

Putin visits Crimea amid rising tensions with Ukraine

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20 August 2016

President Vladimir Putin held a meeting with Russia's Security Council in Crimea Friday amid a new round of Russian military exercises there and continuing tensions with the US-backed regime in neighboring Ukraine.

Putin's trip to the Black Sea peninsula was the fifth since it was reunified with Russia in the wake of the February 2014 US- and German-backed and fascist-spearheaded coup that overthrew Ukraine's elected government. It came amid rising tensions following Moscow's charge that an armed sabotage squad organized by Ukrainian military intelligence attempted to enter Crimea to carry out attacks on critical infrastructure. Two Russian servicemen were reported killed in clashes with the saboteurs.

In his speech to the council, the Russian president declared, "It looks like our partners in Kiev have made a decision to aggravate tensions." At the same time, however, he sounded a conciliatory note, declaring that, despite Ukraine's buildup of its military near the Russian border and Kiev's refusal to accept the appointment of a Russian ambassador, Moscow did not intend "to roll back our ties" with the former Soviet republic.

As a gesture of opening toward Ukraine, Putin has named former education and science minister Dmitry Livanov to the position of special envoy for trade and economic, science and technical relations with Ukraine.

A day before Putin's visit, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko said that he was prepared to impose martial law and a military draft in the country in response to the tensions over Crimea and increased fighting in the Donbass, in eastern Ukraine, where the Ukrainian military and right-wing militias confront militias supporting two pro-Russian separatist republics.

Warning of a possible "full-scale Russian invasion,"

he said in a speech delivered in Ukraine's western Liviv region, "We don't rule out the possibility of introducing martial law and declaring mobilization if the situation in the east and in Crimea escalates." Earlier, Poroshenko had ordered Ukrainian military units placed on the highest combat alert.

The Ukrainian president's speech followed clashes in the east in which three Ukrainian soldiers were killed and six wounded in the Donbass. Fighting there has escalated to the highest level in a year, with the Ukrainian military shelling civilian homes as well as separatist militias, which have also stepped up their attacks. Shelling by government forces Wednesday cut the electricity supply to hundreds of homes and a coal mine in Donetsk.

Nearly 10,000 people have been killed in the fighting over the past two years, with tens of thousands more wounded. The economy of the Donbass has been left in ruins.

In his speech in Crimea, Putin charged that the Ukrainian government had opted for a policy of "stirring up tensions" because "they are reluctant, or unable, to implement the Minsk Accords," and "are unable to explain to their own people the considerable mistakes in social and economic policies."

The Minsk Accords refers to an agreement reached between Russia and Ukraine based on proposals drafted by Germany and France for a negotiated end to the fighting in the Donbass following a series of military reversals for Ukrainian forces in early 2015.

In addition to a ceasefire to be monitored by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the agreement called for the convening of local elections and the passage by the Ukrainian parliament of legislation granting the eastern region a measure of autonomy. The Poroshenko government has not acted

on the political requirements posed by the agreement. To do so would provoke the semi-fascist, anti-Russian elements that dominate Ukrainian politics and likely bring about his downfall.

The Poroshenko government has ample reason to provoke tensions with Russia, both as a means of distracting the attention of the population from the country's continuing economic crisis and unending corruption scandals, and as a means of securing increased support from Washington and NATO.

Since the Western-backed coup of 2014, some five million Ukrainians have lost their jobs, while living standards have been cut roughly in half. While the economy has been kept from complete collapse by foreign aid, a \$17.5 billion IMF bailout has been stalled because of the inability of the government to meet its conditions.

More decisive than Poroshenko's calculations on his regime's survival is the drive by US imperialism against Russia, within which Ukraine serves as a useful pawn. The US and NATO have already implemented plans for deploying four battalions—some 4,000 troops—on Russia's doorstep in Poland and the Baltic republics. In addition, the US-led alliance has formed a 40,000-strong rapid reaction force for military confrontation with Moscow.

Under conditions in which Washington is warily watching Moscow's moves in the Middle East, particularly its closer military alliance with Iran in Syria and its rapprochement with Turkey, the provocation in Crimea serves as a means of stepping up military pressure on Russia's own borders.

The Russian government, representing the interests of the billionaire oligarchs who enriched themselves through the appropriation of state property following the 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union, has no coherent policy for countering this growing military pressure, alternating between attempts at accommodation with Washington, on the one hand, and the flexing of military power and appeals to Russian nationalism, on the other.

As Putin spoke in Crimea, Russian naval and land forces there carried out maneuvers designed to rehearse the rapid deployment of troops, tanks and other equipment to Crimea in the event of war. The exercises included the participation of 2,500 troops, 350 armored vehicles, naval vessels and other military units.



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