

New Zealand government expedites law to ramp up Russian sanctions

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New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern last week announced “significant” new sanctions would be placed on Russia, including oligarchs, individuals and companies “responsible for or associated with the invasion of Ukraine.”

The Russia Sanctions Bill was rushed through parliament under urgency on March 9. It provides a targeted, autonomous sanctions regime on the Russian government. “A Bill of this nature has never been brought before our Parliament, but with Russia vetoing UN sanctions we must act ourselves to support Ukraine and our partners in opposition to this invasion,” Ardern said.

New Zealand could not previously impose economic sanctions outside the UN. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, it has been restricted to sanctions authorised by the UN Security Council in regulations under the United Nations Act 1946. The new law circumvents this while the government considers a broader sanctions regime.

The Ardern government initially responded to Russia’s invasion by issuing travel bans, prohibiting exports to the military and suspending bilateral foreign ministry consultations. International pressure to apply wider sanctions soon followed. The *Wall Street Journal* noted on March 1 that while the US and its allies were ramping up sanctions, New Zealand—a member of the Five Eyes intelligence network including the US, Canada, Australia and the UK—was the “one country sitting out.”

The NZ parliament has united behind the Sanctions Bill, with National, ACT, the Maori Party and the Greens, which is part of the government, voting unanimously in support. The main opposition National Party last year attempted to introduce a similar autonomous sanctions law, principally aimed at China, but was blocked by Labour.

Ardern said New Zealand had tried to work with the UN in recent years on relevant issues. However, with the

Ukraine crisis, she said, the multilateral system had failed. “Ultimately if we had a Security Council that was more functional, we would not be in this situation in the first place,” Ardern added.

The move further exposes the falsehood of New Zealand’s decades-long posturing over its “independent,” approach to foreign policy. Washington suspended defence agreements with Wellington under the ANZUS treaty, which included Australia, in 1985 after the David Lange-led Labour government adopted a nuclear-free policy and refused entry to US warships.

Since then, successive governments have worked to rebuild relations with Washington. In 2001 the Helen Clark-led Labour government, supported by the “left-wing” Alliance, despatched SAS troops to the invasion of Afghanistan, followed by army engineers to Iraq. Hillary Clinton used her official visit to Wellington in 2010 as Secretary of State to formally end the 25-year rift and restore the two countries’ military relationship.

Wellington, however, retained a certain room to manoeuvre. Successive administrations have operated trade and diplomatic ties with countries that suited their immediate purpose—particularly China. Labour has maintained a delicate balancing act with Beijing, the country’s major trading partner, while coming under intensifying pressure from the US and Australia to more overtly join the anti-China confrontation.

The US-NATO war against Russia has now provided the opportunity to advance a strategy that has been under preparation for some time. A NZ Defence Ministry assessment released in December demanded a more aggressive military stance against both China and Russia, which were accused of “undermining the international rules-based system”—i.e. the post-World War II rules established by Washington to enforce its global hegemony.

The new law provides for sanctions on people, services,

companies, and assets related to those in Russia who are responsible for or associated with the invasion, or that are of economic or strategic relevance to Russia, including oligarchs. It also allows for sanctions against other states “complicit with Russia’s illegal actions,” such as Belarus.

The first tranche of sanctions will be relatively straightforward, such as travel ban extensions and banking restrictions. The list of those banned from travelling to NZ has just been published and includes Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The second tranche will take longer to activate and will involve identifying more people to be targeted. Russian investment in New Zealand is only about \$NZ40 million, but according to Ardern “it’s not just about what’s already invested here, but what might be invested here.”

A host of purported “peace” organisations and pseudo-left groups are playing a central role in whipping up support for the intensifying diplomatic and financial isolation of Russia, while suppressing longstanding anti-war sentiment among the population.

The Green Party, notwithstanding that the declared “centre-piece” of its global affairs policy is “to join with peoples around the world to oppose war,” dutifully fell into line. Foreign affairs spokeswoman Golriz Gharhaman said the Greens were initially concerned about not wanting sanctions to affect ordinary Russians. Supporting the Bill, however, she declared: “We feel it is focused on those most responsible and it has a higher level of transparency than sanctions regimes previously [proposed].”

Among the most vociferous advocates is Greenpeace Aotearoa whose director, Russel Norman, a former Green Party leader, said the government was acting “too slowly.” It was necessary, he declared, “to make it very clear to the elites that run Russia ... that what they’re doing is completely unacceptable, and we’re going to freeze their assets if they continue to do it.” Norman is organising a flotilla to Helena Bay north of Auckland to protest a locally-based wealthy Russian resident, Alexander Abramov.

The pseudo-left International Socialist Organisation has taken part in protests, including at the Russian embassy in Wellington, and posted material online with the slogan “We stand with Ukraine!” accompanied by the Ukrainian flag. Ukraine is depicted as an innocent party caught “in the crosshairs” between US imperialism on the one hand and “Russian imperialism,” on the other.

“Standing with Ukraine” is not an anti-war position—it is the slogan of the ruling elites in every capitalist

country, including New Zealand. It means support for the current pro-EU and pro-NATO Ukrainian government which is falsely depicted as “democratic” and was complicit in preparing the conditions for the invasion. The branding of Russia falsely as an imperialist power only serves to diminish the central responsibility of Washington and its allies for the war.

The corporate media and business elite are joining in the demonisation of Russia. Sky TV has dropped Russia Today (RT), a Russian government-funded 24-hour news channel, from its services. A Sky spokesman claimed the Broadcasting Standards Authority had warned broadcasters “of the need for particular care when reporting on crises.” The move follows a pattern of censorship aimed at RT and other media sources with Russian connections imposed across the US and Europe.

A major liquor supplier, Liquorland, has also declared it will not promote or buy any more Russian products. The West Auckland Trusts, which owns 26 retail stores and hospitality venues, announced this week it was stopping selling Russian-made products and would replace their shelves with a Ukrainian flag.

In the increasingly foetid political atmosphere, reports are emerging of New Zealand resident Russians receiving abuse and harassment, including children bullied at school. The Russian Orthodox Church in Mt Eden was reportedly vandalised earlier this week. Photos posted online showed red paint thrown on the door, and posters comparing Putin to Hitler. This came less than a week after a Christchurch shop selling Russian goods was vandalised with graffiti.



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