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NOTE

From: General Secretariat of the Council
To: Permanent Representatives Committee
Subject: European Council meeting (19 and 20 March 2026)
– Draft guidelines for conclusions

With a view to the forthcoming meeting of the European Council, delegations will find below the state of progress regarding the various topics on its agenda. Where possible, first indications are given on the elements the President of the European Council intends to include in the draft of the conclusions.

Member States are invited to provide their reactions, in order to help guide the preparations for the draft European Council conclusions which will be submitted in one week.

I. UKRAINE (draft conclusions)

1. [The European Council held an exchange of views with Volodymyr Zelenskyy, President of Ukraine.]
2. As we enter the fifth year of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, the European Council reaffirms its continued firm and unwavering support for Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognised borders. The European Union will continue to provide, in coordination with like-minded partners and allies, comprehensive political, financial, economic, humanitarian, military and diplomatic support to Ukraine and its people.
3. The European Council commends the fortitude, determination and resilience of the Ukrainian people and its leadership in resisting Russian aggression and defending their land. Ukraine has managed to stand its ground and push back against Russia's enormous pressure, preventing it from achieving its military objectives. It is critical in that context to ensure that Ukraine has the budgetary and military means to continue to exercise its inherent right of self-defence and counter and deter Russia's aggression.
4. The future of Ukraine and its citizens lies within the European Union. The European Council welcomes the significant progress Ukraine has achieved so far under the most challenging circumstances and encourages further reforms needed. Taking good note that the conditions have now been met for opening all clusters, the European Council invites the Council to take the next steps in the accession process, in line with the merit-based approach.

5. The European Council underlines the Union's strong support for a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in Ukraine based on the principles of the UN Charter and international law and underpinned by robust and credible security guarantees for Ukraine. The European Council welcomes the ongoing diplomatic efforts to bring the war to an end and fully supports Ukraine in the negotiations. The European Council urges Russia to agree to a full, unconditional and immediate ceasefire and engage in meaningful negotiations towards a just and lasting peace. For peace to be just and lasting, respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity is the cornerstone. Borders must not be changed by force, the aggressor cannot be rewarded and Ukraine's long-term security and ability to defend itself must be guaranteed.
6. The European Union and its Member States will continue to actively participate in peace efforts, in accordance with the European Union's aim to promote peace, as enshrined in the Treaties. The European Union will decide on matters of its competence or affecting its security.
7. The European Union and Member States are prepared to contribute to robust and credible security guarantees for Ukraine, notably through the Coalition of the Willing and in cooperation with the United States. This will include supporting Ukraine's ability to deter aggression and defend itself effectively, also in the long term. The contribution of the European Union and Member States will be based on their respective competences and capabilities and in line with international law.
8. The European Council condemns Russia for deliberately targeting Ukraine's civilian infrastructure, and specifically heating and power installations. It welcomes the energy support and humanitarian and civil protection assistance provided to Ukraine by the EU and its Member States. The European Council calls for further efforts to help support Ukraine in urgently repairing, rebuilding and strengthening the resilience of its energy system. More generally, the European Union remains committed to supporting Ukraine's repair, recovery and reconstruction, in coordination with international partners.

9. Following its December 2025 decision to provide Ukraine with a support loan of EUR 90 billion for 2026 and 2027, the European Council welcomes the adoption of the loan by the co-legislators and looks forward to the first disbursement to Ukraine by the beginning of April. In this context, it also calls for intensified outreach to third countries to help close the remaining gap of EUR 30 billion in Ukraine's finances.
10. The European Council underlines the importance of further sustained effort to provide military support to Ukraine and urgently accelerate its delivery, in particular air defence systems, ammunition, drones and missiles, including to help Ukraine protect its energy and critical infrastructure. In this context, developing Ukraine's defence industry, including through EU-Ukraine defence industrial cooperation, remains crucial.
11. All military support as well as security guarantees for Ukraine 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.
12. The European Union remains determined to further increase pressure on Russia so that it stops its brutal war of aggression and engages in meaningful negotiations towards peace. [*p.m. 20th sanctions package; listings under the Russia human rights regime*]. The European Council reiterates the importance of further reducing Russia's energy revenues and took stock of efforts to curb Russia's shadow fleet operations. Undermining the Russian shadow fleet's business model requires a 'whole of route' approach and further efforts and coordinated action by Member States. The European Council also stresses the importance of continued coordination with G7 and other like-minded partners on sanctions, and of further reinforcing the anti-circumvention measures.
13. The European Council urges all countries to immediately cease any assistance to Russia in its war of aggression against Ukraine, whether direct or indirect, and notably through the provision of dual-use goods and components. In particular, it strongly condemns the deployment of the DPRK's military forces on the battlefield in Ukraine as well as the continued military support provided by Iran, Belarus and the DPRK, among others.

14. The European Council reiterates its urgent call on Russia and Belarus to immediately ensure the safe and unconditional return to Ukraine of all unlawfully deported and transferred Ukrainian children and other civilians. Other humanitarian relief efforts and confidence-building measures, notably the exchange of prisoners of war, must be part of the pathway to peace.
15. The European Council also reaffirms the EU's commitment to ensuring full accountability for war crimes and the other most serious crimes committed in connection with Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. In this context, the European Council calls for sustained efforts within the framework of the Council of Europe towards the operationalisation of the Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression against Ukraine and the establishment of the International Claims Commission for Ukraine.
16. The European Council will revert to this issue at its next meeting.

II. MIDDLE EAST

The European Council is expected to:

- *p.m.: situation in Iran and the region*
- take stock of latest developments in Gaza and call for the full implementation of the ceasefire and all other provisions of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2803, in line with relevant international political and legal principles, including by ensuring the permanent disarmament of Hamas and other non-state armed groups;
- affirm the European Union's readiness to work on the implementation of the Comprehensive Plan to End the Gaza Conflict in accordance with UNSCR 2803;

- insist on the need for the rapid, safe and unimpeded delivery and sustained distribution of humanitarian aid at scale into and throughout Gaza, in accordance with international humanitarian law, as well as the need to ensure the protection of all civilians at all times;
- strongly condemn Israel’s unilateral actions aiming to expand its unlawful presence in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, as well as continued settler violence against Palestinian civilians, and urge the Government of Israel to abide by its obligations under international law and protect the Palestinian population of the occupied territories; it is expected to reiterate its call on the Council to take work forward on further restrictive measures against extremist settlers and entities and organisations that support them;
- express the Union’s continued support to the Palestinian Authority, including in its ongoing reform agenda;
- note the redeployment of the European Union Border Assistance Mission for the Rafah Crossing Point (EU BAM Rafah), call on all parties to facilitate checks and allow for an increase in crossings, and welcome preparations to scale up the European Union Police Mission for the Palestinian Territories (EUPOL COPPS);
- reaffirm the European Union’s commitment to international law and a comprehensive, just and lasting peace based on the two-state solution.

III. COMPETITIVENESS AND SINGLE MARKET

One Europe, One Market

The European Council will launch a One Europe, One Market agenda, to be completed by the end of 2027, and is expected to consider the areas below to be high priority.

The European Council will regularly review progress on all strands of this agenda and provide additional strategic guidance when needed.

p.m.: joint roadmap of the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission

Single Market

The European Council will provide strategic guidance on the implementation of a fully integrated Single Market, notably through concrete initiatives and timelines. It will underline that this is a shared responsibility of Member States and EU institutions. Companies of all sizes should be free to operate seamlessly across the Single Market, and to scale up to reach their full potential. The European Council will affirm that a ‘One Market’ approach, with harmonised EU-wide rules that replace 27 sets of national rules, in itself brings simplification.

In particular, the European Council is expected to call:

- on the Member States and the EU institutions to remove national barriers to the free movement of goods and services, notably those identified in the Commission’s Single Market Strategy of May 2025, with a view to achieving concrete and tangible progress by [March 2027];
- on the Commission to ensure robust enforcement of Single Market rules, thus preserving its integrity and a level playing field;
- on the co-legislators, on the basis of a Commission proposal, to adopt a 28th regime for companies by the end of 2026, which should be digital by default, contribute to overcoming the challenges facing European companies, in particular innovative start-ups and companies, and help them operate and scale up across the Single Market;
- on the Member States and the Commission to improve the conditions throughout the Union for businesses to achieve the scale needed to invest, innovate and compete at global level, in particular in relation to the telecommunications, financial services, space and energy sectors. This would include the ongoing review of the merger guidelines.

Simplification and reducing administrative burden

The European Council will call on the Commission, the co-legislators and the Member States to continue to ambitiously simplify rules and reduce administrative burdens at EU, national and regional level to ensure a regulatory environment that is both innovation and SME friendly.

This is expected to include, in particular:

- keeping up the momentum to simplify and reduce burdens from existing legislation, notably through the Omnibus agenda and other simplification proposals;
- undertaking an in-depth regulatory review of the EU acquis to systematically eliminate outdated provisions, overlaps, inconsistencies and redundancies, which may include withdrawing legislative proposals;
- ensuring that new EU initiatives are simple-by-design and reduce administrative burdens, including by using regulations instead of directives, and limiting the use of delegated and implementing acts to technical elements;
- avoiding the introduction of new administrative burdens throughout the legislative procedure; and addressing gold-plating when implementing EU rules.

The European Council will welcome the commitment by the President of the European Commission to report annually to the European Council on progress achieved in simplification.

Affordable energy prices and Energy Union 2030

The European Council will underline that the energy transition remains the most effective strategy for achieving Europe's strategic autonomy, strengthening resilience, delivering clean and abundant energy, and permanently lowering energy prices. At the same time, it will stress the need for targeted solutions in the short term to ensure affordable energy, taking into account the specific situations of Member States, the particular exposure of certain industrial sectors to the risk of relocation, and the need to improve the conditions for energy-intensive innovative sectors.

To this end, the European Council is expected to call:

- on the Member States and the Commission to accelerate the implementation of the Energy Union 2030 agenda, to rapidly allow for increased and affordable electrification;
- on the co-legislators to adopt, in 2026, an ambitious grids package to quickly enhance interconnections and build the necessary infrastructure, contributing to an integrated energy market;
- on the Commission to examine all components of wholesale and retail electricity prices and present proposals for concrete actions to lower electricity prices. In this context, the European Council will call for the upcoming review of the ETS system to both reduce volatility and the impact on electricity prices, while preserving the essential role of the ETS in the climate and energy transition through a market-based price signal for carbon emissions that drives investment and innovation.

Fostering Europe's industrial renewal, innovation and reducing dependencies

The European Council will underline that to drive future growth in Europe it is critical to channel investment towards tomorrow's technologies, accelerate innovation and improve the conditions for a sustainable and productive industrial base, in a technologically neutral manner. Reducing strategic dependencies and strengthening Europe's geopolitical and commercial weight has become a precondition for resilience, growth and job creation.

To this end, the European Council is expected to call:

- on the Commission to identify and map dependencies in strategic sectors, such as defence, space, clean tech, semiconductors, quantum, cloud and artificial intelligence, as well as payment systems;
- on the co-legislators, on the basis of Commission proposals, to establish a targeted and proportional 'European preference' in strategic sectors and technologies;
- on the Commission to take action to protect key sectors from unfair competition and supporting their development within Europe, and to proactively tackle economic coercion;
- on the Commission and the Council to continue diversifying trade and investment ties, including to secure access to essential resources and markets.

Mobilising investment

The European Council will recall that a fundamental precondition for sustainable growth is a true Savings and Investments Union with a fully integrated and efficient capital market that effectively channels savings into productive investments in the EU. This is key to providing European businesses with the capital they need to start up and grow, to create quality jobs in the EU and to invest in innovation.

To this end, the European Council is expected to call on the co-legislators:

- to conclude, by the end of 2026, negotiations on the legislative proposals on securitisation, supplementary pensions, and the market integration and supervision package;
- to conclude, by the end of 2026, negotiations on the legislative proposal on the digital euro;
- to swiftly conclude the outstanding legislative proposals for the completion of the Banking Union; and on the Commission to swiftly propose targeted amendments to the prudential framework in order to enhance the capacity of the banking sector to finance the European economy.

p.m.: European Semester

IV. NEXT MULTIANNUAL FINANCIAL FRAMEWORK (draft conclusions)

17. The European Council held an exchange of views on the next Multiannual Financial Framework, including its contribution to EU competitiveness, and the financing needs for EU ambitions. It also took note of the ongoing work on governance.

V. EUROPEAN DEFENCE AND SECURITY (draft conclusions)

18. In a deteriorating geopolitical environment, and with Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine remaining an existential challenge for the European Union, the European Council reiterates its determination to decisively ramp up Europe's defence readiness by 2030, reduce strategic dependencies and address critical capability gaps, with a 360° approach.

19. In this context, the European Council took stock of progress and discussed next steps on the main areas of work to reach Europe's 2030 defence readiness objective. The European Council:

- a) welcomes the progress achieved on capabilities, with all capability coalitions in place and working. It welcomes in particular progress in the field of drones and counter-drones systems, where Member States are already working on joint development and procurement. The European Council invites Member States to further intensify work so that concrete projects can be presented in the next months, including by implementing the SAFE and European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP) instruments, in full coherence with NATO. It also recalls the importance of air defence and the need for accelerated joint development of space assets and services that serve security and defence purposes;
- b) stresses the need to strengthen the European defence technological and industrial base so that it can supply the equipment needed, and reiterates in particular the importance of the proper functioning and further integration of the European defence market across the Union, including cross-border access to defence supply chains, especially for SMEs and mid-caps. The European Council invites the co-legislators to finalise work as a matter of urgency on the Defence Readiness Omnibus;
- c) calls on the European Defence Agency to finalise by June the work to strengthen its support to Member States in the fields of innovation, capability development and common procurement;
- d) welcomes the continued efforts made by the European Investment Bank to strengthen the European defence industry;

- e) recalls the importance of innovation in the field of defence and the need to draw the lessons from Ukraine's experience;
- f) recalling the importance of military mobility, it invites the co-legislators to take work forward on the relevant proposal.

20. In light of Russia's and Belarus' persistent hybrid campaign against the European Union and its Member States, the European Council expects continued efforts to strengthen resilience, protect critical infrastructure, and prevent, deter and respond to hybrid attacks, with particular attention to drone and counter drone security.

p.m.: update of the threat assessment/security strategy

- 21. The European Council recalls the importance of working together with like-minded partners, who share the EU's foreign and security policy goals.
- 22. 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, in accordance with the Treaties.

VI. MIGRATION (draft conclusions)

- 23. The European Council took stock of progress in the implementation of its previous conclusions[, including in the light of the recent letter from the President of the Commission]. It calls for intensified work on all strands to continue as a matter of priority, including on the external dimension and comprehensive partnerships, in line with EU and international law.