

EU Ministers Consider Expansion of Russia Sanctions

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LUXEMBOURG — The European Union threatened Russia with more sanctions on Monday over its actions in eastern Ukraine, which Britain said was being destabilized by Moscow, although some EU states said diplomacy should be given more time.

Ukraine dominated talks among EU foreign ministers after Kiev threatened military action against pro-Russian separatists occupying government buildings in the east.

British Foreign Secretary William Hague, arriving for the meeting in Luxembourg, said there was no doubt that Moscow was behind the destabilization of eastern Ukraine.

"I don't think denials of Russian involvement have a shred of credibility," Hague told reporters, adding the EU now needed to discuss adding more people to a list of 33 Russian and Ukrainian officials targeted by EU asset freezes and travel bans over the Ukraine crisis.

Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski said the EU must now agree how the list could be expanded.

"The EU has to make it clear to Russia what are the consequences of any possible future actions in eastern Ukraine," he said. "I expect a very specific signal when we can expect sanctions if Russia takes further steps."

Other governments were more cautious on sanctions, underscoring concerns in parts of Europe about antagonizing a power with an energy stranglehold over the bloc, and put their faith in talks planned for Geneva on Thursday.

"Our main task today is to do everything so that this conference on Thursday in Geneva can take place and take place in a calm atmosphere," said Jean Asselborn, Luxembourg's foreign minister.

Germany said the planned meeting between the EU, the U.S., Russia and Ukraine could help calm tensions even though the option of sanctions remained on the table.

The ministers also agreed some steps to help Ukraine overcome its deepening economic crisis, approving a package of nearly 500 million euros (\$685 million) worth of trade benefits, which include the removal of duties on a wide range of agricultural goods, textiles and other imports.

Four Ukrainians were also added to a list of people targeted with EU sanctions over misappropriation of state funds.

Under discussion on Monday was also a possible EU mission to train police and other law-enforcement officials in Ukraine to help stabilize the country, as proposed by Britain, Sweden and Poland, and supported by Germany.

Such a mission — likely to irritate Russia — would seek to rebuild Ukraine's police and legal system in the short term to help combat violence in the country of 46 million people and lay the groundwork for implementing a proposed free-trade deal with the EU.

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