

Russia Releases U.S. Prisoner After Talks With Trump Envoy

The Kremlin freed Marc Fogel, a teacher held for more than three years on drug charges, in a deal negotiated by Steve Witkoff, President Trump's Middle East envoy.

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President Trump on Tuesday secured the release of an American imprisoned in Russia as part of a deal with the Kremlin negotiated by Mr. Trump's special envoy to the Middle East, Steve Witkoff.

The American, Marc Fogel, a teacher who was arrested on charges of bringing medical marijuana into Russia in August 2021, was released by the Kremlin and flown out of the country on Mr. Witkoff's plane. Though he began serving a 14-year sentence in June 2022, Mr. Fogel was [classified as wrongfully detained](#) by the Biden administration only late last year.

Mr. Fogel was brought to the White House once he arrived back in the United States. An American flag was draped around his neck as he emerged from a black car, with Mr. Trump waiting to greet him. Mr. Fogel grew emotional as he told Mr. Trump he was indebted to him.

"I feel like the luckiest man on earth right now," Mr. Fogel told a small group of reporters once inside the White House.

Mr. Witkoff, a billionaire New York real estate executive and close friend of Mr. Trump's, had been secretly negotiating the deal, though his presence in Moscow became apparent when he flew there on his private jet, alerting online flight trackers. It was the first known trip to Moscow by a senior U.S. official since William J. Burns, then the C.I.A. director, flew to the Russian capital in November 2021 to try to head off an invasion of Ukraine.

Mike Waltz, Mr. Trump's national security adviser, said in a statement that Mr. Witkoff, at the president's direction, had brought Mr. Fogel out of Russia on his plane as part of an exchange. But he did not provide any details about whether the United States or an ally had released someone in return or what other steps the administration had taken to win Mr. Fogel's release.

“President Trump, Steve Witkoff and the president’s advisers negotiated an exchange that serves as a show of good faith from the Russians and a sign we are moving in the right direction to end the brutal and terrible war in Ukraine,” Mr. Waltz said.

It is unclear whom Mr. Witkoff met with and whether other matters, including Ukraine, were part of any discussions. White House officials declined to comment on those questions. The Kremlin’s spokesman, Dmitri S. Peskov, did not respond to a request for comment. He told reporters earlier in the day that he had “no information” about the reported arrival of Mr. Witkoff’s plane.

But the deal, in discussion for several days, is a gesture of good will for both sides, aimed at smoothing the path to talks over the war in Ukraine and potentially improving relations between Russia and the United States.

It underscored President Vladimir V. Putin’s effort to build warm ties with the new administration after the Russian leader [repeatedly praised Mr. Trump](#) in the weeks since his inauguration. And it highlights the bind in which President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine finds himself, as Mr. Trump builds a channel to Moscow while voicing deep skepticism about Kyiv.

In a statement earlier in the day, the Fogel family thanked Mr. Trump for securing his release.

“We are beyond grateful, relieved and overwhelmed that after more than three years of detention, our father, husband and son, Marc Fogel, is finally coming home,” said the statement from Mr. Fogel’s wife, Jane Fogel, and sons, Ethan and Sam.

Mr. Trump told reporters that it was a “very fair” deal with Russia, saying more would be announced on Wednesday.

The U.S. special envoy for hostage affairs, Adam Boehler, indicated in an [interview on CNN](#) on Tuesday that another American would be released on Wednesday but did not say from where or provide details.

The release of Mr. Fogel had a different feel from past Russian spy swaps or prisoner exchanges. Those exchanges had involved Russians flying detainees to other countries, like Turkey, that hosted the swap. But Mr. Witkoff flew directly to Moscow, an arrangement that could signal a new way of doing business with Russia.

Mr. Witkoff’s role extends beyond just a mission to release a detained American, according to multiple people briefed on the situation, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to describe sensitive arrangements. Mr. Trump has a history of assigning multiple people to carry out a singular goal. And while Mr. Trump has appointed Keith Kellogg, a retired three-star general, as his special envoy for Ukraine and Russia, he has also assigned Mr. Witkoff a role in the peace process.

Weeks ago, Mr. Trump secretly empowered Mr. Witkoff to expand his portfolio beyond the Middle East, with the aim of opening a negotiating channel with the Russians, these people said. Mr. Trump trusts Mr. Witkoff, whom he has been friends with since the 1980s, on a personal level and has told people close to him that he believes the real estate developer has the right negotiating skills to help bring an end to the war in Ukraine.

But the exact lines of authority in the administration on the issue remain unclear.

Mr. Witkoff had direct discussions with close allies of Mr. Putin before the visit to Moscow, the people briefed on the situation said. He has also discussed Ukraine with contacts in Saudi Arabia and Qatar, they said. Countries in the Persian Gulf have long sought to play a role as mediators to end the conflict.

It is unclear whether Mr. Trump and Mr. Putin have spoken — neither side will say — but several senior Trump administration officials who would ordinarily be aware of such a call said they could not confirm it had happened.

Mr. Trump had promised during his presidential campaign to end the Russia-Ukraine war “in 24 hours.” But Mr. Putin, who has shown a willingness to try to outlast the West’s backing of Ukraine, has been in no rush to make concessions. And while Mr. Trump has signaled that he plans to use sanctions or other tools to squeeze Mr. Putin financially to force him to negotiate, it is unclear how much longer Ukraine should expect to receive deliveries of essential weaponry from the United States.

Mr. Trump has said he wants Ukraine to provide hundreds of billions of dollars’ worth of rare earth minerals as repayment for U.S. security assistance since the start of the war. He announced on Tuesday that he was sending Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent to meet with Mr. Zelensky.

“This war MUST and WILL END SOON,” Mr. Trump wrote on his social media site, Truth Social. “Too much Death and Destruction. The U.S. has spent BILLIONS of Dollars Globally, with little to show.”

Mr. Bessent was directed to explore with the Ukrainians what a deal for the rare earth minerals might look like, according to multiple people briefed on the plans.

Mr. Zelensky [told Reuters in an interview](#) that he was open to a deal to giving the United States access to rare earth minerals in exchange for a security guarantee.

Mr. Trump has continued to privately express skepticism about Mr. Zelensky, who he believes has taken advantage of American generosity. Mr. Trump has also been reluctant to entertain any form of U.S. security guarantees for Ukraine as part of any settlement.

The president’s comments in his Super Bowl interview with Fox News about the future of Ukraine have once again thrown into doubt his vision for the end of the war, as well as his support for the country’s sovereignty.

“They may make a deal, they may not make a deal,” Mr. Trump said of Ukraine. “They may be Russian someday, or they may not be Russian someday.”

Mr. Trump seemed to be musing aloud in the interview, which aired on Monday, but any questions the American president vocalizes about the future of an independent Ukraine are deeply disturbing to officials in Kyiv.

Mr. Putin and many Russians see Ukraine, a former Soviet republic, as a rightful part of Russia and questioned its independence even before the war. On the other hand, Ukrainian nationalism has hardened since the Russian invasion three years ago and the staggering losses since then.

Representatives of the Trump administration are expected to discuss their plans for ending the war in Ukraine at the Munich Security Conference this weekend. Mr. Kellogg, the Russia-Ukraine envoy, is set to attend the conference, along with Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Vice President JD Vance.

Mr. Vance is scheduled to meet with Mr. Zelensky in Munich. That meeting could set the stage for a meeting in Washington between Mr. Trump and Mr. Zelensky. Mr. Trump has said he would meet with the Ukrainian leader soon, and he is also expected to speak with Mr. Putin.

Allies of Mr. Fogel had been arguing to the Russian authorities that they should release him as part of gesture to the new Trump administration.

Mr. Fogel’s 95-year old mother, Malphine Fogel, is a resident of Butler, Pa., and a supporter of Mr. Trump’s. She was in attendance at the rally in Butler in July, where an attempted assassin shot Mr. Trump in the ear. Ms. Fogel had [met with him before the rally](#) and was set to join him on the stage, a plan upended by the attack.

Allies of Mr. Fogel’s had hoped he would be included in the large [prisoner swap deal](#) in August that freed Paul Whelan, a former Marine, and Evan Gershkovich, a Wall Street Journal reporter. But the Biden administration did not press for Mr. Fogel to be included because at the time Mr. Fogel had not been classified as wrongfully detained because of the amount of marijuana he was carrying into Russia.

Mr. Fogel’s legal team said his release was “long overdue.”

“After years of bureaucratic inaction including consistent refusals to designate Marc as wrongfully detained, President Trump secured Marc’s release in just a few weeks, wasting no time in taking decisive action to bring Marc home,” Martin De Luca and Andrew Smith, Mr. Fogel’s lawyers, said in a statement.

For Mr. Putin, the decision to release Mr. Fogel is a shift from his far less accommodating stance during the Biden administration. When the former Fox News host Tucker Carlson asked Mr. Putin in an interview last February to release Mr.

Gershkovich, the Russian president shot back, “We have done so many gestures of good will out of decency that I think we have run out of them.”

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