

Putin meets with Merkel and Hollande

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A meeting between the German chancellor and the French, Russian and Ukrainian presidents on Wednesday in Berlin produced no practical results.

Angela Merkel and François Hollande met with Vladimir Putin and Petro Poroshenko for four hours in the Federal Chancellery to discuss the situation in Ukraine, after which there was a further two-hour discussion with Putin on the Syrian war. It was the first meeting in the so-called Normandy format since the four heads of government came together in Paris a year ago, and it marked Putin's first visit to Berlin in four years.

That the discussion took place at all was considered a success by representatives of the German government. *SpiegelOnline* wrote that it underscored "the importance that Putin grants to the German chancellor in the concert of powers." Discussions between Russia and the US had largely come to a standstill after Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov cancelled further meetings with his American counterpart John Kerry.

The Berlin meeting was tense. At the evening press conference that followed, Merkel spoke of a "very hard session." Hollande repeated his accusation that Russia is committing war crimes in Aleppo. Merkel added to this provocative accusation, referring to "inhumane bombings" that could only be considered as crimes according to international law.

Merkel left open the possibility of tougher sanctions against Russia. This is to be a topic of discussion at the EU summit that began in Brussels on Thursday. There is not, however, a majority in favour. While some countries—such as Poland, Britain, and Estonia—urge a sharper course against Russia, others—including Italy, Hungary, Slovakia and Greece—want to ease already existing sanctions.

Berlin faces a dilemma. It has close relations with the Eastern European states, which play a leading role in the conflict with Russia. It has played a prominent role in NATO's march toward the Russian border and does not wish to openly confront Washington on this issue. At the same time, it does not want the conflict with Moscow to

lead to a complete break, as Germany has close economic ties to Russia and depends on Russian gas and oil supplies.

The German government itself is divided on the issue. While Chancellor Merkel and her party, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), have repeatedly spoken in favour of tightening sanctions against Russia, Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier and the Social Democratic Party (SPD) reject this.

Much of the German media has unleashed a veritable war campaign against Russia in the past week, shifting blame for the escalation of the Syrian war onto Putin alone, though the US and its European allies bear the chief responsibility for it.

On the occasion of Putin's visit to Berlin, the *Bild* newspaper went a step further. The Springer Press tabloid turned its wrath on the Russian president, writing: "In a just world, you would be put on the next flight to The Hague where you would face charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity before the International Court of Justice."

The media's wrath does not go very far, however. The offensive against the Iraqi city of Mosul, backed by the Western powers, in which the civilian population is threatened with a greater catastrophe than in Aleppo, exposes the propaganda against Putin as hypocrisy. In Ukraine, it is increasingly clear the Western-backed Poroshenko regime and its fascist militias allies oppose a settlement of the war in the East of the country.

Even the staunchly anti-Russian *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) concluded that the Ukrainian side has systematically sabotaged a ceasefire agreement concluded by the Ukraine Contact Group on September 21. It is apparent that the Poroshenko regime, shaken by corruption scandals and growing social tensions, can only hold onto power by inciting fanatical nationalism and further inflaming the war in East Ukraine.

The FAZ has analysed the daily reports of the OSCE Observer Mission in the East Ukrainian war zone and concluded that "in the last week, the Ukrainian armed

forces have gone on the offensive.” Despite the September 21 agreement, the Ukrainian side “used heavy weaponry on the strategically decisive front east of the port city of Mariupol in particular and northwest of the rebel stronghold of Donetsk to a degree not seen for a long time.”

If pro-Russian fighters broke the ceasefire more frequently than the Ukrainians in the summer, this has been reversed since the beginning of the “disengagement,” writes the FAZ. Over the last three weeks, the Ukrainian side was clearly observed firing 1,030 times. “In contrast, there were only 79 clear violations on the side of fighters supported by Russia.”

The same is true in the use of heavy weapons and military vehicles, which disregards the lines of retreat determined in Minsk. Here the OSCE found 260 violations on the Ukrainian side, and only 82 on the pro-Russian side.

The parliament in Kiev has also not yet adopted the laws agreed upon in the 2015 Minsk peace agreement concerning the status of East Ukraine and the elections there, a prerequisite for the settlement of armed conflict. According to the FAZ, “the presumption exists that the Ukrainian side does not want peace because a prolonged war provides it with an excuse to delay the ‘political process’ in Donbass.”

In Berlin, Poroshenko, Putin, Merkel and Hollande finally agreed on a “road map” towards resuming implementation of the Minsk agreements. A corresponding timetable is to be worked out by the foreign ministers of the four countries by the end of November. This is nothing more than a nonbinding declaration of intent.

There was no agreement at all on the question of Syria. Putin communicated only that Russia and the Syrian government are ready under certain circumstances to extend an eleven-hour ceasefire announced for Thursday in Aleppo.



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