

Steve Witkoff's Business Ties to Russian Individuals and Entities

Summary

Steve Witkoff, a New York real estate mogul turned U.S. envoy, has notable links to Russian-connected figures through his business dealings. **Confirmed** examples include his ongoing partnership with billionaire Leonard “Len” Blavatnik – a Soviet-born investor who built his fortune alongside Kremlin-linked oligarchs – in major real estate projects ¹ ². Witkoff also once personally vouched for an indicted Russian mobster in a condo purchase, an **acknowledged** incident he later regretted ³ ⁴. Additionally, as a diplomat he engaged closely with a sanctioned Russian sovereign wealth fund chief, raising conflict-of-interest concerns ⁵. While no direct joint ventures with the Russian government or state-run companies are documented, these associations – some confirmed by public records, others drawing scrutiny – suggest indirect ties. Observers differ on their significance: some see potential conflicts or **speculative** future deals, whereas those involved (like Blavatnik’s camp) deny any undue influence ⁶ ⁷. The evidence below distinguishes confirmed partnerships from allegations.

Partnership with Len Blavatnik (Russian-Linked Billionaire)

One of Witkoff’s most prominent business partners is Len Blavatnik, an Odessa-born billionaire who holds U.S. and U.K. citizenship. Blavatnik amassed enormous wealth in the 1990s by partnering with Russian oligarchs during post-Soviet privatization – co-founding oil, aluminum, and telecom ventures with figures like Viktor Vekselberg, Mikhail Fridman, and Oleg Deripaska (all later **sanctioned by the U.S. for Kremlin ties**) ¹. Despite Blavatnik’s insistence that he has “no engagement” in Russian politics ⁸, his connections to Putin’s inner circle are well documented (e.g. co-owning TNK-BP, which was sold to state-controlled Rosneft) ⁹.

Witkoff and Blavatnik have repeatedly joined forces in high-profile real estate deals. In late 2021, Witkoff’s firm partnered with Blavatnik’s company (Access Industries) to acquire **One High Line** – a luxury condo/hotel project in Manhattan – rescuing it from a distressed developer ². The deal included two towers with 236 condos and a 120-room hotel, and by 2023 the partners announced over \$1 billion in unit sales ² ¹⁰. More recently, in January 2024, Witkoff and Blavatnik jointly **purchased the troubled Banyan Cay Resort & Golf Club** in West Palm Beach, Florida ¹¹. They secured a \$75 million loan for the acquisition and subsequently split the asset: launching a revamped private golf club and a luxury resort hotel by late 2024 ¹². These ventures underscore a *direct business partnership* between Witkoff and Blavatnik, in which Russian-linked capital is indirectly involved through Blavatnik’s investments.

Notably, Witkoff continued partnering with Blavatnik even after Blavatnik was **sanctioned by Ukraine’s government** in December 2023 for allegedly “harming the interests of the state” ¹³. (Ukraine’s sanctions list, which also included Russian oligarchs like Roman Abramovich and Oleg Deripaska, imposed a 10-year ban on Blavatnik ¹⁴.) This means that as of early 2024, Witkoff was still doing new deals with an associate under Ukrainian sanctions. Ethics watchdogs have flagged this as a potential conflict: Jeff Hauser of the

Revolving Door Project cautioned that a part-time envoy like Witkoff could be “thinking about his next moves in business even while flying to Moscow,” suggesting it’s **possible** he might plan investments “in partnership with Russian or Russian-friendly money” even as he conducts diplomacy ¹⁵ ⁶. (To date, however, no public evidence has emerged of Witkoff initiating any new Russia-related business ventures beyond the Blavatnik link.) Blavatnik’s spokesperson has rejected any insinuation that their relationship affects Witkoff’s envoy role, stating the two men “have never spoken about the Russia-Ukraine negotiations” ¹⁶. In short, the **Blavatnik-Witkoff connection is firmly established** via multiple joint real estate projects, though opinions differ on whether it poses a bias or conflict in the Russia-Ukraine peace talks.

Reference for a Russian Mobster (2010)

Beyond billionaire partners, Witkoff once had a documented brush with Russian organized crime figures. In 2010, he **provided a personal recommendation letter** for Anatoly “Tony” Golubchik – an alleged Russian mobster later convicted of running an illegal high-stakes gambling and money-laundering ring out of Trump Tower ¹⁷ ¹⁸. New York real estate publication *The Real Deal* uncovered documents showing that Witkoff wrote to the board of a Manhattan condominium (at 971 Madison Avenue) vouching for Golubchik’s character when the latter was applying to buy a \$5 million apartment ¹⁹ ²⁰. In the December 2010 letter, Witkoff described Golubchik as a “friend” and “a person of strong reputation and integrity” ³ – despite Golubchik’s deep involvement in a transnational gambling enterprise catering to ex-Soviet oligarchs and reputed mob bosses ¹⁷.

This **affiliation came to light** after Golubchik’s indictment in 2013 (U.S. v. Trinchler et al.), which detailed his role in a criminal network with ties **to notorious Russian** mafia don Semion Mog ²¹ ²². Once exposed, Witkoff swiftly distanced himself. A spokesperson for Witkoff told *The Real Deal* that Steven Witkoff had met Golubchik only “tangentially” through a mutual acquaintance and was simply doing a favor by completing the condo board package; **Witkoff “regrets providing a reference”** and acknowledged it “was a mistake” ⁴. He also denied any involvement in Golubchik’s gambling activities ⁴. There is no indication that Witkoff had a business partnership with Golubchik beyond this ill-considered personal reference. Nonetheless, the incident is a matter of public record and illustrates a past *personal affiliation* with a Russian individual tied to organized crime (albeit one that Witkoff has apologized for in hindsight). It remains an isolated case, but as investigative journalist Craig Unger noted, it highlights how even unwitting ties to the **“Russian Mafia”** can become problematic for figures in Trump’s orbit ²³ ²⁴.

Interactions with Russian Government-Linked Figures

In his diplomatic capacity, Witkoff has also developed direct contacts with Russian officials and government-aligned individuals, which, while not business ventures, are relevant to his affiliations. Most prominently, Witkoff formed a **working relationship with Kirill Dmitriev**, the head of the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) – a sovereign wealth fund closely tied to the Kremlin. Dmitriev is a sanctioned individual in the West (blacklisted by the U.S. Treasury after Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine) and a known confidant of President Vladimir Putin. According to multiple reports, Witkoff **cultivated a rapport** with Dmitriev during early 2025 backchannel negotiations, after being introduced through mutual contacts in the Middle East ²⁵ ²⁶. In February 2025, Dmitriev helped arrange Witkoff’s first meeting with Putin, and was present at high-level talks – effectively serving as Moscow’s envoy to the unofficial peace discussions ²⁷ ²⁸.

Crucially, Witkoff's engagement with Dmitriev moved beyond formal meeting rooms. In April 2025, **he invited Dmitriev to dinner at his private residence in Washington** – a striking breach of diplomatic protocol given Dmitriev's sanctioned status ⁵. This off-record meeting (held just before Witkoff briefed President Trump on the Ukraine ceasefire plan) "set off alarms" among U.S. officials. Normally, sanctioned Russian envoys would have limited access, yet Witkoff hosted Dmitriev one-on-one, without State Department presence. Such an informal affiliation with a Putin-linked financier, while arguably part of Witkoff's peace envoy role, underscores **his comfort** operating in unofficial channels. It also amplified skepticism about Witkoff's objectivity: soon after, he advocated a proposal – granting Russia control of four Ukrainian regions – that aligned with Moscow's maximalist demands ²⁹ ³⁰. Ukraine's President Zelenskyy openly criticized Witkoff for "spreading Russian narratives," implying that **Witkoff might be unduly influenced** by his connections on the Russian side ³¹. There is no evidence that Witkoff and Dmitriev have any financial dealings; their relationship appears tied to negotiations. However, Dmitriev's role as a *government-linked figure* (RDIF's chief) means this connection falls squarely within the realm of Russian affiliations, albeit in a political/diplomatic context rather than a business one.

Allegations and Absence of Other Known Ties

Beyond the cases above, **no public records** or credible reports have surfaced linking Steve Witkoff to direct investments in Russia or partnerships with Russian state-owned companies. There is **no indication** that Witkoff's real estate ventures received financing from Russian state banks or that he co-owned businesses with sanctioned oligarchs like Abramovich or Deripaska (aside from Blavatnik's indirect ties) – nothing of that sort has been documented in major financial disclosures or government filings. Nonetheless, his existing ties have fueled speculation. As noted, ethics watchdogs worry about *indirect* entanglements – for example, the possibility that Witkoff could **seek out Russian or "Russia-friendly"** capital for future deals given his network ⁶. Such concerns remain **speculative** at this stage. They stem from perception more than proof: Witkoff's dual identity as a dealmaker and informal diplomat is unorthodox, and critics caution that any private business interests with Russian-aligned figures could cloud his judgment in geopolitical matters ³².

On the other hand, principals involved dispute any wrongdoing. Blavatnik's representatives maintain that his relationship with Witkoff is purely business and has **no bearing on international affairs**, calling any contrary insinuation "wholly fictitious" ¹⁶. For his part, Steve Witkoff has claimed to be stepping back from daily business operations while he serves in government ³³ ³⁴. (He announced plans in early 2025 to transfer his real estate and crypto assets to his sons, though it's unclear if this divestment has been completed ³⁵.) These statements suggest an effort to mitigate conflicts of interest. Still, without full transparency (Witkoff is a special government employee, not subject to Senate confirmation or extensive disclosures), outside observers can only rely on known information. And the known facts do show **some confirmed links**: a recurring business partner who earned billions in post-Soviet Russia, a past favor to a Russian mob associate, and informal contacts with sanctioned Russian officials.

In summary, **public evidence confirms a few significant affiliations** between Steve Witkoff and Russian individuals/entities, principally through Len Blavatnik's investment partnership and the Golubchik recommendation episode. These are matters of record, reported by reputable outlets ² ³. Additional interactions (such as with Kirill Dmitriev) are also documented by major news agencies ⁵, though in a diplomatic context. While there is *no* evidence of any illicit or undisclosed business venture directly tying Witkoff to the Kremlin or its proxies, the **perception of entanglement** exists. Whether these ties amount to a conflict of interest or merely coincidental associations is debated. What is clear is that they have attracted

media and government scrutiny, ensuring that any further dealings Witkoff has that intersect with Russian interests will be closely watched moving forward ^{36 6}.

Sources: Major investigative reporting and news outlets; e.g., *The Counteroffensive* (conflict-of-interest exposé) ^{37 2}, *The Real Deal* (NY real estate news) ^{3 4}, Reuters ⁵, and official records (Ukrainian sanctions lists, U.S. Treasury sanctions) ^{14 1}. These provide the basis for the confirmed details above, distinguishing verified facts from allegations.

^{1 2 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 29 31 32 33 34 35 36 37} Scoop: Trump envoy's conflict of interest: a Russia-linked business partner

<https://www.counteroffensive.news/p/scoop-trump-envoys-conflict-of-interest>

^{3 4 17 19 20} Steve Witkoff | Anatoly Golubchik

<https://therealdeal.com/new-york/2013/05/10/steve-witkoff-revealed-as-friend-of-indicted-russian-mobster/>

^{5 30} Trump envoy's embrace of Russian demands worries Republicans, U.S. allies | Reuters

<https://www.reuters.com/world/trump-envoys-embrace-russian-demands-worries-republicans-us-allies-2025-04-11/>

^{18 21 22 23 24} Putin's Point Man: What's Behind Steve Witkoff's Ties to the Russian Mafia? - WhoWhatWhy

<https://whowhatwhy.org/politics/us-politics/putins-point-man-whats-behind-steve-witkoffs-ties-to-the-russian-mafia/>

^{25 26 27 28} The Realtor Who Came in From the Cold • russian desk

<https://desk-russie.info/2025/05/14/the-realtor-who-came-in-from-the-cold.html>