

**HIGHLIGHTS**

PULSE OF PEACE IN DONBAS



13–20 January, 2021

INCREASING ESCALATION – THE WEST DISCUSSES MEASURES TO INFLUENCE RUSSIA

Against the background of negotiations between representatives of Russia, the United States and NATO on security issues in Europe, which have not achieved appreciable progress, the situation on the border continues to escalate on the part of Russia, and international discussion of options to resolve it is ongoing.

[According to Oleksiy Danilov, Secretary of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine](#), the Russian plan for Ukraine involves internal destabilization in the country.

[Presidential National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan](#) said that the United States has intelligence that Russia is preparing a foreign-flagged operation in eastern Ukraine in order to provide a pretext to invade the country. He noted that if diplomacy fails to achieve its goals, the initiation of open hostilities will lead to massive human rights violations and war crimes. This statement echoed a January 14 [statement](#) by the Ukrainian Defense Ministry that Russian special services were preparing provocations against the so-called "L/DPR." On January 15, Ukrainian intelligence [reported](#) a possible chemical leak at the Stirol factory in Horlivka, which is in territory controlled by the so-called "DPR," suggesting that this fact could become an excuse to accuse Ukraine of a chemical attack and as a pretext for large-scale aggression. So far, the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) in Donbas has found [no confirmation](#) of the leak, while the verification continues.

Under Secretary of State Victoria Nuland [said](#) that in case of such developments 18 scenarios of response have been developed, and the sanctions of the US and European allies may differ, stressing that the way for a diplomatic solution to the situation remains open.

On January 19, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, and Polish Defense Minister Mariusz Blaszczak, representing the Polish OSCE Chairmanship, held their first [quadrilateral talks](#) on multilateral coordination of European security. Discussions focused on Russia's military build-up on its borders with Ukraine as well as on countering Russia's attempts to change the security environment in Europe. The sides reaffirmed their determination to continue intensive consultations to identify ways to resolve the situation through diplomatic engagement.

On January 19, a bill concerning sanctions against Russia, affecting high-ranking Russian officials, was introduced in the US Parliament. The full text of the bill is not yet available on the [site of Congress](#), but was [published](#) by The Washington Post. A distinctive feature of the bill, drafted by Republican lawmakers, was the proposal to impose sanctions on Russia before the proposed invasion of Ukraine, rather than after it takes place.

In addition to individual sanctions, the proposal would declare Russia a "state sponsor of terrorism" and the armed forces in Donbas that Russia supports as "foreign terrorist organizations," prohibit

US ban on transactions with Russian government debt, applying sanctions against the Nord Stream 2 pipeline.

EXPERTS CRITICIZE GERMANY'S POSITION ON THE SECURITY SITUATION

On January 17, [talks](#) were held between Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba and German Foreign Minister Annalena Berbock, who visited Ukraine for the first time since taking office. One of the main topics of discussion was the settlement of the situation in Donbas and on the borders of Ukraine. Annalena Berbock reiterated Germany's position to support Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, as well as its commitment to the principle of "no agreements on Ukraine without Ukraine". The parties agreed on the need to restore the effective work of the Normandy format and hold a summit of the leaders of Ukraine, Germany, France and the Russian Federation, agreeing to make every effort to bring Russia back into the existing negotiating platforms. During the briefing, Annalena Berbock [stressed](#) that any new Russian aggression against Ukraine would come at a high price, noting that Germany and Europe are ready for dialogue with Russia, as diplomacy is the only possible way to defuse the current situation.

On the eve of the German Foreign Minister's visit to Ukraine, Ukrainian Ambassador to Germany Andriy Melnyk [urged](#) Berlin to reconsider its [position on arms supplies](#), but Annalena Berbock said that the German government's position on this issue

remains unchanged – Germany will not supply arms to Ukraine. Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba noted that the dialogue on this issue would continue.

Following her visit to Kyiv, Annalena Berbock [visited](#) Moscow on January 18 for negotiations with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. The German foreign minister noted that the Russian military buildup near Ukraine was occurring for no apparent reason and could not help but be perceived as a threat. Discussing the escalation of the situation, the sides expressed hope for the revival of the Normandy format. Sergey Lavrov once again stated that it was unacceptable to call Russia a party to the conflict in Donbas, while calling on the German side to exert influence on Ukraine. Annalena Berbock stressed that Germany would defend human rights and security in Europe even at the cost of economic losses, referring to sanctions against Russia. Deutsche Welle [analyzes](#) German media views on Annalena Berbock's visits to Kyiv and Moscow.

On 17 January, the German newspaper Handelsblatt [reported](#) that the US and the EU are removing from the sanctions packages the disconnection of Russia from the global system of interbank channels SWIFT. Instead, spot sanctions against the largest banks are proposed in case of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. According to the newspaper's sources, Western countries are afraid of financial destabilization. It is noted that Germany offers a number of exceptions to the planned sanctions due to the need to pay for gas purchased from Russia. Officially the White House [denied](#) Handelsblatt's information, but Bloomberg [reported](#) that Washington is discussing "Germany's problem" – Berlin's unpreparedness for tough sanctions because of economic and commodity risks.

Russia could significantly reduce tensions in the region by withdrawing its troops and equipment from Ukrainian borders, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz [said](#) at a joint press conference with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg in Berlin. He also confirmed that the government has no plans to supply weapons to Ukraine, while Germany remains committed to trying to prevent the possibility of Russian aggression against Ukraine through diplomacy.

Earlier in the week, German experts [criticized](#) Germany's "eastern policy" in an open letter and said it must be fundamentally adjusted. A translation of a letter by 73 German experts on Eastern Europe and international security, addressed to the German government and political parties represented in the Bundestag, was [published](#) by European Pravda. According to the authors, Germany has a special responsibility as a key EU country. They note that insufficiently powerful sanctions for the annexation of Crimea and aggression in Donbas, the Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2 projects paved the way for Russian aggression against Ukraine, and Berlin's relatively mild response only encourages Russia to continue this policy. The signatories of the letter call on Germany to express support with more significant and effective actions, both in terms of deterrence and sanctions against Russia and support for states against which aggression is being carried out.

NEW OPTIONS FOR MEETING BETWEEN PRESIDENTS OF UKRAINE AND RUSSIA

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has initiated a trilateral meeting between the presidents of Ukraine, Russia and the United States, the head of the Ukrainian presidential office Andriy Yermak [said](#), noting that the United States has expressed interest in such a meeting. According to Andriy Yermak, the possible trilateral format of negotiations is a potential platform to discuss the topic of Donbas.

At the same time, spokesman for the Russian President Dmitry Peskov [spoke out against](#) the involvement of the US in the negotiations, noting that at the moment it is not clear what issues may become the subject of discussion in the trilateral format.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoan [reiterated](#) his country's readiness to provide a platform for talks between Ukrainian and Russian presidents Vladimir Zelensky and Vladimir Putin in order to "settle the differences" between the countries. According to a spokesman for the Turkish president, a confrontation between the two is not in the interests of the entire region, including Turkey. Russian presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov [welcomed](#) Erdoan's idea, but noted that the location of the talks was "secondary".

DRAFT APPEAL FOR RECOGNITION OF "L/DPR" WAS SUBMITTED TO RUSSIAN STATE DUMA

Deputies from the faction of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation [submitted](#) to the Russian State Duma a [draft appeal](#) to Vladimir Putin on the need to recognize the so-called "LPR" and "DPR". In their opinion, the recognition would create grounds for "ensuring security guarantees and protection from external threats and the implementation of a policy of genocide against the inhabitants of the republics." In addition, the deputies called for negotiations with the "DPR" and "LPR" to "create a legal basis for interstate relations" as soon as possible. The Duma Foreign Affairs Committee and the Committee on CIS Affairs, Eurasian Integration and Relations with Compatriots were to consider draft appeals on foreign policy issues, but the position of these committees was not presented in the package of submitted documents.

Viktor Vodolatsky, first deputy chairman of the Duma committee on CIS affairs, Eurasian integration, and relations with compatriots, [noted](#) that the appeal is hasty and might prompt accusations of aggressive Russian plans amid ongoing discussions with NATO on security guarantees, adding that if NATO and the US refuse to support Russian demands, another plan will begin, under which this appeal might be implemented.

Russian presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov [said](#) the Kremlin had not yet considered the appeal.

At the same time, a final decision on recognition would be a [sign that Russia is withdrawing from the Minsk process](#) and recognizing itself as a party to the conflict in Donbas. Furthermore, this could significantly speed up the process of annexing certain areas of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions of Ukraine (ORDLO) to Russia or officially introducing troops to the territory of ORDLO and the line of demarcation in

Donbas. Experts discussing the likelihood of such developments suggest that Russia may plan to present Western countries with the legalization of its military presence in this de facto Moscow-controlled part of Ukraine, comparing it to the "Abkhazian scenario," or to use this topic as leverage over Western countries, while generally agreeing that possible recognition is a rather formal and non-binding step on the part of Russia.