

Suzanne Lynch, *The Irish Times*, 20 March 2014

Unified EU response on Ukraine will not be simple

Officials seek a clear position but sanctions would affect some states more than others

EU leaders today gather for a two-day summit in Brussels that is expected to be dominated by the evolving crisis in Ukraine.

As the euro zone crisis has subsided, foreign affairs has emerged as a key focus for the EU in recent months, with developments in Ukraine plunging Europe into one of its biggest foreign policy challenges of recent times.

Critics of the EU have long chastised the bloc's competencies as regards foreign policy, with many citing its belatedness in dealing with the collapse of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Despite the creation of a foreign policy wing under the Lisbon treaty, the EU's common foreign and security policy remains limited, as the EU tries to balance the very different prerogatives of its 28 member states. The situation in Ukraine is arguably different – the EU's decision to directly engage with Ukraine on an association agreement, and Kiev's decision to withdraw from that process, directly triggered the current crisis, leaving the EU inadvertently implicated in the ensuing events. The EU's close ties with Russia in terms of trade and energy also demanded a response.

To date, the EU has taken an incremental approach to the situation in Ukraine. The emergency EU summit two weeks ago outlined a three-step approach, the first of which was a suspension of visa and investment talks. On Monday, stage two was triggered when EU foreign ministers agreed to travel bans and asset freezes on 21 individuals.

Whether the EU will move to the third step, which could involve broader economic, energy and financial sanctions, remains unclear, with leaders more likely to expand the list of targeted individuals.

From the outset of the crisis, the EU has been divided, with countries such as Poland, Sweden and the Baltic states favouring strong action on Russia, while Germany, Austria and Mediterranean countries have been urging caution.

German interdependence

The prominence of Germany in the current discussions is significant. For historic reasons,

Germany has tended to take a backseat in EU foreign policy, with Britain and France, the only European members of the UN Security Council, taking a lead.

Germany's particular interdependence with Russia in terms of energy supply and exports has forced it to take centre-stage in the current crisis. Despite having toughened its stance in recent weeks by agreeing to sanctions, yesterday Germany was still insisting that further "escalation" of the situation meant Russian military entry into eastern Ukraine, much to the dismay of many of its eastern European neighbours who are urging tougher action.

The reality that punitive sanctions will affect some EU countries more than others is a key consideration for the EU as it weighs up its options. This applies particularly to energy, with some countries almost entirely dependent on Russian gas. However, a combination of high energy reserves due to a mild winter, access to alternative liquefied natural supplies, and the EU's diminishing dependence on Ukrainian gas pipes to carry Russian gas, means the EU is probably better positioned than it was in 2009.