

EU foreign ministers toughen sanctions against Russia

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At yesterday's meeting of EU foreign ministers in Brussels, the European Union avoided an open conflict over its aggressive course towards Russia and further toughened economic sanctions. The new Greek government under Alexis Tsipras, which had questioned the sanctions policy before the special summit, agreed to the new measures.

The decision will continue the existing travel bans and bank account freezes affecting 132 people and 28 organizations until at least September. In addition, other persons, alleged pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine and their supporters, will face similar measures. A further tightening of economic sanctions was not initially agreed. However, the ministers threatened to take the action should the situation in the disputed territories in eastern Ukraine worsen.

A final decision is not expected until a meeting of heads of state and government on February 12. "If there is an offensive towards Mariupol or other regions, one will need to respond with clear and harsher measures," threatened German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, a member of the Social Democratic Party.

Ahead of the meeting, the EU heads of state had threatened Russia with harsher sanctions. In a statement earlier this week, they called for the foreign ministers, "given the deteriorating situation" in Ukraine, "to assess the situation and to take appropriate actions into account, in particular further restrictive measures."

In the same letter, the European leaders condemned "the killing of civilians by the indiscriminate shelling of the Ukrainian city of Mariupol" last weekend, and the supposed "continuing and growing support" of Russia for the separatists in eastern Ukraine.

The American government is singing the same tune. "As long as Russia, with its blatant disregard of its obligations, continues [...], the costs for Russia will

continue to rise," Vice President Joe Biden said on Wednesday in a telephone conversation with the President of Ukraine Petro Poroshenko.

While the Western powers criticise Russia for its alleged involvement in Ukraine, they are simultaneously expanding their economic and military support for the pro-Western regime in Kiev, which is conducting a brutal war against the population in eastern Ukraine.

Following a phone call with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, President Barack Obama held out the prospect of a further aid package for Ukraine. In the spring, the US Army plans to send trainers to western Ukraine to work with the Ukrainian National Guard, which is riddled with fascist elements. Obama recently signed into law the so-called Ukraine Freedom Support Act allowing the United States to supply heavy weapons to the Ukrainian government and to impose additional sanctions against Russia.

Despite the concerted offensive, the issue of further economic war measures against Russia is giving rise to increasing conflicts within and between European governments.

Prior to the meeting on Thursday, the German Vice Chancellor Sigmar Gabriel spoke out against tightening the sanctions. "At this stage it is too early, I think, to call for further sanctions," the SPD chairman told the ZDF broadcast "What now?" Even in the most difficult times we should "not abandon European Russia and just say, now it's a new Cold War for 30 years."

Along with the US, the German government has played a leading role in the installation of the pro-Western Poroshenko regime in Ukraine, but it fears a complete breakdown of political and economic relations with Russia.

Nevertheless, Gabriel still threatened the government

in Moscow. If Putin tried to link the separatist region to Crimea, that would be “such an escalation by the separatists, supported by Russia, that we cannot just sit and watch.” At the same time, Gabriel warned the new Greek government against adopting a unilateral orientation towards Moscow and departing from the previous line of the EU. “The stupidest thing we could do is to be divided among ourselves,” he warned.

The new Greek government and its foreign minister Nikos Kotzias had initially sharply criticized the statement by the EU leaders. He said Greece had not been consulted and it did not coincide with Greek interests. Due to close economic ties and cultural affinities with Russia, Greece rejected tougher sanctions against Russia, he said.

The growing tensions over the course against Moscow reflect the sharp political and economic crisis in Europe. The catastrophic social impact of the austerity measures, especially in southern Europe, and the EU’s increasingly militaristic foreign policy is fueling tensions within the alliance and between the European states.

Rather than expressing any fundamental disagreement between the EU and the new Greek government, the harsh rhetoric is being used to find a common course. While the EU is forcing Tsipras to share in the official austerity policies and the confrontation with Russia, he has suggested certain changes in the official policy in order to get the crisis under control, and insists again and again he wants to “save” the EU.

In parallel with the foreign ministers’ meeting, the European Parliament President Martin Schulz travelled to meet with Tsipras to Athens. The social democrat warned the new Greek government against taking unilateral political action. They had not been elected to boycott sanctions against Russia, he said on German television before his trip. He added arrogantly, “I have no desire to conduct ideological debates with a government that is barely two days in office. What we need are pragmatic solutions, which I will propose to him.”

The European Central Bank (ECB) also warned the Greek government not to deviate from the existing course. “Greece must continue to play by the rules,” ECB director Benoit Coeure said in an interview on Thursday with the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*. “All decisions can have only one goal, namely to

continue with the reforms in Greece,” he explained. Even with a new government, nothing will change the fact that Greece needs further reforms, he said.

Although Coeure said that Europe accepts the political change in Athens, he added that the ECB cannot make any contribution when it comes to a possible lessening of Greece’s debt burden. The term of the Greek government bonds, which were purchased from the country’s central bank, could not be extended. “That would be like giving a loan to Greece and the contracts prohibit it,” he said.

The hard line of the high-ranking EU representative not only speaks volumes about the essentially dictatorial character of the EU, but also about the class character of Syriza. The majority of the population rejects the policies austerity and war. However, even following the elections in Greece, Tsipras will continue these policies in close cooperation with his right-wing coalition partners the Independent Greeks.



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