

Obama Pledges U.S. Aid After Meeting With Ukraine's Poroshenko

By [The Moscow Times](#)

June 04, 2014



U.S. President Barack Obama meets with Ukraine President-elect Petro Poroshenko in Warsaw.

WARSAW — U.S. President Barack Obama endorsed Ukraine's president-elect Petro Poroshenko on Wednesday, offering Kiev financial and security help and saying he was the right choice to lead the country through its stand-off with Moscow.

With the death toll mounting from fighting between Kiev's forces and pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine, Obama met Poroshenko for the first time since his election last month and said he was impressed with what he found.

"What Ukrainians said in the elections is that they reject that path. They reject violence," and want the opportunity to determine their own future, Obama told reporters after meeting Poroshenko in the Polish capital.

"That's the hope that President Poroshenko represents," Obama said. "In my discussions

with him today it is clear he understands the hopes and aspirations of the Ukrainian people."

Obama described Poroshenko as a "wise selection" by the Ukrainian people and said: "I have been deeply impressed by his vision."

Poroshenko, a billionaire confectionery magnate who now takes over a country in deep crisis, told reporters he was preparing to unveil a plan for "the peaceful resolution of the situation in the east" soon after his inauguration on Saturday.

He said a gathering of world leaders in Normandy, France, on Friday to mark the 75th anniversary of the World War II D-Day landings would be crucial for the plan.

Obama, Putin, and Poroshenko will all be at the Normandy commemorations — the first time they have been in the same location since the crisis in Ukraine began — though there is no plan at the moment for them to have a meeting.

"Exactly in Normandy we can start to find out this peaceful process in Ukraine," Poroshenko said in English.

Poroshenko won a landslide victory on May 25 to fill the office left vacant after a pro-Russian president fled an uprising in late February, the start of a crisis that saw Moscow seize Ukraine's Crimea Peninsula and pro-Russian separatists rise up in Ukraine's east.

In the days since Poroshenko was elected, Ukraine has ramped up a crackdown against pro-Russian separatists in the east of the country, leading to the heaviest fighting of the conflict.

Ukraine said Wednesday as many as 300 fighters had been killed in the past 24 hours of fighting, although the rebels denied they had suffered such heavy losses.

Obama flies on from Poland to Brussels for a meeting of leaders of the world's biggest industrialized economies — minus Putin, who was excluded over Ukraine. Obama said he would urge those leaders to also stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Ukraine in the face of Russian intervention.

Poroshenko takes over a country whose troubles far go beyond the violence in the east. Russia is threatening to switch off Ukraine's gas supplies for non-payments of debts, and Kiev must conduct painful economic reforms as a condition for billions of dollars in urgently-needed Western aid.

The White House said in a statement that Obama had approved an additional \$23 million in defense and security assistance to Ukraine since early March, including \$5 million for "the provision of body armor, night vision goggles and additional communications equipment."

Critics who advocate a stronger response say the sums are token amounts given the severe shortcomings of Ukraine's military, and note that Washington has not offered lethal aid.

A foreign ministry official in Wednesday accused Kiev of blatant violations of human rights with its crackdown in the east, where fighting has raged near separatist-held towns.

"Such things cannot happen in Europe of the 21st century," said Konstantin Dolgov. "What we

are seeing today beats all the grim and sad records from the past years."

Germany and Britain, whose leaders will hold private meetings with Putin on the sidelines of the ceremony in France, both stepped up criticism of Russia's role in eastern Ukraine.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, in a speech to parliament in Berlin, urged Putin to use his influence to restrain the separatists and make them disarm and end occupations.

"If this does not happen ... we will not shrink from imposing further sanctions," she said.

The British Foreign Office accused Moscow of fomenting unrest in eastern Ukraine with "a torrent of disinformation" and of trying to intimidate Kiev with a military buildup along the Ukrainian border.

Moscow denies that it is behind the pro-Russian uprising, although the increase in fighting in recent days has revealed that many of the rebels are from Russia, as bodies of dozens of dead Russian fighters have been sent back across the frontier.

NATO's top senior commander, U.S. Air Force General Phillip Breedlove, said he saw the Kremlin's hand behind the unrest in the east. "This has to stop," Breedlove told reporters on the sidelines of a meeting of NATO defense ministers in Brussels.

After his meeting with the Ukrainian leader, Obama delivered a keynote speech in Warsaw's Castle Square as part of celebrations to mark 25 years since Poland held an election shaking off decades of Soviet domination and Communist rule.

In front of at least 5,000 members of the public and around 1,000 dignitaries, Obama assured Eastern European NATO allies worried they could be the next victims of Russian intervention that the U.S. would defend them.

"Poland will never stand alone. But not just Poland. Estonia will never stand alone. Latvia will never stand alone. Lithuania will never stand alone. Romania will never stand alone," Obama said, naming ex-communist countries that — unlike Ukraine — have joined NATO and therefore enjoy protection as treaty allies.

Poland was an example to Ukraine of what could be achieved if a country were allowed to realize its aspirations, he said.

"The people of Ukraine are reaching out for the same freedom and opportunities and progress that we celebrate here today, and they deserve them, too," he said.

"The days of empire and spheres of influence are over. Bigger nations must not be allowed to bully the small, or impose their will at the barrel of a gun or with masked men taking over buildings."

As Obama returned to his seat after delivering his speech, Poroshenko, who was sitting in the front row of the audience, walked over to the U.S. president and shook his hand warmly. A chant of "Thank You Obama!" went up from the crowd.

Putin had been due to host the Group of Eight leaders in the Russian Black Sea resort of Sochi,

but after he annexed Crimea, Russia was excluded and the venue switched to Brussels for a meeting of what is now the Group of Seven.

Despite the escalation in violence on the ground since Poroshenko's election, there are signs that the Ukraine crisis is easing, notably a decision by Putin to draw down tens of thousands of troops he had massed on the Ukrainian border.

Putin is due to hold separate meetings with Merkel, British Prime Minister David Cameron and French President Francois Hollande on the sidelines of the Normandy ceremonies, but there are no plans for a one-on-one with Obama.

The U.S. president said that if he encounters the Russian leader in Normandy, he will urge him to rein in pro-Moscow separatists in eastern Ukraine.

A French diplomatic source said Hollande would hold two separate dinners with Obama and Putin on Thursday evening, the former at a restaurant and the second at his Elysee presidential palace, to avoid the two guests crossing paths.

See also:

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