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EU Says Russia Showing 'Some Signs' of New Approach on Ukraine

By The Moscow Times

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European Union High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini gestures at a news conference with Ukraine's President Petro Poroshenko (not pictured) in Kiev, Dec. 16, 2014.

RIGA — The European Union sees some signs of an easing in the Ukraine conflict and a more constructive approach from Russia to tackling issues like Syria, offering hope of a "new era" in relations with Moscow, the bloc's foreign policy chief said on Thursday.

Federica Mogherini said Ukraine had reported "limited but positive signs" from the east of the country, where more than 4,700 people have been killed since last April in fighting between the army and pro-Russian separatists.

She added that she had personally observed a more cooperative attitude from Moscow in dealings on other issues, including the Iranian nuclear negotiations and Syria.

"The situation on the ground is slightly better now than it was some weeks ago and according

to the Ukrainians there are some limited but important openings," she said. "I see directly there seems to be a different Russian attitude on other issues ... a definitely open and constructive way of working."

Mogherini said she hoped this was part of "a new era with regard to Russia," but added this was still to be seen.

Her upbeat comments contrasted with hawkish remarks from German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who said Europe could not consider lifting sanctions against Russia until all elements of a 12-point peace agreement between Ukraine and the rebels were fully implemented.

Russian Intentions

Latvian Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkevics will fly to Kiev on Friday and on to Moscow on Sunday in his capacity as chairman of the council of EU foreign ministers, to sound out what Mogherini called Russia's "real intentions" as EU leaders consider a possible summit meeting with President Vladimir Putin.

Rinkevics, who met Mogherini on Thursday in Riga, said he was going on a "reconnaissance mission." Talks with Russian officials last month had shown "some signals" of a new approach to the conflict, he said.

Mogherini said it was still unclear whether it would be worth holding a summit which Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko has proposed with Putin, Merkel and French President Francois Hollande in Kazakhstan.

Talks were continuing, she said, to see if a meeting, which Poroshenko proposed for Jan. 15 in Astana, could be held.

Mogherini said that the EU could lift economic sanctions in whole or in part depending on what it saw as Russia's compliance with a peace accord reached in September at Minsk — but added that further friction could also mean an increase in sanctions.

The measures were imposed to punish Moscow for its annexation of Ukraine's Crimean peninsula and what Western governments say is overwhelming evidence of Russia's backing for the separatists in eastern Ukraine.

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