



European Commission - Speech [Check Against Delivery]



Speech by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary on EU-Russia relations, European security and Russia's military threat against Ukraine

Strasbourg, 16 February 2022

Thank you Madam President,

Honourable Members,

The very reason why our Union was created is to put an end to all European wars. So it is particularly painful for me to address you today, as we face the largest build-up of troops on European soil since the darkest days of the Cold War. The people of Ukraine are bravely trying to get on with their lives. But many of them keep emergency bags by their front doors, with basic clothes and important documents, in case they have to rush away from home. Others have stockpiled food cans to prepare for the worst. Some have even set up shelters in their basements. These are not stories from the 1940s. This is Europe in 2022. And this is happening because of a deliberate policy of the Russian leadership. Ukraine is a sovereign country. It is making choices about its own future. But the Kremlin does not like this, and so it threatens war. This is the essence of the current escalation. And despite the signs of hope we saw yesterday, this it is something we simply cannot accept.

In the last seven years, Ukraine has suffered from the Kremlin's constant aggression. But despite that heavy burden, Ukraine has come such a long way. It has taken important steps to fight corruption, rebuilt its infrastructure, created new jobs for its talented youth. Our Union has accompanied them, putting together the largest support package in our history. Of course, the people of Ukraine know that their democracy still has some flaws and issues to deal with. But Ukraine today is a stronger, freer and more sovereign country than in 2014. And this is precisely why the Kremlin is threatening it again.

We stand firm with Ukraine. The idea that the Kremlin should decide what Ukrainians can or cannot desire – we simply cannot accept. The idea of spheres of influence are ghosts of the last century. This crisis is about Ukraine – and more. It is about what it means to be a sovereign, independent and free country in the 21st century. It is about everyone's right to live free from fear. It is about every country's right to determine its own future. And this is the message that our Union is passing to the Kremlin.

Like everyone in this room, I truly hope that the Kremlin will decide not to unleash further violence in Europe. Yesterday, Russia was certainly sending conflicting signals. On the one hand, authorities announce Russian troop pullbacks. On the other hand, the Duma votes for the formal recognition of Donetsk and Luhansk as independent republics. Diplomacy has not yet spoken its last words. It is good to hear yesterday's commitment to the Minsk Agreement. President Macron and Chancellor Scholz have travelled to Kyiv and Moscow. Several others are also speaking to both sides. I am constantly exchanging with all of them, as well as with President Biden, Prime Minister Trudeau and Prime Minister Johnson. The Transatlantic Community has for a long time not been so united. Let me just mention one recent episode.

Earlier this month, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov wrote 36 letters to each and every Member State of the European Union and NATO Ally, with a series of demands. He received two letters in return: One from Josep Borrell on behalf of the European Union, and one from Jens Stoltenberg on behalf of NATO. Once again, the Russian government tried to divide us. But their attempt failed. The European Union and its transatlantic partners are united in this crisis. And our call on Russia is crystal clear: do not choose war. A path of cooperation between us and Russia is still possible. But let us stay vigilant. Despite yesterday's news, NATO has not yet seen signs of any Russian troop reduction. And should the Kremlin choose violence against Ukraine, our response will be strong and united. The European Commission and the EEAS have been working closely with all Member States to prepare a robust and comprehensive package of potential sanctions. And we have worked in close coordination with our friends in the US, the UK and Canada. Let me say that in these weeks we have built a unity of purpose that is truly remarkable, both within the EU and with our partners. In case of a Russian aggression, Europe's reaction will be swift and robust. We are not just talking about freezing assets

and banning travel for Russian individuals. Russia's strategic interest is to diversify its one-sided economy and to close its current gaps. But for this, they need technologies in which we have a global leadership. High-tech components for which Russia is almost entirely dependent on us. Our sanctions can bite very hard, and the Kremlin knows this well.

We are also ready in case that the Russian leadership decides to weaponise the energy issue. At a time of high demand, Gazprom is restricting its gas supplies to Europe. A ten-year low in storage, no sales on the spot market. This behaviour has already damaged Russia's credibility as a reliable energy supplier. We are currently in talks with a number of countries that are ready to step up their exports of liquefied natural gas to the EU. This resulted in January in record deliveries of LNG gas – more than 120 vessels and 10 bcm of LNG. On top, since the annexation of Crimea, we have increased the number of LNG terminals. We have reinforced our pan-European pipeline and electricity interconnector network. And the good part is that these investments in infrastructure will in future be the backbone of green hydrogen supply. During the last weeks, we have looked into all possible disruption scenarios in case Russia decides to partially or completely disrupt gas supplies to the EU. And I can say that our models show that we are now rather on the safe in this winter. On top of this, we have also developed with Member States a new set of emergency measures, which we could trigger in case of complete disruptions. But one of the lessons we can already draw from this crisis is that we must diversify our energy sources, to get rid of the dependency of Russian gas, and heavily invest in renewable energy sources. They are clean and good for the planet, and they are home-grown and good for our independence.

Honourable Members,

This is a crisis that has been created by Moscow. We have not chosen confrontation, but we are prepared for it. We now have two distinct futures ahead of us. In one, the Kremlin decides to wage war against Ukraine, with massive human costs – something we thought we had left behind after the tragedies of the twentieth century. Moscow's relations with us would be severely damaged. Tough sanctions would kick in, with dire consequences on the Russian economy and its prospect of modernisation. But another future is possible. A future in which Russia and Europe cooperate on their shared interests. A future where free countries work together in peace. A future of prosperity, built on the respect of the fundamental principles enshrined in the UN Charter, and in the European security architecture since the Helsinki Final Act. This is my aspiration. And I am sure the Russian people share this aspiration, too. It is now up to the Kremlin to decide. Whatever path they decide to take, we will stand our ground. Europe will be united, on the side of Ukraine, on the side of peace, on the side of Europe's people.

Long live Europe.

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