



Recent Developments in the Russia-Ukraine Conflict

February 13, 2020

On January 31, 2020, U.S. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo met with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in Kyiv. The meeting occurred during the Senate's presidential impeachment trial and two months after the relaunch of international [talks](#) on resolving the conflict in eastern Ukraine. Pompeo [expressed](#) the United States' commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity and stated that the United States would continue to provide security assistance to Ukraine.

Pompeo also acknowledged Zelensky's efforts to invigorate a relatively dormant conflict-resolution process and reduce tensions around Russia-controlled areas of eastern Ukraine. It remains to be seen whether confidence-building efforts can lay the groundwork for discussions on thornier issues, including withdrawal of Russian forces and the legal status of Russia-controlled areas. New flare-ups of conflict also may overtake such efforts.

The United States supports Ukraine's efforts to pursue a diplomatic solution to the conflict. From 2017 to 2019, U.S. policy was directed mainly through the office of the Special Representative for Ukraine Negotiations. Ambassador Kurt Volker resigned from this position in September 2019 prior to the impeachment inquiry in the House of Representatives; the position remains unfilled.

Many Members of Congress condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine (including occupation of Ukraine's Crimea region), promote continued sanctions against Russia, and support aid to Ukraine. Members may consider whether and how to further support Ukraine's recent efforts to reduce tensions and promote conflict resolution.

Relaunching Talks with Russia

On December 9, 2019, Zelensky and Russian President Vladimir Putin met alongside German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron in what is known as the Normandy Four, a grouping that supports implementation of the [Minsk agreements](#), which structure efforts to resolve the conflict in eastern Ukraine.

Although Normandy Four officials have held regular meetings, leaders had not met as a group since 2016. After his April 2019 election, Zelensky sought to convene a Normandy leaders' summit, but Russia made such a meeting contingent on Ukraine's acceptance of the so-called Steinmeier formula, a previously

Congressional Research Service

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

IN11222

defunct proposal for implementing some of the Minsk agreements' political elements (see below). In addition, the Ukrainian and Russian governments agreed to first implement a withdrawal of armed forces and hardware within “disengagement areas” originally [agreed](#) in 2016 but never established. In another confidence-building measure, Ukraine and Russia [each freed](#) 35 detained individuals.

Results of Talks

Before the December 2019 Normandy meeting, some observers [expressed](#) concern that Zelensky might agree to measures that were not in Ukraine's interest, due to his lack of foreign policy experience, the perceived eagerness of French President Macron to restore relations with Russia, and diminished U.S. engagement after Special Representative Volker's resignation.

The Normandy talks did not lead to major new commitments. They mostly [produced](#) expressions of support for the implementation or extension of prior commitments and confidence-building measures, including

- a “full and comprehensive” cease-fire (which has not held);
- release of all conflict-related detainees;
- establishment of new disengagement areas;
- opening of new crossing points along the line of contact (adding to an existing five); and
- an updated demining plan.

The meeting also addressed contentious issues related to conflict settlement. First, the parties expressed “interest” in the legal development of a “special status” for Russia-controlled areas of eastern Ukraine. This status—which the Minsk agreements stipulate but most Ukrainians [appear](#) to oppose—is to provide the areas with special rights of local self-government. Ukraine has adopted and thrice extended a temporary [law](#) that establishes special status, but only after illegal armed formations withdraw from the areas and democratic local elections are held.

Second, the parties stated that they consider it “necessary” to incorporate the [Steinmeier formula](#) into Ukrainian law, although it remains unclear when or if Ukraine will do so. The formula [proposes](#) a nuanced sequencing for holding local elections in and granting special status to Russia-controlled areas. According to the formula, special status is to come into effect on a temporary basis at the close of local elections. If an election observation mission (headed by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe [OSCE]) concludes elections were held in accordance with OSCE standards and Ukrainian law, special status is to become permanent.

Many Ukrainians appear to oppose the Steinmeier formula, as they do special status more generally. In October 2019, the Ukrainian government's initial announcement that it would accept the Steinmeier formula was met with [protests](#). Ukrainian opponents of the formula express concern that Moscow will manipulate the process to entrench Russia-controlled regimes. Many are concerned that Russia will refuse to withdraw its forces from the region or restore control of the border to Ukraine after local elections are held. In response, Ukrainian officials have said Russia should return control of the border before local elections, although this would alter the order of steps in the Minsk agreements. To date, the Russian government has rejected this proposal.

One concrete result from the Normandy meeting was the release of more detainees on December 29, 2019. Russia's proxy authorities in eastern Ukraine released 76 individuals; the Ukrainian government released 124. The Ukrainian government has [estimated](#) that more than 200 Ukrainian prisoners remain in Russia-controlled areas of eastern Ukraine, the occupied Crimea region, and Russia. Talks on releasing detainees [continue](#).

Observers generally have welcomed the confidence-building measures agreed at the December 2019 meeting. Many, however, consider the meeting as only the start to a process that remains highly tenuous, especially as parties grapple with more contentious issues. The next Normandy summit is scheduled for April 2020.

Energy Agreement

Also in December 2019, Ukraine and Russia negotiated a contract for the continued transit of Russian natural gas through Ukraine to Europe. For years, Russia has sought to reduce its dependence on Ukraine for transit, an objective it has promoted through the construction of alternative pipelines (e.g., [Nord Stream 2](#) and [TurkStream](#)). The contract [provides](#) for the transit of 65 billion cubic meters (BCM) of natural gas in 2020, a volume equal to about 75% of the 2018 volume, and 40 BCM a year from 2021 to 2024. Many observers believe that in reducing its dependence on Ukraine for transit, Russia may become more aggressive in its policies toward Ukraine.

Author Information

Cory Welt
Specialist in European Affairs

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.