

Merkel Skeptical About Russia's Pledge to Pull Back Troops From Ukraine Border

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President Vladimir Putin's order to withdraw troops to their bases in southern Russia is a move towards easing the Ukraine crisis, but Moscow has made previous pledges which it has not fulfilled, German Chancellor Angela Merkel's spokesman said Monday.

The Kremlin said Sunday that Putin had ordered troops to go back to base after several months of military exercises in the Rostov region of southern Russia, near the border with Ukraine.

Ukraine and its Western allies have previously accused Russia of arming pro-Moscow separatists in eastern Ukraine and sending troops across the border to support them — charges that Russia has denied.

Putin and Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko are due to meet on the sidelines of a summit of Asian and European leaders in Milan on Oct. 16-17, and will also hold talks with Merkel and French President Francois Hollande.

"If this announcement and significant withdrawal of Russian troops from the border actually takes place, then this would be a step towards deescalation," Merkel's spokesman Steffen Seibert told a news conference in Berlin.

"But unfortunately we know from experience that there have been some cases before important international meetings where Russia made announcements which were then not upheld or only partially upheld. Actions alone are what counts."

He added Russia and the separatists still had further steps to take to meet the terms of a peace agreement to end the conflict in Ukraine, and there were no grounds for reconsidering Western sanctions against Moscow over its role in the crisis.

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