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Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy, French President Emmanuel Macron, Russian President Vladimir Putin and German Chancellor Angela Merkel at the Elysee Palace, on December 9, 2019 in Paris | Christophe Petit Tesson/Pool/AFP via Getty Images

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Normandy talks land in Paris but fail to deliver peace in Ukraine
Macron hails ‘relaunch’ and Merkel cites ‘regained momentum’ as leaders recommit to ceasefire.

*Нормандська розмова в Парижі не зможе досягти миру в Україні
Макрон вітає "відновлення", а Меркель заявляє про "відновлення обертів" та
рекомендують припинити вогонь*

Можливо, було поганою ідеєю називати мирні переговори на честь Нормандії, регіону, відомому кровопролитними битвами Другої світової війни, в яких загинули десятки тисяч солдатів. Лідери Франції, Німеччини, Росії та України зібралися у Парижі у такому «нормандському форматі», створеному для вирішення воєнного конфлікту на сході України - першої зустрічі на найвищому рівні з жовтня 2016 року. Вони не просунулись достатньо далеко, аби президент Франції Емманюель Макрон і канцлер Німеччини Ангела Меркель рекомендували відмінити економічні санкції проти Росії. Для змученої війною української громадськості, виснаженої роздробленням своєї країни і чотирма роками жорстокого насильства, в якому загинуло понад 13 000 чоловік, паризька зустріч, ймовірно, буде ще більшим розчаруванням. Вона не принесла того прориву, на який багато хто сподівався - угоду про розширення зони припинення вогню і конкретне зобов'язання Росії роззброїти бойовиків, яким Кремль надає зброю, гроші, матеріально-технічну та політичну підтримку.

Новий Президент України Володимир Зеленський не приховував свого розчарування. «Для мене цього недостатньо, - сказав він після закінчення переговорів. - Мені б хотілося вирішити більше питань».

<https://www.politico.eu/article/normandy-talks-land-in-paris-but-fail-to-deliver-peace-in-ukraine/>

PARIS — In hindsight, maybe it was a bad idea to name peace talks after Normandy, a region known for blood-soaked World War II battles in which tens of thousands of soldiers died.

The leaders of France, Germany, Russia and Ukraine met in Paris Monday in the so-called Normandy Format aimed at ending the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine — the first top-level gathering since October 2016.

They did not get very far — certainly not far enough for French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel to recommend ending economic sanctions against Russia when they report back to their fellow EU leaders at a European Council on Thursday in Brussels.

For the war-weary Ukrainian public, exhausted by the fracturing of their country and four years of grinding violence, in which more than 13,000 people have died, the Paris meeting was likely to be even more disappointing.

It did not yield the breakthrough many had been hoping for — an immediate agreement to an expanded ceasefire zone and a concrete commitment by Russia to disarm the militants the Kremlin has provided with weapons, money and logistical and political support.

After roughly five hours of discussions, the sum total of their efforts seemed to be a better grasp of just how distant they remain from full implementation of the Minsk II peace accord.

Nor did the meeting provide any resolution of another fierce dispute between Russia and Ukraine, over the natural gas transit contract that expires on December 31.

Ukraine's new president, the comedian and actor Volodymyr Zelenskiy, did not hide his own disappointment. "It's not enough for me," he said at the close of the talks. "I would have liked to resolve more issues."

After roughly five hours of discussions, the sum total of their efforts seemed to be a better grasp of just how distant they remain from full implementation of the Minsk II peace accord, which was agreed at a similar four-leader meeting in Belarus in February 2015 but never seriously pursued by Moscow or Kyiv, nor pushed very hard by Paris or Berlin.

In a meager set of conclusions that didn't even fill two pages — despite being published in large font — the leaders recommitted themselves to an existing ceasefire that is violated hundreds of times on a daily basis, according to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's [Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine](#).



Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy | Genya Savilov/AFP via Getty Images

They also agreed to work on three new areas for troop withdrawals, with a goal of completing the pull-backs by the end of March, and to continue de-mining efforts. In perhaps their most concrete steps, they called for opening new crossing points along the line of contact within 30 days, and to work toward a new prisoner exchange by the end of this year — "the release and exchange of conflict-related detainees ... on the principle of 'all for all.'"

But there was no meeting of the minds on the most difficult issues — specifically on when, if ever, Ukraine might regain control of its border with Russia, or how to proceed with plans for special political status for the war-torn Donetsk and Luhansk regions, and when and how to call local elections.

'Totally opposing views'

At a closing press conference that started shortly before midnight, Zelenskiy and Russian President Vladimir Putin, who met face to face for the very first time on Monday, clashed openly over the issue of border control and on the question of local elections.

"We have totally opposing views with the Russian Federation president," Zelenskiy said, adding: "For now we are not in agreement ... We're not talking about a summit in four months for nothing. I think we are obliged to find a solution otherwise we cannot move forward."

Putin said, "On the border, we have totally divergent positions."

Still, the leaders insisted the talks were fruitful and would lead to swifter and more concrete progress in the weeks and months ahead.

Macron, the host of Monday's meeting at the Elysée Palace, called the session "a credible relaunch — which wasn't a given."



François Hollande and Petro Poroshenko | Thierry Chesnot/Getty Images

Merkel pronounced herself satisfied. "There is still a lot of work to be done," she said. "But I feel there is goodwill to resolve the difficult issues ... I'm satisfied with the meeting." She added: "We regained momentum today."

It was hard not to gain momentum after a long standstill.

Back in 2015, it was a different quartet, with François Hollande and Petro Poroshenko then the presidents of France and Ukraine, who along with Merkel and Putin laid out a 13-point peace plan. The accord called for an "immediate and comprehensive ceasefire" in the embattled Donetsk and Luhansk regions, a withdrawal of heavy weapons and pullback of forces, followed by a political dialogue leading to special status for those regions and ultimately a calling of local elections. Virtually none of it happened.

And after Monday's meeting it appeared likely that it will take at least several more months for any serious advances.

Bridging the gaps

Given that Macron and Zelenskiy were attending their first Normandy Format meeting, it was perhaps some measure of progress for the leaders to leave with a clearer sense of the gaps.

In the days leading up to the talks, French officials had suggested that simply being able to gather the four leaders together after more than three years represented a small victory.

And they worked hard to put a positive spin on recent events, including Russia's return of three Ukrainian naval vessels that it had seized in the Kerch Strait, its release of sailors who were imprisoned and jailed in Russia, and also an exchange of prisoners between Kyiv and Moscow in early September. Even the disengagement process represented only inches of forward progress: Ukrainian and Russian negotiators first agreed to the pull-outs in September 2016.

Perhaps the most encouraging developments in recent months occurred in three "disengagement" zones that have seen a withdrawal of forces and weapons by both sides in the towns of Stanytsya Luhanska and Zolote in Luhansk and Petrovske in the Donetsk region. Late last month, Zelenskiy even reopened a pedestrian bridge near Stanytsya Luhanska connecting Russian-occupied and Ukrainian-controlled territories.

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The EU has voiced steadfast support of Ukraine since Russia's invasion and annexation of Ukraine's Crimean peninsula in 2014.

But the ongoing conflict is likely to prove a stubborn challenge for the new EU leadership, particularly European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, who has said she wants the bloc to be more assertive on the world stage, yet begins her term confronting the reality that for half a decade now, European powers have been unable to end a war on their own continent.

Mano-a-mano

Still, in at least one sense, the gathering represented a historical marker: the first face-to-face encounter between Putin, the former KGB operative who has led Russia for two decades, and Zelenskiy, the actor who played a president on a popular television show right up until he ran for president in real life. Zelenskiy had said he wanted to use the meeting to take the measure of his Russian counterpart up close, by looking him in the eye.

"We spoke to the president of the Russian Federation," Zelenskiy said last week, appearing on popular news talk-show "Free Speech with Savik Shuster." "But this was a telephone conversation," he added. "I want to see the person and I want to bring from Normandy the understanding and the feeling that really everyone wants to gradually end this tragic war. I'll be able to understand exactly that at the table."

And, indeed, Zelenskiy got to experience firsthand the Russian president's unflinching and unapologetic view about Russia's role in the internal affairs of Ukraine — a level of meddling that Putin would never tolerate within Russia.

The Ukrainian president for his part seemed intent on reassuring his voters back home that he was not surrendering any principles or any of his country's sovereignty.

At one point during the news conference Putin calmly described his insistence on change to the Ukrainian constitution.

"First of all, we are talking about introducing amendments to the constitution of the country, fixing the special status of Donbass on an ongoing basis," Putin said. "Of course, it is necessary to extend the validity of the agreement on the special status of certain regions of Donbass and, ultimately, to give this norm a permanent character."

In effect, what Putin is demanding is to enshrine Donetsk and Luhansk as permanent breakaway republics, with political autonomy from Kyiv — and his remarks drew an evident smirk from Zelenskiy. The Ukrainian president for his part seemed intent on reassuring his voters back home that he was not surrendering any principles or any of his country's sovereignty. Other Ukrainian officials in Paris were

quick to tell journalists that Zelenskiy had held firm in the face of Putin's demands and refused to back away from his own insistence that Ukraine regain control over its own territory.

"I insisted on the necessity of Ukraine to restore its control on all the territory," Zelenskiy said at the closing news conference.

He also said that he would not agree to local elections unless they took place in accordance with Ukrainian law, as called for in the original Minsk peace accord. "I insisted that elections could only take place according to Ukrainian legislation," he said.

Symbolic end

For Macron, the summit was a continuation of his recent efforts to expand France's role as a diplomatic powerbroker on the world stage, and specifically to pursue his efforts at a broader rapprochement with Moscow. Macron has also sought to take the lead in easing tensions between the U.S. and Iran, and forcing tough conversations at NATO about the alliance's purpose and cohesion.

Monday's talks — and their relatively thin yield — were also the latest illustration for Macron of just how difficult it is to untie some of the world's tightest geopolitical knots.

The Normandy Format got its name after an initial meeting between Poroshenko, Putin, Merkel and Hollande took place in June 2014 on the sidelines of ceremony to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Allied D-Day landings in World War II.

Aside from the bloody history at Normandy that perhaps lends a macabre specter to the peace negotiations, France and Germany might also have taken note of Russia's view that the D-Day landings were not particularly important.

In a statement last June, Maria Zakharova, the spokeswoman of the Russian foreign ministry, said: "The Normandy landings were not a game-changer for the outcome of WWII and the Great Patriotic War.

The outcome was determined by the Red Army's victories — mainly, in Stalingrad and Kursk. For three years, the U.K. and then the U.S. dragged out opening the second front."

It was yet another example of how Russia and the West can look at the same events and see completely different realities.