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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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20.12.2019

Russia, Ukraine to resume talks on energy following Paris summit

Following the Normandy Summit talks in Paris on December 5, Russia and Ukraine, along with the European Union (EU), resumed talks this week in attempts to strike a deal over the continuation of the transit of Russian through Ukraine to Europe.

Ukraine, with backing from the US and the European imperialist powers, is attempting to obtain a new ten-year deal with Russia's energy monopoly Gazprom. It seeks to avoid being cut off from Europe as a major gas-transit country as Russia moves towards completing its Nord Stream 2 pipeline by the spring of 2020. The pipeline will transport gas directly from St. Petersburg to Germany.



The Ukrainian delegation at the Paris summit. Behind Ukrainian president Zelensky stands Interior Minister Arsen Avakov

The current deal is scheduled to expire on December 31. Without an extension, both Ukraine and Europe could experience significant disruptions to gas supplies in the middle of winter. In 2018, Russia supplied the entire EU with more than 40 percent of its gas.

For its part, Ukraine receives over \$3 billion in Russian gas transit fees through its own energy giant, Naftogaz.

Earlier in November, Russia balked at any possibility of a long-term deal. Instead, it offered Naftogaz a mere one-year extension on the current deal and demanded that all legal claims against Gazprom, which currently total \$22 billion, be dropped. **United States sanctions against Nord Stream 2** are included in the massive \$738 billion 2020 National Defense Authorization Act that has passed the US House of Representatives and Senate, and could temporarily delay Nord Stream 2's completion. The US sanctions target not only Russia but also the German and European companies that are involved in the project.

The sanctions force Russia to fall back on a gas deal with Ukraine at least for the time being.

Revealing the shared imperialist interests underlying both major United States political parties, the legislation targeting the pipeline's completion has received bipartisan support, with Democratic Senator Jeanne Shaheen stating that it “sends an unmistakable, bipartisan message from Congress to Vladimir Putin that the United States will not sit idly by while the Kremlin seeks to further spread its malign influence.”

The National Defense Authorization Act also includes an additional \$300 million in defense spending to support Ukraine. **The Paris talks**, which were held under the Normandy Format that includes Germany and France along with Russia and Ukraine—but notably not the United States—were promoted as a means to resolve not only the gas crisis, but also an end the over six-year long civil war in eastern Ukraine. The war has claimed the lives of 14,000, displaced 1.4 million and left 3.5 million in need of humanitarian assistance.

While the talks were billed as a “win” or “draw” for Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in both the United States and Ukrainian corporate media, they in fact failed to solve any of the intractable problems of the conflict.

Zelensky, who was elected in April upon promises to end the widely despised war, essentially stuck to the dictates of the country's far right, which demanded that the separatist controlled Luhansk and Donetsk regions receive no special federal status and

that local elections not be held until all occupied territories and borders are back under the control of Ukrainian forces.

Days prior to the Paris meeting, far-right forces set up tents in front of the presidential offices in Kiev and prepared to storm government buildings if any of their “red lines” were crossed by Zelensky in negotiations with Russia. Following the conclusion of the talks, which changed essentially nothing, the tents came down and the far-right forces conceded that Zelensky had obeyed their demands, while threateningly stating that “our war continues.”

The country’s far right has been backed by the US for years and has played a critical role in both the US-EU-backed coup in February 2014 and the ensuing civil war in east Ukraine. Ukraine has received \$5 billion from the United States since 2014 and continues to receive 90 percent of its foreign military aid from Washington. A significant portion of this money has gone to support far-right forces like the Azov Battalion and the Right Sector. The US also explicitly voiced opposition to any softening of the line of Berlin and Paris toward Russia in advance of the Paris summit.

The far right and the US were further placated by the prominent inclusion in the talks of Ukraine’s Minister of Internal Affairs Arsen Avakov, who controls the country’s internal police forces and possesses well-known ties to Ukraine’s most notorious fascist militia, the Azov Battalion. Avakov also has ties to the factions of the US ruling class and state that seek to impeach Trump on a pro-war and anti-democratic basis over his attempts to pressure Ukrainian president Zelensky. He was mentioned positively by the US ambassador to Ukraine, Marie Yovanovitch, in her testimony in the congressional impeachment hearings.

Although as Interior Minister Avakov should theoretically have little to do with foreign policy, he was photographed in Zelensky’s entourage at the talks and gave interviews to well-known Ukrainian news outlets discussing the details of the talks and his impressions.

Following the talks, Avakov has taken on a much more public role in Ukrainian politics. Last week, he appeared on the 1+1 Ukrainian television station. Avakov stated that he foresaw police forces under his command being deployed to the separatist controlled regions and that local militias would have to be disbanded before any local elections.

Such a move would essentially amount to the establishment of martial law in Donetsk and Luhansk with Avakov as its leader and would most certainly never be accepted by

separatist forces that been fighting against the right-wing US-installed Kiev regime for over six years.

Since the talks, Zelensky likewise has demanded that the Minsk Agreements, which was signed in September 2014, be amended to stipulate that Ukraine gain control first over its border and the separatist regions before any local elections or federalization takes place.

Both Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel and Russian President Vladimir Putin supported the implementation of the Minsk Agreements as is at the Paris talks. This put them in direct opposition to both Zelensky and Ukraine's far-right forces which direct the country's foreign policy with Washington's blessings.

Responding to Ukraine's call to amend the agreement prior to the next scheduled Normandy Format meeting in March 2020, Russian representatives stated that Zelensky had simply "reiterated" the "unacceptable" ideas of former President Petro Poroshenko in Paris.

This week, Russian Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov also stated that any change to the Minsk Agreement regarding local elections should be discussed with the self-proclaimed Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics directly, and not with Russia.

19 December 2019