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Russia, Ukraine carry out high-profile prisoner exchange

Amidst the ongoing war in eastern Ukraine between Kiev and Russian-backed separatists, which, since 2014, has claimed over 13,000 lives, Russia and Ukraine carried out a high-profile prisoner exchange this past Saturday, each swapping 35 captives.

The freed Ukrainians included 24 sailors who were captured by Russian forces in the Kerch Strait during a naval provocation stoked by the previous president Petro Poroshenko last November.

Among those released by Russia are also the film director Oleg Sentsov, journalist Roman Sushchenko, Crimean Tatar activist Edem Bekirov, and others who had run afoul of Moscow and were considered allies of Kiev in the five-year-long war in eastern Ukraine.

In exchange, Ukraine released 35 prisoners, including Volodymyr Tsemakh, a separatist leader who has been labeled a “person of interest” in the phony investigation into the 2015 MH-17 downing, carried out by the Dutch-led Joint Investigation Team. His release was explicitly protested by the Netherlands, and Tsemakh was questioned by Dutch investigators prior to his release.

While the western imperialist media such as CNN consistently referred to the 35 individuals released by Kiev as “Russian prisoners,” only 12 are Russian citizens and the rest are Ukrainians, including Tsemakh.

Most were imprisoned on charges of “terrorism” or colluding with Moscow and pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine. Among them was journalist Kirill Vyshinsky, who

was accused of publishing “anti- Ukrainian” articles and imprisoned on charges of “high treason and illegal possession of weapons” in May 2018.

The exchange of prisoners was celebrated by Ukrainian media but was met with a remarkably muted response in the Russian press and television. Recent statements by Ukrainian officials suggest that more prisoners could be exchanged in upcoming weeks.

The exchange of prisoners between Moscow and Kiev occurred just a week after President Volodymyr Zelensky’s first 100 days in office. The **electoral victory of Zelensky in April** this year represented a major rebuke of the former president Petro Poroshenko who had come to power in the wake of the US- and EU-backed coup in Kiev in February 2014, which had been spearheaded by far-right forces. In running against Poroshenko, Zelensky had played on popular anti-war sentiments, promising to enter negotiations with Russian president Vladimir Putin.

However, during his first weeks in office, Zelensky **continued the anti-Russia campaign of his predecessor**. In his interactions with western imperialist allies Zelensky opposed Russia’s return to the Council of Europe and attempted to drum up support among France and Germany for increased sanctions and a more aggressive united stance with little to no avail.

The recent shift in Zelensky’s foreign policy comes amid growing conflicts between the leading imperialist powers of the EU, France and Germany, on the one hand, and the US on the other. In recent months, there have been growing tensions between Berlin, Paris and Washington particularly over the conflict with Iran and the escalation of US sanctions.

The prisoner exchange was strongly backed by France and Germany with media reports suggesting that French President Emmanuel Macron, in particular, played a central role in it. German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who had met with Zelensky earlier this summer, called the prisoner exchange a “hopeful sign.” The French foreign minister Jean-Yves Le Drian welcomed the exchange as a sign of a “new atmosphere.” He stated that “It’s not yet the time to lift sanctions” but that a “window of opportunity, an opening for calming down the situation” had opened up.

According to a report by UNIAN, in a telephone conversation between the French president and Zelensky that took place just a week prior to the prisoner exchange, Macron had “reminded the President of Ukraine...of the need to make progress on security issues and implement political measures to resolve the situation in Donbas.”

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The *Financial Times* remarked in an article that the move was part of Macron's attempts "to strengthen European ties to Russia to secure Moscow's co-operation in other international crises, in particular the dangerous dispute over Iran's nuclear ambitions." In August, Macron told a gathering of French ambassadors that, "Pushing Russia away from Europe is a profound strategic error, because we will push Russia either into an isolation that increases tensions or into alliances with other great powers such as China."

Following the prisoner exchange, Macron spoke directly with Putin and announced that a new summit of talks under the "Normandy" format would be held in the upcoming weeks that includes Ukraine, Russia, France and Germany, but notably not the United States. In the phone meeting with Macron, Putin proposed a deal on Ukraine that would be based on a plan that had been worked out in 2016 by the then German foreign minister and now German president, **Frank-Walter Steinmeier**, who had supported the 2014 putsch.

The plan provides for a withdrawal of Russian troops from the separatist-held territories, and elections which would set up administrations under the control of the Kiev government, but which would be granted a certain amount of autonomy.

The plan had been strongly opposed by the previous Poroshenko government and is still met with fierce resistance by substantial sections of the Ukrainian bourgeoisie and the country's far-right, which maintains close ties to the state apparatus.

In the US, where the ruling class has been engulfed for years in vicious infighting over the tactical orientation of US foreign policy towards Russia as it inexorably drives toward world war, response to the prisoner exchange varied widely.

In a tweet, US President Donald Trump called the exchange "good news, perhaps a first giant step to peace." Trump later signaled that he would be willing to join the Normandy Format talks. By contrast, the Atlantic Council, an influential think tank in Washington, warned against viewing the prisoner exchange as an occasion to ease the pressure on Russia.

In contrast to both Macron and Merkel, who have met with Zelensky multiple times, Trump has thus far not met with Zelensky although reports now suggest the two will finally meet in September.

Although Trump was the first US president to approve the delivery of direct lethal military equipment to Ukraine, he has recently vacillated on military aid to Ukraine, unilaterally holding up \$250 million in congressionally approved military assistance to Kiev before finally approving its release on Thursday.

The denial of military aid to Ukraine by Trump had been met with criticism by both Democrats and Republicans. On Monday the Democratic chairmen of the Foreign Affairs, Intelligence, and Oversight and Government Reform House Committees announced a joint investigation into Trump's meddling with Defense Department money, writing, "The Trump Administration's decision to withhold vital security assistance to Ukraine is only the latest in a series of actions in which President Trump appears to undermine U.S. foreign policy to placate Russia and place his personal interests above the national interest."

Prior to Trump's decision to release the military funds, the State Department notified Congress on Wednesday that it is planning to send \$141.5 million of its own "aid" by the end of the month to shore up the Ukrainian military as well as Kiev's naval forces in the Black Sea bring the latest round of US military aid to nearly \$400 million.

The bourgeoisies in Europe are also divided over policy toward Russia and Ukraine. The Baltic States and Poland have been at the forefront of NATO's saber-rattling against Russia. These states, along with Ukraine, which stands to lose billions of dollars in transit fees for gas, have also bitterly opposed the efforts of Germany to expand its pipeline to Russia via the Nord Stream 2. The Trump administration too has strongly opposed the creation of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline and threatened sanctions against Germany over its construction.

This week, the EU's General Court sided with US-backed Poland in a case against Russia's Gazprom, reversing a previous decision by the European Commission that favored Russia and Germany. If the ruling stands, it will limit the transport of Russian gas through the Opal pipeline, which is an onshore extension of the Nord Stream 1 pipeline that runs across the Baltic Sea to Germany. It could also threaten Russia's construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline which runs along the same route.

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