

# Ceasefire agreement for Eastern Ukraine announced after Minsk summit

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Thursday morning the leaders of Germany, France, Russia and Ukraine reportedly reached a ceasefire agreement in eastern Ukraine. The deal came after 17 hours of negotiations in the Belorussian capital, Minsk. It is supposed to come into effect on Sunday.

Details of the agreement remain unclear and those involved in its formulation are already seeking to downplay expectations. While German Chancellor Angela Merkel's spokesman, Steffen Seibert, wrote on Twitter that "therein lies hope", German foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier was less enthusiastic. "For some this won't be enough. Also we wished to gain more. But that's all what the Ukrainian president and the Russian president could agree upon this night," he said.

"We have managed to agree on the main issues," Russian President Vladimir Putin commented. "The next thing that I believe is very important is the withdrawal of heavy weapons ... and the withdrawal of Donbass militias." In contrast, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko told journalists, "The main thing which has been achieved is that from Saturday into Sunday there should be declared *without any conditions at all*, a general ceasefire". [emphasis added]

French President François Hollande said much work still needed to be done but described the agreement as a chance to ameliorate the situation in Ukraine. Hollande and Merkel will ask the European Union to support the agreement at a European Union summit later tonight.

The agreement was reached after Washington announced new military deployments in Eastern Europe aimed at Russia and amidst heavy fighting in eastern Ukraine.

US Army-Europe Commander Lt General Ben Hodges announced that 600 paratroopers from the 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team in Vicenza, Italy would deploy to Lviv, Ukraine to train the far-right volunteer battalions that comprise the Ukrainian National Guard. "We'll train

them in security tasks, medical, how to operate in an environment where the Russians are jamming, and how to protect from Russian and rebel artillery," Hodges said.

It has been documented by human rights groups that volunteer battalions fighting for Kiev have carried out atrocities, including killings of civilians, in eastern Ukraine.

The US Air Force also announced yesterday it would deploy a dozen A-10 attack jets and 300 airmen to Spangdahlem Air Base in Germany.

To place maximum pressure on Russia, Washington is still threatening to directly arm the Kiev regime against Russian-backed forces in eastern Ukraine—a strategy that NATO officials have said could lead to war between NATO and Russia. Obama confirmed on Monday that the White House is considering arming Kiev. On Tuesday, a bipartisan group of legislators in the US House of Representatives introduced legislation that would provide \$1 billion in lethal weaponry to Kiev.

European countries including Britain and Poland have also indicated that they may supply arms to the Kiev regime.

The US views the civil war in Ukraine triggered by the US- and NATO-backed coup in Kiev a year ago as part of a strategy whose ultimate aim is the reduction of Russia to a semi-colonial status. Military and foreign policy strategists believe that a bloody and ruinously expensive Russian war in Ukraine, combined with ethnic wars by US-linked Islamist fighters elsewhere in Russia or the former USSR, could undermine the Russian military.

The *Financial Times* wrote that bogging Russia down in "a drawn-out, larger war [in Ukraine] makes it more vulnerable on other flanks, such as the restive North Caucasus and Central Asia." If these conflicts flare up, one military expert told the newspaper, "There are just not enough Russian soldiers to fight a war of attrition in Ukraine."

Talks continued throughout last night in Minsk. The Ukrainian delegation demanded that separatist forces give up Russian weapons, control of border posts with Russia, and the territorial gains they have made in fighting with Kiev forces since the previous accord in Minsk last September. While it is considering “autonomy” for eastern Ukraine, it opposed Russian demands that Kiev end its financial blockade of eastern Ukraine, which has seen funding for pensions and state programs cut off by Kiev.

The Russian delegation was proposing a demarcation line closer to the current line of fighting. It denied that Russia has troops or military equipment in eastern Ukraine.

As Washington’s behavior makes clear, even with the agreement reached in Minsk, US imperialism is pushing to escalate the conflict, virtually ensuring that any deal would be a dead letter, like the Minsk cease-fire agreement reached last September. That agreement broke down in a matter of weeks amid fighting for control of Donetsk, the center of the rebel-held Donbass region.

Even as the Minsk talks began, fighting in eastern Ukraine surged yesterday. The Kiev regime reported that 19 of its soldiers were killed in fighting near the strategic rail junction at Debaltseve, which separatist forces have largely surrounded. In Donetsk, hospital number 20 was hit by a shell, killing one person and forcing the evacuation of several patients.

Both sides are preparing for an even broader escalation. While officials of the separatist Donetsk People’s Republic have announced that they are preparing to draft 100,000 men into their armed forces, Poroshenko has announced a call-up of 75,000 men.

There is rising opposition in the western Ukrainian population to the military and economic policies of the Kiev regime. As Ukraine’s economy collapses and the death toll from fighting in eastern Ukraine mounts, resistance is growing to Poroshenko’s draft orders and his policy of confrontation with Russia.

“At least here, mobilization has been a total failure,” Iryna Vereshchuk, the mayor of the small town of Rava-Ruska in western Ukraine, told the Guardian. She said that of 100 call-up papers meant to be distributed as part of the draft, only six could be served. The other men were in hiding or missing.

“We still have diplomatic and financial links with Russia, and yet people are saying we have to go and fight their troops and die,” she added. “If our region was coming under attack, people would take up arms, but they

are not ready to go to the east and end up killing other Ukrainian citizens.”

Coal miners who have been thrown out of work by the Kiev regime’s suspension of subsidies have mounted protests in Kiev. Regime officials are insisting that nothing will be done to deal with the escalating social crisis facing the western Ukrainian population.

“This year, almost all sectors of the economy will experience layoffs on a larger or smaller scale,” said Oleksandr Zholud, an analyst at the Kiev-based International Center for Policy Studies. He said he expected significant wage cuts and demands that workers take unpaid vacations until the economy improves.

“A single position attracts 30-35 candidates today,” said Social Policy Minister Pavlo Rozenko, who declared criticism of rising joblessness in Ukraine to be illegitimate. “Forecasts on Ukraine’s grim future are groundless and are based on a criticism from opponents and those who are not interested in wide-scale reforms. Many will lose their jobs and salaries, but we don’t have any other way,” he declared.

The Kiev regime is threatening to impose a military dictatorship. “I, the government, and the parliament are ready to take the decision to introduce martial law in all the territories of Ukraine,” Poroshenko declared at a government meeting.

“Martial law would mean a lot of restrictions, including on freedom of speech, democratic freedoms, and would have lots of consequences. It would be the complete transfer of the country onto a military track,” declared Ihor Lapin, a legislator and member of the fascistic Aidar Battalion.



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