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Latvia Says EU Will Lift Sanctions on Russia in Case of 'Real Progress'

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Ukrainian servicemen patrol an area near the eastern Ukrainian town of Debaltseve in Donetsk region.

The European Union will consider lifting sanctions on Russia over the Ukraine crisis only if there is "real progress" in implementing a four-month-old cease-fire deal, Latvia's foreign minister said Monday.

Edgars Rinkevics, whose country took over the EU's rotating presidency on Jan. 1, held talks in Moscow before a meeting of the German, French, Russian and Ukrainian foreign ministers scheduled in Berlin later on Monday.

"We think the sanctions imposed over east Ukraine can be lifted when we see not only agreements signed but real progress," Rinkevics told a news conference after meeting Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

"If we see real progress, the European Union will be ready to seriously consider easing or lifting the sanctions," Rinkevics said.

He said that he had heard ideas in Moscow that showed there was "potential to move forward" but that he could not rule out more EU sanctions if the cease-fire deal reached in the Belarussian capital Minsk were not implemented.

Kiev and Moscow blame each other for the failure to implement the Minsk agreement in a conflict in which more than 4,700 people have been killed since mid-April in east Ukraine, where pro-Russian separatists are fighting Ukraine's army.

Lavrov said he believed "artificial barriers" between Russia and the EU would be lifted, but did not say when he thought this might happen. Moscow, which denies arming the rebels, has imposed a retaliatory ban on food products from Western countries.

Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko has invited the leaders of Russia, France and Germany to talks in Kazakhstan's capital, Astana, on Thursday to try to restore peace.

However, Germany and France have raised doubts on whether such a four-way summit can take place without further progress on the Minsk peace plan, which was agreed in September.

President Vladimir Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, told Russian news agencies on Monday that the Astana meeting was not in the Kremlin leader's schedule.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel said last week that all 12 points in the Minsk Protocol had to be fully implemented before the EU could consider easing sanctions against Russia.

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