

France to host “peace summit” with Germany, Ukraine and Russia

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The Élysées Palace of French president Emmanuel Macron announced on Friday that “peace talks” in the so-called Normandy format—involving Berlin, Paris, Kiev and Moscow, but not the United States—will be held in Paris on December 9. The proclaimed aim of the talks is to advance a peaceful resolution of the five-year-long civil war in East Ukraine, which has claimed the lives of at least 13,000 people. The war was triggered by the US- and EU-backed coup in Kiev in February 2014 and has heavily involved Ukrainian fascist forces like the Azov Battalion who have been terrorizing and killing the civilian population in the East.

The announcement of the talks comes amidst growing tensions between US imperialism and the leading European imperialist powers, above all Germany and France, and an escalation of warfare within the US ruling class over an impeachment probe that centers on the White House withholding lethal aid for Ukraine’s war effort against Russian-backed separatists.

The announcement was preceded by months of negotiations. Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky was elected in April based on promises to end the five-year conflict in East Ukraine. After initially continuing the anti-Russia campaign of his predecessor, Zelensky agreed to a high-profile prisoner swap with Russia in September. Shortly thereafter, his government announced that it would accept the Steinmeier formula.

Named after the current German president, the formula is a vague set of propositions aimed at bolstering the Minsk agreement from 2015. It technically provides for limited autonomy for the Eastern Ukrainian territories with elections held under the supervision of the OSCE and Kiev.

Tens of thousands of far-right nationalists and war veterans have demonstrated against Zelensky’s adoption of the formula. When Zelensky initiated the withdrawal of troops in October, members of the fascist Azov Battalion

refused to follow his orders. The ceasefire has been violated several times in recent weeks.

Former president Petro Poroshenko, who is facing charges for corruption and high treason by this administration, denounced Zelensky’s decision as “treason.” Responding to the pressure from sections of the oligarchy and the US-backed far-right, prominent members of the Zelensky administration have since publicly posed with some of the country’s most notorious neo-Nazis.

The war is extremely unpopular in the Ukrainian population and Zelensky’s promises to end it were a central factor contributing to his electoral victory in April. Beyond the at least 13,000 who have been killed, an estimated 30,000 people have been wounded, 1.4 million people have been displaced and 3.5 million are considered in need of humanitarian assistance. Austerity measures implemented since 2014 have pushed living standards in the country down to levels of a Third World nation. In 2018, the Ukrainian population’s net wealth was below that of the population in countries like Nepal, Kenya, Bangladesh and Cameroon and only slightly higher than in war-torn countries like Syria and Mali.

Polls have repeatedly shown that the majority of the population seeks an end to the war and is most concerned by the widespread poverty and ongoing economic crisis. A recent government-conducted poll in the Donbass, the region in East Ukraine where the two separatist self-declared “republics” of Luhansk and Donetsk are located, found that the overwhelming majority of respondents prefer being integrated into the Russian Federation. Respondents overwhelmingly blamed the US and EU for the war, and opposed integration with the EU and NATO.

Zelensky’s primary motivation for the summit, however, is his determination to have his hands free to implement the most far-reaching privatization program since the restoration of capitalism in the 1990s against

opposition within the working class. The other major factor is his attempts to maneuver between the European powers and the United States.

The outcome of the talks remains highly uncertain. The Kremlin has been noticeably reluctant to publicize the negotiations or to present them as a major step toward a resolution of the conflict. Recent weeks have seen a series of mutual recriminations between Moscow and Kiev with each side accusing the other of trying to sabotage the talks.

The Ukrainian oligarchy is torn over its foreign policy orientation, with all factions vying for the allegiance of the country's violent far-right. These conflicts in the Ukraine elite are closely bound up with the growing tensions between Ukraine's imperialist backers, above all the US, France and Germany. Zelensky's endorsement of the Normandy talk format is widely regarded as a concession to Paris and Berlin.

France and especially Germany are important economic allies of Ukraine and have escalated their involvement in the country's affairs since 2014. However, geopolitical tensions with Germany, in particular, continue to run high over the Russian-German pipeline Nord Stream, which the Ukrainian oligarchy, including the Zelensky administration, bitterly opposes.

The US remains by far the most important military ally of Ukraine. In Washington, the impeachment proceedings against Trump focus on his allegedly withholding military aid from the Kiev government. The anti-Trump campaign by the Democratic Party and military-intelligence agencies in recent years has focused on whipping up hysteria over Russia and accuses Trump of not pursuing a sufficiently aggressive course against Russia. A substantial faction of the Ukrainian oligarchy is still primarily oriented toward the alliance with US imperialism and seeks to further bolster Ukraine's role as a critical military front in the US-led war preparations against Russia.

The warfare in the American ruling class over foreign policy and increasing clashes with the interests of US imperialism in both the Middle East and Europe have also provoked heated discussions in Paris and Berlin about their foreign policy orientation. The French president Macron has been pushing for the Normandy talks, in particular. The decision to host the summit in Paris is, in many respects, a demonstrative move, aimed to underscore the ambitions of French imperialism to play a leading role in Eastern Europe and Europe as a whole under conditions of growing transatlantic tensions.

In recent months, Macron, who had met with Zelensky before the latter was even elected as president, has undertaken several steps aimed at improving relations with Russian president Vladimir Putin while publicly questioning the viability of NATO. Most recently, he gave an interview to the *Economist* in which he described NATO as "brain dead" and warned of another world war, especially in light of the reorientation of US foreign policy. In this context he urged that "If we want to...rebuild European strategic autonomy, we must reconsider our position towards Russia."

Echoing the concerns of the French president, a recent paper by the leading German think tank *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik* (SWP) discusses the potential disintegration of NATO. Stressing that the security of Germany was still primarily dependent upon NATO, the paper warns that "the changes in US policy and lack of clarity about future developments" constitute "by far the greatest endurance test for the cohesiveness of the alliance."

Pointing to growing divisions over policies toward both Russia and China, the SWP warns: "These internal differences [within NATO] harbor considerable potential for conflict. The greatest risk is the formation of groups (bilateralization and fragmentation), an (unintended) break with the US and, hence, a weakening of NATO." Implicitly warning of another inter-imperialist war, pitting Germany against the US, the think tank evaluated three potential scenarios for the future development of NATO: NATO's "Europeanization" with only a subordinate role played by the US; a continuation of the status quo with a stronger role played by Germany and ongoing political conflicts with the US; and a total break-up of the alliance and fragmentation of Europe. For all scenarios, the think tank, which has played a leading role in pushing for the remilitarization of Germany in recent years, urges a more rapid build-up of the German army.



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