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Trump's Envoy Presses Kremlin as Ukraine Ceasefire Deadline Nears

August 6, 2025

— Categories: *Breaking News*



MOSCOW — U.S. Special Envoy Steve Witkoff arrived in Moscow on Tuesday to meet with senior Russian officials, as the Trump administration intensifies efforts to bring an end to the war in Ukraine. The visit comes just days before a Friday deadline set by President Donald Trump for Russian President Vladimir Putin to make tangible progress toward a ceasefire agreement or face new U.S. sanctions.

President Trump, increasingly frustrated with what he sees as Moscow's continued aggression in Ukraine, has signaled that patience is wearing thin. According to White House sources, the administration is prepared to target Russia's so-called "shadow fleet," a network of covert oil tankers allegedly used to bypass Western sanctions, if Putin refuses to engage in serious negotiations.

These vessels, whose ownership is deliberately obscured, have enabled Russia to move oil through global markets while circumventing penalties imposed by the U.S. and European allies in response to the invasion of Ukraine. Officials believe cracking down on the shadow fleet would be an effective first step in pressuring the Kremlin without escalating direct military involvement.

The Trump administration has made clear that any path toward sanctions relief will require immediate and verifiable steps toward ending hostilities. So far, however, sources close to the Kremlin indicate that Putin remains defiant, viewing the sanctions threat as more political posturing than a credible deterrent.

The visit by Witkoff, a real estate executive turned diplomat with longstanding ties to the Trump family, underscores the administration's preference for backchannel diplomacy over multilateral forums. His role in leading these sensitive negotiations highlights the president's desire to maintain close control over foreign policy decisions, particularly in high-stakes conflicts involving U.S. adversaries.

Meanwhile, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky confirmed on Monday that he spoke with President Trump regarding the ceasefire push, sanctions strategy, and a pending U.S.-Ukraine drone deal. Zelensky described the call as "productive," emphasizing Kyiv's commitment to ending the war but also its need for continued Western support to counter Russian advances.

With the clock ticking toward Friday's deadline, attention is now focused on whether Moscow will respond to Washington's demands. A failure to reach an agreement could deepen Russia's economic isolation and further strain its export capabilities, particularly in the energy sector, which remains vital to funding its war efforts.

While the Kremlin has yet to release a statement on Witkoff's visit, observers expect that any meaningful progress would have to come quickly. The Trump administration has shown a willingness to take swift action when red lines are crossed, and this Friday may prove no exception.