

# Ukrainian army steps up offensive in the east

Christoph Dreier  
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The Ukrainian government's war against pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine is intensifying. On Sunday, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier warned that "we continue to slide into a direct confrontation between Russian and Ukrainian combat forces."

On Sunday evening, the foreign ministers of Germany, Russia, France and Ukraine met in Berlin to discuss the conflict in eastern Ukraine. The negotiations lasted almost five hours but brought no concrete results.

Steinmeier spoke afterwards of "difficult discussions," concerning more effective control of the Russian-Ukrainian border, humanitarian assistance for the besieged cities of eastern Ukraine and the possibility of a ceasefire.

"I believe and I hope that we have certainly made progress on specific points," said Steinmeier. Prior to the talks, the foreign minister had already played down expectations. "We are far away from a political solution," he said. The real problem was that previous talks "have all failed to produce results."

The diplomats only concrete decision was to discuss future meetings after consultations with their governments. Steinmeier, his French counterpart Laurent Fabius, and Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov stated on Monday that they were optimistic. There was no joint statement or even an agreement.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Pavel Klimkin struck a self confident stance after the talks. He had not had to give up on any fundamental points. "There are no compromises on the issues on which a state has to overstep its red lines. Ukraine has not overstepped these. I sensed the support from our partners," Klimkin tweeted. "I am thankful to Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Laurent Fabius for their support."

Klimkin also thanked German Chancellor Angela Merkel in an interview with *Deutschlandfunk* on

Sunday. Merkel was doing "an incredible amount" and was one of "the most important moderators." At the same time, the minister called for stronger military engagement by NATO in Ukraine. "Because if such support is given, it will be easier for our troops to act locally," he said. The minister accused Russia of sending weapons and soldiers into the country.

Klimkin announced conditions for a ceasefire for the first time in Kiev on Monday. These included the securing of the Russian-Ukrainian border, the supervision of the ceasefire by the OSCE, and the release of all prisoners of war by the separatists. Government troops had been repeatedly encircled by the rebels and taken prisoner.

The last demand in particular will likely make it impossible to achieve a ceasefire. In exchange for a loose commitment to a pause in the fighting, which can be broken at any time, the rebels would have to give up their most important bargaining chip.

At a press conference on Monday, Lavrov evaluated the meeting as positive. They had been able to move forward on some aspects of humanitarian aid and on what a ceasefire would look like, the Russian diplomat said.

Lavrov also expressed his support for the expansion of the OSCE mission on the Russian-Ukrainian border. The supervisors would prevent the supply of weapons to the areas controlled by the rebels. At the same time, Lavrov defended the stationing of Russian army units on the Russian-Ukrainian border. This was necessary to secure Russia's security, he said.

Lavrov appealed to Berlin and Washington to exercise their influence on the fighters in Ukraine. "We know that the west has sufficient influence and expect that they will become conscious of their responsibility for the events in Ukraine, and take the steps necessary to influence those who do not want to end the war," said Lavrov.

The Russian foreign minister was referring to the fact that substantial sections of the Ukrainian armed forces are not controlled by the government. Units like the extreme right-wing Azov battalion and the Right Sector are only accountable to themselves in Ukraine and have close ties to the US.

The right-wing extremist paramilitaries already played a decisive role in the overthrow of President Viktor Yanukovitch in February. They carried out armed occupations of administrative and government buildings and persecuted political opponents. Only a day after Steinmeier, Fabius and Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski had negotiated an agreement between the government and the opposition, they surrounded parliament and forced deputies to vote for the removal of the elected President.

Since then, the fascists have occupied central positions in the new regime. On Saturday, the Right Sector gave Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko an ultimatum. He had to release all members of the nationalist movement within 48 hours and abandon all investigations into their activities. In addition, the authorities should give back weapons which had been illegally confiscated, and dismiss all anti-Ukrainian elements from the Ukrainian interior ministry. Otherwise, Right Sector would leave the front in the east and organize a march on Kiev.

On Monday, Right Sector announced that its members had been set free. A defense ministry spokesman rushed to explain that they would continue to cooperate with the fascists. "Interior minister Arsen Avezkov acknowledges the contribution made by Right Sector members in the struggle against terrorists," said the spokesman. "Both sides agreed to regularly exchange information and to cooperate to protect Ukraine from the terrorist threat within the existing legal framework."

The US and NATO are repeatedly using these forces in Ukraine to escalate the situation and produce confrontation with Russia. NATO's commanding officer in Europe, US Gen. Phillip Breedlove, confirmed in an interview with German newspaper *Die Welt* at the weekend that NATO was making such preparations.

The general announced that the NATO conference planned at the beginning of September would be used to strengthen the alliance's principle of collective

defense, and to adopt a massive build-up of the military, especially in the area of rapid response troops. In addition, he announced that in the event of a similar development as in Ukraine taking place in a NATO member, Article 5, the collective defense clause, would apply, even if a state was not directly threatened by another nation.

In a joint article with NATO General Secretary Anders Fogh Rasmussen on the same day, Breedlove noted that all diplomatic efforts notwithstanding, NATO must prepare for a war with Russia. NATO had to prove that it is "ready, willing and able to defend our almost one billion citizens."

On the ground, the Ukrainian army stepped up its offensive. The cities of Luhansk and Donetsk once again came under sustained fire from heavy artillery. Russian news agency Rossiya 24 showed footage of missile parts in Luhansk which suggest that the Ukrainian army are using ballistic missiles against the cities. The government reported it had captured one of the rebel centers close to Luhansk.

On Monday, a column of refugees was shot at with missile launchers around Luhansk, according to government claims. A government spokesman blamed the rebels for the attack, claiming that "dozens" had been killed. Rebel spokesmen denied that it had carried out or that they even had the capability of carrying out such an attack and questioned whether the incident had even taken place. In Washington, the State Department condemned the attack, but said it was not able to determine "who was responsible."



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