

# The EU's 'tougher' sanctions against Russia must be used as a step toward greater engagement, not simply as a punishment

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On 29 July, EU governments approved a number of new sanctions against Russia over the Ukraine crisis.

**Borja Guijarro-Usobiaga** writes on the likely impact of the new sanctions, arguing that rather than simply using sanctions as a method for punishing Russia, they must be seen as a stepping stone to promote greater engagement with the country. He notes that alienating Russia would not only pose a problem for the crisis in Ukraine, but also for other conflicts such as the civil war in Syria.



After months of discussions, EU leaders have finally [agreed](#) to impose the so-called “tier three” sanctions against Russia, which will target broad sectors of the Russian economy. Although this decision responds to the failure of repeated threats to deter Putin from supporting Pro-Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine, EU leaders only reached agreement after the commercial air carrier MH17 from Malaysia Airlines was allegedly shot down by the rebels.

Sanctions are expected to have an important [economic cost](#) for Russia, yet it is far from clear that this will automatically lead to a solution to the conflict. In fact, as happened with Iran, broad economic sanctions could also contribute to a further isolation of Russia. This would be highly detrimental to efforts to solve other problems worldwide, as Russia is still a key player in the United Nations and in the Mediterranean (e.g. with regard to issues like Syria).

It is also unclear whether Russia will yield to the pressure of sanctions. In fact, as the Sino-Russian meeting at the end of May showed, Putin is likely to turn to China to strengthen the economic ties with the Asian giant and to find alternative markets for Russian exports. This could undermine the effectiveness of sanctions in changing Russia's stance towards the Ukrainian conflict.

Moreover, economic pain will not automatically translate into a change of Russian attitude. After all, Russia's economic and security interests are not going to change in the short term. To make this point clear, the Kremlin has already threatened Ukraine with a [food import ban](#) if it ratifies the Association Agreement that it has already signed with the EU. A similar ban is likely to follow against EU fruit exports to Russia. Most worrying of all, EU and Ukrainian leaders can also expect an interruption of gas supplies to Europe this winter.

Nevertheless, economic sanctions might succeed in halting the flow of Russian arms over the Ukrainian border and in bringing an end to violence. As Jan Techau has [argued](#), the only way of establishing a good relationship with Russia is by showing a firm position: ‘Weakness invites Russia's disdain and aggression. Robustness creates a constructive atmosphere’. Hence, the failed Geneva talks in April might have been more successful if the threat of strong economic sanctions had accompanied the EU's negotiating delegation.

However, the EU's need to show resolve in its relationship with Russia points to another problem that looms on the horizon: how should the EU engage with Russia in the long term? Although sanctions might enhance the EU's position in the current crisis and force Putin to the negotiating table, the EU needs to make clear what it expects from its eastern neighbour in the future and to [design a strategy](#) accordingly.

The EU cannot afford to repeat the mistakes of its accommodating approach to the Kremlin. This has not only failed to integrate Russia into the club of democratic nations of Europe; it has also contributed toward sustaining and strengthening an increasingly assertive, corrupt and repressive state that is willing to revise the existing sovereign

order by force. Dealing with such a country will be difficult as long as the EU and its member states tolerate the authoritarian excesses of Putin.

Sanctions will strain the relationship with Russia even more. But they will also open new spaces for accommodating the interests and concerns of the two parts. The EU needs to use these opportunities to set clear and specific goals about its ambitions and expectations regarding Russia. In particular, it has to be certain that its relationship with the Kremlin can only improve if it is based on political reciprocity. This implies that the EU should be ready to back its words with economic coercion if necessary, but also that it should offer Russia incentives to co-operate.

Most importantly, the EU cannot continue expanding eastwards without expecting some political fallout in its relations with Russia. Although its promotion of Association Agreements with former Soviet countries responds to the latter's sovereign desire to join the EU to foster economic growth and prosperity, the EU cannot simply ignore *Realpolitik* considerations when it proceeds with these agreements.

Finally, the EU has to reassess the possibilities of integrating its eastern neighbour into the legal and institutional framework of Europe. Change in Russia will only occur slowly and from within, but the EU can help by making its help and co-operation conditional on the achievement of specific targets. This could be achieved through the revival of existing institutional frameworks like the [Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe](#) (OSCE).

Inevitably, the implementation of tier three sanctions is likely to occupy the minds of EU leaders in the foreseeable weeks. However, EU policy-makers would be wrong to conceive of these sanctions as a goal in themselves. Rather, they should start thinking of sanctions as *a means* to engage with Russia, and not simply as a punishment. Only in this way might sanctions be of help to address the "Russian problem".

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