The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Putin Ready for Minsk Talks After Weekend Summit With Merkel, Hollande

February 08, 2015



President Vladimir Putin meeting with his Belarussian counterpart Alexander Lukashenko in Sochi on Sunday.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Sunday he planned to meet the leaders of Germany, France and Ukraine in Minsk on Wednesday if the sides moved closer to an agreement on implementing an unravelling 2014 peace deal for east Ukraine.

"Conversation with colleagues from Kiev, Berlin and Paris has just ended. We have agreed to try to organize a meeting of this same format in Minsk," Putin said during a meeting with Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko in Sochi.

"We will aim [to meet on] Wednesday if by then we have managed to agree our positions, which we have been discussing very intensively in recent days," Putin added.

French President Francois Hollande and Chancellor Angela Merkel met with Putin late Friday evening to discuss the Ukraine conflict.

The French and German leaders had held similar late talks the night before with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, part of a last-ditch push for a breakthrough before EU leaders consider new financial sanctions against Russia next week.

European officials had played down expectations ahead of the Moscow talks, expressing doubt that Putin would compromise while pro-Russian rebels are advancing on the ground.

Afterward, Moscow and Berlin both described a commitment to work on a "possible joint document" on restoring a collapsed peace deal signed last September in Minsk, Belarus. The document would include ideas proposed by the leaders of France, Germany, Russia and Ukraine, who would all speak in a conference call on Sunday.

But there was no public word of any agreement on the crucial issue of whether rebels would withdraw from territory they have seized since last year's truce collapsed.

In a sign of the tense atmosphere, the French and German leaders had gone straight into the Kremlin for the talks without the usual diplomatic niceties of a welcoming handshake for the cameras. They emerged only for a stiff photo opportunity.

On the ground, a brief truce was organized on Friday so trapped civilians could reach safety from Debaltseve, a government-held railway hub nearly encircled by rebel forces who have made it the target of their advance.

Both sides sent convoys of buses, giving residents a choice to evacuate to government or rebel territory. The government buses left full; the rebel buses left mostly empty.

"The last two weeks were hell," said Artem Nikishin, 31, boarding a bus to the government-held town of Slavyansk with his wife and two sons. "This is our property now," he said, pointing to several bags and a parcel wrapped in a blanket.

Ukraine's military said on Saturday that pro-Russian separatists had stepped up shelling of government forces and appeared to be amassing forces for new offensives on Debaltseve and the coastal city of Mariupol.

The West accuses Russia of backing an advance in recent weeks by rebels fighting for territory Putin has called Novorossia, which scuppered the cease-fire agreed last September, reviving a conflict that has killed more than 5,000 people.

Moscow denies it is involved.

Meanwhile, Washington began openly hinting last week that it could arm Ukraine's military, exposing a potential rift with its main European allies, which argue the move would backfire by escalating the conflict without giving Ukraine the means to win.

Merkel warned on Saturday that sending arms to help Ukraine fight pro-Russian separatists would not solve the crisis there, drawing a sharp rebuke from a leading U.S. senator who accused Berlin of turning its back on an ally in distress.

The heated exchange at a security conference in Munich pointed to the fragility of the transatlantic consensus on how to confront Putin over the conflict.

European officials say the Russian leader may have little incentive to negotiate now, preferring to sit back and watch the separatists make territorial gains in Ukraine that have made a mockery of a prior cease-fire agreement clinched last September in Minsk, Belarus.

The German leader conceded in Munich, after returning home from Moscow, that it was uncertain whether the Franco-German peace plan presented to Kiev and Moscow this week would succeed.

But she flatly rejected the idea that sending weapons to Kiev, an idea being considered by U.S. President Barack Obama, would help resolve the conflict.

"I understand the debate but I believe that more weapons will not lead to the progress Ukraine needs. I really doubt that," said the conservative German leader, who has led a Western initiative to resolve the crisis through negotiations.

"The problem is that I can't envision any situation in which a better-equipped Ukraine military would convince President Putin that he could lose militarily," Merkel added.

Speaking after Merkel, U.S. Senator Lindsey Graham, a Republican hawk, praised the chancellor for her engagement in the crisis but said it was time for her to wake up to the reality of what he called Moscow's aggressions.

"At the end of the day, to our European friends, this is not working. You can go to Moscow until you turn blue in the face. Stand up to what is clearly a lie and a danger," Graham said.

He accused Merkel of turning her back on a struggling democracy by rejecting Kiev's request for arms. "That is exactly what you are doing," he said.

Hollande, speaking to reporters in the city of Tulle in central France, cast the talks with Putin as a last-ditch effort to avert full-blown war.

"If we don't manage to find not just a compromise but a lasting peace agreement, we know perfectly well what the scenario will be. It has a name, it's called war," he said.

In a further sign of cracks in the Western approach towards Russia, NATO's top military commander, U.S. Air Force General Philip Breedlove, signaled that he now wants the alliance to consider sending weapons to Ukraine.

"I don't think we should preclude out of hand the possibility of the military option," Breedlove told reporters, adding that he was referring to weapons or capabilities and that there was "no conversation about boots on the ground."

After her speech, Merkel held three-way talks with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko and U.S. Vice President Joe Biden. She is due to fly to Washington on Sunday to meet Obama.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2015/02/08/putin-ready-for-minsk-talks-after-weekend-summit-with-merkel-hollande-a43655