

## EXIT OF WESTERN COMPANIES Moscow plans to seize their assets

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

Russia has drawn up plans to seize the assets of western companies leaving the country as the Kremlin pushes back against sweeping sanctions and the exodus of international businesses since its invasion of Ukraine.

Announcing the move after a string of global firms said they would suspend operations in Russia this week, including McDonald's, Coca-Cola and Pepsi, the country's economic ministry said it could take temporary control of departing businesses where foreign ownership exceeds 25 percent.

Speaking in a video link with members of his government on Thursday, Vladimir Putin said the Kremlin could find legally viable ways to seize international firms. The government would push to "introduce external management and then transfer these enterprises to those who actually want to work," Putin said. "There are enough legal and market instruments for this."

The move comes as western governments seek to impose maximum pressure on Putin after the invasion of Ukraine by announcing drastic restrictions on imports of Russian oil and gas on top of financial sanctions and asset freezes for prominent oligarchs.

On top of formal sanctions, major western businesses and high-profile brands have taken steps to either exit the country altogether or suspend operations in response to the invasion.

Russia announced plans on Thursday designed to exert pressure back on the west through economic sanctions, including through an export ban on timber, electronic and telecoms equipment. Moscow also passed laws to impound \$10bn (£7.6bn) of jets leased to Aeroflot and other Russian airlines by western organisations.



This handout picture released by the State Emergency Service of Ukraine yesterday, shows rescuers working at the scene of an airstrike in Dnipro. Civilian targets came under Russian shelling in the central Ukrainian city of Dnipro, emergency services said, in what appeared to be the first direct attack on the city. PHOTO: AFP

## Russia to use ME volunteer fighters in Ukraine

REUTERS, London

Russian President Vladimir Putin yesterday gave the green light for up to 16,000 volunteers from the Middle East to be deployed alongside Russian-backed rebels to fight in Ukraine, doubling down on an invasion that the West says has been losing momentum.

The move, just over two weeks since Putin ordered the invasion, allows Russia to deploy battle-hardened mercenaries from conflicts such as Syria without risking additional Russian military casualties.

At a meeting of Russia's Security Council, Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu said there were 16,000 volunteers in the Middle East who were ready to come to fight alongside Russian-backed forces in the breakaway Donbass region of eastern Ukraine.

"If you see that there are these people who want of their own accord, not for money, to come to help the people living in Donbass, then we need to give them what they want," Putin said from the Kremlin.

Shoigu also proposed that Western-made Javelin and Stinger missiles that were captured by the Russian army in Ukraine should be handed over to Donbass forces, along with other weaponry such as man-portable air-defense systems, known as MANPADS, and anti-tank rocket complexes.

## FAST-TRACK MEMBERSHIP FOR UKRAINE

# EU rebuffs Kyiv's plea

Eyes doubling military aid; US says Kyiv needs surface-to-air missiles, not fighter jets



AGENCIES

Emmanuel Macron has led western European leaders in rebuffing appeals from Volodymyr Zelenskyy for fast-track EU membership for Ukraine despite the backing of eastern member states.

At a summit in Versailles, the 27 EU countries acknowledged as one the "tectonic shift in European history" caused by Russia's invasion of its neighbour and vowed to bolster their military might and "strengthen our bonds and deepen our partnership" with Kyiv.

But calls from Ukraine's president, supported by Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, for a special membership process failed to convince France, Germany, Spain or the Netherlands.

France's president said he wanted to "send a strong signal in this period to Ukraine and to the Ukrainians" of solidarity but "at the same time, we must be vigilant", adding that he did not believe it possible to "open an accession procedure with a country at war".

"Should we close the door and say never, it would be unfair," he said.

Mark Rutte, the Dutch prime minister, told reporters there was no prospect of the EU membership for Ukraine in the short term.

He said: "All countries in the western part of Europe that I speak to say that you shouldn't try to have a fast-track procedure or accelerated accession process ..."

"What's important is that Ukraine has asked to be member of the EU ... There is no fast-track procedure to become a member of the EU."

However, EU yesterday looked to double financing for military aid to Ukraine by an extra 500 million euros.

EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said he expected the leaders to sign off on a proposal to expand the spending package that has seen the bloc fund weapons going to Ukraine.

Germany's chancellor, Olaf Scholz, suggested that the EU was not ready for enlargement as its decision-making was still rooted in unanimity.

The leaders were meeting in France just hours after talks between Ukraine's foreign minister, Dmytro Kuleba, and his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, in Turkey ended in stalemate.

Meanwhile, the US State Department on Thursday ruled out proposals to send MiG fighter jets to Ukraine via an American base, saying Kyiv's efforts to repel the Russian invasion would be better served by the supply of ground-based weapons.

## No-fly zone can spark Nato-Russia war Says Stoltenberg

AFP, Antalya

Nato must not allow Russia's invasion of Ukraine to spill over into an open conflict between the alliance and Moscow, its chief Jens Stoltenberg said yesterday, warning a no-fly zone would likely lead to full scale war.

Nato's rejection of Ukrainian calls to provide air cover against Russian missiles and warplanes has drawn strong criticism from Kyiv.

He warned that a no-fly zone over Ukraine would "most likely lead to a full war between Nato and Russia", causing "so much more suffering, so much more death and destruction".

Stoltenberg said a no-fly zone over Ukraine would mean that Nato would have to take out Russian air defence systems not only in Ukraine, but also around Belarus and Russia.

"It will mean that we need to be ready to shoot down Russian planes because a no-fly zone is not only something you declare you have to impose it," he told AFP.

Stoltenberg told AFP that the training of tens of thousands of Ukrainian troops by Nato member states in recent years, as well as the supply of military equipment, had proved "extremely important (for Ukraine's forces) in the fight against invading Russian forces".

## WAR IN UKRAINE Developments

AGENCIES

### FOOD PRICES TO RISE BY UP TO 20PC

International food and feed prices could rise by between 8 percent and 20 percent as a result of the war, triggering a jump in global malnourishment, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) said. Russia is the world's largest exporter of wheat and Ukraine is the fifth largest, the FAO said. Together, they provide 19 percent

of the world's barley supply, 14 percent of wheat, and 4 percent of maize, making up more than one-third of global cereal exports. Some 50 countries, including many of the least developed nations, depend on Russia and Ukraine for 30 percent or more of their wheat supplies, leaving them especially vulnerable, it added.

### RUSSIA ENCIRCLING KYIV

The capital Kyiv risks being surrounded, with Russian tanks moving in on areas north and west of the capital, the Ukrainian military says, with some suburbs heavily bombarded. Three other major cities are effectively besieged.

### CARE HOME, KINDERGARTEN HIT

An apartment block and shoe factory are hit in the first air strikes on the central city of Dnipro

-- until now seen as a safe

haven -- with a kindergarten also damaged. A home for the disabled near Kharkiv in the east is also bombed, with 330 people there at the time, officials say.

Zelenskyy says trucks carrying food and medicine

of Mariupol in the south -- without water and power for 11 days -- were attacked by Russia tanks. The city's mayor says it is being shelled "every 30 minutes", with 1,200 civilians already dead and reports of people starving and of corpses in the streets.

### US TO REVOKE RUSSIA'S MFN STATUS

US President Joe Biden yesterday said he wants to strip Russia of its "most favored nation" trade status, according to a source familiar with the matter, a move that would pave the way for tariff hikes. Final approval on the new measure in response to the invasion of Ukraine -- to be taken in coordination with the G7 countries and the European Union -- will be decided by Congress, the source added. However, it should be a formality, as Congress has already declared itself in favor of such a sanction. Most favored nation (MFN) is an international trade status accorded by one state to another, and means the country which is the recipient must nominally receive equal trade advantages.

### SYRIA MERCENARIES ROW

The Kremlin says Syrian fighters can fight for Russia in Ukraine after President Vladimir Putin backs plans to draft 16,000 volunteers, mostly from the Middle East. Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy accuses Moscow of hiring "murderers" from a country they have destroyed, "like they are doing here to us".

### MORE THAN 2.5M FLEE

The UN migration agency reports that as of today more than 2.5 million people have fled Ukraine. Of the total, the International Organisation for Migration said that 116,000 were third-country nationals. The majority of refugees, around 1.5 million people, have fled to Poland.

## HATE SPEECH AGAINST RUSSIANS UN sounds alarm over Meta's move

AFP, Geneva

The UN yesterday voiced alarm at Facebook's decision to temporarily ease its policy on violent speech after Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, warning it could spark "hate speech" against Russians.

The policy decision from Facebook and Instagram's parent company Meta on Thursday said the platforms would now allow statements like "death to Russian invaders" but not credible threats against civilians.

"This is clearly a very, very complex issue, but it does raise some concerns under the terms of human rights law and international humanitarian law," UN rights office spokeswoman Elizabeth Throssell told reporters in Geneva.

In its statement Thursday, the firm pointed to the Russian invasion of Ukraine that began on February 24.

"We have temporarily made allowances for forms of political expression that would normally violate our rules like violent speech such as 'death to the Russian invaders'," it said. It added that it "still won't allow credible calls for violence against Russian civilians".

Throssell warned that the new policy lacked clarity, which "could certainly contribute to hate speech directed at Russians in general".

"That would be really concerning," she said, adding that the UN rights office planned to raise its concerns with Meta.



People wearing protective mask pay a silent tribute to mourn the victims of the March 11, 2011 earthquake and tsunami, on the 11th anniversary of the events that killed thousands and set off a nuclear crisis, in Tokyo, Japan, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS