

The Ukrainian-Russian conflict and East-West relations

Witold Rodkiewicz

Reacting to the Russian military intervention in Crimea, on 2 March the United States suspended trade talks and discontinued military co-operation with the Russian Federation; on March 6 President Barack Obama authorised his administration to apply financial and travel sanctions against those responsible for threatening the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine. On the same day the European Council suspended its negotiations with Russia on visa abolition and the new Basic Agreement. The Council threatened to impose travel bans, asset freezes and to cancel the EU-Russia summit, if Moscow failed to take steps to de-escalate the conflict. The G7 member states announced that they were suspending their participation in the G8 summit in Sochi planned in June.

Moscow has consistently denied the fact of a military intervention in Crimea, and has consistently maintained that the toppling of President Yanukovych was illegal. Meanwhile, in a press conference on 4 March, President Vladimir Putin hinted that Russia was prepared to co-operate on stabilising the situation in Ukraine, albeit on its own terms.

Commentary

- The first diplomatic and press reactions suggest that – despite the general consensus that Russia has violated international law by committing armed aggression against Ukraine – the West, and especially the EU, intends to limit itself to temporary and symbolic sanctions, its primary objectives being to de-escalate the conflict and maintain dialogue with Moscow. Some rifts have emerged between Washington on the one hand, and Berlin and Paris on the other: while the US administration is ready to demonstrate its disapproval of Russia's actions in Ukraine in harsher terms, Berlin and Paris have traditionally emphasised the need to continue the dialogue with Russia and oppose any actions that might 'isolate' Russia. For instance, Berlin has rejected Washington's proposal to exclude Russia from the G8, and Paris announced that it would not end its military co-operation with Moscow, referring to Russia as its "historical partner". The media in the US and Germany have expressed doubts as to whether the EU would impose real economic sanctions against Russia, because of the German economy's dependence on Russian gas, and fears that sanctions would merely lead to a further escalation of tensions, isolating Russia from the West and deepening the divisions on the European continent.
- Russia's strategy towards the West envisages two phases. In the first, the West is to be forced to accept Russia's definition of the crisis and its causes, i.e. to accept that the

problem that needs to be addressed is not the Russian aggression against Ukraine, but rather the collapse of the Ukrainian state in the aftermath of an alleged armed *coup d'état* carried out by extreme groups in Kyiv. The second phase would involve negotiating the parameters of the 'reconstruction' of the Ukrainian state with the West in a way that would safeguard Russian interests. In return, Russia would refrain from further destabilising Ukraine. At the moment the key Russian diplomatic objective appears to set such conditions for the operation of the contact group (which was proposed by Chancellor Angela Merkel on 1 March) that would guarantee the achievement of the Russian objectives. Russia should not be expected to agree to a OSCE fact-finding mission to Ukraine, as such a mission could subject Russia's actions there to international scrutiny, but it will be prepared to accept a mission tasked with monitoring the new Ukrainian government's observance of human and ethnic minority rights. Likewise, Russia will not allow military observers into Crimea (on 4 March, eighteen OSCE member states decided to send observers to the peninsula under the Vienna Document on confidence and security building).