

Lavrov Has Harsh Words for EU

By [Matthew Bodner](#)

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Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov accused the European Union of trying to create a sphere of influence in Ukraine at a meeting with Germany's new foreign minister on Friday, as the political crisis that erupted in Kiev months ago continued to fester.

The meeting came after months of diplomatic wrangling between the U.S., the EU and Russia over Ukraine's uncertain future after President Viktor Yanukovich's U-turn on a trade deal sparked massive street protests and demands for his ouster.

Exasperation seemed evident on all sides at Friday's meeting, as Lavrov did not mince his words, telling Frank-Walter Steinmeier that the EU was playing a divisive geopolitical game that could damage Ukraine if not abandoned immediately.

While the two agreed that there should be no battles over territorial influence, Lavrov said that "pulling Ukraine to one side and telling it that it needs to choose either or — either with the EU or with Russia — is in fact trying to create such a sphere of influence."

"This is obvious and no nice words can change that," he said, RFE/RL reported.

Lavrov further criticized the EU, and the West in general, for imposing a choice on Ukrainians, under the pretext of freedom.

President Vladimir Putin offered a decidedly more optimistic statement to Steinmeier at a meeting on Friday, saying that Russia "welcomed steps toward economic convergence between the EU and Ukraine," Reuters reported, citing a source in the German delegation.

Meanwhile, perhaps in a sign that all sides are eager to end the crisis, German Chancellor Angela Merkel announced plans to meet with Ukrainian opposition leaders Vitaly Klitschko and Arseny Yatsenyuk in Berlin on Monday.

The meeting is expected to focus on the possibility of a power-sharing agreement between Yanukovich and the opposition.

Merkel's earlier planned meetings with Klitschko had been rescheduled due to "the complicated situation in Kiev," though Merkel did not refrain from warning Yanukovich against the use of force against protesters.

It is unclear how Merkel's visit will be perceived by Russian officials. Lavrov said in an article he wrote for Kommersant on Thursday that mediation in the Ukraine crisis should not be imposed on the country.

He slammed reassurances by the EU "that this [Association Agreement] project has no confrontational component," and is simply meant to help Eastern European nations with modernization and development. In practice, he said, this project "looks like another round of attempts" to expand to the East.

Since Russia has no intention of joining the EU, he said, such efforts to expand were pointless, and continued attempts will only infringe on existing CIS agreements.

"Our partners from the EU must fully take into account that a large-scale integration project is being implemented in the Eurasian space, which was initially built up taking into account the opportunities for its harmonization with integration processes within the EU, as a link between Europe and the Asia-Pacific region," Lavrov wrote.

Lavrov made it clear that Russia was prepared to mediate between the Ukrainian opposition and government in order to find a resolution to the ongoing crisis, as long as both sides requested Russia's involvement. Yet, "to impose mediation, as we are frequently observing from the side of other partners of Ukraine, is not something we intend. This should be a truly free choice," Lavrov said.

Steinmeier appeared to echo the sentiment expressed in Lavrov's article in an interview with Kommersant on Friday, denying the accusations of trying to carve out a sphere of influence.

"The citizens of Ukraine should be given the opportunity to determine the future of their country in a free election. But regardless of the path chosen by voters, one thing is clear: the future of Ukraine cannot be built on violence and extremism," he said.

Steinmeier also said Russia "has a valuable contribution to make" in resolving the Ukraine situation, and that it would be worth reflecting on the future economic integration of Russia, Europe and their common neighbors together.

"Here, much will depend on these common neighbors and, of course, on Germany, Russia, Poland, the Baltic states, and the entire membership of the EU," he said.

At a press conference following his talks with Steinmeier, Lavrov said that high level meetings between Russian, German, and Polish foreign ministers would take place in April.

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