European Council

Brussels, 22 March 2024
(OR. en)

EUCO 7/24

CO EUR 6
CONCL 2

NOTE

From:	General Secretariat of the Council
To:	Delegations
Subject:	European Council meeting (21 and 22 March 2024) – Conclusions

Delegations will find attached the conclusions adopted by the European Council at the above meeting.

The European Council held an exchange of views with the UN Secretary-General António Guterres on the geopolitical situation and key global challenges.

The European Council marked the 30th anniversary of the EEA Agreement with the Prime Ministers of Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway.

*

* *

I. UKRAINE

1. Two years into the war of aggression that Russia launched against Ukraine, and ten years after Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol, both in manifest violation of its obligations under the UN Charter and international law, the European Council is ever more steadfast in its support for Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognised borders. Russia must not prevail.

   Given the urgency of the situation, the European Union is determined to continue providing Ukraine and its people all the necessary political, financial, economic, humanitarian, military and diplomatic support for as long as it takes and as intensely as needed. The European Council invites allies and partners across the world to join in this endeavour.

2. As it exercises its inherent right to self-defence, Ukraine urgently needs air defence systems, ammunition and missiles. At this critical moment, the European Union and Member States will speed up and intensify the delivery of all the necessary military assistance. The European Council welcomes all recent initiatives in this regard, including the one launched by Czechia to urgently procure ammunition for Ukraine, which will enable the swift fulfilment of the EU's commitment to provide Ukraine with one million rounds of artillery ammunition.

3. The European Council welcomes the bilateral agreements on security commitments concluded with Ukraine by several Member States and partners. It reviewed progress on the EU's contribution to the security commitments to Ukraine which will help Ukraine to defend itself, resist destabilisation efforts and deter acts of aggression in the future. The European Council welcomes the adoption of the Council Decision regarding a Ukraine Assistance Fund which ensures the continuation of military support for Ukraine under the European Peace Facility. The European Council calls on the Council to work on the 8th support package for Ukraine under the European Peace Facility. It also welcomes the increased capacity of the EU Military Assistance Mission (EUMAM).

4. The European Council reviewed progress on the next concrete steps towards directing extraordinary revenues stemming from Russia's immobilised assets for the benefit of Ukraine, including the possibility of funding military support. It invites the Council to take work forward on the recent proposals by the High Representative and the Commission.

5. Military support and EU security commitments will be provided in full respect of the security and defence policy of certain Member States and taking into account the security and defence interests of all Member States.

6. The European Council welcomes the adoption of the 13th package of sanctions. It calls for further steps to weaken Russia's ability to continue waging its war of aggression, including by strengthening the sanctions. Full and effective implementation of sanctions is essential. The European Council requests that the Council and the Commission improve exchange of information, strengthen implementation, enhance the EU and Member States' action with third countries, and close all loopholes both inside and outside the Union. This includes preventing the circumvention of sanctions through third countries, and ensuring their enforcement, also as concerns subsidiaries of EU companies abroad. Russia's access to sensitive items and technologies with battlefield relevance must be restricted to the maximum extent possible, including by targeting entities in third countries enabling this circumvention. The European Council calls on the High Representative and the Commission to prepare further sanctions against Belarus, North Korea and Iran.

7. The European Council calls on third parties to immediately cease providing material support to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. It is extremely concerned about reports that Iran may transfer ballistic missiles and related technology to Russia for use against Ukraine after having supplied the Russian regime with unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), which are used in relentless attacks against the civilian population in Ukraine. Were Iran to do so, the European Union is prepared to respond swiftly and in coordination with international partners, including with new and significant restrictive measures against Iran.

8. The European Council strongly condemns Russia's continuous human rights violations in the occupied Ukrainian territories, including the deportation of children. It firmly rejects and will never recognise the illegal so-called 'elections' organised by Russia in the temporarily occupied Ukrainian territories of Crimea, Sevastopol, Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson, nor their results.

9. Russia and its leadership must be held fully accountable for waging a war of aggression against Ukraine and for other most serious crimes under international law, as well as for the massive damage caused by its war. The European Council supports ongoing efforts, including in the Core Group, to establish a tribunal for the prosecution of the crime of aggression against Ukraine that would enjoy the broadest cross-regional support and legitimacy, and a future compensation mechanism.

10. The European Union remains committed to supporting Ukraine's repair, recovery and reconstruction, in coordination with international partners. The European Council welcomes the recent strengthening of the European Union Advisory Mission (EUAM) in Ukraine which will allow the scaling up of support for Ukrainian law enforcement agencies in Ukraine's liberated and adjacent territories, and for reforms in the context of its EU accession process. The European Council calls for further support for psychological and psychosocial rehabilitation and for increased demining assistance.

11. The European Union and its Member States will continue their intensive global outreach efforts to ensure the widest possible international support for a comprehensive, just and lasting peace and the key principles and objectives of Ukraine's Peace Formula, with a view to a future Global Peace Summit.

12. The European Council stresses the strategic importance of security and stability in the Black Sea region. It highlights the need to assist Ukraine in rebuilding its position in its traditional export markets, notably in the Middle East and Africa.

13. The European Union will continue to provide all relevant support to the Republic of Moldova in addressing the challenges it faces as a consequence of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, and to strengthen the country's resilience, security and stability in the face of destabilising activities by Russia. The European Council welcomes Member States' bilateral commitments to support the European Union Partnership Mission (EUPM) in Moldova in order to enhance the resilience of the security sector.

14. The European Union will also continue to support Georgia in strengthening its resilience and addressing the challenges it faces as a consequence of Russia's actions to undermine Georgia's territorial integrity as well as Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

II. SECURITY AND DEFENCE

15. The European Union is committed to increasing its overall defence readiness and capabilities to match its needs and ambition in the context of rising threats and security challenges. Building on the Versailles Declaration and the Strategic Compass, it is committed to reducing its strategic dependencies and scaling up its capacities. The European defence technological and industrial base should be strengthened accordingly across the Union. Increasing defence readiness and enhancing the Union's sovereignty will require additional efforts, in accordance with Member States' competences, to:

a) fulfil the shared commitment to substantially increase defence expenditure, and invest better and faster together;

b) improve the European defence industry's access to public and private finance. In this context, the European Council invites the Council and the Commission to explore all options for mobilising funding and report back by June. Furthermore, the European Investment Bank is invited to adapt its policy for lending to the defence industry and its current definition of dual-use goods, while safeguarding its financing capacity;

c) incentivise development and joint procurement to address critical EU capability gaps, in particular in strategic enablers, as well as to make full use of the synergies between national and European defence planning processes;

d) enhance cooperative/joint defence investment, from the research and development to the planning stage, to industrialisation and joint procurement, and improve predictability, e.g. through multi-year fixed contracts;

e) increase the resilience of the European defence industry, its flexibility and its capacity to develop and produce innovative defence products, enhancing their interoperability and interchangeability, and ensuring their availability to Member States;

f) incentivise further integration of the European defence market across the Union, by facilitating access to defence supply chains, in particular for SMEs and mid-cap companies, and by reducing red tape;

g) enhance rapid response and timely identification of bottlenecks in supply chains for the defence market and ensure that EU regulation is not an impediment to the development of the European defence industry;

h) support initiatives to continue investing in skilled labour to address prevailing labour and skills shortages in the defence industry.

16. The European Council invites the Council, the High Representative and the Commission to swiftly advance work on the Joint Communication on a European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS). It also invites the Council to take work forward without delay on the accompanying proposal for a European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP).

17. The implementation of the Strategic Compass remains a key element in increasing Europe's defence readiness and should be accelerated. The EU Rapid Deployment Capacity, military mobility, live exercises, enhancing space security, countering cyber and hybrid threats and addressing foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) are of particular importance in that respect.

18. A stronger and more capable European Union in the field of security and defence will contribute positively to global and transatlantic security and is complementary to NATO, which remains the foundation of collective defence for its members.

19. The above is without prejudice to the specific character of the security and defence policy of certain Member States, and takes into account the security and defence interests of all Member States.

III. MIDDLE EAST

20. The European Council discussed the latest developments in the Middle East. It is appalled by the unprecedented loss of civilian lives and the critical humanitarian situation. The European Council calls for an immediate humanitarian pause leading to a sustainable ceasefire, the unconditional release of all hostages and the provision of humanitarian assistance.

21. The European Council recalls its previous conclusions condemning Hamas in the strongest possible terms for its brutal and indiscriminate terrorist attacks across Israel on 7 October 2023, recognising Israel's right to defend itself in line with international law and international humanitarian law, and calling for the immediate release of all hostages without any precondition. Their safety and well-being is of grave concern. Hamas and other armed groups must immediately grant humanitarian access to all remaining hostages. The European Council calls on the Council to accelerate work on the adoption of further relevant restrictive measures against Hamas.

22. The European Council is deeply concerned about the catastrophic humanitarian situation in Gaza and its disproportionate effect on civilians, particularly children, as well as the imminent risk of famine caused by the insufficient entry of aid into Gaza. Full, rapid, safe and unhindered humanitarian access into and throughout the Gaza Strip via all routes is essential to provide the civilian population with life-saving assistance and basic services at scale. The European Council welcomes the Amalthea Initiative opening a maritime route for emergency assistance from Cyprus to Gaza, which supplements land routes that remain the main way to deliver the volumes needed. Additional land routes and crossings are needed.

23. Immediate measures should be taken to prevent any further population displacement and provide safe shelter to the population to ensure that civilians are protected at all times. The European Council urges the Israeli government not to undertake a ground operation in Rafah, which would worsen the already catastrophic humanitarian situation and prevent the urgently needed provision of basic services and humanitarian assistance. Over a million Palestinians are currently seeking safety from the fighting and access to humanitarian assistance there.

24. All parties must respect international law, including international humanitarian law and international human rights law. The European Council stresses the importance of respecting and implementing the 26 January 2024 order of the International Court of Justice, which is legally binding. Violations of international humanitarian law need to be thoroughly and independently investigated and accountability ensured. The European Council takes note of the reports by UN Special Representative Pramila Patten with grave concern and is appalled by the sexual violence during the 7 October attacks. The European Union supports independent investigations into all allegations of sexual violence, noting also the reports by UN Special Rapporteur Reem Alsalem.

25. The European Council stresses that the services UNRWA provides in Gaza and across the region are essential. The European Council notes the recent EU measures and the financial support. It welcomes the swift launch by the UN of an internal investigation and external review following the serious allegations against 12 UNRWA staff about their alleged participation in the 7 October terrorist attacks. It looks forward to the results of the investigation and further decisive action by the UN to ensure accountability and strengthen control and oversight.

26. The European Council calls for an immediate halt to violence in the West Bank and East Jerusalem as well as for ensuring safe access to the holy sites. The European Council strongly condemns extremist settler violence. Perpetrators must be held to account. The European Council calls on the Council to accelerate work on the adoption of relevant targeted restrictive measures. The European Council condemns Israeli Government decisions to further expand illegal settlements across the occupied West Bank. It urges Israel to reverse these decisions.

27. The European Union will continue to work intensely with regional and international partners to prevent further regional escalation, notably in Lebanon and the Red Sea. The European Council calls on all actors, notably Iran, to refrain from escalatory actions. It welcomes the launch of EU Operation ASPIDES to safeguard freedom of navigation and the security of seafarers in the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden and the broader region.

28. The European Union remains firmly committed to a lasting and sustainable peace based on the two-state solution. Palestinians and Israelis have an equal right to live in safety, dignity and peace. The European Council calls on all parties to refrain from actions that undermine the principle of the two-state solution and the viability of a future Palestinian state. It recalls that the two CSDP missions – the European Union Police Mission for the Palestinian Territories (EUPOL COPPS) and the European Union Border Assistance Mission to the Rafah Crossing Point (EUBAM Rafah) – can play an important role based on this principle in support of a future Palestinian state. The European Union stands ready to work with Israel, the Palestinian Authority, and regional and international parties to contribute to reviving a political process, including through the Peace Day initiative and a Peace Conference to be convened as soon as possible, and to support the Palestinian Authority as it undertakes the necessary reform. The European Union stands ready to support a coordinated international effort to rebuild Gaza.

IV. ENLARGEMENT AND REFORMS

29. Recalling the Granada Declaration, the European Council took stock of preparations for enlargement and internal reforms recalling that work on both tracks needs to advance in parallel to ensure that both future Member States and the EU are ready at the time of accession. The European Council will address internal reforms at an upcoming meeting with a view to adopting by summer 2024 conclusions on a roadmap for future work.

30. Building on the Commission's recommendation of 12 March 2024, the European Council decides to open accession negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina. The European Council invites the Commission to prepare the negotiating framework with a view to its adoption by the Council the moment all relevant steps set out in the Commission's recommendation of 12 October 2022 are taken.

31. The European Council welcomes the progress of Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova in advancing on the necessary reforms on their EU path. Further to the submission of the draft negotiating frameworks for Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, the European Council invites the Council to swiftly adopt them and to take work forward without delay.

32. The European Council takes note of Georgia's ongoing efforts and encourages the country to advance on the outstanding priority reforms.

V. EXTERNAL RELATIONS

Comprehensive partnerships

33. The European Council welcomes the joint declaration on the strategic and comprehensive partnership between the European Union and Egypt.

34. The European Council also welcomes the partnership with Mauritania.

35. It underlines the importance of strengthening and developing such strategic partnerships.

Haiti

36. The European Council is extremely concerned about the deteriorating situation in Haiti and the suffering inflicted on the population as a result of the new wave of violence unleashed since the end of February. It welcomes the recent release by the European Union of EUR 20 million in humanitarian support. The European Council encourages the ongoing efforts to put in place a viable, inclusive and sustainable Haitian-led political transition plan. It calls on all Haitian political forces to show responsibility by compromising to agree on the way forward in the best interests of the country and of the long-suffering population. The European Council welcomes UN Security Council Resolution 2699 setting up a Multinational Security Support Mission and underlines the importance of its rapid deployment.

Russia

37. The European Council calls for the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners in Russia and an end to the persecution of the political opposition. The ultimate responsibility for the death of Alexei Navalny lies with the Russian authorities. The European Council calls for an independent and transparent international investigation into the exact circumstances of his death. It welcomes the adoption of new restrictive measures against those responsible for serious human rights violations and abuse and calls for work to be taken forward in the Council to establish a new sanctions regime in view of the situation in Russia and its destabilising actions abroad.

38. The European Council condemns Russia's politically motivated persecution of EU citizens. It invites the Commission and the High Representative to take the necessary steps to prevent the execution by third countries of arrest warrants issued by Russia in such cases.

Belarus

39. The European Council is deeply concerned by the deteriorating human rights situation in Belarus. Repression, human rights violations and restrictions on political participation and access to independent media in Belarus reached unprecedented levels in the build-up to the parliamentary and local elections on 25 February, which failed to meet basic democratic standards. The European Council calls for the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners. It reiterates the EU's solidarity with Belarusian civil society and democratic forces.

VI. MIGRATION

40. The European Council reviewed the state of play on migration following the Communication from the Commission and reaffirmed the EU's commitment to continue pursuing a comprehensive approach to migration as agreed in its conclusions of December 2023. Noting that over 90 % of irregular migrants enter the EU with the assistance of smugglers, the European Council supports the Commission's resolve to strengthen all tools at the EU's disposal to effectively counter human trafficking and smuggling, while in parallel launching a Global Alliance to respond to this global challenge.

VII. AGRICULTURE

41. The European Council underlines the importance of a resilient and sustainable agricultural sector for food security and the Union's strategic autonomy, the value of vibrant rural communities, and the essential role of the Common Agricultural Policy in that regard. Farmers need a stable and predictable framework, including to accompany them in tackling environmental and climate challenges.

42. The European Council reverted to the current challenges in the agricultural sector and concerns raised by farmers. It took stock of the ongoing work at European level. The European Council invites the Commission and the Council to take work forward without delay, notably on:

    a) all possible short- and medium-term measures and innovative solutions, including those to reduce the administrative burden and to achieve simplification for farmers;

    b) strengthening the position of farmers in the food supply chain, in particular to ensure a fair income;

c) easing the farmers' financial strain by designing means of additional support, such as for example extending the temporary framework on State aid, and report back to the next European Council;

d) ensuring rules-based and fair competition globally and in the internal market;

e) addressing issues related to the Autonomous Trade Measures for Ukraine in a fair and balanced way while preparing a solution in the framework of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement/Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area.

43. The European Council will keep the situation under review.

VIII. PREPAREDNESS AND CRISIS RESPONSE

44. The European Council underlines the imperative need for enhanced and coordinated military and civilian preparedness and strategic crisis management in the context of the evolving threat landscape. It invites the Council to take work forward and the Commission together with the High Representative to propose actions to strengthen preparedness and crisis response at EU level in an all-hazards and whole-of-society approach, taking into account Member States' responsibilities and competences, with a view to a future preparedness strategy.

IX. EUROPEAN SEMESTER

45. The European Council endorses the policy priorities of the Annual Sustainable Growth Survey and invites the Member States to take them into account. It also endorses the draft Council recommendation on the economic policy of the euro area.

*

* *

The European Council took stock of preparations for the new Strategic Agenda.