

Ukraine: Berlin foreign ministers meeting brings no solution

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On Wednesday, two days after the Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko launched a military offensive against opposition forces in the east of the country, ending a cease-fire which was never adhered to, the foreign ministers of Germany, France, Russia and Ukraine met in Berlin. The German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier had called the meeting at short notice, ostensibly to discuss a solution to the conflict, which has been going on for months.

The result of the meeting was minimal. The four foreign ministers agreed that the so-called Contact Group should meet no later than Saturday to try and negotiate a lasting ceasefire to be agreed by all sides. The Contact Group includes representatives of the OSCE, Ukraine, Russia and the eastern Ukrainian Self-Defense Forces. They had met twice last week under the chairmanship of former Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma in Donetsk without coming to a conclusion.

Steinmeier commented on the agreement: "This is not the solution to all problems. This is not a miracle formula, which makes everything good overnight. But it is a first and important step towards a bilateral ceasefire."

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov expressly thanked Steinmeier and said the ceasefire would be essential to prevent further casualties among the civilian population and provide a chance of reaching an agreement between the sides in the conflict. The Russian government also agreed on joint border controls with Ukrainian border guards after the conclusion of a cease-fire agreement.

While the foreign ministers were negotiating in Berlin, Kiev continued its military offensive against eastern Ukrainian towns and villages with unrestrained brutality.

The end of the cease-fire on Monday had already

been accompanied by blood-curdling threats. President Poroshenko called it "our answer to the terrorists, guerrillas and marauders". Defense Minister Mikhail Koval threatened: "The offensive ends when the last Russian mercenary has left Ukrainian soil." And parliamentary president Oleksandr Turchynov boasted that government forces and the National Guard were "effectively cleansing the east of the country from terrorists and liberating it from the besiegers".

The army leadership in Kiev announced that around 120 bases of pro-Russian insurgents would be targeted as part of the "anti-terrorist operation", involving tanks and fighter bombers. An adviser to the Ukrainian Interior Ministry claimed that about 1,000 "separatists" had been killed on Tuesday alone. The insurgents immediately denied this figure. Their leader in Lugansk, Valery Bolotov, did admit, however, that there had been "heavy fighting".

According to the Stratfor information service, which has close links to US intelligence agencies, the government has in the east of the country between 10,000 and 20,000 personnel, comprising military troops, Interior Ministry troops, intelligence units and members of the recently established national guard fighting "several hundred" highly trained separatists.

Countless photos and videos on the web show that the Ukrainian armed forces are bombing densely populated areas and killing many civilians, even if the authenticity in individual cases is difficult to establish. According to the authorities, 279 people have been killed in the Donetsk region alone since the beginning of the conflict in spring, including 160 civilians. According to the UN, more than 110,000 people have fled to Russia and another 50,000 have fled to other parts of Ukraine.

President Poroshenko is determined to create facts on

the ground by killing as many insurgents as possible and terrorizing the majority of the civilian population that rejects his government. In this he has the full backing of the Western powers.

On Monday, the White House supported his decision to end the ceasefire and to start a new offensive. Poroshenko had the right to defend his country, a spokesperson for President Barack Obama declared.

A similar statement was made by the outgoing president of the European Commission, Jose Manuel Barroso, who announced his “sympathy for this decision.”

Representatives of Germany and France were somewhat more reserved in their comments. They had previously repeatedly called on Poroshenko to extend the ceasefire. But that demand, like the foreign ministers’ meeting on Wednesday in Berlin, was made mainly for domestic political and tactical reasons. Both governments are trying to pose publicly as arbitrators rather than warmongers. As their economies would suffer far more than the US economy from economic sanctions and trade war with Russia, both Germany and France have not yet gone as far as the United States in adopting bellicose rhetoric against Russia.

In their basic orientation, however, they agree with the United States. They are determined to break Ukraine from its close economic and political ties to Russia and integrate it into the sphere of influence of the EU and NATO. This in turn will isolate and weaken Russia, forcing it eventually into a relation of greater dependence on the imperialist powers.

Germany in particular is vigorously pursuing this goal. For years, foundations attached to German political parties have supported and financed nationalist and anti-Russian forces in Ukraine. Berlin played a very active role in the Maidan protests, the subsequent toppling of President Viktor Yanukovych, and the rise to power of the billionaire oligarch Poroshenko.

In so doing, German imperialism was once again adopting its traditional policy of expansion towards the east. Germany occupied Ukraine in both the First and Second World War. The Berlin administration also works together with ultra-right forces such as Svoboda and the Fatherland Party, which pay tribute to former Nazi collaborators.

The relationship between the German Foreign Minister Steinmeier and his American colleague John

Kerry is characterized by a division of labor rather than by genuine differences: Kerry wields the stick, Steinmeier offers the carrot. While Kerry presses Poroshenko for a crackdown, Steinmeier invites all sides to the conference table to obtain new concessions from Russia.

In so doing he is deliberately accepting the risk of nuclear war. The Russian government is ready to make concessions and aims to achieve a compromise, but it is not clear whether they are on offer. The Russian president can only accept so much humiliation before his own political existence is at risk.

A speech made by Vladimir Putin on Monday before Russian ambassadors in Moscow expressed this contradiction. On the one hand, Putin called upon the US to cooperate: “We have absolutely no plans to shut down our relations with the US.” On the other hand, he threatened not to stand by endlessly and watch what was going on in Ukraine. He expressed regret at the deaths of civilians and the growing refugee flows, adding: “We will not sacrifice our vital interests just to be allowed to sit nearby at G8/G20.”



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