

EU WILL TOUGHEN SANCTIONS ON UKRAINIAN SEPARATISTS, BUT NOT ON RUSSIA

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Since Federica Mogherini's nomination as EU Foreign Affairs Chief in August, some Eastern European member states expressed some reserves over her ability to adopt a strong position on Moscow regarding its role in the Ukrainian crisis. As such, in July, some Eastern European countries tried to block her candidacy, fearing that it is too sympathetic of Russia, which is one of Italy's biggest energy suppliers and export markets and although recently she has adopted a more critical approach towards Moscow, she will be under a close scrutiny because Italy has been perceived as not so critical of Russia's actions as the Eastern European countries which have recently felt strongly threatened by Moscow's actions in eastern Ukraine.

The new head of EU Foreign Affairs acknowledged since the beginning that a "*mix of assertiveness and diplomacy*" was important in balancing Moscow's reactions. The realistic views Mogherini has over EU's relations with Kremlin are based upon the fact that although Russia is not a partner today, it still represents a strategic country and more important a neighbour, with whom Brussels has to engage on key international issues. The EU has imposed in the last months important rounds of economic sanctions on Russia for its illegal annexation of Crimea and support for the pro-Russian separatists in Eastern Ukraine, thus creating the strongest tensions between Moscow and the West since the end of the Cold War.

On November 17th, the EU agreed to blacklist more Ukrainian separatists, but it did not extend its sanctions against Russia, expressing thus the hope of restarting dialogue with Moscow and Federica Mogherini mentioned the possibility of her to visit Moscow in an attempt to end the military crisis that claimed over 4.100 lives. At the G20 Summit, important Western leaders including Barack Obama and David Cameron strongly condemned Putin's actions in Ukraine and warned that despite the important economic cost, they were ready to intensify the sanctions.

NATO'S chief, Jens Stoltenberg recently confirmed Ukrainian reports that Russia has indeed moved military troops closer to the border with Ukraine, continuing at the same time its support for the rebels in the country's east (training, equipment, special forces), after the elections held by the Pro-Russian separatists, a move strongly condemned by the Western community.

The renewed fighting between Russian-backed rebels and Kiev's security forces, Putin's rejection of Western claims that Moscow has sent troops and equipment into Ukraine and its decision to retaliate by expelling several European diplomats, underline the important obstacles faced by any peace efforts. Although resuming peace talks with Russia is an important aspect on the European political agenda and Federica Mogherini emphasizes that even if Moscow is part of the problem, it is also part of a possible peaceful solution, the recent military support offered by the Russian Federation to rebels in Eastern Ukraine make the peace talks scenario unlikely. What is important to mention is that the EU has long been divided over the sanctions and if initially limited them to individuals, after the illegal annexation of Crimea they were extended to target the Russian economy.

Regarding this recent Russian military involvement in eastern Ukraine, it's important to see if in the near term Moscow will make genuine efforts towards a peaceful solution and if it will cooperate with the West in asking the rebels to respect the Minsk agreements, the ceasefire which is a vital precondition of any future political solution to the extremely difficult situation in Ukraine. But as long as Moscow declared that after the election of Alexander Zakharchenko and Igor Plonitsky as leaders of the Donetsk and Luhansk "*people's republics*", Kiev should negotiate directly with them, it can be concluded that Russia does not understand the peace process in the same manner Western leaders do. It is extremely important

to mention that those two self-proclaimed leaders do not have legitimacy, the Kiev government being the sole authority that has the right to govern the entire Ukrainian territory. The so called elections were illegal and illegitimate, not recognized by the EU and together with Moscow's approach of treating them as legal partners in the peace negotiations, amount to an important risk that could end chances for rebel dialogue with Kiev and then of Kiev with Moscow. The effects of this regional conflict can quickly broaden in "major fires" in the entire European Union and even Germany recognizes that Russia should be strongly blamed for its actions in Ukraine, for intimidating sovereign states in Eastern Europe.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin urged Brussels to "*send a clear message*" to Moscow that robust and more powerful sanctions will be adopted if Russia does not end its actions of destabilizing Ukraine and if it continues to support the rebels, thus making the situation on the ground deteriorate. So even if the Ukrainian authorities urge EU to speak with one voice to Russia over Ukraine, Klimkin warned that the Ukrainian crisis represents a threat to the security of the whole continent and Brussels has to clearly define its unitary position when it will become clear that Russia will not willingly return to the Minsk Agreement.

Not imposing more sanctions on Russia, but only on separatist rebels, may underline the strong division within the EU's 28 member states about imposing more sanctions for the main energy supplier, fearing that possible reprisals of Moscow could damage their own economies. Thus any discussion regarding tighter economic sanctions will probably have to wait. Despite the fact that Mogherini is the chief of EU Foreign Affairs, foreign policy is still very much the domain of national governments and there is not yet a unified European voice. Also, Ms. Mogherini underlined that sanctions may be an appropriate tool, but questioned their effectiveness in changing Moscow's actions in Ukraine, declaring at the same time that the EU must be more active in pressing for a political solution to the crisis. The strategic discussions of EU foreign ministers about the situation in Ukraine are likely to continue and even though Mogherini pushes for an increased dialogue with Moscow, Putin's position in the different international forums and in its lengthy discussions with Angela Merkel, emphasize that EU leaders have made little progress in easing the renewed tensions in eastern Ukraine.

"Who would've thought," said Angela Merkel, "*that 25 years after the fall of the wall, after the end of the Cold War, after the end of the division of Europe, something like that can happen right at the heart of Europe?*" (Deutsche Welle). Merkel admits that the Ukrainian conflict goes to the centre of our European values and that Putin's annexation of Crimea and military and political interference in eastern Ukraine represent a return to the moment when Russia decided the fate of its near neighbours. Putin is not likely to cede in front of the European pressures and will probably continue to accuse the West for acting inappropriately, with an already familiar line of defence, believing that according to the international law Crimea's independence, similar to Kosovo's which came after a parliamentary vote, should be recognised by the international community.

Ukraine's prime-minister, Arseniy Yatsenyuk urged the Western community to determine Russia to stop its aggression because he believes that "*Putin will move as far as the world will allow him*". Although sanctions are as Federica Mogherini asserts "*an effective tool in a broader strategy*", it will remain to see if there will be a halt to the continuous violation of the Minsk agreement and of the ceasefire it proposed, if Russia will withdraw its illegal forces, mercenaries and military equipment. Ukraine will also have to greatly enhance its economic and political reform efforts in order to continue to receive support from the European Union. Even if Vladimir Putin acknowledged that peace is still possible, because of the fact that he still believes that neither the Ukrainian government troops and the rebels are fully abiding by the Minsk Agreement and after Russia's recent military mobilization at the Ukrainian border, the scenario of a new rebel offensive becomes extremely probable.