

Outcome of the special European Council meeting of 24 February 2022

On 24 February 2022, at a special European Council meeting following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, EU leaders delivered a message of unity and determination, acknowledging 'the European aspirations and the European choice of Ukraine' and reiterating the EU's support to the territorial integrity of the country. They condemned Russia's continued violation of international law, and stressed that Russia 'will be held accountable for its actions'. EU leaders also approved politically a new package of sanctions, which 'bites but does not deter'. Key restrictions linked to gas supply and to access to the SWIFT payment system, a measure supported by the European Parliament, did not find a consensus. The EU institutions were also asked to prepare a new set of 'individual and economic sanctions' targeted at Belarus.

1. Background

On 24 February 2022, EU leaders met to express the Union's support for Ukraine and its people, to discuss further political, financial and humanitarian assistance, and to uphold the EU's commitment to an international order based on rules and norms, as well as to agree on a new set of sanctions against Russia. The meeting took place on the very day Russia launched its full-scale military operation against Ukraine, violating international law and plunging Europe into potentially the most severe security crisis since World War II. The President of the European Council, Charles Michel, stressed that he had not been aware of the date and timing of Russia's invasion when he called the special meeting. In his invitation letter, President Michel, set four [objectives](#) for the meeting, namely to: i) take stock of the latest developments; ii) consider how to protect the rules-based international order; iii) discuss the next steps in dealing with Russia and in holding 'Russia accountable for its actions'; and iv) further support Ukraine and its people.

The special European Council meeting took place exactly a week after the EU leaders had discussed the Ukraine-Russia crisis informally on [16 February 2022](#). At that meeting, they had built unity on and support for a common and coordinated response to Russia's offensive actions, reiterated the Union's support for Ukraine's territorial integrity, and prepared possible next steps in the event of the crisis escalating. They also increased aid to Ukraine by [€1.2 billion](#), in the form of emergency macro-financial assistance aimed at lessening the effects of the crisis. EU leaders discussed a package of [sanctions](#) which, in the interim, were adopted by written procedure in the Council after Russia's 'recognition of the non-government controlled areas of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts of Ukraine and sending of troops into the region'.

2. Russia's full-scale military operation against Ukraine

At dawn, on 24 February 2022, on the pretext of a 'special military operation' in the Donbass, Russia launched a full-scale military attack on strategic locations in major cities across Ukraine, [sparkling](#) anti-war protests including across Russia (see Figure 1). The invasion occurred a few days after Russia's recognition, in [violation of international law](#), of the independence of the self-proclaimed

Donetsk (DPR) and Luhansk (LPR) republics, where a Russian so-called 'peacekeeping' force was sent earlier in the week. In response to the attack, Ukraine cut diplomatic ties, declared martial law and called on all its citizens of an age to do what is necessary to protect the country.

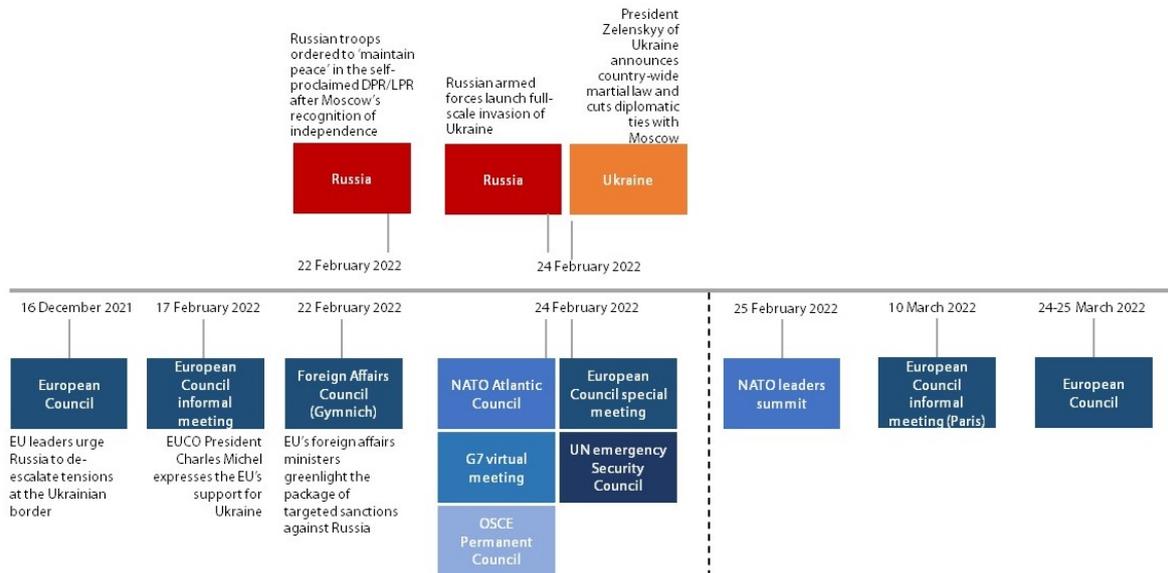
Before escalating into a full-scale war, the Ukraine-Russia crisis started in autumn 2021 with a progressive military build-up, which ended up in a force of nearly [200 000](#) Russian troops being positioned (in Russia and Belarus) on Ukraine's borders. Intensive diplomatic talks at multilateral level (OSCE, NATO-Russia Council and in the Normandy Format) and bilateral level took place in recent weeks without changing the course of events. Since December 2021, EU leaders have closely monitored the situation in and around Ukraine (see Figure 2).

Figure 1 – Russia's military attack on Ukraine



Source: EPRS, based on international press reports.

Figure 2 – European Council's monitoring of Russia's actions in and around Ukraine



In December 2021, in an attempt to strengthen its sphere of influence over its neighbourhood, Russia requested 'security guarantees' from NATO, including an end to the Alliance's 'open door policy' and a limitation and repositioning (away from Russia's borders) of assets (weapons and personnel) of member states that had joined before 1997. Russia was thus contesting Ukraine's right to freely choose its alliances and also NATO's ability to shape its own defence policy.

Through such assertiveness and aggressiveness, Russia, which has recently engaged in a [rapprochement](#) with China, has in effect called into question the entire European security architecture as defined by the [Helsinki Final Act](#). Moreover, the UN Security Council, which Russia has chaired this February, risked being [paralysed](#), endangering global security. The result has in fact

been strengthened unity within NATO, which has refused to end its 'open door policy' and is further [strengthening](#) its eastern flank. However, major geopolitical consequences are to be expected from the war. As outlined by EU High Representative [Josep Borrell](#), the survival of the 'post-war multilateral "acquis"', with 'the UN, international law and universal rights' at its core, is at stake. Analysts [argue](#) that Russia and China 'share a commitment to creating a 'post-West' global order' based on their interests and 'conducive to authoritarian rule' and that the US and their allies need to '[develop a free world defence strategy](#)', enabling democratic values and the rules-based international order to be protected.

3. Initial reactions of the EU and the international community

On 25 February 2022, the UN Security Council (UNSC) voted on a [resolution](#) 'condemning Russia's attack in Ukraine'. This was vetoed by Russia, while China, India and the United Arab Emirate abstained. High Representative Josep Borrell [stressed](#) that the resolution would be submitted to the UN General Assembly and that he was working to forge 'an alliance of people who want to protect the sovereignty of nations'.

Meeting in a video-conference format, the G7 leaders [called](#) on 'the Russian Federation to stop the bloodshed, to immediately de-escalate and to withdraw its forces from Ukraine'. They condemned Belarus's involvement and expressed unity with Ukraine, NATO and the EU. The OSCE Permanent Council also held an extraordinary meeting, where Josep Borrell [stressed](#) the EU's readiness to set 'both sectoral and individual restrictive measures' together with partners.

After an extraordinary meeting of the North Atlantic Council, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg [condemned](#) Russia's 'brutal act of war', expressed support to Ukraine and said that NATO had activated its defence plans. He confirmed that NATO would protect all its territory and increase its land, air and sea presence on the eastern flank. In addition, [President Michel](#), Commission President [Ursula von der Leyen](#), and Jens Stoltenberg jointly expressed the EU's and NATO's unity.

The US President, Joe Biden, [announced](#) 'additional strong sanctions' against Russia, stressing that the US had closely coordinated the measures with allies representing more than 'half of the global economy'. This will limit Russia's possibility to trade in dollars, euros and yen, impact its industrial capacity and cut almost half of its high-tech imports.

In an unprecedented move, the members of the European Council issued a [joint statement](#) ahead of their special meeting, in which they condemned 'in the strongest possible terms Russia's unprecedented military aggression against Ukraine' as well as Belarus's involvement.

4. European Council special meeting: Principal results

The European Council meeting started with an address by the President of the European Parliament, Roberta Metsola, as well as, by video-conference, the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy. President Michel [said](#) that 'it was a moment of grave seriousness, dignity, cool heads' and that EU leaders had 'welcomed and saluted the courage of the Ukrainian people'.

Confirming unity and supporting the rules-based international order

EU leaders [expressed](#) their support for the territorial integrity of Ukraine, its right to choose its own path and alliances, and 'unwavering support for the territorial integrity of Georgia and of the Republic of Moldova'. Moreover, the EU would mobilise the international community in support of the international order based on the [UN Charter](#) and international law.

Sanctions

President Michel [stressed](#) that EU leaders had agreed on an 'additional package of massive sanctions, which will be painful for the Russian regime', as well as to the preparation of a new package targeting Belarus. The Prime Minister of Belgium, Alexander de Croo, [stressed](#) that 'we don't need sanctions that bark, we need sanctions that bite', while the Prime Minister of Latvia, [Krišjānis Karinš](#), pointed out that sanctions needed 'to deter' in order to be effective. This deterrence

element was lacking, as two [key measures](#) relating to gas supply and access to the SWIFT international payments system were not included. The new set of sanctions was closely coordinated with the EU's partners (US, UK, Canada, Norway, Japan, South Korea and Australia) and was [adopted](#) in Council on 25 February 2022. The following day, an [agreement](#) was reached 'to cut some Russian banks from SWIFT'.

Financial sector: President von der Leyen [stressed](#) that 70 % of the Russian banking market and key state-owned companies, including defence companies, were targeted. The aim was to 'increase Russia's borrowing costs, raise inflation, and gradually erode Russia's industrial base'. The sanctions package also targets the Russian elite by 'curbing their deposits'.

Energy, transport and technology: President von der Leyen stressed energy was the 'key area' to hurt the Russian state. EU sanctions will hit the oil sector (€24 billion in export revenues in 2019) and 'make it impossible for Russia to upgrade its oil refineries'. The sale of aircraft spare parts and equipment to Russian airlines will be banned, targeting a crucial industrial and connectivity sector. She added that three quarters of the Russian commercial airline fleet was built in the EU, US and Canada. In coordination with partners, access to cutting-edge technologies will also be limited.

Visas: President von der Leyen announced that diplomats, privileged groups and the business community would no longer have 'privileged access' to the EU. After the European Council, a [consensus](#) was reached to place Vladimir Putin and Sergey Lavrov on the list of sanctioned persons.

Support for Ukraine

The Prime Minister of Latvia, [Krišjānis Karinš](#), stressed that Ukraine needed financial support but also [military aid](#). The President of France, Emmanuel Macron, announced that France [would](#) offer an extra €300 million to Ukraine (beyond the EU's [€1.2 billion](#) financial assistance) and supply material to the population and the military. Several EU Member States, including the [Baltic countries](#) and the [Netherlands](#), announced the provision of military aid to Ukraine, whilst President Michel indicated the EU would provide humanitarian support and that countries bordering Ukraine were [preparing](#) to receive Ukrainian refugees.

A strategically autonomous EU

Reducing the EU's energy dependency and increasing strategic autonomy were core issues for discussion, which EU leaders will revert to in March 2022. As President Michel [stressed](#), they also agreed to 'beef up' security and defence capabilities in coordination with NATO.

Main message of the European Parliament President: President [Roberta Metsola](#) insisted on firmness with Russia, and said 'it is right and sensible to adopt massive, unprecedented, severe sanctions on Russia'. She called for Russia's exclusion from SWIFT, a measure the European Parliament [supports](#), welcomed the suspension of the certification of Nord Stream 2, and stressed the wider need to reduce EU dependence on Russian gas.

DISCLAIMER AND COPYRIGHT

This document is prepared for, and addressed to, the Members and staff of the European Parliament as background material to assist them in their parliamentary work. The content of the document is the sole responsibility of its author(s) and any opinions expressed herein should not be taken to represent an official position of the Parliament.

Reproduction and translation for non-commercial purposes are authorised, provided the source is acknowledged and the European Parliament is given prior notice and sent a copy.

© European Union, 2022.

eprs@ep.europa.eu (contact)

www.eprs.ep.parl.union.eu (intranet)

www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank (internet)

<http://epthinktank.eu> (blog)

