

Poland attacks 'Russophile' France in sanctions talks

By ANDREW RETTMAN

A Polish minister has accused France of harming EU solidarity on Russia in a sign of tension ahead of sanctions talks.

The Polish agriculture minister, Marek Sawicki, made the comments in Brussels on Monday (26 January) at a regular meeting with his EU counterparts.

“France and Germany are more Russophile than some other member states”, he said.

“France has two ships to sell, so it’s looking for any way to improve Franco-Russian relations ... France has shown many times its relations with Russia are more important to it than its relations inside the EU and that disturbs me”.

His remarks refer to two warships which France was to deliver to Russia before the Ukraine crisis.

They also refer to Russia’s ban last year on EU pig meat exports on health grounds and its later ban on most EU food exports in retaliation against the EU’s Ukraine-linked sanctions.

Sawicki spoke after France, one week ago, announced that “an agreement in principle was reached on the resumption of French exports of live pigs, offal, and pig fat to Russia” during bilateral talks with Russian officials in Berlin.

For its part, the European Commission in Berlin also made a deal with Russia to let it pick and choose which EU countries can be exempt from the Ukraine-linked ban.

Sawicki said after Monday's meeting that both the health commissioner, Vytenis Andriukaitis, and the farm commissioner, Phil Hogan, told him in "head-to-head" conversations there is no EU green light for bilateral arrangements with Russia.

He added that Andriukaitis said Ladislav Miko, the EU official who made the Berlin deal on the food ban, "had no authority" to do so.

Hogan himself told press "all member states agreed we have to show solidarity on this issue". Britain, Germany, and the Baltic states also backed the Polish line.

France, whose minister left the EU Council room during the Russia ban debate, declined to comment. But sources say France was "surprised" by Sawicki's attack because its pig meat announcement related to progress in "technical talks" with Russia rather than to a final agreement.

Sanction options

The food dispute points to divisions inside the EU ahead of foreign ministers' talks on the Ukraine crisis on Thursday.

The EU called Thursday's meeting after Russia-controlled fighters killed dozens of civilians in a rocket attack on the Ukrainian city of Mariupol as part of a new Russian offensive.

Estonian president Toomas Hendrik Ilves said on Monday Russia's actions "must ... mean expansion of the visa sanction list and that we consider new economic sanctions".

Two EU diplomatic sources said the EU foreign service is identifying new names to add to existing blacklists and might propose listing the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic as terrorist entities.

The EU foreign service declined to say if this is true.

Jack Lew, the US treasury chief, who was in the EU capital on Monday, also threatened Russia with further “economic strain”.

He described the existing economic sanctions as “the most sophisticated ever designed”, adding “we have more tools at our disposal”.

But German foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier said in Berlin the EU might not take any extra measures if there are no more attacks on Mariupol.

“A lot depends on how the next three days go. After the talks I've had in last days with some European colleagues, nobody is desperately ambitious to meet in Brussels to impose sanctions”, he noted, Reuters reports.

“Of course, an attack or a broad offensive on Mariupol would be a qualitative change in the situation to which we would have to react”.

Desired effect?

EU and US economic sanctions prevent Russian banks from raising capital on international markets, making it harder to service their dollar-denominated debt.

For his part, Marlen Kruzhkov, a US-based lawyer who represents what he describes as several Russian “oligarchs”, told EUobserver the sanctions could help cause a Russian default.

“The low oil price is the main driver [of Russia’s economic problems]”, he said.

“The Russian economy was going downhill, but the sanctions gave it a push so it’s going more quickly and more out of control ... there's a very good chance of a default in general and of some banks closing”.

He added the EU and US pressure might not have the desired effect - eroding support for the war on Ukraine - because of Russian propaganda and culture, however.

“So long as the Russian people feel they are being targeted by a foreign enemy, and the Russian authorities have been very good at putting that across, they will forgo things. They’ll eat less. They’ll party less. They’ll suffer”, he said.

“Russian people are very good at suffering”.