

EU countries impose sanctions on Russia over Ukraine crisis

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European governments are responding to Moscow's recognition of the independence of parts of eastern Ukraine with sanctions, threats and an escalation of the war drive against Russia.

On Monday, European Council President Charles Michel and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen condemned "Russian aggression against Ukraine" in an official statement.

"The decision of the Russian Federation to recognize as independent entities and send Russian troops to certain areas of Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts is illegal and unacceptable", the statement declares. "It violates international law, Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty, Russia's own international commitments and it further escalates the crisis."

Both presidents welcomed "the steadfast unity of Member States and their determination to react with robustness and speed to the illegal actions of Russia in close coordination with international partners."

At an extraordinary meeting in Paris, European Union (EU) foreign ministers adopted a package of sanctions against Russia. The measures include placing on the EU sanctions list the 351 members of the Russian parliament who voted for the recognition of the Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics. A further 27 individuals and entities that contribute to undermining "the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence" of Ukraine are further targeted for sanctions.

In addition, the Russian state's access to EU financial markets will be curtailed and EU trade with the breakaway regions restricted. Individuals and entities placed on the EU sanctions list will have all assets held in the EU frozen. In addition, listed individuals will no longer be allowed to enter the EU and no business may be conducted with those affected. According to the current French presidency of the EU Council, the new EU sanctions against Russia are to come into force as early as this Wednesday.

"This package of sanctions has been approved by unanimity," said the EU's High Representative for Foreign

Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell after the meeting of foreign ministers. "It will hurt Russia and it will hurt a lot and we are doing that in strong co-ordination with our partners, the US, the UK and Canada with whom I have been in close contact."

Von der Leyen welcomed the German government's decision to put the Nord Stream 2 permitting process on hold. "Nord Stream 2 must be looked at completely anew from the point of view of supply security for all of Europe," she said. After all, she said, the crisis shows that Europe is still far too dependent on Russian gas.

As other European leaders have, von der Leyen threatened further steps. "If the Kremlin continues to escalate this crisis, then we will not hesitate to take further measures," she said. "The European Union stands united and is prepared to act swiftly."

Apparently, the EU is discussing possible sanctions against the Russian president himself. "Mr. Putin is not on the list of those sanctioned," Borrell said Tuesday evening after the special meeting of EU foreign ministers in Paris. The decision was made, he said, because there was a need to have further measures in reserve.

At the same time, the EU is increasing its support for the anti-Russian regime in Ukraine and increasing its NATO deployments in eastern Europe. On Tuesday, several EU states announced plans to mobilize their joint cybersecurity unit. "In response to Ukraine's request, [we] are activating [a] Lithuanian-led cyber rapid-response team, which will help Ukrainian institutions to cope with growing cyber-threats," the Lithuanian Ministry of Defence tweeted.

The EU's cybersecurity rapid response team was established in 2019 and consists of Estonia, Croatia, Lithuania, Poland and Romania.

German Defense Minister Christine Lambrecht on Tuesday visited German NATO troops in Lithuania, which have been reinforced in recent days by 350 soldiers and about 100 vehicles and weapons systems. "Russia is acting as an aggressor here. And it is uncertain at this hour how far the Russian side will push its aggression. We stand here

vigilant and ready to defend ourselves,” she threatened. “Unfortunately, the diplomacy of the last weeks and months has not been able to prevent this blatant breach of our European peace order.”

The arguments advanced by EU leaders for pursuing an escalating military confrontation with Russia are steeped in lies and hypocrisy. Above all, it is not Russia but the NATO powers that are pursuing an aggressive global military and economic policy, seeking to isolate Russia and reduce it to a semi-colonial status, totally subordinated to the political and military concerns of the NATO imperialist powers.

The current crisis represents the culmination of the war drive with which the NATO imperialist powers reacted to the Stalinist bureaucracy’s dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Freed of the military-political obstacle posed by the Soviet Union, the NATO powers attacked Iraq, Yugoslavia, Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq again, and then Libya and Syria. The wars left these countries shattered, costing trillions of dollars and millions of lives.

After Russian warships based in the port of Sevastopol in Crimea deployed off the Syrian coast to prevent US, French and other NATO warships from bombing Syria in September 2013, the NATO powers turned violently against Russia. They backed the Maidan protests and supported a putsch led by Ukrainian neo-fascists in Kiev in 2013 to install a NATO puppet regime in Ukraine. The separatists in Donetsk and Luhansk rebelled against far-right, anti-Russian militias sent by the Kiev regime to attack and terrorize Russian-speaking inhabitants.

As the Ukrainian armed forces, led by fascistic units like the Azov Battalion, now bomb Donetsk and Luhansk, this conflict has re-erupted, but the NATO powers are now pursuing it on a far larger scale, working to break diplomatic relations with Russia and create the grounds for war.

In its editorial, the French daily *Le Monde* denounces those who do not support a major escalation of sanctions against Russia, writing: “They want to believe that, as Russia was de facto present in the Donbas since 2014, it is not strictly speaking an invasion. This reaction is not up to task of facing the aggression now underway. It legitimizes the 2014 intervention. It does not take into account the profound ambitions of the Russian president: to re-establish a division of the European continent into spheres of influence based on his own criteria.”

The power that intervened in Ukraine in 2014 was not primarily Russia, however, but Washington and Berlin. When *Le Monde* denounces the “2014 intervention,” it attacks Russian aid to forces in Donetsk and Luhansk, but falsely treats the Kiev regime as an entirely legal entity by simply passing over in silence the fact that it was installed through an illegitimate, far-right coup.

Based on this *Le Monde* editorial, Russian intervention in east Ukraine in the most incendiary way possible, as an all-out invasion. From this it concludes that Russian concerns can play no role in the division of military influence between the capitalist powers in Europe, that is, in practice, that the NATO powers will brook no Russian objections to NATO’s placing weapons and troops on its very borders.

In this crisis, the geopolitical appetites of the NATO powers intersect with their attempts to impose reactionary health and social policies amid mounting working class opposition at home.

At the heart of the EU powers’ war drive against Russia is a political campaign to bury reporting of the COVID-19 pandemic. As 6 million people fall ill and more than 20,000 die every week in Europe, governments across the continent are moving to eliminate all remaining public health measures to stop the spread of the virus, a policy already adopted in Britain. Yet the pandemic increasingly is falling out of the news, as officials and pundits insist it must take a back seat to the war crisis NATO is inciting against Russia over Ukraine.

This was crassly laid out this weekend by Munich Security Conference chairman Wolfgang Ischinger, who called to abandon public health measures on COVID-19 and focus on war: “We cannot just postpone world politics. Security challenges don’t do social distancing.”

Such remarks testify to the total political bankruptcy of European capitalism. The war that must be fought is the war to stop the COVID-19 pandemic, not a global war with Russia, a nuclear-armed power. The critical question posed to workers across Europe and internationally by the EU threats against Russia is the building of an international anti-war movement in the working class.



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