

Speech by the President at the European Parliament Plenary

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President,

Honourable Members,

I wish to begin by expressing my full solidarity with the inhabitants of Mayotte. France, and all of Europe, is grieving. Yesterday evening, France activated the EU Civil Protection Mechanism and we stand ready to coordinate emergency aid from Europe. We will face this test together.

Honourable Members,

Let me focus on two key topics for the next European Council: Syria and Ukraine. The fall of Bashar al-Assad is a liberation for the people of Syria. We have all seen the heartbreaking images coming from Assad's prisons, where so many innocents were held, tortured and killed. Innocents like the young girl who spent 14 years in jail for a social media post. Or the babies born in prison, who had never seen the light of day. Assad had built a whole system of underground dungeons. This was the true face of the regime. And this is why so many Syrians are overwhelmed with joy. For the first time in decades, hope is back in Syria.

But while the old Syria is gone, the new one is not born yet. Some of the first steps taken by the new leadership are encouraging. But many questions are still open. Will there be a political transition that respects national unity? Will all minorities be safe and protected? And will the fight against Daesh continue? To name just a few. The future of Syria is full of

promise but also fraught with risks. The coming weeks and months will be crucial to shape it. And Europe will play its role. Syria shares a maritime border with one of our Member States. And events in Syria have affected us deeply over the last decade. A credible and inclusive transition is a core European interest.

So Europe must engage – both at regional and local level. I just came back from Jordan and Türkiye, where I discussed how we can work together for the stability of the region. First, our top diplomat has returned to Syria. Our Union has always kept a presence in Damascus to support those in need – while respecting the principles of no contacts, no cooperation, and no funding to the Assad regime. But now, our presence is taking on a different dimension. And we will intensify our direct contacts with HTS and other factions. We care about Syria's future, and we have to be there on the ground.

This is why we have just launched a new humanitarian air bridge via Türkiye and Jordan. We have increased our humanitarian aid to more than EUR 160 million this year. And we are ready to do even more, provided that we get better access across the country. But we should also consider expanding our support beyond humanitarian aid. Europe is already Syria's biggest donor. Since 2011, our annual Syria Conferences have mobilised around EUR 33 billion. We will continue this support, but with a new focus on early recovery and reconstruction. We are speaking about electricity, water, basic infrastructure and more. But this will have to follow a step-by-step approach. The new leadership in Damascus has to prove that their deeds match their words.

In this context, we should also reconsider our sectoral sanctions, to facilitate reconstruction. Here again – to do so, we need to see real progress towards an inclusive political process. Europe has leverage in Syria. And we should use it, so that the power can go back to the people of Syria.

Finally, on refugees. The fall of the regime has given hope to so many Syrian refugees. A significant number of them have already started going back to Syria. But UN agencies tell us that risks remain for both individuals and ethnic groups. So while all refugees have the right to return, this has to be voluntary, safe and dignified. For Syrians who decide to go home, Europe is ready to support them every step of the way. Syria belongs to all its people, including those who fled from Assad's brutality. And all Syrians have the right to take the country's future into their hands.

Honourable Members,

The events in Syria will resonate well beyond the Middle East. The fall of Assad is a cautionary tale about the limits of Russia's power projection. After three years of all-out war, Russia has not managed to break Ukraine's resistance. But now Putin is trying harder than ever. With new weapons, new troops from North Korea, and a new wave of attacks on energy infrastructure. His strategy is clear. He is trying to make gains on the ground and to terrorise the people of Ukraine. So, bolstering Ukraine right now is not only

a moral imperative. It is also a strategic imperative. The world is watching. Our friends, and even more our foes, will observe carefully how we sustain our support to Ukraine. And this support has to be ironclad.

The most immediate challenge is Ukraine's energy system. We have already done a lot on this front. We have provided Ukraine with thousands of power generators, transformers, electrical components, and millions of LED bulbs. But we must do more. There is still a substantial capacity gap. Tomorrow in the European Council I will ask leaders to do more on repairs, to further upgrade the connecting grid, and to do more for decentralised electricity generation. In these darkest days of the year, we must keep the lights on, and keep the hope alive.

And beyond the winter, we must maintain Ukraine's basic economic and financial stability. The IMF estimated Ukraine's financing gap at over USD 42 billion for 2025. But we are closing this gap, together with our G7 partners and international financial institutions. Our Union will contribute EUR 13 billion next year from the Ukraine Facility. And as of January, we will start transferring our part of the G7 loan, financed with the revenues of immobilised Russian assets. That is over EUR 18 billion for 2025. This will give Ukraine economic and financial stability until the end of 2025, and it will free up their fiscal space to purchase military equipment. In other words, Putin's strategy to drive Kyiv into the financial abyss has utterly failed.

This is a major achievement, because the economic dimension of this war is as important as the military side. Over one third of Russia's budget today goes to military spending. It is a war economy. So it is essential to undermine Putin's revenue potential. Last week, we adopted our 15th package of sanctions. It includes measures against Russia's shadow fleet and circumvention channels. And the 16th package is already in preparation. Our sanctions are taking their toll on the Russian economy. The rouble is at its lowest levels since the start of the war, in spite of massive countermeasures by the Russian Central Bank. Inflation has reached 70% in some sectors of the Russian economy. We are sending a clear message to the Kremlin: the longer the war continues, the higher the price for the Russian economy.

Finally, we must also continue our political support to Ukrainians. They have achieved tremendous progress towards membership of our Union. And if they keep up these efforts, we should be ready to open the negotiations on the fundamentals cluster in early 2025, and other clusters during the year. Ukrainians are fighting for their future in our Union. And they must know that their efforts are paying off. The flag of Ukraine will fly at the heart of our Union.

To conclude: This is the moment to stay the course. No matter what happens next, we do need to keep the key principles in mind. First, Ukraine must remain an independent state, with the right to choose its own destiny. Second, it is for Ukraine to decide its own territory. And third, we have to always keep in mind that when we speak about Ukraine's security, we speak about Europe's security. We need a just and lasting peace, for Ukraine and for all of Europe.

Thank you, and long live Europe.