

# EU foreign ministers discuss attacks on democratic rights, provocations against Russia

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European Union foreign ministers held talks Monday and Tuesday in Brussels under conditions of a virtual siege, with armed soldiers patrolling outside the European Council building.

The meeting took place against the backdrop of a massive mobilisation of troops in France and Belgium in the wake of this month's attacks on the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* and a Kosher supermarket in Paris. Raids and arrests also took place in Germany, Spain and Greece amid claims that the continent faces an existential threat from Islamic extremists.

The deliberately engendered atmosphere of fear and hysteria is being used to implement anti-democratic measures increasing the repressive powers of the state. The foreign ministers discussed greater sharing of passenger flight data within the EU, the re-introduction of border checks, and proposals to withdraw passports and identity cards from EU citizens considered "public threats." These proposals are to go before an EU summit on February 12.

State surveillance of the Internet is to be stepped up under an EU cyber security directive. This is in line with US President Barack Obama's unveiling of similar measures last month and UK Prime Minister David Cameron's demand that Facebook, Twitter and other social network sites be forced to hand over data to intelligence agencies.

The Brussels gathering also discussed greater cooperation between the EU and Arab countries to combat Islamic extremism. Talks to this end were held with the secretary-general of the Arab League, Nabil El-Araby.

No details were forthcoming, but the plans are in line with a summit starting today in London that is being hosted by UK Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond and US

Secretary of State John Kerry. The gathering, which involves some 20 countries, including Arab states, is intended to prepare the way for greater military involvement by the Western powers in Iraq, Syria and across the Middle East and North Africa.

The foreign ministers' discussions underscored the fact that the machinations of the imperialist powers constitute the gravest danger to the peoples of Europe and the world.

The meeting was originally called to discuss the confrontation with Russia over Ukraine in the wake of the EU's decision last year to join the US in imposing sanctions against Moscow. The result of the sanctions has been further economic stagnation and outright deflation in the euro zone. This had led to concerns among some EU member states that European competitiveness is being sacrificed to US geo-political interests.

On January 5, just two days before the attack on *Charlie Hebdo*, French President François Hollande called for the easing of sanctions against Russia in return for progress in resolving the Ukraine crisis. "I think it is necessary to stop the sanctions. They should be cancelled once there is progress," he said.

Hollande's stance was reportedly backed by Austria, Hungary, Italy, Cyprus, Slovakia and the Czech Republic.

In a confidential brief that was leaked to the press, EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini asked ministers to consider "possible elements for selective and gradual re-engagement" with Moscow. Russian cooperation was necessary, she argued, to deal with shared concerns over the spread in Iraq, Syria, Libya and elsewhere of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Hollande had expressed hope for progress in talks scheduled in Berlin for January 12 between Ukraine, Russia, France and Germany—the so-called Normandy quartet. But the meeting failed to reach an agreement,

with Moscow claiming that Ukraine had rejected its proposals to halt the fighting in the east between Kiev government troops and militias and pro-Russian forces.

Instead, on January 14, Ukraine President Petro Poroshenko signed a decree authorising a wave of new conscriptions for its operations in the east. The conscriptions, which will take place in four stages, are expected to total 50,000 men.

This is part of a sweeping operation in the Donbass region, especially around Donetsk airport. While Kiev accuses Russia of sending troops to aid its opponents, government shelling by heavy artillery has killed at least nine civilians in recent days.

Ukraine's provocations have been used to quash any talk of concessions to Russia by the EU. Even before the foreign ministers met, Mogherini was being denounced by the US and British press for adopting a "dovish" tone toward Moscow.

The *Times* of London wrote that Mogherini's brief was "based on the fairytale assumption that the Kremlin leader needs only a little Western encouragement to see the errors of his way."

Charging that Russia was "determined to dismantle Ukraine," it insisted that there could be no end to sanctions until Moscow ceded control of Crimea and Sevastopol—home to its Black Sea fleet—to Kiev.

"Standing firm on sanctions, sapping the Russian economy and thus reducing Moscow's power in the world is the only sure way of forcing Mr. Putin to think again about his reckless actions in Ukraine," it editorialised.

Such claims stand reality on its head. It was the Western powers, led by the US and Germany, that engineered the February 2014 right-wing putsch in Kiev. The aim was to draw Ukraine more firmly into the orbit of the US, the EU and NATO as part of a geo-political encirclement of Russia. The result is a bloody civil war, in which nearly 5,000 civilians and combatants have been killed, towns and villages have been destroyed, and 1.5 million people have been displaced.

Poland and Lithuania, which are playing a leading role in the build-up of NATO forces on Russia's borders, denounced any change in EU policy. Polish Foreign Minister Grzegorz Schetyna said this was impermissible in "the context of what is happening today in Donetsk and Lugansk, the return to fighting and warfare."

German Chancellor Angela Merkel similarly insisted that there could be no consideration of an end to sanctions until Moscow fully complied with EU demands.

Against this backdrop, Mogherini was forced to deny that the EU was going "soft" on Russia. "There is no normalisation, no back to business as usual," she insisted, holding out the possibility of tighter sanctions.

Vladislav Seleznyov, spokesman for Ukraine's General Staff of Armed Forces, announced that a delegation from the US Army Command, headed by the commander of US Army Europe, Lt. Gen [Frederick Ben] Hodges, would arrive in Ukraine this week. The US has been giving military aid to Ukraine, but this is the first time any mention has been made of direct American military involvement.

Yuriy Chizhmar, from the Society of Assistance to the Defense, confirmed NATO's presence on the ground. The Society, which is euphemistically described as a "socio-patriotic sports organisation," boasts that it trains "experts" for Ukraine's military and militias—several of which are openly fascist.

"We are taking an active part in negotiations to attract NATO experts from the United States," he told a press conference cited by ITAR-Tass, so as to "teach an art of war to mobilised Ukrainians."

NATO already has military training programmes in Ukraine, he said. "We are training about 100 people at our weekly course of intensive NATO training. They acquire military professions of a machine gunner, a submachine-gunner, and so on."

A Ukrainian delegation is taking part in meetings of the NATO military committee this week.

Denmark, Lithuania, Estonia and Britain have also called on the EU to fund a Russian-language channel as a conduit for anti-Putin propaganda. The four countries have presented a document, EU Strategic Communications in Response to the Propaganda, demanding Russian "disinformation" over Ukraine be rebutted more effectively.



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