



Summary of the tenth high-level *EU Diplomacy Lecture*

EU International Relations and
Diplomacy Studies

College of Europe, Bruges

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ANNUAL HIGH-LEVEL EU DIPLOMACY LECTURE



EU INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
AND DIPLOMACY STUDIES

EU sanctions against Russia – a paradigm shift or more of the same?

Ambassador David O'SULLIVAN, EU Sanctions Envoy



The event started with Federica MOGHERINI, the Rector of the College of Europe, welcoming the audience. She expressed her gratitude to Ambassador David O'SULLIVAN for accepting the invitation to come to Bruges and give a lecture on the very topical question of sanctions against Russia. She also thanked Professor Sieglinde GSTÖHL, the Director of Studies of the Department of EU International Relations and Diplomacy Studies, for organising the EU Diplomacy Lecture. Professor GSTÖHL then introduced the speaker and reminded the audience that the lecture is livestreamed and will be followed by a Q&A.

Ambassador O'SULLIVAN began his talk by explaining why he chose the title "EU sanctions against Russia – a paradigm shift or more of the same?". According to him, the current situation is a paradigm shift on three main levels. First, it is a paradigm shift in the European Union's relations with Russia. Before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, most of the Member States did not consider confrontation with Russia as the best strategy since we share a continent



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together. The EU tried to have a peaceful co-existence through the development of economic interdependence with Russia. This state-of-play persisted after the Russian war in Georgia in 2008, and even to a certain extent after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the outbreak of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine with the use of the 'little green men'. In spite of signs of an imperialistic and more and more aggressive Russia, the EU and the US adopted measures to send a signal but kept the core economic relationship untouched in their bilateral relations with Russia. However, everything changed dramatically in February 2022, triggering a turning point in the EU's approach towards Russia. Ambassador O'SULLIVAN had thought he would never witness another major full-scale conflict on the European continent in his lifetime.



Second, there has been a major shift in the EU's image as an international actor, considering its resolute response in support of Ukraine. The Ambassador stressed that despite help from other countries, especially the US, the EU should not forget that this war is existential for the security architecture of the European continent. There is no doubt that if Putin is not stopped in Ukraine, he will try to grasp other territories. Therefore, by helping Ukraine, the EU is also preparing its own future and defending its core values.

Third, in reaction to this brutal and illegal invasion, the unprecedented level of sanctions against Russia that the EU adopted constitutes another paradigm shift. So far, the Union has adopted 11 packages of sanctions against Russia, which, among its 45 sanction regimes against third countries in total, is something never seen before. The EU's support to Ukraine also comprises military support in terms of providing military equipment and training and, for the first time in history, the funding of lethal arms as well as macro-financial assistance to restore the Ukrainian economy.

The key goals of the sanctions are to deprive Russia of access to critical technologies for its military industrial complex and to increase the costs to wage its war of aggression by undermining its industrial capacity. On the one hand, these sanctions have already resulted in the Russian economy shrinking and slowly becoming less competitive and its military complex becoming weaker and less sophisticated. On the other hand, Ambassador O'SULLIVAN recognised that sanctions as an instrument have their limits: they do not necessarily bring about a change in people's thinking and in the case of Russia work as "a slow puncture rather than a fast blow-up of a tire".



Ambassador O'SULLIVAN then turned to the issue of the circumvention of sanctions. Since the sanctions against Russia are very complex and their implementation involves many actors, certain malign actors are actively looking for ways to evade them and re-export sanctioned items to Russia via third countries. Circumvention of sanctions will not disappear and Member States are equipping themselves and take actions to enforce sanctions in a thorough and efficient manner. The Ambassador underlined that he thinks that these sanctions are going to be with us for a long time. They are unlikely to be lifted just after the conflict as there will be many issues to solve, including the question of compensation for Russia's responsibility for starting the war and war crimes. He stressed that sanctions are one of the most efficient tools to deprive Russia of resources to continue its illegal and brutal war. The EU is actively cooperating internationally to deal with the challenge of circumvention with third countries' authorities.



As a final point, Ambassador O'SULLIVAN noted that the EU should reflect about why it failed to gain the support of many third countries when it adopted its sanctions condemning Russia's aggression against Ukraine. EU policymakers and academics will thus have plenty of work in the future to reflect on why other countries are not condemning Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and to what extent this might be caused by these countries' perception of Europe.



The lecture was followed by a lively Q&A session with the audience on subjects such as EU engagement with third countries to prevent the circumvention of sanctions, freezing Russian assets, further packages of sanctions, effectiveness, how to counter the argument that they are also, or even more, detrimental to the EU than to Russia, and the implications of the upcoming presidential elections in the US for the transatlantic cooperation on sanctions.

Despite all challenges mentioned, Ambassador O'SULLIVAN concluded his lecture by reiterating that now the European Union should continue to support the people of Ukraine, and for this, the full and effective implementation of sanctions is essential to maximise the pressure against Russia.



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David O'SULLIVAN was appointed as EU Sanctions Envoy in December 2022 and formally took up his role in the second half of January 2023.

Before his appointment as Sanctions Envoy, he was Director General of the Institute for International and European Affairs, a leading Irish think tank. Prior to that, he joined the Brussels office of the law firm of Steptoe and Johnson LLP as a Senior Counsellor (2019-2022).

David O'SULLIVAN served as Ambassador of the European Union Delegation to the United States from November 2014 until February 2019.

Prior to his appointment as Ambassador, he was the Chief Operating Officer of the EU's newly established diplomatic service, the European External Action Service. He had previously held a number of senior positions within the European Commission, including Director General for Trade (2005-2010); Secretary General of the European Commission (2000-2005); and Chief of Staff to Commission President Romano Prodi (1999-2000). Before joining the Commission, he started his career with the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs (1977-1979).

He is a graduate of Trinity College (Dublin) and the College of Europe (Bruges), and holds Honorary Doctorates from the Dublin Institute of Technology and Trinity College Dublin. He was awarded the EU Transatlantic Business Award by the American Chamber of Commerce in 2014. In 2019, he was awarded the Légion D'Honneur by France and made a Grand Officier de l'Orde de Léopold by Belgium. He is Chairman of the Governing Board of the European Policy Centre, and a Member of the Governing Board of the King Baudouin Foundation.



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