

G7 Leaders Urge Tough Line on Russia at Start of Summit

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U.S. President Barack Obama, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Francois Hollande wave to photographers before their first meeting in the hotel castle Elmau in Kruen, Germany, Jun. 7.

KRUN, Germany — Leaders from the Group of Seven (G7) industrial nations backed a tough line toward Moscow at the start of a summit in the Bavarian Alps, with U.S. President Barack Obama urging the gathering to stand up to Russian aggression in Ukraine.

Host Angela Merkel greeted Obama in the idyllic Alpine village of Krun under blue skies, surrounded by locals in traditional dress, drinking beer and eating white sausage and pretzels.

The German chancellor was hoping to secure commitments from her G7 guests to tackle global warming ahead of a major United Nations climate summit in Paris in December. The German agenda also foresees discussions on global health issues, from Ebola to antibiotics and tropical diseases.

But the crises in Ukraine and Greece seemed likely to overshadow the discussions at Schloss Elmau, a luxury Alpine hotel near the Austrian border.

European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, speaking before the start of the summit, voiced exasperation with Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, who has dismissed the latest aid-for-reform proposal from international creditors as "absurd."

Athens is running out of cash and will default on its debt, a move that could end up pushing it out of the euro zone, if it fails to reach a deal with its European partners and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in the coming weeks.

Juncker reaffirmed that a so-called "Grexit" was not an option being considered, but said this did not mean he could "pull a rabbit out of a hat" to prevent it.

Russian Aggression

Obama said leaders would discuss the global economy, trade partnerships and "standing up to Russian aggression in Ukraine," as well as threats from violent extremism and climate change.

Both he and Merkel highlighted the importance of the German-American relationship, damaged in recent years by revelations of U.S. spying in Germany, including the bugging of the chancellor's mobile phone.

"My message to the German people is simple: We are grateful for your friendship, for your leadership," said Obama, using the traditional Bavarian greeting "Gruess Gott" with a crowd gathered in the village square in Krun. "We stand together as inseparable allies in Europe and around the world."

Merkel alluded to "differences" but described the United States as "our friend" and an "essential partner."

British Prime Minister David Cameron and European Council President Donald Tusk both said they hoped the G7 would present a united front on sanctions toward Russia.

EU leaders agreed in March that sanctions imposed over Russia's intervention in Ukraine would stay until the Minsk cease-fire agreement was fully implemented, effectively extending them to the end of the year, but a formal decision has yet to be taken.

Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi is known to be skeptical about sanctions and left-wing politicians in Germany have also called for them to be removed.

"If anyone wants to start a discussion about changing the sanctions regime, it could only be about strengthening it," said Tusk.

European monitors have blamed a recent upsurge in violence in eastern Ukraine on Russian-backed separatists. Russian President Vladimir Putin was frozen out of what used to be the G8 after Moscow's annexation of Crimea last year.

Protests

Leaders and reporters were shuttled to the summit site by helicopter on Sunday morning as hundreds of protesters blocked the main road to Schloss Elmau.

On Saturday, thousands of anti-G7 protesters marched in the nearby town of Garmisch-Partenkirchen. There were sporadic clashes with police and several marchers were taken to hospital with injuries, but the violence was minor compared to some previous summits.

Germany deployed 17,000 police around the former Winter Olympic games venue at the foot of Germany's highest mountain, the Zugspitze. Another 2,000 were on standby across the border in Austria.

In addition to climate and health issues, the leaders of Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United States and European Union were due to discuss Islamist militant threats from groups such as Islamic State and Boko Haram. The leaders of Nigeria, Tunisia and Iraq were to join them later as part of an "outreach" group of non-G7 countries.

Merkel was likely to have her work cut out for her on the climate talks. She won plaudits in 2007 when she hosted a G8 meeting on the Baltic coast and convinced Obama's predecessor George W. Bush to join other leaders in pledging to fight global warming.

This time, she and Hollande, who will host the climate summit at the end of the year and is keen to generate some momentum for that in Bavaria, were facing resistance from Japan and Canada.

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