



Merkel, Hollande, Poroshenko, Lukashenko, Putin, and Poroshenko at the Minsk Summit in February © Wikimedia Commons

This power dynamic was illustrated in the negotiations for the second ceasefire protocol between Ukraine and Russia's proxy rebels. Angela Merkel and François Hollande arrived in Minsk on February 11 with a peace proposal portrayed as a last resort to avoid "total war." They had just returned from Washington DC, where Chancellor Merkel had convinced President Obama not to arm Ukraine out of fears that it would escalate the conflict.

Putin negotiated in Minsk from a position of power. First, the Americans were not present at the negotiations. Second, he had the tactical advantage of heavy weaponry positioned in the field. Even as the talks were ongoing, 50 Russian tanks, 40 missile systems, and 40 armored vehicles crossed into Ukraine through the Izvaryne border crossing.

"Putin laughs last," wrote Spiegel, commenting on how he managed to exploit the powerlessness of the European negotiators. Putin emerged smiling after 16 hours of negotiations and even joked with the journalists. Hollande and Merkel were gloomy and cautious in their statements, and talked about "a glimmer of hope" and "very, very much work still to do." The ceasefire did not hold. But that's just a detail, it's not the first red line Putin has crossed or will cross.

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