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Russia Says Pushing for Ukraine Peace Talks as Soon as Possible

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Russia is sparing no effort to convene another round of peace talks on the conflict in east Ukraine, Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich said Thursday, criticizing Kiev's reluctance to do so.

Kiev's envoy to the talks, which also bring together Moscow, pro-Russian separatists and the OSCE European watchdog, said on Wednesday that any fresh meeting was not viable as long as the rebels do not stop firing completely.

In September in Minsk, the four parties agreed a cease-fire in east Ukraine that has since been repeatedly violated, with more than 4,300 people killed in fighting since mid-April. The next round of Minsk talks was planned this week.

"Russia will dedicate the maximum effort to having a meeting of this group organized as soon as possible and bringing about positive results for further steps towards carrying out the Minsk agreements," Lukashevich told a news conference.

Lukashevich said he was "puzzled" by the Kiev envoy's comments, and that the separatists were very interested in holding the talks. He blamed Kiev for scrapping a teleconference on Wednesday to prepare the meeting.

The Russian spokesman said the new round of talks should focus on agreeing a demarcation line between the rival sides in east Ukraine and an exchange of prisoners.

The West accuses Russia of supporting the rebels with arms and of sending troops to destabilize Ukraine and stall its drive towards the European Union. Russia says it is not involved in the armed conflict, a position Lukashevich reiterated on Thursday.

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