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Putin Says Kiev on 'Dead End Track' With Policy in Eastern Ukraine

By The Moscow Times

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Members of the Ukrainian armed forces ride on an armoured personnel carrier (APC) near Debaltseve, eastern Ukraine, Feb. 8, 2015.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said Kiev must stop its military operation in east Ukraine and cease exerting economic pressure on rebel-held regions, warning that it was on a "dead-end track fraught with ... catastrophe."

In a newspaper interview before a planned summit with the leaders of France and Germany in Minsk on Wednesday, Putin showed no sign of softening his stance over the Ukraine crisis.

"The most important condition for the stabilization of the situation is immediate cease-fire and ending of the so-called 'anti-terrorist', but in fact punitive, operation in the south-east of Ukraine," Putin told Egyptian state newspaper Al-Ahram on the eve of a two-day trip to Cairo, according to an English transcript provided by the Kremlin.

"Kiev's attempts to exert economic pressure on Donbas [region of east Ukraine] and disrupt its daily life only aggravate the situation. This is a dead-end track, fraught with a big catastrophe," he said.

The West says Moscow is driving the rebellion, providing weapons and well-trained troops. Moscow says Russians fighting Kiev troops in east Ukraine are volunteers and denies arming the rebels.

In his interview, Putin reiterated Moscow's line that the violence in east Ukraine was a reaction to a Western-supported "coup" in which protesters overthrew Moscow-ally Viktor Yanukovych from the presidency in Kiev last year.

"The ultranationalists who seized the power using military force put the country on the edge of disruption and started the fratricidal war," he said.

Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin will travel to Berlin on Monday and representatives of Russia, Ukraine, the rebels and the OSCE security watchdog are due to meet in Minsk on Tuesday before the leaders' summit the next day.

Putin has said the summit on Wednesday would take place "if by then we have managed to agree our positions."

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