

Russia, Ukraine to negotiate amid deepening crisis

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The Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin are set to meet Friday at the Asia-Europe Summit (Asem) in Milan, to discuss a resolution of the civil war in eastern Ukraine. The German Chancellor Angela Merkel was also due to meet the Russian President for the first time since July of this year. The offers made to Russia in the negotiations are accompanied by massive threats and the preparations for new aggression against Moscow.

In an official government statement on Thursday, Merkel demanded that Russia make “a decisive contribution to de-escalation”, and defended the sanctions imposed on Russia. “We will continue to make clear that the violation of the territorial integrity of Ukraine and the violation of international law will have consequences,” Merkel declared. At the same time, she announced she was prepared to negotiate with Putin.

Merkel had agreed to adopt this line in an earlier videoconference with the leaders of France, Italy and the United States. US President Barack Obama then informed Poroshenko on the results of the videoconference in a telephone call. According to Poroshenko, Obama expressed confidence that they could convince Putin at the summit to comply with the Minsk Agreement, in particular, that Putin would permit effective control of the border and remove Russian arms from eastern Ukraine.

The offer of talks was accompanied by threatening actions. The Security Advisor to the US defence secretary, Derek Chollet, had already spoken out last week in favor of a powerful Ukrainian army. On Sunday, two US ships returned to the Black Sea to be joined shortly by a French surveillance vessel.

On Wednesday, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier and his French counterpart Laurent

Fabius confirmed plans to send combat troops to the Ukraine to protect a drone deployment of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). The OSCE has yet to confirm the deployment, Steinmeier admitted.

Prior to the summit, Putin described American policy as “hostile” and sharply criticized the sanctions imposed on Russia, warning of the potential for war. “We hope our partners will realise the futility of attempts to blackmail Russia and remember what consequences discord between major nuclear powers could bring for strategic stability,” he said. Now “a real opportunity has opened up to stop the military confrontations, which amount to a civil war,” stated Putin.

Pro-Russian separatists have been fighting in the east of the country for independence from Kiev since February, when a Western-sponsored coup removed the elected President Viktor Yanukovich from power. Officially, a truce went into effect on September 5, but has been repeatedly ignored. According to UN figures, at least 331 persons have been killed in the first month of the ceasefire.

The intensification of negotiations takes place against the background of profound crisis in Ukraine. The truce itself was the result of military defeats inflicted on the forces mobilized by the Kiev regime, which was increasingly unable to control its troops. In the battles currently taking place, Ukrainian armed forces are once again on the defensive. It was announced on Wednesday that more than 100 Ukrainian soldiers were surrounded by rebels in Lugansk.

As winter approaches, Ukraine confronts an acute gas shortage, with Russia currently refusing to supply the country. Ukraine has not paid its bills for months and amassed debts totaling 5.3 billion euros. Moscow is

now demanding the outstanding payments. In addition, following the coup, Russia has refused to grant Ukraine any rebates on its gas price. A compromise negotiated with the EU was rejected by Kiev.

Furthermore, in January, a Ukrainian government loan held by Russia matures and the Moody's rating agency has declared that national bankruptcy for Ukraine in 2015 is likely.

Under these conditions, Poroshenko is trying to dampen down the conflict and assure the country some sort of stability, at least until elections on October 26. He has by no means, however, shifted from his pro-Western course. Poroshenko is seeking merely to buy some time in order to proceed against the separatists and enforce EU austerity diktats even more aggressively. He has made this patently clear in the last few days.

On the basis of a proposal from Poroshenko, the Ukrainian Parliament voted on Tuesday to appoint Stepan Poltorak as the country's new defense minister. Poltorak is an absolute hardliner. He formerly commanded the National Guard, which is composed of voluntary associations and includes a number of openly fascist battalions. The National Guard is regarded as responsible for numerous human rights violations, including torture and mass murder.

On the same day, the government submitted to parliament a draft law orienting the foreign policy of Ukraine to NATO accession. In early September, NATO leaders announced at their summit in Wales that they would support Ukraine in modernizing its armed forces.

In preparation for the parliamentary elections later this month, all opposition to the regime's military aggression is being brutally suppressed. The parliamentary fraction of the Moscow-oriented Communist Party has already been dissolved. Now the party is to be banned. Behind the ban is the attempt to silence all opposition to the war being conducted in the east of the country.

The chairman of the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU), Valentyn Nalywaitschenko, made this clear last week. With regard to the ban on the CP, he announced the plan was to ban “both the organization and its ideology”. The Ukrainian news agency Ukrinform quoted him, saying that the evidence collected by his agency demonstrated “that communism should be

banned”.

Shortly beforehand, the Security Service announced at a press conference that the anti-terrorist operation—the official designation for the regime's war against the separatists—was to be extended to areas of the Kharkiv region, which is currently controlled by the Kiev government. The escalation of the war in this region can only mean a brutal crackdown on any opposition.

This escalation, in turn, increases the conflicts within the government camp. The extreme right-wing forces upon which the government relies, reject anything which has the hint of a compromise with Russia.

On Tuesday, there were violent street battles between police and thousands of far right protesters who attacked the parliament building. The protesters were armed with chains, tear gas and clubs. According to the Ministry of Interior, 36 people were arrested.

On the morning of the same day, supporters of the Fascist Svoboda party demonstrated for the official recognition of Nazi collaborators as liberation fighters. One day earlier, hundreds of National Guardsmen marched to the presidential palace to demand payment of salaries.

In August, members of the National Guard had already threatened to leave the eastern front and march on Kiev if the government undertook any disciplinary action against right-wing extremist organizations.



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