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Putin Calls for Compromise in Ukraine

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President Vladimir Putin publicly expressed support Sunday for Ukraine's declaration of a cease-fire in its battle against pro-Russian separatists and called on both sides to negotiate a compromise.

On a day when Russia and Ukraine commemorated the millions who died during World War II, Putin said such a compromise must guarantee the rights of the Russian-speaking residents of eastern Ukraine, who must feel like they are "an integral part" of their own country. Putin's statement appeared to signal that he sees their future in Ukraine.

Separatists in the eastern Donetsk and Luhansk regions have declared independence and asked to join Russia. Moscow has rebuffed their appeals, but is seen by Ukraine and the West as actively supporting the insurgency. Putin's conciliatory words came as Russia began large-scale military exercises and after NATO accused Russia of moving troops back toward the Ukrainian border.

Putin appears determined to keep up the pressure to force the Kiev government to give the eastern industrial regions more powers and to prevent Ukraine from moving too close to the European Union or NATO. But he also wants to avoid more punishing sanctions from the U.S.

and particularly from the E.U., whose leaders will meet Friday in Brussels, and therefore needs to be seen as cooperating with efforts to de-escalate the conflict.

Putin discussed the cease-fire on Sunday with German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Francois Hollande, Merkel's office and the Kremlin said.

"After the Russian government too referred to the cease-fire in positive terms, the interlocutors emphasized the need for all sides to abide by it now and for a political dialogue to be put in motion," Merkel's office said in a statement. "Another topic of the conversation was the issue of securing the Ukrainian-Russian border."

In a statement issued by the Kremlin late Saturday, Putin welcomed Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko's decision to declare a cease-fire and called on "the opposing sides to halt any military activities and sit down at the negotiating table."

Putin's public comments Sunday, which followed ceremonies commemorating the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, were more specific.

In Kiev, Poroshenko called for peace, but urged his compatriots to stand strong and united. "It was so during the violent struggle with the Nazis and it should be the same now," he said in his address. "Facing a real threat, we must unite even more and secure our historical choice, defend our right to live freely on our land."

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