

EU summit threatens Russia

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The escalating coronavirus pandemic and threats against Russia were the focus of the EU summit that met on Thursday in Brussels. The two issues are closely linked. The more palpable the criminal recklessness with which the European governments are sabotaging any serious safeguarding of the population from the life-threatening virus, the louder they bang the war drum to deflect social tensions outward.

The assembled leaders agreed that with the Omicron variant, a fifth wave was now developing that would dwarf all the previous ones. In Britain, which is no longer part of the EU, infection rates are doubling every other day. By mid-January, Omicron will also be dominant in the EU, reports the *Wiener Standard*, citing EU council circles: “No one questioned this diagnosis.”

Nevertheless, the summit participants did nothing to halt the looming disaster. Even Italy’s decision to require those entering the country to provide a negative PCR test was met with fierce criticism. This undermined freedom of travel in the Schengen area, the EU Commission complained. Luxembourg’s Prime Minister Xavier Bettel also criticized that travel restrictions were not a solution.

The two sides finally agreed on a platonic call for “coordinated efforts” based on scientific findings. One wanted to proceed in a “coordinated” and “joint” manner, both in raising vaccination rates and in procuring medicines, and to push forward with booster vaccines. Above all, it was important to ensure that restrictions did not undermine the functioning of the internal market and did not “disproportionately hinder” free travel within the EU, the final draft declaration reads.

In other words, despite the threat of an Omicron tsunami, the summit continued the current policy of subordinating the protection of life and health to the profit interests of big business.

Several participants stressed that vaccination was the best weapon against the pandemic anyway. But aside from the fact that vaccination rates vary widely across the EU—ranging from 80 percent in Portugal to 30 percent in Bulgaria—and even a double vaccination provides

insufficient protection against Omicron, vaccination alone cannot contain the pandemic. It can only do so in conjunction with lockdowns, contact tracing and other measures, which the summit categorically rejected.

There was only a brief debate on the pandemic, on Thursday morning. The summit devoted much more time to the conflict with Russia. A meeting of participants with the so-called Eastern Partnership (Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Moldova) and talks between President Emmanuel Macron and Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky had already taken place on Wednesday. On Thursday, the confrontation with Russia was again the main topic of the summit, which lasted into the night.

EU leaders had already threatened Russia with punitive measures in the run-up to the summit. “Any further military aggression against Ukraine will entail massive consequences and high costs,” Council President Charles Michel wrote in the invitation letter. Commission President Ursula von der Leyen threatened that the EU would “take additional, unprecedented measures with serious consequences for Russia” in the event of a further escalation of the Ukraine conflict.

Chancellor Scholz said, “Any violation of territorial integrity will have a high price.” In the final declaration, the leaders warned Russia of the “massive consequences and high costs” of further military aggression against Ukraine.

The accusation that Russia is planning a military incursion into Ukraine has been made by the governments and media of NATO countries for weeks. It has no factual basis. Nevertheless, it is being spread as aggressively, like the lie about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction that provided the pretext for the Iraq war in 2003. The accusation is based on hard-to-verify US intelligence reports that Russia is massing troops near the eastern Ukrainian border; with talk of 100,000 to 175,000 troops.

Emissaries from the Biden administration have been systematically pushing this line to European allies, as news weekly *Der Spiegel* reported in its latest issue.

“For weeks, the US has been pushing the Europeans behind the scenes to take a tougher line against Moscow,” the news magazine writes. In November, Avril Haines, Biden’s Director of National Intelligence, had appeared with a phalanx of aides in a bug-proof meeting room in Brussels and showed the NATO ambassadors “intelligence pictures of the Russian deployment, without much preamble.” The diplomats were said to have been surprised.

Similar briefings had taken place for individual allies in the days that followed. “In Germany, as well as the intelligence agencies, the US also briefed the Foreign Ministry in detail, as rarely before.” Two weeks later, at the meeting of NATO foreign ministers in Riga, Secretary of State Antony Blinken then joined his British counterpart in pressing for tougher sanctions against Russia.

“The ministers were surprised by the Americans’ vehemence,” *Der Spiegel* reports. “Many Europeans, meanwhile, are reacting hesitantly. They see no evidence that Russia is really planning an invasion of Ukraine.” Which did not stop them from backing the US threats.

Even if the reports of troop deployments were true, they do not indicate Russia intends to invade. The troop movements are taking place on Russian territory, which it has a right to do as a sovereign country.

Moscow has every reason to feel threatened. President Zelensky, who is under domestic political pressure because of the coronavirus pandemic and the desolate economic situation, has been threatening for months to reconquer Crimea by force. In August, he told representatives from 40 countries in Kiev, including then-German Economy Minister Peter Altmaier, that from now on, the “countdown to de-occupation” of Crimea was underway.

At the time, NATO was conducting its largest ever military manoeuvres in the Black Sea region, involving 32 countries—including Ukraine—with 5,000 troops, 32 ships, 40 aircraft, and 18 special forces units. In the course of this and other manoeuvres, there were repeated near-misses with Russian troops.

At the instigation of President George W. Bush, NATO had held out the prospect of Ukraine joining as early as 2008, but did not link it to a specific timetable, at the insistence of Germany and France. After the 2014 coup, which brought a pro-Western regime to power in Kiev with US and German support, Ukraine was then systematically rearmed and integrated ever more closely into NATO.

The US alone has since provided it with more than \$2.5 billion in military aid. The US military budget approved Wednesday provides another \$300 million for this purpose.

President Vladimir Putin and his Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov have repeatedly made clear in recent days that Ukraine’s NATO membership was a “red line” they could not accept. They are demanding a formal guarantee that NATO and its military infrastructure will not expand further east.

President Biden and other NATO leaders have indignantly rejected this demand, citing Ukraine’s sovereignty. In fact, such a demand is not outlandish. When the Soviet Union deployed intermediate-range missiles in Cuba in 1962, President John F. Kennedy risked nuclear war to force the Soviet Union to withdraw the missiles, even though Cuba is also a sovereign state.

Accepting Ukraine into NATO would render Russia virtually defenceless militarily. The two states share a 2,300-kilometre border that runs only 500 kilometres from Moscow.

When Moscow gave the green light for the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact in 1990, NATO had pledged not to expand eastward. In the meantime, almost all former Eastern bloc states and the three former Baltic Soviet republics are members of NATO, which is encircling Russia ever more closely militarily. It regularly conducts manoeuvres on the Russian border, along which it flies strategic bombers, and has built up a rapid reaction force that can be deployed to the Russian border at a moment’s notice.

The Putin regime has no answer to this threat. It vacillates between making threatening military gestures and pandering to one imperialist camp or another, trying to play them off against each other. It is completely incapable of appealing to the international working class, the only social force that can stop the threat of war, because it itself represents the interests of a reactionary capitalist oligarchic caste.



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