

Early on Saturday morning, some 48 hours after Russian military forces had pushed into his country, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy put in a call from Kyiv to Brussels with a plea for military assistance.

During the Feb. 26 phone call with the head of the European Council, the body that represents the European Union's member states, Zelenskiy provided an update on Russia's advance. He said he was proud of his country's efforts to stem the blitz so far but that he was worried about a dwindling supply of arms, a senior European Union official told Reuters.

Zelenskiy's message, according to the senior official: Can you help us with weapons? Can you coordinate EU offers?

The Council president, Charles Michel of Belgium, responded by asking for a list of arms Ukraine needed, another senior EU official said. They said Michel then contacted Poland's prime minister to ask if his country would be the logistics hub for the equipment; Michel's team drew up plans for a joint fund worth 500 million euros to finance the emergency arms, and shared Kyiv's wish list with EU governments.

The first deliveries of arms began arriving in Ukraine over the weekend.

Inside the futuristic glass Europa Building known as "The Egg", the Council's headquarters in Brussels, officials were already working on an unprecedented slew of sanctions agreed by the EU's 27 member countries aimed at punishing Moscow for its invasion of Ukraine. And they were lining up more.

But the move to help supply Ukraine weapons marks an even more historic precedent. It is the first time the EU - founded in the wake of World War Two with the purpose of upholding peace on the continent - has collectively provided arms to a third country. The EU's chief executive, Ursula von der Leyen, described it as a "watershed moment" when the bloc announced the weapons funding plan Sunday.

However, it brings with it the risk of further antagonising Russia, already seething with the West over sanctions. "We know that it is a very thin line," a third EU official said.

Michel was unavailable to comment, his office said. In public remarks Sunday, the Council

president addressed the Ukrainian people, saying they were defending not only their democracy and freedom but that of the whole of Europe. “That is why we in the EU have a political and moral duty to rise to this historic challenge,” Michel said.

The two senior EU officials declined to detail the arms Zelenskiy requested. The EU, which is enabling the arms through a so-called European peace facility, has said it will fund 450 million euros of weapons and 50 million of non-lethal equipment. Arms pledged or provided so far include anti-tank weapons and surface-to-air missiles from Germany and machine guns from Belgium.

The Ukrainian and Polish governments didn’t immediately respond to requests for comment. On Tuesday, Zelenskiy pressed the West for more assistance during a joint interview with Reuters and CNN. Speaking in a heavily guarded government compound, Zelenskiy urged NATO members to impose a no fly zone to stop the Russian air force.

Russia, which calls the invasion “a special operation,” has condemned the EU’s decision to fund the delivery of weapons to Kyiv. Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said at a news briefing on Monday that Western arms supplies to Ukraine was “an extremely dangerous and destabilizing factor” and showed that Moscow was right to try to demilitarise its neighbour.



Image source: Reuters

Turning point

The war in Ukraine is the latest in a series of crises the EU has faced in recent years, including an influx of migrants and refugees, rising eurosceptic populism and Britain's acrimonious departure. Deep divisions remain, including an ideological rift between eastern and western Europe - particularly over the rule of law and democracy in Hungary and Poland - that poses an existential threat to the bloc itself.

On Russia, the EU has held back so far from imposing the most severe sanctions. It stopped short of curbing Russian energy imports, which account for around half of the country's export earnings. Some EU governments - including Germany - have been reluctant to add to the challenges for a post-pandemic recovery. Russia provides more than a third of Europe's gas imports and more than a quarter of its oil imports, and scarce energy supplies are already stoking inflation.

But the speedy moves to help supply arms to Ukraine and impose sweeping sanctions demonstrated an exceptional level of speed and unity in responding to Russian President Vladimir Putin's aggression for an organisation that has long faced criticism for being dithering and quarrelsome.

After Putin formally recognised two breakaway Ukraine regions on Monday Feb. 21, the EU faced immediate public pressure to respond.

The following day, Germany, in an abrupt turnaround, halted the start-up of the Nord Stream 2 Baltic gas pipeline, designed to double the flow of Russian gas direct to Germany. A flurry of significant German U-turns followed over the next few days. Berlin promised a dramatic hike in military spending to above 2% of national economic output, and threw out a decades-long policy of not exporting arms to conflict zones with an announcement that Germany would supply Ukraine with anti-tank weapons and missiles.

A senior German government official said the big shift in Berlin's thinking began when Russian started launching airstrikes on Ukrainian cities and advancing troops and tanks across the border on Thursday, Feb. 24.

That evening, Germany's Chancellor Olaf Scholz - in office less than three months - gathered with the EU's other 26 leaders in Brussels for an emergency summit over dinner.

Many of them were under pressure from growing protests at home and hostile media commentary for pulling their punches on sanctions compared to Washington and London. The EU was notably drawing fire for its reluctance to cut Russia off from the SWIFT international payment system.

Michel, who chairs the bloc's summits, had arranged for Zelenskiy to join the EU leaders' emergency summit by video link from Kyiv. Dressed in army fatigues and speaking from what appeared to be a bunker, Zelenskiy appealed to European leaders to take the harshest measures they could against Russia, said the two senior EU officials. Zelenskiy's concluding message, according to the second official: This may be the last time you see me alive.

"There was a stunned silence," said the first senior official. "People were left speechless, some had tears in their eyes."

His moving address prompted many in the room to question if the second package of sanctions they were meeting to approve was enough and whether events in Ukraine "meant we had to have the political courage to go further," the first senior EU official said.

It was at that point, this official added, that support increased for more punitive measures such as cutting Russian institutions off from SWIFT, the dominant global payment system, and imposing personal sanctions on Putin and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.



Image source: Financial Times

Historic move

The EU leaders' doubts about whether they were doing enough were echoed the next morning by former European Council President Donald Tusk, who publicly criticized the leaders for not going far enough with sanctions. "In this war everything is real: Putin's madness and cruelty, Ukrainian victims, bombs falling on Kyiv," Tusk tweeted, adding that the EU's sanctions were just a pretense.

By Monday, the EU had added to an array of financial, energy, export and travel bans beyond what was agreed at Thursday's summit. These additional steps included a freeze on Russian central bank assets, the shutdown of EU airspace to Russia, and sanctions on a clutch of Russian tycoons. Most importantly, it had agreed to cut a number of Russian banks off SWIFT in a move aimed at harming their ability to operate globally.

Even Hungary, whose prime minister, Viktor Orban, has openly cultivated warm ties with

Russia and President Vladimir Putin, supported the sanctions.

While much of this was coordinated with the United States and Britain, one senior EU diplomat said the speed and scope of Brussels' response to the crisis was unparalleled in its history. By contrast, the EU took more than a year to impose several tranches of sanctions on Belarus after its president crushed protests following August 2020 elections. Those were ultimately less severe than those it targeted Russia with in less than a week.

"I am not sure we should use the words 'coming of age' but it's definitely a paradigm shift," said the senior diplomat, referring to critics who have long dismissed the EU as a "giant NGO."

The EU has also quickly agreed to grant Ukrainians fleeing the war the right to stay and work in the bloc for up to three years. The proposal, due to be approved this coming Thursday, is the first time the EU had used a mechanism drawn up after the 1990s war in the Balkans. That move marked a stark contrast to the deep discord in 2015 over a flood of migrants from the Middle East, Africa and Asia that tore at the bloc's cohesion.

Despite the extraordinary series of steps taken by the EU in just a few days, Zelenskiy is looking for more. On Tuesday, Zelenskiy urged European leaders to prove that they sided with Kyiv the day after Ukraine formally requested to join the EU. Any membership process will be long and difficult, even if it manages to avoid falling back under Moscow's domination.

"Do prove that you are with us," he said.

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