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Lukas I. Alpert

—Katya Gorchinskaya, Laurence Norman and Anton Troianovski contributed to this article.

Ukraine Government Representatives to Meet With Rebels Meeting Could at Least Temporarily Extend Cease-Fire

*Державні представники України зустрілися з повстанцями
Зустріч може хоча б тимчасово продовжити припинення вогню
Сепаратистські лідери та представники українського уряду погодилися на новий раунд
мирних переговорів. Спішно організована зустріч може принаймні тимчасово
продовжити хитке перемир'я. Президент Росії Володимир Путін закликав Україну
продовжити тиждневий термін припинення вогню, але український президент Петро
Порошенко, який висунув мирний план, попередив, що "буде дуже важко для нас"
продовжити перемир'я, якщо повстанці в Східній Україні не бажають йти ні на які
поступки.*

<http://online.wsj.com/articles/ukraine-president-says-tough-decision-looms-if-deal-with-separatists-isnt-reached-1403782384?KEYWORDS=Ukraine>



Ukraine's President Poroshenko told the Council of Europe in France on Thursday that deciding whether to continue the truce would be tough. Agence France-Presse/Getty Images

MOSCOW—Separatist leaders and Ukrainian government representatives agreed to a new round of peace negotiations to be held Friday, a hastily organized meeting that could at least temporarily extend a shaky truce set to end the same day.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has urged Ukraine to prolong its weeklong cease-fire, but Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, who is pushing a peace plan, warned Thursday it "would be very difficult for us" to continue if the rebels in eastern Ukraine were unwilling to make any concessions.

Rebel leaders came to the table for talks for the first time on Monday and agreed to join Ukraine's cease-fire. But both sides have accused the other of violating the truce and clashes between the pro-Russia separatists and government troops have continued.

Any significant extension of the deadline could buy the rebels time to consolidate their military position and better organize their leadership, potentially giving them more negotiating power. Mr. Poroshenko had repeatedly said the government wouldn't meet with anyone "with blood on their hands," raising questions about how negotiations would move forward.

Mr. Poroshenko said during a speech to the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, France that the rebels reached out to the government Thursday and said they were interested in more talks. Following his speech, a rebel leader and Kiev's representative, former President Leonid Kuchma, said they would be held Friday.

It was still not clear where the talks would happen and neither said what time they would be held. The truce is set to end at 10 a.m.

Before the meeting was announced, Mr. Poroshenko warned that Kiev would face a tough decision Friday morning.

"If the key elements of the peace plan are accepted by the separatists, it would give us hope, but if it is rejected, we will make a very important decision, a very tough decision tomorrow. I cannot tell you now what we will decide," he said in Strasbourg.

Russia's push for a cease-fire could also help it toward its goal of decentralizing power in Ukraine, which would give Russian-leaning regions more autonomy.

"[Russia] would like to freeze this conflict and preserve the status quo," said Volodymyr Fesenko, director of the Penta Center of Applied Political Studies in Kiev. "The tactic is to make them recognize these republics eventually, and for now they want to legitimize them via negotiations."

Ongoing talks would also likely further forestall the imposition of tougher sanctions from the West. The European Union is putting an effort to agree on a new round of sanctions during a Friday summit on the back burner after the rebels agreed to the cease-fire, and is expected to focus instead on how to push peace talks forward.

But German Chancellor Angela Merkel held out such penalties as an option since fighting hadn't stopped.

"Progress so far has not been as pronounced as I had hoped given the now seven days of cease-fire," she said "We will talk about to what extent we have to go further with sanctions or to what extent there's further progress." she said.

The fighting has cast strong doubts over whether a sustainable peace could be achieved. In all, 11 government soldiers have been killed since Monday, with nine dying when rebels shot down a government helicopter near the militant stronghold of Slovyansk. On Thursday, however, there were no reports of any serious fighting.

Russia received some support for the extension under certain conditions from Ms. Merkel, who spoke on the phone with Mr. Putin.

"The phone call centered on which concrete steps can be taken to make an extension of the cease-fire possible," a spokesman for Ms. Merkel said.

Mr. Poroshenko stressed that a peace deal could only be successful if Russia were to put pressure on the militants to lay down their arms, but that Moscow's efforts had so far been insufficient.

"We expected real steps from Mr. Putin and from Russia," he said.

Ukraine and the West have accused Russia of controlling the separatists and supplying them with weapons and fighters—a charge Moscow denies.

—Katya Gorchinskaya, Laurence Norman and Anton Troianovski contributed to this article.

Write to Lukas I. Alpert at lukas.alpert@wsj.com