

**As Russia's new offensive begins, the EU leaders meet with Zelenskyy, express support for Ukraine, call for accountability for Russia**



Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy at yesterday's European Council meeting

Yesterday, after meeting Wednesday with British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak in London and French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in Paris, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy met in Brussels with the EU's European Council, which consists of the heads of state or government of the 27 member states of the EU. In its Conclusions issued after the meeting, the European Council reiterated its "resolute condemnation of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, which constitutes a manifest violation of the UN Charter [and] has brought immense suffering and destruction upon Ukraine and its people. Russia must stop this atrocious war immediately. The European Union will stand by Ukraine with steadfast support for as long as it takes." The Council said the EU's support for Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders and its inherent right of self-defense "remains unwavering," and it will seek to further increase, in consultation with international partners, collective pressure on Russia to end its war of aggression and withdraw its troops from Ukraine. To further the cost to Russia of the war, it said a price cap on petroleum products has been adopted and the EU stands ready to reinforce both its restrictive measures and its anti-circumvention measures.

Importantly, the European Council also reiterated "its strong commitment to accountability. Russia's continuing deadly, indiscriminate strikes against civilians and civilian infrastructure are international crimes and must stop....The EU is firmly committed to holding to account all commanders, perpetrators and accomplices of war crimes and the other most serious crimes committed in connection with Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine." Toward that end, the European Council said it "fully supports Ukraine's and the international community's efforts in this respect, including the establishment of an appropriate mechanism for the prosecution of the crime of

aggression...It underlines the EU's support for the investigations by the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court as well as for the creation, in The Hague, of an international centre for the prosecution of the crime of aggression against Ukraine."

Looking toward the eventual end of the war, the European Council reiterated the EU's "readiness to support Ukraine's initiative for a just peace based on respect for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity...The European Council expresses its support for the peace formula of President Zelenskyy and reaffirms the EU's commitment to work actively with Ukraine on the 10-point peace plan. The EU supports the idea of a Peace Formula Summit aiming at launching its implementation." Turning to Ukraine's candidacy for membership in the EU, the European Council acknowledged the "considerable efforts" Ukraine has demonstrated in recent months toward meeting the objectives underpinning its candidate status, which it formally approved last June. It welcomed Ukraine's efforts to achieve those objectives in such difficult times and encouraged Ukraine to continue on the path toward membership. The Council acknowledged Ukraine's determination to meet the necessary requirements in order to start accession negotiations as soon as possible, and reiterated once more that "Ukraine's future lies within the European Union."

Also importantly, the European Council reaffirmed the commitments it made in the joint statement after last Friday's EU-Ukraine summit in Kyiv that "the EU will continue to provide strong political, economic, military, financial and humanitarian support to Ukraine and its people for as long as it takes." It noted that the overall assistance to Ukraine and its people by the EU and its member states so far amounts to at least €67 billion and noted that it has approved a seventh tranche of €500 million in military support under the European Peace Facility and has launched the EU Military Assistance Mission to train an initial 30,000 soldiers this year, which will bring the total military support from the EU and its member states to nearly €12 billion. In view of the current situation in Ukraine, the Council said it "welcomes the speedy provision of military equipment to Ukraine by member states." It also noted that it remains committed to supporting the macro-financial stability of Ukraine and the efforts of the European Investment Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and the World Bank to support the repair, recovery, and reconstruction of the Ukrainian economy. Toward that end, it said it is stepping up its work toward using Russia's frozen and immobilized assets to support Ukraine's reconstruction and provide it with reparations in accordance with EU and international law. Russia's response was, of course, highly predictable – another wave of cruise missiles and drones aimed at the energy infrastructure and population centers of Ukraine. Today, 71 cruise missiles and 7 Iranian drones were fired from frigates in the Black Sea and strategic bombers based in Russia. Fortunately, 61 of the missiles and five of the drones were shot down. But unfortunately, some of them got through and hit Kyiv, Kharkiv, Zaporizhzhia, and other cities.

Meanwhile, the war in eastern Ukraine continues along the contact line between the Ukrainian and Russian forces in eastern Ukraine, with the Russian forces continuing their drive to push westward and take the territory in the western half of Donetsk region still held by Ukraine. British Defence Intelligence reports today that over the last several days Russian forces have likely made tactical gains in two key sectors in Donetsk region. On the

northern outskirts of Bakhmut (pre-war population 75,000), it reports the Russian forces have pushed westward 2-3 kilometers, enabling them to control countryside near a main road into the city from Ukraine-held territory to the west. And 150 kilometers to the south of Bakhmut, British Defence Intelligence reports that Russian units have advanced around the western edge of the town of Vuhledar (pre-war population 15,000), although they have likely suffered heavy casualties and lost considerable equipment, including several dozen armored vehicles, in part because Russia has been throwing recently “mobilized” (i.e., drafted) and inexperienced troops into the battle. Russian forces are also attacking Ukrainian forces in Kreminna and several other small cities and towns in Luhansk region.

There has been considerable speculation about when Russia will launch its widely anticipated offensive in eastern Ukraine. Some have speculated it would begin on Feb. 23, Defender of the Fatherland Day. Others have speculated on Feb. 24, which of course will be the first anniversary of the start of Putin’s “special military operation” to protect the people in the Donbas region who, he said, “have been facing humiliation and genocide perpetrated by the Kiev regime.” In a press conference Sunday, Oleksii Reznikov, Ukraine’s defense minister, said, in reference to the possible start on Feb. 24, “Of course, we expect possible offensives from the Russians...they like symbolism.” And according to Andriy Chernyak, a representative of the Main Directorate of Intelligence of the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense (HUR MO), “We’ve observed that the Russian occupation forces are redeploying additional assault groups, units, weapons, and military equipment to the east. According to the military intelligence of Ukraine, Putin gave the order to seize the territories of Donetsk and Luhansk regions by March.” Perhaps the most perceptive comment came from Mykhailo Podolyak, the head of President Zelenskyy’s Office: “It is clear that there will be some active measures in the spring. However, even today, we are already seeing such actions in the Luhansk and Donetsk directions. That is, the offensive is underway.”

Podolyak is right; the much-anticipated Russian offensive has already begun, with the continued assault on Bakhmut, Vuhledar, Kreminna, and other small cities and towns along the contact line in eastern Ukraine. How it will end remains to be seen.

David R. Cameron  
February 10, 2023