

## War in Ukraine

### Putin demanded Ukraine cede Donetsk and Luhansk in exchange for freezing rest of front line

Russian president reiterated 'core demands' that would undermine Ukraine's statehood and roll back Nato expansion



Donald Trump said his meeting on Friday with Vladimir Putin, who is wanted for war crimes by the International Criminal Court, was a 'great and very successful day' © Credit:EyePress News / Avalon

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Published AUG 16 2025

Updated AUG 16 2025, 15:11

Vladimir Putin has demanded Ukraine withdraw from the Donetsk and Luhansk regions as a condition for ending Russia's war but told Donald Trump he could freeze the rest of the frontline if his core demands were met.

The Russian leader made the request during his meeting with Trump in Alaska on Friday, according to four people with direct knowledge of the talks.

Trump then communicated that message to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and European leaders in a call on Saturday, during which he urged them to drop efforts to secure a ceasefire from Moscow.

The move would hand Moscow full control of a territory it has partially occupied for more than a decade and where its troops are advancing at the fastest pace since November.

In exchange for Donetsk and Luhansk, Putin said he would freeze the frontline in the southern regions of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia, where his forces occupy large swaths of land, and not launch new attacks to take more territory, according to three of the people familiar with the talks.

Putin made it clear that he had not dropped his core demands to “resolve the root causes” of the conflict, which would essentially end Ukraine’s statehood in its current form and roll back Nato’s eastward expansion.

But the Russian president is prepared to compromise on other issues, including territory, if he is satisfied that the “root causes” are addressed, according to a former senior Kremlin official.

Russian forces control about 70 per cent of Donetsk, but its westernmost chain of cities remains under Ukraine's control and is critical to its military operation and defences along the eastern front. All but a sliver of the westernmost part of Luhansk is controlled by Russian forces.

People familiar with Zelenskyy's thinking said he would not agree to hand over Donetsk, but that he would be open to discussing the issue of territory with Trump in Washington, where they are expected to meet on Monday.

Zelenskyy would also be open to discussing the matter in a trilateral meeting with Trump and Putin, the people said.

According to one Ukrainian official, Trump also told Zelenskyy that Putin appeared open to negotiations over returning small parts of the Sumy and Kharkiv regions occupied by his army to Kyiv's control. But the official dismissed the offer as unserious, since Russia's grip on those areas is minimal.

Another person with knowledge of the matter said Zelenskyy welcomed Trump's apparent willingness to offer US security guarantees to Ukraine but said their extent was yet to be determined. The two presidents will discuss the matter further on Monday, the official added.

Putin's territorial demands appeared to have hardened since April, when he told Trump's special envoy Steve Witkoff that Russia could freeze the entire front line if its "root causes" were addressed.

The White House did not respond to a request for comment about the substance of Trump's discussions with Putin.

Dmitry Peskov, Putin's spokesman, told the FT: "A very important and substantive conversation was held that could bring an agreement closer. The work will continue, but naturally, the substance of what was discussed cannot be made public."

Upon returning to Moscow, Putin told a group of top officials in the Kremlin that the

trip had been “timely and very useful”, according to footage shown on state TV. Putin said he had “explained the reasons for the crisis” to Trump and said any peace settlement needed to address them.

Trump went into Friday’s meeting threatening severe consequences if Putin did not agree to a ceasefire. He walked away from the summit empty-handed and instead relayed Putin’s demands for territorial concessions to leaders in Europe.

In a post on social media on Saturday, Trump urged European leaders to drop efforts to secure a ceasefire from Putin, advising Zelenskyy to “make a deal” with Russia.

“It was determined by all that the best way to end the horrific war between Russia and Ukraine is to go directly to a Peace Agreement, which would end the war, and not a mere Ceasefire Agreement, which often times do not hold up,” Trump wrote on Truth Social after a call with European leaders including German Chancellor Friedrich Merz and French President Emmanuel Macron.

“If all works out, we will then schedule a meeting with President Putin,” Trump added.

The Kremlin said that Putin and Trump did not discuss a three-way meeting with Zelenskyy in Anchorage.

The Russian demand and Trump’s unwillingness to insist on a ceasefire are likely to revive deep angst among European leaders, who expressed alarm before the Alaska meeting when the US president floated the possibility of land swaps as part of a peace deal.

The three-hour meeting provided Putin — who is wanted for war crimes by the International Criminal Court since launching the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 — with an opportunity to break out of his international isolation. Trump welcomed him in Anchorage on a red carpet and was seen joking with him before the talks.

During Trump’s call with European leaders on Saturday, Macron told the US

president that Putin could not be trusted and reminded him of the experience of the Minsk ceasefire deal Putin never implemented a decade ago.

“Putin plays a long game and will not respect promises,” said a European diplomat briefed on the call. “Trump is in a rush to make a deal but Putin is much less so.”

The so-called Coalition of the Willing, a group of countries that have committed to help enforce security guarantees for Ukraine after any peace settlement, will meet on Sunday, according to three people with the matter.

The coalition includes European countries such as France, the UK and Germany, as well as others including Canada and Japan.

*Additional reporting by James Politi in Washington, Fabrice Deprez in Kyiv, Andy Bounds in Brussels, Leila Abboud in Paris, David Sheppard in London and Amy Kazmin in Rome*

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