

Peace negotiations stall as ceasefire begins to fall apart in Ukraine

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Negotiations to end the over-six-year-long civil war in eastern Ukraine have stalled as the longest ceasefire in the civil war's history has begun to fall apart after the killing of a Ukrainian soldier last week.

Meeting in Berlin last Friday, political advisors from the “Normandy Format” discussions involving Germany, France, Russia and Ukraine failed to achieve any significant steps forward in the ongoing negotiations.

The last meeting between all four heads of state—Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, Russian President Vladimir Putin, French President Emmanuel Macron, and German Chancellor Angela Merkel—took place in December 2019 amid much public fanfare but failed to make any significant agreements other than to meet again at some time in the future.

Over nine months later, the four heads of state have failed to schedule a follow-up meeting after a planned summit in March of this year was cancelled due to the COVID-19 epidemic.

The Ukrainian government had stated prior to Friday's meeting that it expected another summit of the countries' leaders would subsequently be scheduled, but according to Russia's envoy Dmitriy Kozak the prospect for another major “Normandy Four” event was not even discussed. The four sides failed to even schedule another meeting between their countries' present advisors.

Last Friday's meeting had already been postponed several times due to the supposed unavailability of the French advisor to attend. Speaking to the *New York Times* in weeks prior to the meeting, a German advisor said its status was “up in the air” suggesting that the major European imperialist powers Germany and France have little interest in the Ukrainian crisis as they ratchet up an anti-Russia campaign in their own countries over the Navalny case and Belarus.

Independently of France and Germany, Ukraine and Russia agreed to continue a negotiated ceasefire that first

began on July 27 despite back-and-forth accusations of violations in early September.

According to the Ukrainian military, Russian-backed separatists opened fire on government forces in several incidents last week, killing one Ukrainian soldier and wounding another.

Representatives of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) in turn claimed that Ukrainian forces had opened fire on the republic six times between September 2 and 15 and accused the Ukrainian side of carrying out “offensive operations” which are prohibited under the cease-fire's terms.

Negotiations between representatives from Russia, Ukraine and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)—known as the Trilateral Contact Group—were held throughout August but likewise failed to achieve any major agreements. The main sticking points have been the offering of special autonomous status and local elections independent of Kiev. Both points are vociferously and violently opposed by Ukraine's far-right.

Within the Ukrainian ruling class there has been significant disagreement over these issues. In August, Ukraine's deputy representative in the Trilateral Contact Group negotiations, Vitold Fokin, stated that he believed the war would end once Ukraine offered special status to Donetsk and Lugansk and offered amnesty to separatists.

Speaking with news website *Strana*, Fokin stated, “Another important question is about pardon. On both sides, many crimes have been committed that should ultimately be investigated, and let the perpetrators be prosecuted. But today, in order to end the war and save the lives of soldiers and commanders, my position is to declare general pardon, hold elections, resolve the issue of the special status of certain regions, and best of all, the entire Donbass.”

Fokin's comments were quickly denounced as treason

by the country's far-right and Kiev officials. Notably Ukraine's Interior Minister Arsen Avakov, who is known for his ties to the far-right Azov Battalion, stated "None of our soldiers should die because of awkward political gambling. Therefore, the statement by Ukraine's representative to the TCG Vitold Fokin about a general amnesty and a special status for the entire territory of Donbas is provocative and does not correspond to national interests. We should remember that thousands of our soldiers died for every piece of Ukrainian land in Donbass."

The Ukrainian government later released an official statement calling Fokin's words "not the official position of the Ukrainian government."

The failure to achieve any significant gains in peace negotiations takes place as support for Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky continues to erode. Zelensky, who was elected largely on misplaced hopes that he offered an alternative to the rabid war-mongering nationalism of his predecessor Petro Poroshenko, has so far made little progress in achieving peace in eastern Ukraine.

Subsequently, recent polls conducted within Ukraine suggest that Zelensky's support has fallen precipitously after winning the presidency in April 2019 with 73 percent of the vote. According to polls conducted in June by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, just 38 percent of Ukrainians now support Zelensky's presidency. Another poll conducted by Ukraine's Razumkov Center in July found that if presidential elections were held, Zelensky would be supported by just 34.6 percent of voters in an initial election. Furthermore, second place would go to the leader of the Opposition Platform – For Life party led by Yuri Boyko which favors reviving relations with Russia and ending the war by negotiating directly with the break-away regions of Luhansk and Donetsk.

The newly founded party of popular video blogger Anatolity Shariy has also gained noticeable support, receiving 3.7 percent of a potential vote in recent polls. There are fears that Shariy, who has over 2.3 million subscribers on Youtube, could tear away support from Zelensky particularly among younger voters with whom he is popular. Shariy is critical of the right-wing orientation of the Ukrainian government and like the Opposition Platform—For Life party supports an end to the war in eastern Ukraine.

The rise in support for parties that favor a negotiated settlement with Russia has not gone unnoticed by

Ukraine's far-right groups. They have carried out a number of attacks on both members of Shariy's party and members of the Opposition Platform—For Life party.

In August, members of the Azov Battalion and affiliated National Corps carried out their most brazen attacks shooting a bus carrying 22 members of the Opposition Platform—For Life party in Kharkiv in broad daylight. After they critically injured several and kidnapped two more members of the Opposition Platform—For Life party, video of the attack spread widely on Ukrainian social media but went unreported in the Western mainstream press.

Following the incident, the Opposition Platform—For Life assigned blame for the attack on Zelensky stating, "This crime of the National Corps and Azov is a consequence of the impunity of the far-right radicals acting under the direct patronage and incitement of the authorities, including President Zelensky, who openly declares his support for their position."

Conversely, the infamous Azov leader Andriy Biletsky responded to questioning by stating that the Ukrainian government should award medals to the 14 men who were detained by police in the attack.

The over-six-year-long war that began in 2014 following the installation of far-right nationalist NATO-aligned government in Kiev has claimed the lives of over 13,000 and left 30,000 injured. In addition, the war has created 1.5 million internally displaced persons and a 2019 UNICEF report found that nearly half a million children in eastern Ukraine "face grave risks to their physical health and psychological well-being" as they attend bullet-ridden schools and walk through fields of land mines.

Despite the nationalist and far-right orientation of Ukraine's mainstream media, a recent poll found that 53 percent of Ukrainians believe that "all connections with people living in non-government-controlled areas in the east of the country, including transport connections," should be restored.



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