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EU Draft Would Extend Russia Sanctions Over Ukraine Escalation

By The Moscow Times

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A decision on further economic sanctions on Russia is likely to be left to EU leaders who next meet on Feb. 12.

The European Union will extend asset freezes and travel bans imposed on dozens of Russians and Ukrainians after Moscow's annexation of Crimea to the end of this year, according to a draft statement seen by Reuters on Wednesday.

A draft statement, prepared for an extraordinary meeting of EU foreign ministers on Thursday, said sanctions imposed from March last year on people undermining Ukraine's sovereignty would be extended until December 2015.

Foreign ministers have called the extraordinary meeting after a new advance by pro-Russian rebels. Kiev says 30 civilians were killed in shelling of the Ukrainian government-held port of Mariupol by pro-Russian rebels on Saturday, shattering a five-month ceasefire.

"In view of the worsening situation, the Council (of foreign ministers) agrees to extend the restrictive measures targeting persons and entities for threatening or undermining Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity," draft conclusions for the meeting said.

The statement was referring to asset freezes and travel bans put on dozens of Ukrainians and Russians since Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Crimea peninsula last March.

The ministers will also ask the EU's executive Commission and its diplomatic service to draw up a list of further names that could be put under sanctions, for a decision within a week, the draft statement said.

Ministers will pledge to closely follow the situation on the ground and to "act accordingly." They will ask officials to carry out more work "on any appropriate action, in particular on further restrictive measures, aiming at ensuring a swift and comprehensive implementation" of a truce deal signed last September in Minsk, which Western countries accuse Moscow of violating.

A decision on further economic sanctions on Russia is likely to be left to EU leaders who next meet on Feb. 12.

Russia Responsible

The draft statement noted evidence of continued and growing support given to the separatists by Russia, saying it underlined Russia's responsibility for the conflict that has already killed more than 5,000 people.

Russia denies direct involvement in the conflict. Kiev and NATO say Moscow has sent thousands of troops to fight alongside pro-Russian rebels, as well as arming and funding them.

Forging a unanimous policy on Russia has been tricky for the European Union, and one wild card could be Greece, whose newly elected leftist Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras has complained about Brussels speaking on Russia without consulting him first.

Greece's new foreign minister said he would not comment on Greece's position ahead of Thursday's meeting. A government spokesman said the issue was not discussed at a meeting of the new cabinet.

According to the draft, EU ministers will call on Russia to condemn the actions of the separatists and implement the Minsk deal. The most urgent goal was ending hostilities and withdrawing heavy weapons from the security zone along the line of contact foreseen in the Minsk agreement, the draft said.

"Public statements distorting the reality on the ground, inciting to hatred and further violence, as well as publicly humiliating prisoners in violation of international law will not lead to the badly needed de-escalation," the draft says.

The ministers will call on Russia and the separatists to allow free and safe access to international monitors, and ask the EU's foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini to step up efforts to counter Russian disinformation.

Despite sharp divisions among the EU countries over the wisdom of imposing sanctions on Russia, the bloc's main energy supplier, the EU agreed several rounds of sanctions last year.

In some of the strongest language yet, the head of the European Council of EU leaders, Poland's Donald Tusk, hit out at the weekend at "appeasement" of Russia and said it was "time to step up our policy based on cold facts, not illusions."

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