn into office in January, he has sat for just 12 presentations from intelligence officials of the President's Daily Brief.

That's a significant drop compared with Trump's first term in office, according to a POLITICO analysis of his public schedule.

In much of his first term, Trump met with intel officials twice a week for the briefing, which provides the intelligence community's summary of the most pressing national security challenges facing the nation.

The low number of briefings this time around is troubling to many in and around the intelligence community, who were already concerned about Trump's act-first-evaluate-after approach to governing.



WSJ

# White House Quietly Pressures Senate to Water Down Russia Sanctions

Trump administration officials urge Sen. Lindsey Graham to weaken legislation

WORLD NEWS

# Trump warns of 'severe consequences' if Putin does not agree to stop war after summit

August 13, 2025



1 of 10 | President Donald Trump says there will be "very severe consequences" if Russia doesn't agree to stop the Ukraine war after Friday's summit with President Vladimir Putin. He said a pre-summit call with Ukrainian and European leaders was "very friendly."

BY GEIR MOULSON, SYLVIE CORBET, STEFANIE DAZIO AND  
LORNE COOK

Updated 10:53 PM GMT+3, August 13, 2025

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The Budapest Blunder followed the Alaska Fiasco, with Witkoff & Trump ignoring the simple reality that Putin started a war because... he wanted to start a war. Witkoff instead preposterously claims that he "remains fully committed to achieving peace".

9/20



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In today's Vatnik Soup, we'll explain the context of the upcoming Budapest Blunder, and how it follows the infamous Alaska Fiasco from two months ago and Trump's absurd delaying of serious aid to Ukraine and effective sanctions on Russia for the past nine months.

1/20 [Show more](#)



1:07 PM · Oct 21, 2025

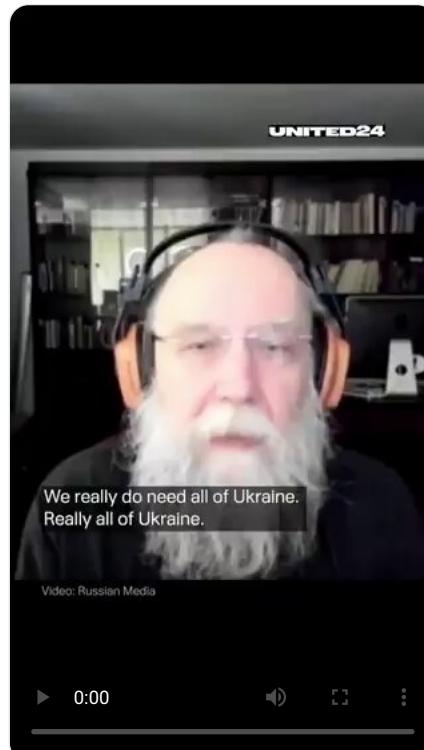


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# Kremlin demands full capitulation from Ukraine, rejects compromise in peace talks — ISW

April 19, 2025, 10.26 5905

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Moscow demands Ukraine's full capitulation and refuses to compromise in peace talks. (Photo: REUTERS/Stringer)

Author: [Alex Stezhensky](#)

**Russian officials and propagandists continue to reject U.S. proposals for ending the war in Ukraine unless all of the Kremlin's demands are met — including regime change, demilitarization, and significant territorial concessions — the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) said in a new report on April 18.**

# Why Does Steve Witkoff Keep Taking Russia's Side?

Trump's envoy isn't promoting peace. His interventions are helping Vladimir Putin.

By Anne Applebaum



Illustration by The Atlantic. Source: Kevin Dietsch / Getty.

NOVEMBER 26, 2025

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**Special Envoy Steve Witkoff**    
@SEPeaceMissions

 ...

Over the last two days in Florida, the Russian Special Envoy Kirill Dmitriev held productive and constructive meetings with the American delegation to advance President Trump's peace plan on Ukraine.

The American delegation included Special Envoy Steve Witkoff, Jared Kushner, and White House staff member Josh Gruenbaum.

Russia remains fully committed to achieving peace in Ukraine. Russia highly values the efforts and support of the United States to resolve the Ukrainian conflict and re-establish global security.

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Russia is not committed to peace in Ukraine. It has bombed cancer hospitals, schools, and just a couple of days ago, kidnapped more than 50 elderly civilians from border regions. If it was committed to peace it would stop invading.

[theguardian.com/world/article/...](http://theguardian.com/world/article/)

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While Putin wages a genocidal war of aggression he started and could end at any time by withdrawing from Ukraine's borders, Witkoff goes on propagandist Tucker Carlson's show and sells him as "not a bad guy", spreads the lies he uses to justify his war, and carefully...

10/20

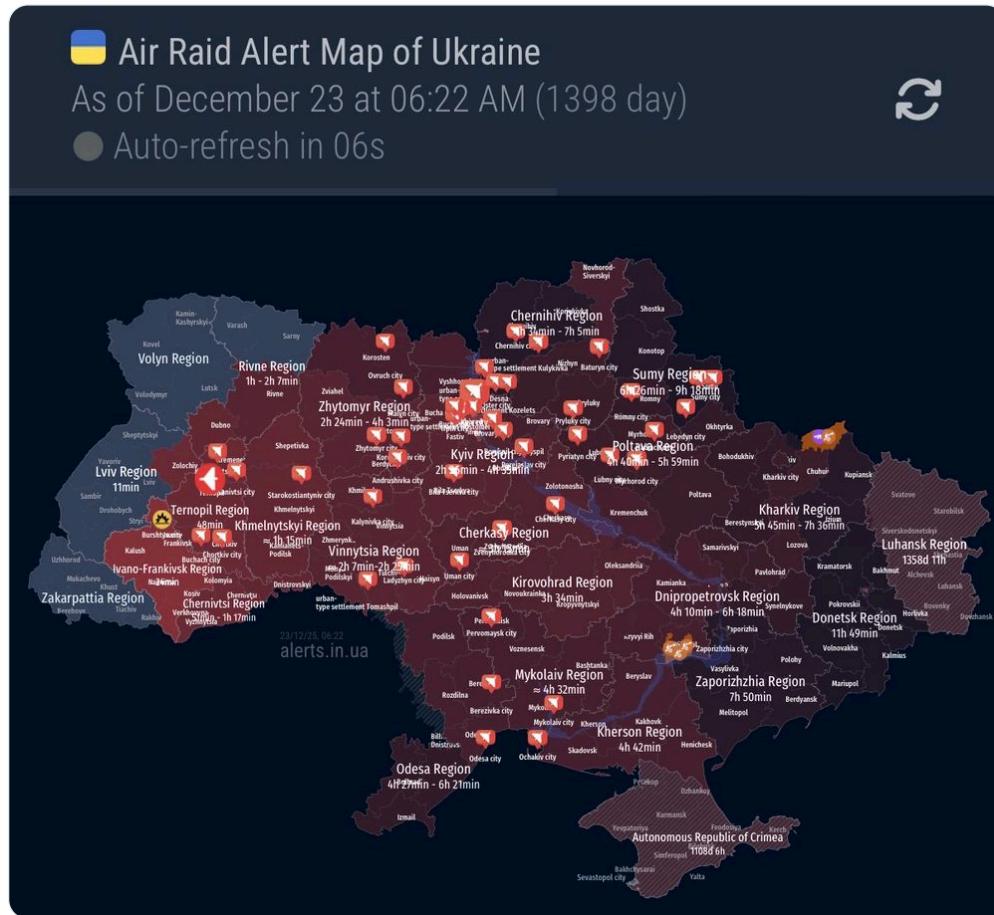
## Russia bombs children's hospital as missiles kill dozens across Ukraine

Putin's forces deliberately targeted kids, Kyiv officials said.



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Making matters worse, Russian media have picked up on a pattern of Witkoff parroting Putin, with [state television announcers](#) recently commenting that the American easily accepts Moscow's narratives — even when Russians don't.

The most egregious example came during a March 21 interview with Tucker Carlson, when Witkoff repeated Kremlin talking points that "the largest issue" in negotiations was "political" and related to Moscow's annexing of "these so-called four regions" — while forgetting the names of the eastern oblasts at stake (Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk and Zaporizhzhia).



Steve Witkoff, special envoy to the Middle East, speaks to the press outside the White House on March 6.  
Getty Images

"They're Russian-speaking," Witkoff said, repeating a common excuse Putin gives to justify his assault on Ukraine. "There have been referendums where the overwhelming majority of the people have indicated that they want to be under Russian rule."

But the envoy failed to acknowledge that Moscow either killed or drove out Ukrainian-language speakers, or ordered them to only communicate in Russian — [which The Post and other outlets have confirmed on the ground](#) — and that the referenda were conducted under the watchful eye of armed Kremlin troops.

... avoids naming the aggressor deliberately murdering Ukrainians every day: Steve's dear Putin. Witkoff then expects us to trust Putin promising to not attack again, when in fact Russia's own laws and a number of treaties should already have guaranteed that.

# Trump tells Ukraine: Accept Putin's demands 'or be destroyed'

US president, shouting and swearing, pressures Zelensky to surrender the Donetsk region



6003

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An angry Donald Trump is said to have thrown aside Ukrainian battlefield maps and pressured Volodymyr Zelensky to give up territory  
Credit: AFP via Getty Images

**Memphis Barker** Senior Foreign Correspondent. **Kieran Kelly**  
19 October 2025 9:01pm BST

Donald Trump demanded that Ukraine submit to Vladimir Putin's peace terms or face destruction in an angry meeting at the White House last week, it has emerged.

The US president, who spoke with his Russian counterpart shortly before hosting Volodymyr Zelensky, warned that Putin would "destroy" Ukraine unless a peace deal was in place.

## Putin agreed to allow "robust" security guarantees as part of peace deal, Trump envoy Witkoff tells CNN

From CNN's Kevin Liptak



Special Envoy Steve Witkoff speaks at the White House in Washington, DC, on May 28. Leah Millis/Reuters

Russian President Vladimir Putin agreed to allow "robust security guarantees" for Ukraine from the United States as part of a potential peace deal during his summit with President Donald Trump on Friday, top envoy Steve Witkoff told CNN today.

"We agreed to robust security guarantees that I would describe as game changing," Witkoff told Jake Tapper on "State of the Union," describing the security guarantee as an "Article 5" type protection against further Russian invasion.

He said [Putin also agreed to "legislative enshrinement" by Russia to not go into any other territory, in Ukraine or elsewhere in Europe, as part of a potential peace deal.](#)

**Some context:** Putin [spelled out his demands](#) for "land swaps" with Ukraine during his nearly three-hour summit with US President Donald Trump Friday, including his insistence Ukraine gives up the Donbas region in eastern Ukraine, according to European officials familiar with Trump's accounting of the meeting to his counterparts afterward.

Putin said in exchange, he would be willing to freeze the current front lines in the rest of Ukraine — in the regions of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia — and agree to a promise not to attack Ukraine or other European nations again.

But he didn't back away from a demand to eliminate what Russia calls the "root causes" of the war in Ukraine — code for reducing the size of Kyiv's military, abandoning its aspirations to join NATO and becoming a neutral state.

Current Russian Law already prohibits everything Russia has been doing:

#### Chapter 34. Crimes Against the Peace and Security of Mankind

##### **Article 353.** Planning, Preparing, Unleashing, or Waging on Aggressive War

###### **1.** Planning, preparing, or unleashing an aggressive war

Shall be punishable by deprivation of liberty for a term of seven to fifteen years.

###### **2.** Waging an aggressive war,

Shall be punishable by **deprivation of liberty** for a term of 10 to 20 years.

##### **Article 354.** Public Appeals to Unleash an Aggressive War

###### **1.** Public appeals to unleash an aggressive war,

Shall be punishable with a **fine** in an amount of up to 300 thousand roubles, or in the amount of the wage or salary, or any other income of the convicted person for a period of up to two years, or by deprivation of liberty for a term of up to three years.

**2.** The same deeds, committed with the use of the mass media or by a person who holds a state post of the Russian Federation or a state post of a subject of the Russian Federation,

Shall be punishable with a fine in an amount of 100 thousand to 500 thousand roubles, or in the amount of the wage or salary, or any other income of the convicted person for a period of one to three years, or by **deprivation of liberty** for a term up to five years, with disqualification from holding specific offices or engaging in specified activities for a term of up to three years.

##### **Article 355.** The Development, Manufacture, Stockpiling, Acquisition or Sale of Mass-Destruction Weapons

The development, manufacture, stockpiling, acquisition or sale of the chemical, biological, toxic and other types of mass-destruction weapons banned by an international treaty of the Russian Federation,

Shall be punishable by imprisonment for a term from five to ten years.

##### **Article 356.** Use of Banned Means and Methods of Warfare

**1.** Cruel treatment of prisoners of war or civilians, deportation of civilian populations, plunder of national property in occupied territories, and use in a military conflict of means and methods of warfare, banned by an international treaty of the Russian Federation,

Shall be punishable by deprivation of liberty for a term of up to 20 years.

**2.** Use of weapons of mass destruction, banned by an international treaty of the Russian Federation,

Shall be punishable by **deprivation of liberty** for a term of 10 to 20 years.

##### **Article 357.** Genocide

Actions aimed at the complete or partial extermination of a national, ethnic, racial or religious group as such by killing its members, inflicting grave injuries to their health, forcible prevention of childbirth, forcible transfer of children, forcible resettlement, or by any other method of creating living conditions meant for the physical destruction of the members of this group,

Shall be punishable by deprivation of liberty for a term of 12 to 20 years with restriction of liberty for a term of up to two years, or by deprivation of liberty for life, or by capital punishment.

##### **Article 358.** Ecocide

Massive destruction of the animal or plant kingdoms, contamination of the atmosphere or water resources, and also commission of other actions capable of causing an ecological catastrophe,

Shall be punishable by **deprivation of liberty** for a term of 12 to 20 years.



## President Vladimir Putin signed a law ratifying the Treaty between Russia and Ukraine on the Russian-Ukrainian State Border

**2004**

April 23, 2004 00:00

The treaty, signed in Kiev on January 28, 2003, is a framework document determining the state border between the two countries on land, including rivers and lakes, and the fundamental approach to the issues connected with the Black and Azov seas and the Kerch Strait.

The line of the state border has been mapped as a result of the joint work on the demarcation of the border carried out by the Russian and Ukrainian demarcation commissions.

The basis of the border is the administrative boundary between the RSFSR and the Ukrainian SSR at the time of the dissolution of the USSR, which is to be sealed by corresponding state legal documents.

The description of the passage of the state border and the atlas of the maps of the state border between the Russian Federation and Ukraine have been made and agreed upon, and form an inalienable part of the treaty.

In particular, the Budapest Memorandum, which in fact should also have precluded the very sort of pressure against Ukraine that the US is now committing by bullying Ukraine into accepting Witkoff's "peace" plan.

12/20

**Erik N Kross**    

X

@ErikNKross · [Follow](#)

Spent my Saturday analysing the 28-point plan. The result:

If the US is seriously considering enforcing this plan, it would place itself in violation of:

- 13 binding treaties and international instruments
- 23 political commitments, declarations, and authoritative [Show more](#)

 Last edited 4:28 PM · Nov 22, 2025



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Confirm the following:

Budapest Memorandum, 1994

1. The Russian Federation, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the United States of America reaffirm their commitment to Ukraine, in accordance with the principles of the CSCE Final Act, to respect the independence and sovereignty and the existing borders of Ukraine.

 [treaties.un.org](http://treaties.un.org)

Volume 3007, I-52241

against Ukraine except in self-defense or otherwise in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations.

3. The Russian Federation, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the United States of America reaffirm their commitment to Ukraine, in accordance with the Principles of the CSCE Final Act, to refrain from economic coercion designed to subordinate to their own interest the exercise by Ukraine of the rights inherent in its sovereignty and thus to secure advantages of any kind.

WSJ | OPINION

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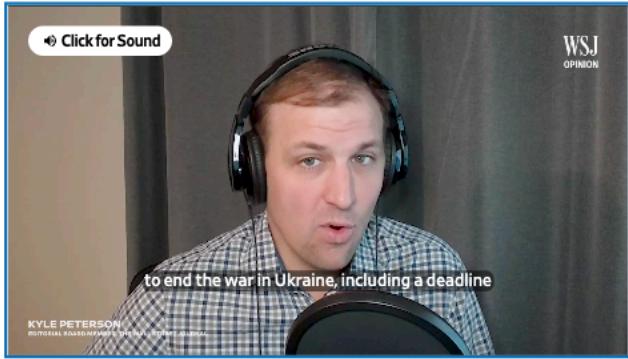
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## Trump Issues an Ultimatum to Ukraine

His latest peace offer fulfills Vladimir Putin's wishes and leaves Kyiv with a terrible choice.

By The Editorial Board [Follow](#)  
Nov. 21, 2025 7:14 pm ET

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OPINION

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KYLE PETERSON  
EDITORIAL CARTOONIST FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

to end the war in Ukraine, including a deadline

His proposal to end Russia's war is actually an ultimatum to Ukraine. Trump suggests he might end American support if Ukraine won't agree, but what might be the costs to the U.S. of a bad deal?

The Trump Administration is making another run at ending the war in Ukraine, and a lasting peace with honor would be a laudable achievement. But for three years the only peace on offer has been Ukraine's surrender, and the latest American offer—really, an ultimatum—is merely another dressed-up version.

A strange “peace plan” with everything upside down, with the US acting to pressure Ukraine, the victim, instead of Russia, the aggressor, to make concessions and cede land: either siding with Russia or falling for the most blatant manipulation. In fact, it turns out that...

13/20

# Ambrose Evans-Pritchard

## Snatching defeat from the jaws of victory in Ukraine

Trump's peace plan is a scandalous attempt to rescue Russia, which is losing the larger economic war



Ambrose Evans-Pritchard

26 November 2025 7:00am GMT

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Russia-Ukraine war, Vladimir Putin, Ukraine, Russia, Global economy, Donald Trump



882

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Vladimir Putin can no longer find buyers for Russian oil in the global market. Credit: Gavril Grigorov/Shutterstock

The Kremlin has been telling the world for a month that the Ukrainian logistics junction of Pokrovsk is in Russian hands. It is central to the assiduously cultivated narrative of inevitable victory.

No doubt Pokrovsk will fall, but it has taken a year longer than Vladimir Putin planned and right now Russian soldiers are still fighting cellar by cellar north of the railway line, dying in staggering numbers.

Captured Russian documents indicate that he has sacrificed 100,000 dead and wounded trying to storm this one town of inflated strategic importance.

Over the same month, Russia's energy exports have collapsed. The Kremlin's fiscal regime has suffered its first life-threatening crisis since the invasion of Ukraine.

Putin can no longer find buyers for Russian oil on the world market. Some 48 million barrels are floating on stranded tankers from the Mediterranean to the South China Sea, shunned by Indian refiners and even China's state-owned energy companies, both afraid of secondary US sanctions.

Only cloak-and-dagger customers outside the dollar-based financial system dare to touch oil from Rosneft and Lukoil. They want a bargain.

Leaders | Ukraine

## Donald Trump's peace plan would be bad for Ukraine, Europe and America

It is a sad mix of naked opportunism and strategic myopia



PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY IMAGES

Nov 22nd 2025 | 6 min read

**I**T IS HARD to know whether to laugh or panic. The [28-point peace plan](#) that America is hawking around as a basis for ending the war in Ukraine is so poorly put together, so vague, unbalanced and impractical that, in a more normal world, it would never have seen the light of day—and once leaked it would have been quietly dumped.



...the plan was written by Russians, in Russian. Holding crucial talks without any note-takers or American interpreters, lacking any training in political negotiations, Witkoff has breached diplomatic protocol and sidelined anyone reasonable still left in the US government.



## Made in Moscow: The “U.S. peace plan” for Ukraine was substantially formulated months ago by Kremlin operative Kirill Dmitriev

Christo Grozev, Michael Weiss  
26 November 2025

Since it was first published on Nov. 20, the much-discussed 28-point plan for ending the war in Ukraine has borne all the signs of a Kremlin information operation. In fact, many of its most controversial conditions were contained in a document that sources discussed with The Insider several months ago. Now, as Donald Trump's Thanksgiving Day deadline for a decision from Volodymyr Zelensky approaches, fresh leaks show how the details of the plan were discussed – in conversations between Russian and American representatives, and amongst high-ranking Russian officials themselves. Kyiv, for its part, has shown a willingness to accept most of the points contained in the original document while calling for negotiations around several of the “peace plan’s” transparently unacceptable clauses.

The 28-point plan adopted by the Trump White House for ending the war in Ukraine, allegedly written by American negotiators with “input” from Kirill Dmitriev, the head of Russia’s sovereign wealth fund and a Kremlin insider, is in fact at its core a recycled Russian document that *The Insider* was shown several months ago by a source close to the Russian government.

WASHINGTON, Aug 28 (Reuters) - Shortly after meeting Vladimir Putin in Moscow on August 6, U.S. special envoy Steve Witkoff delivered major news to Donald Trump: The Russian president was prepared to offer significant territorial concessions to end his war in Ukraine.

Following Witkoff's readout to the U.S. president, described by two people briefed on the matter, Trump hailed his emissary's "great progress" and agreed to hold a historic summit with Putin, indicating that a land swap was on the table.

But the diplomatic drive soon descended into confusion.

On an August 7 call with several European leaders, Witkoff indicated that Putin was willing to withdraw from the Ukrainian regions of Zaporizhzhia and Kherson in return for Kyiv ceding Donetsk and Luhansk, according to a source familiar with the exchange.

The proposal startled many of those on the call, since it departed sharply from their own assessments of Putin's position, said four people with knowledge of the discussions, including U.S. and European officials who requested anonymity to discuss sensitive matters.

Witkoff appeared to change his account the next day. In a call convened by U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio with European national security advisers, the envoy said Putin was not in fact offering to withdraw from the two territories in question, according to one of the sources.

Instead, U.S. officials indicated on the call Putin had signaled lesser concessions to Washington, including that he would not demand the West formally recognize Zaporizhzhia and Kherson as Russian, said a separate U.S. official.

Reuters couldn't independently determine what was said in the Moscow meeting.

Witkoff, a real estate magnate with no background in diplomacy, broke with standard protocol by going to the meeting without a State Department notetaker and thus left without a record of Putin's precise proposals, said one source with knowledge of internal administration dynamics.

Interviews with more than a dozen U.S. and European officials flesh out the Trump administration's latest push to end the war in Ukraine, which culminated in the anti-climactic Trump-Putin summit in Alaska on August 15 that saw the leaders exchange warm words but no peace agreement.

The picture that emerges from the interviews is of an American president willing to move quickly on some foreign policy decisions, relying more on confidants and instinct than the traditional diplomatic channels and deliberative process typical of most prior administrations.

Trump's supporters say his approach has yielded breakthroughs unimaginable under his predecessor, variously citing the opening of U.S. relations with the new Syrian government, the bombing of Iran's nuclear facilities and the establishment of a direct line to Putin that could end a war that has killed hundreds of thousands of people.

Yet his seat-of-the-pants style has also created confusion within the administration and among allies, critics argue.

And despite the summit, the Ukrainian war is no closer to a conclusion, said Kurt Volker, a former U.S. ambassador to NATO who served as U.S. special representative for Ukraine in Trump's first term.

"We are just exactly where we were before Trump took office," Volker added. "Russia has not changed its position one iota. The war is raging on... We don't have a clear strategy of how to get Putin to stop the war."



ANDREW HARNIK/GETTY IMAGES

## Trump's Ukraine Peace Deal Appears to Be Translated From Russian

Certain phrases in Trump's proposed deal seem to be using Russian language.

Hafiz Rashid

November 21, 2025 / 12:27 p.m. ET

The U.S. [peace plan](#) presented to Ukraine appears to have been translated from Russian.

The syntax of certain phrases are more common in the Russian language, such as the third point of the 28-point plan: "It is expected that Russia will not invade neighbouring countries and Nato will not expand further."

"It is expected" is not commonly used in English, but it is common in Russian and appears to come from the phrase *ожидается* or *ozhidayetsya*, according to *The Guardian's* Luke Harding. Other words that appear to be translated from Russian include "ambiguities" (неоднозначности) and "to enshrine" (закрепить).

It's no accident, either: The plan was [hammered out](#) by President Trump's envoy Steve Witkoff and Kirill Dmitriev, an adviser to Russian President Vladimir Putin, after the two met last month in Miami. While Secretary of State Marco Rubio was also involved, no Ukrainian or European officials were, which is pretty evident by [its contents](#).

For example, under the proposal, Ukraine would cede Crimea, Luhansk, and Donetsk to Russia and would be banned from joining NATO. Russia would get readmitted to the G8. Ukraine would also reduce the size of its military by hundreds of thousands, and no NATO troops could be stationed in the country.



## Witkoff Foolishly Relied On Kremlin-Provided Interpreter During Talks With Putin

11 May 2025 at 12:26



Steve Witkoff, a Trump-appointed U.S. envoy with no formal diplomatic experience, has come under scrutiny after bypassing standard protocol by using a Kremlin-provided interpreter during sensitive meetings with Russian President Vladimir Putin, raising alarm among foreign policy experts and former officials.

Witkoff, a real estate developer turned envoy, relied on Natalia Koshkina — an interpreter with longstanding ties to Russian intelligence circles — during high-level discussions.

During his visit to Moscow, Witkoff asked the Kremlin officials whether Koshkina "was from the Embassy." He did not specify which Embassy and proceeded to sit down with Koshkina.

Koshkina has previously worked with the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, served at Russia's NATO mission, and was affiliated with state-backed broadcaster RT, known for disseminating pro-Kremlin propaganda.

Worse, it was actually Putin who chose Witkoff for this purpose, enticing Trump with a "goodwill" prisoner exchange: in February, Witkoff traveled to Moscow, met with Putin and brought home schoolteacher Marc Fogel in exchange for Russian money launderer Alexander Vinnik.

15/20



**How Steve Witkoff pushed Ukraine sympathizers out of White House, and led the US into Russia's arms**

by Tim Zadorozhny • November 22, 2025 4:19 PM ⓘ (Updated: November 23, 2025 2:10 pm) • 6 min read

Rubio was scheduled to attend peace talks with Ukrainian officials in Switzerland, but Witkoff had set off early in what some officials saw as a bid to beat him to the punch, according to two U.S. officials and a person familiar with the episode. Witkoff did not communicate his travel plans to Rubio and other State Department officials, the three sources said, in what they perceived as a move to allow Witkoff to negotiate with Ukraine in a way he saw fit.

Rubio ultimately made it to Geneva, ensuring that Witkoff would not be meeting the Ukrainian officials without him, according to the three sources.



Marco Rubio next to Steve Witkoff in Geneva on Nov. 23.  
Fabrice Coffrini / AFP - Getty Images file

It was not the first time U.S. officials had seen Witkoff's actions as an attempt to make an end-run around Rubio. The episode, which has not been previously reported, was the latest example of a long-running rift between the two senior figures in the Trump administration with sharply different views about how to end the war in Ukraine and how much the U.S. should trust Russia's promises.

"They seem to be singing off of a different sheet of music," said Alexander Vershbow, a former career diplomat who was ambassador to NATO. "And if you don't have a common understanding of the problems and of your adversary in a negotiation, it can't be good."

Eager to strike a quick deal as ordered by Trump, Witkoff has pushed for proposals that put the onus on Ukraine to make concessions, give up territory and accept risks to its future security. Rubio and some other officials in the administration favor imposing more economic and military pressure on Russia to force Russian President Vladimir Putin to make concessions and allow a secure future for Ukraine. a view



## *How Putin Got His Preferred U.S. Envoy: Come Alone, No CIA*

Kremlin fueled rise of Trump's friend Witkoff  
with prisoner release, sidelining career diplomats.

By [Joe Parkinson](#) [Follow](#), [Rebecca Ballhaus](#) [Follow](#), [Drew Hinshaw](#) [Follow](#),  
[Thomas Grove](#) [Follow](#), [Benoit Faucon](#) [Follow](#) and [Yaroslav Trofimov](#) [Follow](#) | Design  
by [Annie Ng](#) [Follow](#) and [Audrey Valbuena](#) [Follow](#)

Dec. 19, 2025 9:00 pm ET

**S**teve Witkoff, a billionaire real-estate developer and longtime golfing partner of Donald Trump, was just days into his job as the new president's special envoy to the Middle East when he received a tantalizing message from the crown prince of Saudi Arabia.

Vladimir Putin was interested in meeting Witkoff—so interested that he might consider releasing an American prisoner to him. The invitation came from a Kremlin moneyman named Kirill Dmitriev, using the de facto Saudi ruler, Mohammed bin Salman, as an intermediary.

# US frees jailed cybercrime boss after Russia releases teacher Marc Fogel

By Steve Holland, Jeff Mason and Dmitry Antonov

February 12, 2025 10:02 PM GMT+1 · Updated February 12, 2025



Alexander Vinnik is escorted by police officers to a court in Athens, Greece December 13, 2017. REUTERS/Costas Baltas/File Photo [Purchase Licensing Rights](#)

## Summary

- Kremlin says Russian was freed in US in exchange for Marc Fogel
- Russian identified as cyber exchange operator Alexander Vinnik
- Second detained American released from Belarus

WASHINGTON/MOSCOW, Feb 12 (Reuters) - The United States is freeing a Russian cybercrime boss from prison in return for Moscow's release of American schoolteacher [Marc Fogel](#), U.S. administration officials said on Wednesday.

The Kremlin said the deal - the first it has struck with the new administration of President [Donald Trump](#) - could help build trust between the two countries.

Worse yet, Witkoff has been actively helping the Kremlin manipulate Trump: a leaked transcript of a phone call between Witkoff and Yuri Ushakov, Putin's most senior foreign policy adviser, shows Witkoff giving Ushakov tips on how to convince Trump against helping Ukraine.

Pay attention to the dates, because the timing matters. Steve Witkoff spoke with Yuri Ushakov, a Russian official, on October 14. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky held a meeting with President Donald Trump in Washington, D.C., on October 17. Trump had been hinting that he would offer to sell Tomahawks, long-range cruise missiles, to the Ukrainian army. But he did not.

Why not? Perhaps because Ushakov listened to Witkoff's advice and persuaded Russian President Vladimir Putin to call Trump on October 16. Witkoff, in other words, may have helped block that sale. And that would make Witkoff responsible for prolonging the war.

Let me back up and explain.

Witkoff, a former real-estate developer, is supposed to be negotiating a peace settlement between Russia and Ukraine. He is in theory acting on behalf of the United States but also on behalf of millions of people who want peace in Ukraine and security in Europe. Ushakov, a former Russian ambassador to the United States, has different interests: Like his boss, he wants Russia to win the war.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Anne Applebaum

 Follow

Anne Applebaum is a staff writer at *The Atlantic*.



Ushakov: Hallo.

Dmitriev: Yuri Viktorovich.

Ushakov: Yes, Kirill Aleksandrovich, well, I've sent everything there. We'll talk tomorrow.

Dmitriev: Well, great, great. Yes, yes, yes. I flew to Saudi Arabia. But it seems to me it's very important, because it's a really good way forward.

Ushakov: Well, we need the maximum, don't you think? What do you think? Otherwise, what's the point of passing anything on?

Dmitriev: No, look. I think we'll just make this paper from our position, and I'll informally pass it along, making it clear that it's all informal. And let them do like their own. But, I don't think they'll take exactly our version, but at least it'll be as close to it as possible.

Ushakov: Well, that's exactly the point. They might not take and say that it was agreed with us. That's what I'm afraid of.

Dmitriev: No, no, no. I'll say it exactly as you say it, word for word.

Ushakov: They might twist it later, that's all. There is that risk. There is. Well, alright, never mind. We'll see.

Dmitriev: Yeah, it seems to me you can talk later with Steve about this paper. We will do everything neatly.

Ushakov: [Unclear]

Dmitriev: Thank you so much, Yuri Viktorovich. Thank you so much, thank you. Goodbye

SW: Yuri, Yuri, here's what I would do. My recommendation.

YU: Yes, please.

SW: I would make the call and just reiterate that you congratulate the president on this achievement, that you supported it, you supported it, that you respect that he is a man of peace and you're just, you're really glad to have seen it happen. So I would say that. I think from that it's going to be a really good call.

Because – let me tell you what I told the President. I told the president that you - that the Russian Federation has always wanted a peace deal. That's my belief. I told the president I believe that. And I believe the question is – the issue is is that we have two nations that are having a hard time coming to a compromise and when we do, we're going to have a peace deal. I'm even thinking that maybe we set out like a 20-point peace proposal, just like we did in Gaza. We put a 20-point Trump plan together that was 20 points for peace and I'm thinking maybe we do the same thing with you. My point is this...

It's hard to see all of this as anything but a betrayal both of Ukraine by the United States, and of the US by Witkoff. Mere ignorance is a lame excuse for taking the side of our enemies in such a morally straightforward and well-documented conflict going on for years.

Trump administration

## 'Traitor': US representatives call for Trump envoy Witkoff to be fired after leaked Kremlin call

Republicans and Democrats warn Witkoff 'cannot be trusted' after reportedly advising officials on peace plan



Steve Witkoff speaks in Kiryat Gat, Israel, on 21 October 2025. Photograph: Ammar Awad/Reuters

**Joseph Gedeon in Washington**

Wed 26 Nov 2025 17.39 CET

A handful of US representatives have reacted furiously to a leaked recording in which the special envoy to [Ukraine](#) reportedly [coached](#) Moscow on how to handle [Donald Trump](#), but most have so far remained mute on the revelation that American officials were advising a US adversary.

Don Bacon, a Republican representative, called for Steve Witkoff's immediate dismissal. "For those who oppose the Russian invasion and want to see Ukraine prevail as a sovereign & democratic country, it is clear that Witkoff fully favors the Russians," the Nebraska lawmaker [wrote on X](#).

"He cannot be trusted to lead these negotiations. Would a Russian paid agent do less than he? He should be fired."

The envoy has met Putin at least [five times](#), spending three to four hours with him during each session on Feb. 11, March 13, April 11 and 25, and again in August.

After nearly every meeting, the U.S. president [declared](#) that "great progress was made," while Witkoff later echoed Kremlin talking points in his conversations with U.S. media.

The envoy also [reportedly](#) used Kremlin translators during these talks.

This kind of approach has [alarmed](#) U.S. officials, who said that Witkoff appears overly aligned with Moscow and lacks a clear understanding of Ukraine's position. In July, he also [urged](#) Trump to lift U.S. energy sanctions on Russia and pushed a territorial swap that Ukrainian officials consider unworkable and a dangerous concession.

## The Moscow walks

Witkoff's other track has been his talks with [Dmitriev](#), who heads Russia's Direct Investment Fund and has long served as one of Putin's key emissaries to the West.

Each time Witkoff traveled to Russia, Dmitriev was waiting — the two held quiet, informal meetings away from official channels.

When Witkoff landed in [Moscow](#) on Aug. 6, they strolled together through Zaryadye Park in the city center, a scene that showed the unusually comfortable rapport between Washington's envoy and Russia's chief negotiator.

In the latest contacts, Dmitriev flew to Washington and was planning to meet Witkoff on Oct. 25, though it remains unclear if the meeting occurred. There were no public announcements.



Shortly after, the new U.S. [peace proposal](#) emerged — one that looks remarkably like Moscow's demands.

Witkoff has spent the past month quietly shaping the framework, working directly with Dmitriev, a source familiar with the matter said.

Multiple sources noted that European allies were excluded from drafting the plan — and Ukraine was cut out as well.

## War inside the White House

Witkoff's close coordination with Dmitriev points to a deeper internal struggle in Washington.

According to a source familiar with the power dynamics, Witkoff is running a broader operation with Dmitriev, trying to sideline the pro-Ukraine voices in the [Trump](#) administration.

One of the people responsible for communications for the White House is seen as "one of Witkoff's people," feeding media talking points favorable to Witkoff and his Russia-friendly approach, a source familiar with the matter said.



Trump said in Alaska he and Putin had agreed on most points. It is particularly shocking that he did not appear to push back on the most important, Putin's territorial demand, which Zelenskyy, with European support, has said is an absolute red line. Abandoning territory Ukrainians have spilled much blood over 11 years to defend is politically indefensible and militarily suicidal. It would mean relinquishing the belt of towns and fortifications as well as rivers and ridge lines that have enabled Ukraine to resist Russia's advances and help protect the rest of the country. Giving up this land would plunge Ukraine into political turmoil and leave it badly exposed to further Russian aggression.

A darker explanation could be Witkoff's business connections to Russia, making him willing to sacrifice Ukrainian lives and actual US interests for a few real estate opportunities, whether it's repayment for past help or hoping for future deals.

18/20

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X

1: Let's talk about Steve Witkoff, because I think the narrative of him being a "useful idiot" is a dangerous trap to walk in.

It's darker than that.

Witkoff has spent three decades swimming in russian money, russian mob circles, and russian real-estate pipeline.

A thread 



7:20 PM · Nov 25, 2025

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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.



*Make Money Not War:  
Trump's Real Plan  
for Peace in Ukraine*

The Kremlin pitched the White House on peace through business.  
To Europe's dismay, the president and his envoy are on board.

In a video by RIA, one of Russia's state news agencies, Luna is seen accepting a box of chocolates with Putin's face inscribed on the front.

The images appear to show Luna and Dmitriev in a conference room at the Faena Hotel in Miami.

The Faena Hotel is owned by Access Industries, a company run by Len Blavatnik, according to the company's website. Blavatnik, who was born in Ukraine and is a dual U.S-U.K. national, initially earned his money partnering with Viktor Vekselberg, a Russian billionaire sanctioned by the U.S. for his ties to Putin.

Blavatnik fully divested from all Russian assets following the Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, according to his spokesperson.

Witkoff's company, the Witkoff Group, does business with Blavatnik, including in Miami.

### **The Envoy who Walked in With Two Hidden Conflicts**

**B**yline Times can reveal that Steve Witkoff entered this meeting carrying two conflicts of interest: his real estate empire has been financed, in part, by a former adviser to President Vladimir Putin's right-hand man on money and investment; and several of his Florida and New York developments have drawn on investment vehicles linked to post-Soviet networks now intertwined with Russia's political elite.

These financial entanglements starkly contradict the narrative that Witkoff's apparent willingness to support Moscow's position stems from inexperience. Long before he picked up the phone to Kremlin officials, he was already moving through business circles shaped by the same interests he was now claiming to mediate.

In fact, as long ago as 2011, the Kremlin's sovereign investment fund had recruited a Wall Street billionaire close to [Trump](#) as an adviser – and the same financier's firm later became one of Jared Kushner's biggest lenders, providing hundreds of millions of dollars for prime New York properties. Years before the current "peace plan" emerged, Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner and a Kremlin-backed fund were already moving in a shared financial orbit.



To what degree does Trump bear responsibility for letting Witkoff speak for him and the United States? We certainly won't "Good Tsar, Bad Boyars" this: whether incompetent, corrupt or compromised, Witkoff has not been fired yet.

19/20

 **Vatnik Soup**   
@P\_Kallioniemi · [Follow](#) 

In today's Vatnik Soup, I'll cover the autocratic concept of "Good Tsar, Bad Boyars": the idea that the leader is wise and just, but constantly sabotaged by corrupt advisors. This narrative shields the ruler from blame, and it's used by both Putin and Trump today.

1/20

1:56 PM · Aug 6, 2025 

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**S**teve Witkoff's private jet can be a lonely place. For the last six months, President Trump's golf buddy and fellow New York real estate developer has been charged with solving some of the world's most intractable problems: the war between Israel and Hamas, Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine and Iran's nuclear ambitions.

But as he criss-crosses the world on his plane, apparently on his own dime, [Trump](#)'s ambassador-at-large cuts a solitary figure, often travelling with only one or two aides and leveraging his property contacts into meetings with senior officials.

It has been more than 40 years since Witkoff, then a young property lawyer, befriended a braggadocious Queens-born real estate developer. Now Trump is the most powerful man in the world and Witkoff is his personal emissary, a one-man diplomatic channel that runs straight to the Oval Office.

Yet this role has not been without incident. Witkoff has been repeatedly accused of letting Putin toy with him and repeating Russian talking points — for instance, when he told Tucker Carlson in March that the “overwhelming majority” of people in eastern regions of Ukraine wanted to live under Russian rule. In one meeting with the Russian leader, he was criticised for relying on a Kremlin translator.

“He walks into a meeting with [Putin](#) without an aide, he walks into meetings with the Iranians without aides, he’s not getting briefed — I mean, it’s just, it’s insane,” said an informal foreign policy adviser to Trump. “But the responsibility lies with the president. I think any normal president would have yanked this guy already and said, you’re embarrassing my country.”

### **Witkoff's Foreign Business Entanglements and Introduction to the World of International Oligarchs**

Witkoff eventually ended his partnership with Larry Gluck, who shifted his focus to residential properties, while Witkoff concentrated on commercial real estate.

By the early 1990s, Witkoff had acquired several landmark buildings in Manhattan, including the Woolworth Building — once the tallest skyscraper in the world — and the Daily News Building.

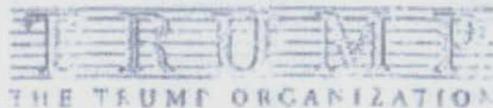
Witkoff granted a small ownership stake in the Daily News Building to his friend Bo Dietl

One of the earliest tenants he brought into the building was the global advertising conglomerate Omnicom.[\[20\]](#)

In 2006, Omnicom's public relations subsidiary, Ketchum, signed a contract to represent the Russian government and its state-owned natural gas giant, Gazprom. Among other services, Ketchum orchestrated a media campaign that culminated in Vladimir Putin being named *Time* magazine's 2007 "Person of the Year."[\[21\]](#)

Witkoff's success in New York eventually led him to pursue opportunities abroad. After founding his current company, the Witkoff Group, he made a splash in the London real estate market with his 1999 purchase of Shell-Mex House — now known as 80 Strand — for nearly a quarter of a billion dollars. This 12-story Art Deco landmark on the River Thames once served as the UK headquarters of Shell Oil.[\[22\]](#)

Omnicom followed Witkoff to London, opening an office in the same building.[\[23\]](#)



December 19, 2007

President Vladimir Putin  
Russian Federation  
4, Staraya Square  
Moscow, 103132

Dear President Putin:

Congratulations on being named Time magazine's "Man of the Year" --- you definitely deserve it. As you probably have heard, I am a big fan of yours! Take care of yourself.

With best wishes,

In sincerely,  
Donald J. Trump



Instead, Trump is already easing sanctions to help the Kremlin terrorist regime, something Witkoff has wanted for years, and he brings him... red caviar. Not black: no matter how hard you try to please or appease the Kremlin, it will never be enough.

20/20



Garry Kasparov [@Kasparov63](#) [Follow](#)



Latest Russian joke going around is that Witkoff was given red caviar instead of black as a subtle reminder that Trump's KGB codename is "Krasnov" (the Red), not "Chernev" (the Black)!

**Ахметов і Ірмак захопили Україну** [@KrahRossii](#)

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The Wall Street Journal published a fascinating story Friday on how Vladimir Putin persuaded Trump to swap out pro-Ukraine Gen. Keith Kellogg for red caviar lover and businessman Steve Witkoff to negotiate an end to the Russia-Ukraine war



Last edited 12:48 AM · Dec 25, 2025



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## US quietly removes sanctions from firms accused of supplying Russia's military

Treasury offers no explanation for lifting restrictions on Cyprus, Dubai, Turkish, and Finnish companies.

BY BENJAMIN MURDOCH · 19/12/2025 · ① 2 MINUTE READ



The White House in Washington DC, USA. Illustrative image via Wikimedia Commons.

The United States has removed sanctions from several foreign companies previously accused of supplying equipment to Russia, including items linked to its defense and military-industrial sectors.

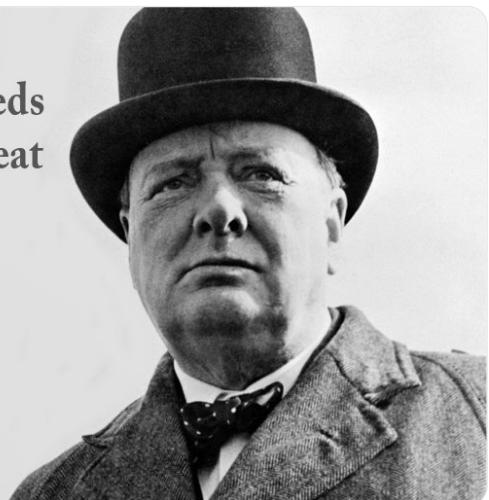
The changes were published on the US Treasury Department's [website](#) on December 18, without any explanation for the move.

In 2018, Mr. Witkoff also criticized Western economic sanctions against Russia, imposed after it annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in 2014 and tried to influence the 2016 U.S. presidential election. “I never understood the Russian sanctions, candidly, because all it did was stop Russian investment into this country,” he said in a [podcast interview](#).



An appeaser is one who feeds  
a crocodile, hoping it will eat  
him last.

WINSTON CHURCHILL



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