en | de

News | 31.07.2014

Sanctions against Russia

Disagreements in the EU strengthen Putin

Comment by Rebecca Harms, president of the Greens/EFA group in the European Parliament

Published in German on 28 Juli 2014 at www.zeit-online.de

As early as late February, following Russia's occupation and annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula, the European Union had resolved to strengthen its negotiating position towards Russia through economic sanctions. The aim was to prevent a further escalation against Ukraine and a further infringement of her right of self-determination and territorial integrity. Russia's breach of the Budapest Memorandum and alarming violation of the European peace order was to be met with an entirely non-military response. This was, and is, appropriate. Today, however, we must say: To date, the destabilization of Ukraine's eastern territories could not be stopped. Yet none of what is happening in eastern Ukraine would be possible without the self-proclaimed separatists receiving supplies from across the Russian border. The downing of the Malaysian airliner with nearly 300 lives lost, the dehumanizing treatment of the dead, their families and friends, the blatant disregard for the international community shown by the mercenaries of the so-called 'Donetsk People's Republic', is a disturbing event for the entire world. And in this single instant, Western Europe too suddenly becomes aware of how terrible conditions are on the ground in eastern Ukraine. Thus far, any rekindled hope that Vladimir Putin might change his course has been misplaced. Clashes between the mercenaries and the Ukrainian army continue day after day. Allegedly, there is now more fire coming from Russian territory. The number of refugees, of people killed and wounded is rising. The Red Cross has categorized the fighting as war.

I firmly believe that economic sanctions, i.e. non-military instruments, are the correct means by which to confront Russia in this dispute. But the European heads of state and government must finally ensure that what is jointly declared and decided on behalf of the EU is binding for all – precisely because it is possible

to influence the Russian leadership through economic sanctions. The previous targeted measures and sanctions against individual persons and companies have already impacted the Russian economy. International capital is being withdrawn from Russia. However, economic sanctions will only work if the EU's common position is not eroded from within the EU itself. Existing arms deals with Russia should have been stopped immediately after the Crimean annexation. Now several countries are facing deserved criticism, including France for the Mistral warships. Great Britain, one of Ukraine's "protectors" along with Russia and the United States according to the Budapest Memorandum, is continuing to supply Russia with arms and military equipment! By contrast, up until last week, the week that MH117 was shot down, an embargo was still in place against Ukraine on defensive equipment such as flak jackets, military helmets or 2-way radios. Apart from the arms exports, it is also the contracts on the new Southstream gas pipeline concluded with Gazprom while the military escalation in Ukraine was unfolding that undermine the European position.

In spite of all assurances and resolutions, the EU so far has remained inconsistent. If anything, the shocking end of flight MH117 should have put a stop to business as usual. However, it appears as if politicians and businesspeople are still refusing to squarely face the post-Crimean reality. Even –and particularly – in the affluent EU states, governments are hesitant to explain to their citizens that they will have to prepare for a different stance if Russia does not alter its strategy of destabilizing its neighbour. The Dutch government is not the only one currently being confronted with the question of how it could come to this.

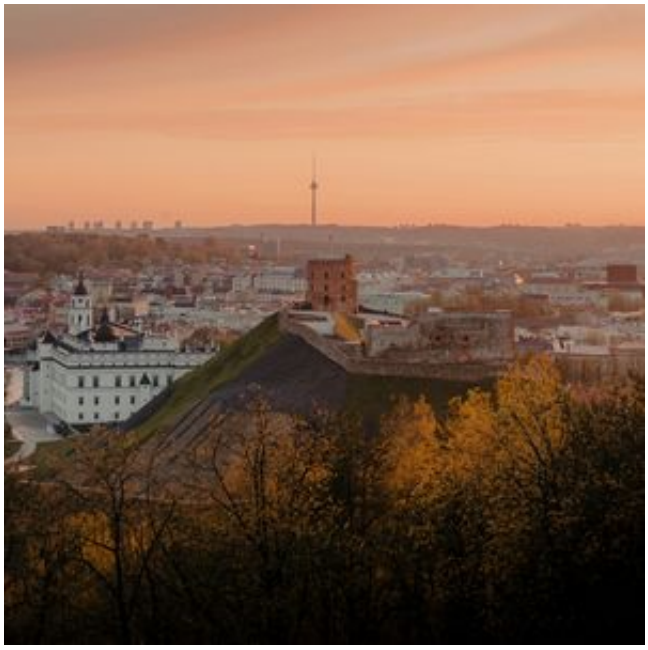
At the moment it is not clear what the EU heads of state and government will decide next week. Most certainly, we will still be left with the question of what else must happen for stage 3 of the sanctions to be implemented. But what is even more pressing than determining the rationale behind these steps is the need for unified action. After my trip to Slavyansk, Artemovsk and Kharkiv in the days immediately following the downing of flight MH117, after many talks with politicians, old friends, soldiers, and opponents as well as supporters of the Euromaidan movement, my conclusion today is that despite the signing of the association agreement with Ukraine and despite the catalogue of sanctions, the EU has convinced neither the Russian president nor the Ukrainian citizens. As many times as president Putin has promised de-escalation, as often it has led to nothing. The treatment of the victims of flight MH117 demonstrates this once again. Vladimir Putin simply does not perceive the EU as standing united. This makes him strong. And the Ukrainians are following all of this very closely. Despite all conflict between the regions and Kiev, and despite president Poroshenko being criticized, the country is more united than ever. The winter of the Euromaidan, Putin, the occupation of the Crimea, and the military escalation in the Donbas, have brought this about. And the strongest force is the citizens' desire to democratically shape their country's future and to take responsibility for it. Yet because the EU appears so double-minded and mostly guided by economic interests, there is a growing sentiment among Ukrainians that they are being left to their own devices. The destabilization strategy, the provocation trap, is thus all the more effective. Ukraine, her citizens and government are apparently being pulled further and further into an ever-expanding military conflict. The Ukrainians never wanted this war. Nor are the country and its army prepared for it. With the European Council about to deliberate anew on the matter, it should be clear that our inconstancy intensifies the dangerous undertow. We bear responsibility for previous and future developments. As the most critical step towards de-escalation, as a prerequisite for an armistice, we must achieve a closing of the border between Russia and Ukraine. The supply of weaponry, manpower and money from Russia into Ukraine must be cut. How this can be accomplished, and whether a robust and reinforced OSCE mission can help to achieve this, is a matter which security experts need to determine.

The EU must obtain the consent of the Russian leadership. I remain convinced that what this requires of us in the EU is that we modify our economic relations with Russia. In any case, the proposed European energy union must be pursued. But while we are talking about natural gas, Mercedes, Mistrals and other goods, for many people at Europe's eastern edge the question of war or peace is growing more and more acute by the day. The partial mobilization of the Ukrainian army was enacted a few days ago. And this does concern us. The EU did not only sign an association agreement. We pledged to vouch for Ukraine's right of self-determination and territorial integrity. Not just Ukraine, but Poland and the Baltic states as well, are observing very closely whether this promise stands – particularly with regard to Germany. The credibility of the EU's strategy has long become a matter of self-respect and one of respect for European values, for global values. Who is to respect the EU if we do not respect ourselves? The heads of state and government should bear this in mind when they decide on economic sanctions: 100 years after the outbreak of the First World War, the European Union faces the challenge of defending the continent's peaceful order by non-military means.

Our failure would hit Ukraine the hardest. Such a failure, however, would also put the EU itself to the most severe test.

Recommended

Press release



[Greens/EFA in Vilnius: Lithuanian Presidency must lead…]

05.11.2026

Press release

@gettysignature



[U-turn by Conservatives and Social Democrats Puts Jobs…]

04.11.2026

Press release

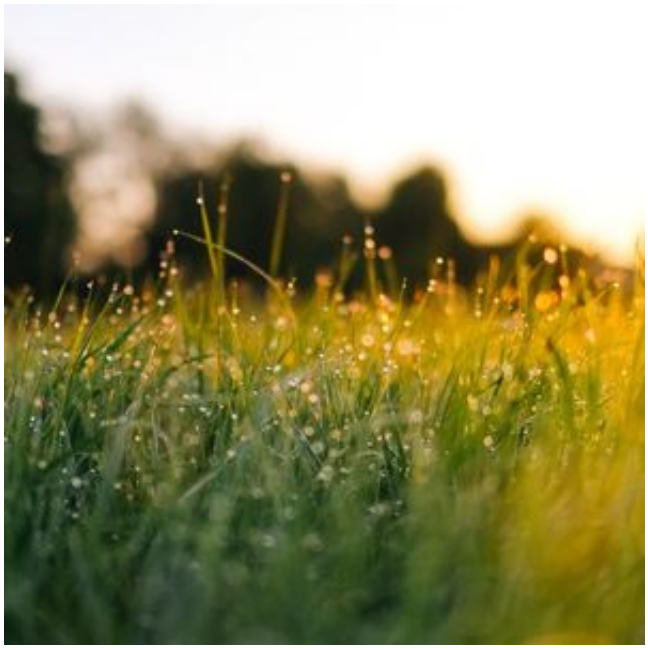
Image by joakant from Pixabay



The World must triple efforts to save nature

29.10.2026

Press release



COP17/Armenia: Jutta Paulus, MEP, to attend as member …

22.10.2026

Responsible MEPs



Rebecca Harms

Member

Please share

- E-Mail