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Ukraine crisis: Francois Hollande and Angela Merkel make desperate attempt to convince the two sides to accept a political solution

Криза в Україні: Франсуа Олланд та Ангела Меркель зробили відчайдушну спробу переконати обидві сторони прийняти політичне рішення

Лідери Німеччини та Франції намагаються переконати російського президента прийняти новий план по мирному врегулюванню кризи в Україні. Вони висловлюють глибоку стурбованість ескалацією бойових дій на сході України, які тривають вже майже рік і мають негативний вплив на країни Європи. Франсуа Олланд сказав, що франко-німецький план буде ґрунтуватися на територіальній цілісності України та вимог припинення вогню з обох сторін.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/ukraine-crisis-hollande-and-merkel-in-ukraine-peace-mission-10025495.html?origin=internalSearch>



The leaders of Germany and France will try to convince Russia's President Vladimir Putin to accept a new peace plan for Ukraine today, in a desperate search for a political solution to a war spiralling out of control on the European Union's doorstep.

The surprise joint mission by Chancellor Angela Merkel and President François Hollande signals deep concerns in EU capitals that the escalation of fighting in Ukraine marks a dangerous new phase of a conflict which has damaged ties with Russia and had an adverse impact on some EU economies.

It also marks a widening gap in transatlantic approaches to Russia's apparent backing of the separatists who have been waging an insurgency in eastern Ukraine for nearly a year. In Kiev, the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, warned that the US "cannot close [its] eyes to tanks that are crossing the border", and underscored that the Obama administration was close to a decision on sending arms to the Ukrainian government.

EU leaders, mindful of their close economic and trade ties to Moscow, have been more cautious and made repeated attempts to broker ceasefires. The two leaders flew first to Kiev today to seek the Ukrainian president's support for the plan, before flying to Moscow for talks with the Russian leader on Friday.

Mr Hollande said the Franco-German plan would be based on the “territorial integrity” of Ukraine and would require a lasting ceasefire. It is understood to be based on a nine-point plan originally presented by Mr Putin, which Ms Merkel and Mr Hollande have adapted to include points raised in other peace plans, such as more autonomy for some eastern areas.

It is also believed to include recognition of language rights for Russian speakers in the whole of Ukraine; recognition of Kiev’s overall authority by the rebels; and Russian acceptance of a monitoring force to prevent further movement of troops or weapons across the border from Russia.

Mr Hollande said that France was “opposed to Ukraine joining Nato”, one of Russia’s fears, and some guarantee along those lines may also be part of the plan.

The latest initiative by the EU’s foreign policy heavyweights comes after a peace plan agreed in Minsk, the Belarus capital, last September fell apart. A tenuous ceasefire held for a while but in recent weeks rebels have resumed their offensive and dozens of civilians have been killed.

“In Ukraine it is now war,” Mr Hollande said. “Heavy weapons are being used. Civilians are dying. No one will be able to say that France and Germany didn’t try everything possible [to stop the fighting].”

Western nations were confronted with two options, he said: arming the Ukrainians to help them confront the “separatists armed by Moscow” or making a final attempt at diplomacy.

Mr Hollande made clear, however, that there would be further consequences for Russia if it did not commit to a new solution to end the war in Ukraine, which has killed more than 5,000 people. Negotiations “cannot go on indefinitely”, he warned.

Both France and Germany have long-standing trade ties with Moscow. While this has made them more cautious about imposing economic sanctions against Russia, it does give them more clout with Mr Putin.

Moscow welcomed the initiative, with Mr Putin’s adviser Yuri Ushakov saying Russia was “ready for a constructive conversation”. Russia denies that it is arming the rebels or sending troops to eastern Ukraine, despite a dossier of Nato evidence.

Previous peace plans have apparently been agreed by Moscow, only for it to resume combative rhetoric within weeks. EU sanctions have hit Russia’s economy, but they have also had knock-on effects in the EU itself.

The US has taken a harder line, with Ashton Carter, the new nominee for Defence Secretary, telling Congress this week that “we need to support the Ukrainians in defending themselves”. Most European leaders are against this.

The German Defence Minister, Ursula von der Leyen, said at a Nato meeting in Brussels that it was necessary to “find a solution at the table and not on the [battle]field, because to give input to a potential escalation is not a good solution”.

The US is not involved in the new peace initiative and Mr Kerry has no plans to travel to Moscow. In Kiev, he repeated calls for Russia to back up words with actions. “We want a diplomatic solution but we cannot close our eyes to tanks crossing the border from Russia...into Ukraine,” he said.

“We cannot close our eyes to Russian fighters in unmarked uniforms crossing the border, and leading individual companies of so-called separatists in battle.”

Analysts were cautious about the initiative’s chances of success. Matthew Bryza, a former US diplomat now working for the Estonia-based International Centre for Defence Studies, said it sent the wrong signal just as Mr Putin faced internal pressure because of sanctions. “By meeting him, the

Western leaders play into Mr Putin's ridiculously false narrative that no price is too high for him to pay for continuing his hybrid war against Ukraine."