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German Foreign Minister: G7 Should Welcome Russia Back Longer Term

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Germany's Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier visits a local high school in the southern Israeli town of Sderot, near the border with Gaza June 1, 2015.

BERLIN — German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier said Thursday that the Group of Seven industrialized nations should welcome back Russia in the longer term, striking a different tone from Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Speaking after meeting his Ukrainian counterpart Pavlo Klimkin three days before a G7 summit in Bavaria, Steinmeier said excluding Russia over its actions in Ukraine was a necessary step but not a goal in itself.

The G7 members — Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and the United States — brought Russia into their exclusive club in 1998 but suspended its membership last year after Moscow annexed Crimea.

Their June 7-8 summit will cover foreign policy issues including Ukraine, where President Petro Poroshenko told his military on Thursday to prepare for a possible "full-scale invasion"

by Russia after the worst fighting in months with Russian-backed separatists in the country's east.

"I believe that we cannot have an interest in keeping the G7 format a G7 format in the long term," Steinmeier, whose Social Democrats (SPD) rule in coalition with Chancellor Merkel's conservatives, told journalists.

"A look at the world shows that we need Russia as a constructive partner in a number of conflicts," he said, citing the Middle East.

Merkel, who grew up in communist East Germany, has struck a tougher tone towards Russia. In an interview with broadcaster RTL, she said the G7 nations shared common values about democracy.

"It is exactly that group that should sit at the table," she said. Merkel said it was a loss not to have Russia at the table, but its violations of Europe's post-war peaceful order made this unavoidable.

At their news conference, Klimkin asked that the G7 send "simple and clear messages to Russia." He and Steinmeier condemned the recent upsurge in violence in eastern Ukraine.

"We must avoid falling back into a situation with the old escalation and must ensure that the entire Minsk [cease-fire] process does not derail," said Steinmeier.

"That's why we expect all sides, especially the separatists responsible for the violation of the ceasefire last night, to return to the Minsk deal," he said.

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