

European Union extends economic sanctions against Russia

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The six-month extension of European Union (EU) economic sanctions against Russia, agreed Wednesday in Brussels by ambassadors from all 28 EU members states, marks a milestone in the war drive waged by the imperialist powers of NATO against Russia.

These sanctions, first imposed amid the crisis over the still-unresolved shoot-down last July of Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 in Ukraine, targeted exports of equipment to Russia's oil industry and cut off Russian access to credit from European banks. As the EU is Russia's largest trade and investment partner, the sanctions played a key role in the Russian ruble's collapse last year.

Now, EU officials pointed to ongoing fighting in eastern Ukraine, after the February peace accords negotiated in Minsk between the NATO-backed Kiev regime's forces and pro-Russian separatists, to justify maintaining the sanctions. EU sources said, "The idea is to extend [sanctions] to end-January to give time to review progress on the Minsk accord before having to take a new decision."

"EU foreign ministers will finalize the decision in Luxembourg on Monday," Poland's permanent representative to the EU said on Twitter.

Russian officials replied by accusing the Kiev regime of provoking recent fighting in east Ukraine to provide a pretext for their decision. "It's obvious there are forces in the world and in Ukraine, which are interested in the deterioration of the situation on the ground in the run-up to major international events, including EU summits, in order to urge the international community to extend sanctions and impose new ones," said Deputy Foreign Minister Alexey Meshkov.

Nevertheless, Meshkov neither condemned the sanctions nor called on the EU to stop them. He said Russian officials are "realists, we carefully analyze

what our Western partners say," adding: "Russia did not impose sanctions, we are not asking anyone to lift them."

The latest EU sanctions are part of a broad drive by US and European finance capital to isolate Russia, threatening it with bankruptcy and war, in order to reduce it to semi-colonial status and establish the hegemony of the NATO powers, led by Washington, over all of Eurasia. This politically criminal policy, which NATO launched last year by backing a right-wing putsch against a pro-Russian regime in Ukraine, threatens to lead to all-out war with Russia, a nuclear-armed power.

In February, US officials discussed directly arming Ukrainian forces fighting Russian-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine, and earlier this month, Pentagon officials testified before the US Congress that Washington is preparing missile strikes on Russia.

The EU sanctions are the most powerful weapon in the financial arsenal NATO is deploying to wage economic war on Russia. During the ruble crisis last year, financial analysts calculated that cutting off Russian access to credit from Europe could bankrupt much of the Russian economy in as little as two years. This policy appears to be aimed at convincing the capitalist oligarchs who control Russia's post-Soviet economy to topple Russian President Vladimir Putin and install a regime that will obey all the dictates of Washington and the EU powers.

The pursuit of such an aggressive policy has vast and potentially unforeseeable implications. When the sanctions were first imposed last year, Russian officials attacked them as a campaign for regime change. "Western leaders publicly state that the sanctions must hurt [Russia's] economy and stir up public protests. The West doesn't want to change Russia's policies.

They want regime change,” said Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

Given that previous targets of NATO campaigns for regime change—from Serbia’s Slobodan Milosevic to Iraq’s Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi of Libya—all died in custody of NATO-backed forces, Russian officials are doubtless preparing policies as fraught as those of Washington.

The decision to maintain EU sanctions testifies to the recklessness and anti-democratic character of EU foreign policy. A recent Pew poll found mass popular opposition in Europe to a policy of stoking war with Russia. The European powers are proceeding with a confrontation that has the potential to escalate into full-scale war.

The only force that can oppose the drive to war is the mobilization of the working class internationally in a revolutionary struggle against imperialism and capitalism. Neither Russia’s bankrupt capitalist regime nor critics of EU sanctions policy within the European ruling class can halt the war drive launched by the most powerful imperialist countries.

Significantly, the EU is adopting its sanctions even after significant sections of the European bourgeoisie criticized them as self-destructive and dangerous. Last year, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban attacked the sanctions as “shooting oneself in the foot,” while former Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi said they amounted to “collective suicide.”

“I do not support basing policy on worst-case outcomes, I think sanctions must stop,” French President François Hollande declared in January. He added, “Mr Putin does not want to annex east Ukraine, I am sure of it. ... What Mr Putin wants is to prevent Ukraine from joining the camp of NATO. The idea for Mr Putin is to avoid having a hostile military presence on his borders.”

Many argue that the EU sanctions are dangerous, because cutting off economic ties between Europe and Russia encourages Moscow to turn to an alliance with China against NATO.

After the announcement of EU sanctions last year, Chinese officials indicated that they could extend credit to Russia to keep it from going bankrupt. This year, Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) chief Kirill Dmitriev said China was investing tens of billions of dollars in Russia, adding: “Within 2-3 years the

investment inflow from China may be equal to that from Europe in recent years.”

One critic of EU sanctions against Russia, former Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini, declared: “My concern is that Russia could turn to the East by strengthening their cooperation with China and playing a greater role in Asia and deciding that Europe is irrelevant. This is my concern and yet another argument to say that this policy is against European interests.”

Nonetheless, on Wednesday, representatives of these governments all toed the line advanced by the United States, Germany and Britain, who have pressed for an aggressive stance against Russia.

Indeed, Italian and French officials criticizing EU sanctions are participating in the same imperialist scramble to grab resources and markets as their US, German and British counterparts.



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