Putin says Russia not aiming to divide EU

Mr Putin's visit to Austria is his first trip to West Europe for nearly a year

Russian President Vladimir Putin has insisted Moscow is not trying to split the European Union.

He was speaking hours before arriving in Austria, on his first trip to Western Europe in almost a year.

He told Austria's ORF television he wanted a "united and prosperous" EU, calling it Russia's most important commercial and economic partner.

In Vienna, he said EU economic sanctions against Russia were hurting both sides.

Speaking after talks with Austrian President Alexander Van der Bellen, Mr Putin said Russia had overcome all difficulties caused by the sanctions.

Russia's annexation of Ukraine's southern Crimea peninsula in 2014 triggered the sanctions, which were later ratcheted up as Russia helped separatists in eastern Ukraine.

Russia has hit back with counter-sanctions on food and raw materials.

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More than 10,000 people have been killed since the conflict began in eastern Ukraine.

Another major concern among many European liberals is close links between the pro-Putin United Russia party with far-right parties in the EU.

The two populist parties now ruling Italy favour closer ties with Moscow and are both Eurosceptic.

In the ORF interview Mr Putin played down the links between United Russia and Austria's far-right Freedom Party, the FPÖ. The parties have a co-operation agreement, but the FPÖ denies claims it has received money from Moscow.

Splits on sanctions

The FPÖ has some key posts in Austria's coalition government – it is in charge of the interior ministry and defence – and says it wants to get the EU sanctions on Russia lifted. However, the coalition has agreed to back EU policy on sanctions.

Italy's new government openly called for a review of EU sanctions on Tuesday, starting with those that "threaten civil society in Russia". Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte told parliament in Rome that Italy was in favour of opening up towards Russia, which represented a key partner for Italian business.

"The more problems at the heart of the EU, the more risks and problems there are for us," Mr Putin told ORF.

"We need to build co-operation with the EU. We don't have a goal of dividing anything or anyone in the EU."

Russian soldiers in unmarked camouflage took control of Crimea in March 2014

What some call a "new cold war" was also fuelled by Russia's role in the Syrian civil war and the poisoning of a former Russian double agent, Sergei Skripal, and his daughter, in southern England. The UK blamed the Kremlin for that attack; Russia furiously denied any role in it.

Pro-Putin activists have been accused of spreading "fake news" on social media to undermine the tough Western stance on Russia and help empower nationalists in the EU.

Austria and many other EU states depend on Russia for much – and in some cases all – of their natural gas.

Mr Putin is now meeting Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, as well as business leaders.

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