

Ukrainian President Zelensky adopts Steinmeier formula amid mass far-right protests

By Clara Weiss
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On October 1, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky signed a document affirming that Ukraine will follow the so-called “Steinmeier formula,” which calls for elections in eastern Ukraine. The formula is named after the current German president and former foreign minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who devised it in 2016 after having played a critical role in the US- and German-backed far-right coup in Kiev in February 2014.

The resulting civil war in eastern Ukraine has claimed the lives of at least 13,000 people and wounded as many as 30,000 more. It has displaced millions.

The Steinmeier formula proposes a series of steps to realize the 2015 Minsk agreement. It is extremely vague and ambiguous, stipulating nothing clearly except elections in the Donbass that could result in a semi-autonomous status for the eastern Ukrainian territories of Donetsk and Luhans, which are now ruled by pro-Russian separatists. Steinmeier himself has repeatedly emphasized that virtually every aspect of his “formula” is subject to further negotiation. Polls indicate that over two thirds of Ukrainians do not know what to make of the formula, with about 23 percent opposing and 18 percent supporting it.

The terms for the elections will be set by the so-called Normandy Format, which includes Germany, France and Russia, but not the United States.

Thousands of far-right nationalists, who were heavily involved in the 2014 coup and the ensuing civil war, protested on October 3 and October 14 against the Zelensky government on Kiev’s Independence Square. Officials of the former Poroshenko government joined the rallies, where the Steinmeier formula was denounced as a “concession” and “capitulation” to Russia.

Former president Poroshenko openly backed the demonstrations, stating, “We feel solidarity with the present actions and calls heard from among veterans, and we will not allow the ruin of the Ukrainian state.”

Zelensky felt compelled to give a press conference lasting

14 hours to defend his adoption of the formula. He emphasized that elections in the Donbass would be held only after Russian troops had withdrawn. Russia continues to deny that it has any troops in Ukraine.

The Kremlin has welcomed the support by Kiev for the Steinmeier formula, describing it as a “step in the right direction,” but has remained notably low key about the negotiations, with very limited coverage in the Russian press and few official statements. After five years of economic warfare and military encirclement by the imperialist powers, Russia’s economic and political position has been dramatically weakened, a fact Zelensky is no doubt trying to exploit.

Zelensky’s move comes shortly after a prisoner swap between Russia and Ukraine, which was heavily supported by Berlin and Paris. It also takes place amid a dramatic intensification of the political crisis in Washington, where the CIA and the Democratic Party are using a call between Trump and Zelensky in July as the basis for an impeachment inquiry.

The adoption of the Steinmeier formula is part of Kiev’s maneuvers between US imperialism, on the one hand, and Berlin and Paris, on the other. Especially since 2014, Ukraine has become heavily reliant on US military support, forming a bulwark in Washington’s build-up for war against Russia. At the same time, Ukraine has extensive economic ties with the EU, and especially with Germany. Speaking to *Foreign Policy* magazine, a source close to Zelensky said that the Ukrainian president regarded the adoption of the Steinmeier formula as a political concession to France and Germany.

While the representatives of German and French imperialism like to present themselves as the “peace makers” in Ukraine, there is, in fact, nothing benign about their increasingly heavy involvement in the affairs of the country.

The involvement of Berlin stands in the tradition of the

attempts by German imperialism to control the region as part of its drive to dominate Europe. Germany has occupied Ukraine and Eastern Europe in two world wars. In collaboration with local fascist forces, the Nazis murdered up to 7 million people in Ukraine, including roughly one million Ukrainian Jews.

Following the coup in February 2014, the then-German foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier had his picture taken alongside the Ukrainian neo-fascist Oleh Tyahnybok from the Svoboda party. Speaking as the president of Germany, Steinmeier omitted any reference to the Holocaust in his speeches in Poland on the 80th anniversary of the outbreak of World War II in September of this year.

If Berlin is now pushing for a settlement of the conflict in the east of Ukraine under its own supervision, this is bound up with, first, the economic interests of the German bourgeoisie, which sees its business harmed by the ongoing war, and second, the growing conflict with US imperialism.

Since the coup in February 2014, the German bourgeoisie has aggressively expanded its involvement in the Ukrainian economy and politics. According to the German government, the number of those employed in Kiev at the Society for International Development (GiZ) and the KfW bank, both arms of the German government, has grown sevenfold since 2014. In 2016, Germany founded a separate chapter of its Foreign Chamber of Commerce (AHK) to represent the interests of German businesses in Kiev.

Some 1,000 German firms are now active in Ukraine. Nevertheless, business representatives and politicians have complained that they have not been as successful economically as expected under Poroshenko. Earlier this year, the German carmaker Volkswagen (VW) announced it would relocate one of its factories in Ukraine to Slovakia, amid an almost complete collapse of Ukrainian auto production.

The trade war between the EU and the US and the economic crisis Europe have heightened the significance of the markets in Eastern Europe for Germany. Trade with Eastern Europe recently surpassed that with both China and the US. Numerous German political commentators have stressed the need for Germany to defend its interests in the region to offset the economic impact of the trade war as well as the Brexit crisis.

Beyond these economic interests, Ukraine is at the center of the growing conflict between the imperialist powers over strategy vis-à-vis Russia. While Germany has played a central role in the EU and NATO military build-up against Russia, sections of the German bourgeoisie have watched with apprehension as their close business ties with Russia have been undermined by economic sanctions. The US sanctions, in particular, have hit not only Russian

companies, but also their international, and especially German, partners.

Germany is also pushing the construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which would expand direct gas flows from Russia to Germany. The project is bitterly opposed by the US, Ukraine and most East European countries, and the Trump administration has repeatedly threatened to impose sanctions on companies involved in it.

France, which similarly has seen its relations with the US worsen significantly, has also played a major role in the latest moves by Zelensky. The *Financial Times* assessed Macron's push for the Russian-Ukrainian prisoner swap in August as part of his attempts "to strengthen European ties to Russia to secure Moscow's cooperation in other international crises, in particular the dangerous dispute over Iran's nuclear ambitions," where France and Germany have clashed with the US.

The Zelensky government is trying to exploit these divisions between the imperialist powers to somehow improve the bargaining position of Ukraine. While appealing to Germany and France for negotiations on eastern Ukraine, Zelensky has doubled down on the criticism he made of Merkel and Macron in his July 25 phone call with Trump. In the call, Zelensky denounced Merkel and Macron for not doing enough for Ukraine. Last week, he added that he had "spoken a lot with [Merkel and Macron] about" Nord Stream 2, and that he could not agree with their positions on the project.

Zelensky is also motivated by domestic considerations. His government just announced the most comprehensive privatization program since the restoration of capitalism in the 1990s, and he is trying to free his hands to implement this escalation of the Ukrainian oligarchy's class war on the working class. The planned factory closures would result in the layoff of potentially tens of thousands of workers in a situation where most of the population is already living in dire poverty.

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