

Witkoff and Kushner in Moscow and Kyiv: White House resumes peace mediation

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On 5 September, President Donald Trump's special envoys, Steven Witkoff and Jared Kushner, visited Moscow, resuming efforts to bring Russia's war against Ukraine to an end after a hiatus of more than six months. Their talks at the Kremlin with Vladimir Putin, attended by his foreign policy adviser Yuri Ushakov and special representative for economic cooperation Kirill Dmitriev, lasted three hours. The US side stated that new ideas on how to end the war had emerged on both sides during the meeting. Witkoff and Kushner called for the resumption of trilateral negotiations involving Russia, Ukraine and the United States. Ushakov described the talks as very frank and constructive. His remarks suggest that the Russian side portrayed the military situation on the front in Ukraine as favourable to Moscow and accused Kyiv of glorifying Ukrainian nationalists from the Second World War period. The talks reportedly also covered potential projects for US-Russian economic cooperation.

The day after their visit to Moscow, the US negotiators arrived in Kyiv, where talks took place in three formats: a meeting with President Volodymyr Zelensky, followed by talks with the Ukrainian delegation and finally a meeting involving national security advisers from the United Kingdom, Germany and France. Zelensky described the meetings as 'highly substantive', stressed the need to resume negotiations and declared his readiness to continue them. He emphasised that the most sensitive issues relating to the territorial dispute can only be resolved at the level of national leaders. Both Moscow and Kyiv view talks with the two White House envoys as a means of demonstrating their goodwill and winning President Trump's favour, hoping to secure political and economic benefits in their bilateral relations with the United States that would strengthen their respective positions in the ongoing conflict. Despite the positive assessments, the current meetings hold out little prospect of a peace agreement. The primary obstacle is the Kremlin's determination to pursue its maximalist objectives of subordinating Ukraine and dismantling the existing security order in Europe.

Commentary

- **Following the meeting, no information emerged to suggest that Moscow is ready to compromise and that a ceasefire could be reached quickly.** Russia's tactics continue to focus on exploiting the White House's desire to create the appearance of progress in the peace talks ahead of the congressional elections this autumn, as well as the interest among Trump's business associates in lucrative deals. The aim is to persuade the US to

impose Moscow's maximalist terms for freezing the conflict on Kyiv, thereby triggering a political crisis in Ukraine. At the same time, the Kremlin intends to continue the war, calculating that large-scale strikes on energy infrastructure and civilian targets will cause a humanitarian catastrophe in Ukraine over the winter. Moscow also hopes to exploit deteriorating public sentiment and the rise of populist forces in European countries, anticipating that this will make it more difficult to sustain support for Ukraine and sanctions pressure on Russia.

- **The Kremlin will continue to exploit divisions between the White House and Europe.** It may offer Washington a reduction in its cooperation with Iran, including intelligence sharing, in exchange for similar steps by the US with regard to Ukraine. In Europe, Russia will intensify its campaign of so-called hybrid attacks below the threshold of open warfare against selected European countries and step up its disinformation campaigns. Germany, facing a series of local elections amid declining support for the federal government, is among priority targets of these efforts. In an indication that Russia intends to continue its aggressive actions against Germany, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov launched an unprecedented attack on Friedrich Merz's government, stating that the closure of Russian institutions in Germany (a consulate and the Russian House) in response to Russia's **attempted terrorist attack** at Leipzig Airport marked 'the beginning of a real war'. He compared Germany's current policy to that pursued by Nazi Germany prior to its attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941.
- **Ukraine sought to demonstrate a constructive stance towards the Trump administration's latest peace initiative despite limited expectations regarding its outcome.** Zelensky thanked Kushner and Witkoff for restarting the negotiating process, saying that even a format Ukraine did not favour was better than no dialogue at all. The inclusion of British, German and French security advisers in part of the talks suggests that Kyiv is seeking to prevent Washington and Moscow from reaching potential arrangements over the heads of Ukraine and its European partners. From the Ukrainian leadership's perspective, securing the first visit by both negotiators to Kyiv and thereby restoring a direct channel of communication with Trump's closest associates is an achievement in itself. The Ukrainian administration had long sought to ensure that Witkoff and Kushner, who have maintained regular contact with Moscow, would also visit Ukraine.
- **Zelensky's positive rhetoric is primarily intended to prevent Ukraine from being blamed for the anticipated failure of the peace process.** At the same time, the Ukrainian leader consistently stressed that any agreement would require security guarantees for Ukraine, including support for its post-war reconstruction. He rejected any reduction in the size of the Ukrainian armed forces or acceptance of Russia's territorial demands, despite Witkoff's remark that both sides would need to compromise. This effectively rules out the prospect of reaching a peace agreement in the coming months, a reality underscored by Zelensky's appeal to provide Ukraine with additional air defence systems ahead of the winter period.
- **Increased US engagement in efforts to resolve the Russia-Ukraine conflict indicates that Washington is concerned about potential escalation at an inconvenient time, while also seeking to curb Russian support for Iran.** In recent months, the United States has

focused primarily on the Middle East and the Western Hemisphere, assessing that there was little prospect of a swift end to the war in Ukraine. Washington's calculations may have shifted because of concerns about possible Russian escalation - whether directed against Ukraine following a potential mobilisation or targeting NATO - and the need to limit Russian economic and military support for Iran.

- **US efforts appear to be following a two-track approach.** On the one hand, CIA Director John Ratcliffe likely conveyed a warning intended to signal to Moscow that the war in the Middle East had not significantly weakened the US capacity to respond to a potential crisis in Europe. On the other, Kushner and Witkoff, accompanied by Gene Lange, who oversees sanctions policy at the Treasury Department, most likely outlined the potential benefits Russia could gain from ending the conflict sooner. From Kyiv's perspective, this would represent a negative shift: a scenario in which the US once again seeks to reach a rapid agreement with Russia, while likely combining this effort with pressure on Ukraine to accept the resulting deal. According to media reports, Trump's envoys stressed in Kyiv that the war should be brought to an end before the coming winter.