

EU and US split over response to Russia-Ukraine crisis

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News

MEP Anna Elżbieta Fotyga says 'lack of determination' over Ukraine is facilitating Russian aggression.



At last week's European council summit meeting, German chancellor Angela Merkel and French president François Hollande were praised for successfully achieving a ceasefire agreement between Ukraine and Russia. However, this diplomatic success failed to mask the clear differences between the western allies on how to deal effectively with Russia, which emerged at the Munich security conference (MSC), in Germany, earlier that week.

Reflecting these differences in an angry reaction to Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov's invitation speak at the MSC, chair of the parliament's security and defence subcommittee (SEDE) Anna Elżbieta Fotyga told this magazine, "Russia should be officially recognised as an aggressor state, and should not have been invited to such events as the conference in Munich nor AFET [foreign affairs] committee meetings."

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invited to such events as the conference in Munich nor AFET committee meetings" - Anna Elżbieta Fotyga

Military and security experts, as well as world leaders including German chancellor Angela Merkel, US vice-president Joe Biden, US secretary of state John Kerry, Ukraine president Petro Poroshenko, and European parliament president Martin Schulz, discussed various security and humanitarian issues. However, the main issue that dominated the two-day meeting was the current Ukrainian crisis and what action should be taken against Russia, in particular the question of whether to send more sophisticated military equipment to Ukraine to counter Kremlin backed Russian minorities.

Biden was categorical in his support for military aid, telling attendees, "let me be clear we do not believe there is a military solution in Ukraine, but let me be equally clear, Russia does not have the right to do what they are doing. We believe we should attempt an honourable peace, but we also believe the Ukrainian people have a right to defend themselves."

Though Merkel, echoing Biden's view that, "there is no military solution to the present crisis", strongly opposed sending arms, saying, "the problem is that I cannot imagine a situation in which better equipment [...] would lead to president Putin being so impressed that he thinks he is losing militarily."

Merkel's views on not arming Ukraine, were also backed by some of the members of the European parliament's SEDE subcommittee. Fellow German MEP and SEDE vice chair Sabine Lösing believed, "The supply of weapons, which will likely to be operated by US soldiers, sends a completely wrong signal for rapprochement."

For the GUE/NGL deputy, sending arms will "simply encourage aggressive behaviour from the Ukrainian government". According to Lösing, a more aggressive position against Russia is "like attempting to douse flames with petrol".

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- Sabine Lösing

Though fellow vice chair Afzal Khan wanted the west to "take all necessary action including more sanctions to end the violence", he too agreed with Merkel's view, saying, "No amount of armament - short of direct Nato intervention - is likely to shift the balance in a war where the Kremlin is determined not to lose."

Fotyga was supportive of Biden's view on helping arm Ukraine. "In my opinion current US policy, although not ideal, is more realistic and has more potential to bring tangible results," she said.

The SEDE chair also strongly felt that Europe had been weak against Russia, saying, "Vladimir Putin has used the lack of determination from our side, to continue his policy of blackmail and aggression."

The Polish MEP, whose country has a long history of conflict with its eastern neighbour, blamed the EU saying it "failed to deter Russian aggression and has chosen endless negotiations instead". She also pointed to the invitation and attendance of the Russian foreign minister to the Munich conference as a cause of splits among the western allies. According to Fotyga, had Lavrov not been there it "would have made it easier to establish a common EU-US position".

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Recognising differences between some EU members and the US, Khan was keen to stress, "if we want our response to be effective and successful it is fundamental that we remain united and strengthen our coordination with both Nato and US." Instead of arming Ukrainian forces, the UK MEP wanted the EU's common and security defence policy (CSDP) strengthened, so that "the CSDP and Nato [...] have a complementary and mutually reinforcing role in supporting international peace and security".

But European parliament president Martin Schulz highlighted the non-military strength of the EU, saying, "despite the setbacks over the last months, especially in regard to the situation in Ukraine, we need to continue with our diplomatic efforts." He added, "A united EU with its 'soft' power remains key, in an unstable world."

However, despite a ceasefire being agreed in eastern Ukraine, there were still reports of sporadic fighting in the region. With clear differences emerging in Munich, a question now arises for those EU members sharing a border with Russia, or with Russian minority populations such as Latvia, or former Soviet Union occupied countries like Poland.

If the ceasefire were to break down, are the EU and US united enough, with the necessary political resolve, to back Ukraine militarily and more robustly stand up against Putin's Russia?

About the author

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