

Zelensky Visits France After EU Honors Ukraine Fight 'for Europe'

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Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky landed in Paris Sunday for talks with French President Emmanuel Macron, after accepting a prize for his country's fight for "European ideals" during a visit to Germany.

"Paris. With each visit, Ukraine's defense and offensive capabilities are expanding," Zelensky tweeted as he arrived on Sunday evening at the airbase of Villacoublay southwest of Paris.

"The ties with Europe are getting stronger, and the pressure on Russia is growing."

Macron shortly afterwards welcomed Zelensky to the Elysee Palace, for the second time since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February last year.

"Every day we are bringing peace closer for all Ukrainians and Europeans," Zelensky wrote on Telegram, posting a video of the welcoming ceremony.

The French leader's office said the pair would discuss France's "support" in responding to "Ukraine's urgent military and humanitarian needs" during dinner at the presidential palace.

Macron would "reaffirm the unwavering support of France and Europe for restoring Ukraine's legitimate rights and defend its fundamental interests," it added.

Zelensky's arrival in Paris came hours after EU leaders in Germany presented him with a prize for the Ukrainian people for fighting for the bloc's freedom and values.

"Ukraine incarnates everything the European idea is living for: the courage of convictions, the fight for values and freedom, the commitment to peace and unity," said EU chief Ursula von der Leyen at the Charlemagne award ceremony in Aachen.

"President Zelensky and the people of Ukraine are fighting for the values and the obligation that this prize embodies. And in doing so, they are also fighting for our own freedom and our values," she said in a message echoed by Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki.

For German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, Russia's war on its neighbor had "cemented one clear realization: Ukraine is part of our European family."

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Germany 'a true friend'

Zelensky received the prize while on his first trip to Germany since Russia's invasion, a day after meeting Italian leaders and Pope Francis in Rome.

The weekend diplomatic tour comes ahead of an EU summit in Reykjavik and a gathering of G7 leaders in Japan.

Zelensky won extended standing ovations at the Aachen ceremony, during which EU leaders also vowed to support Ukraine along its road to joining the bloc.

Calling Germany a "true friend and reliable ally" to Ukraine as it battles to repel Russian invaders, Zelensky held separate talks with Scholz and President Frank-Walter Steinmeier.

Berlin on Saturday unveiled a new military package for Kyiv worth 2.7 billion euros (\$3 billion), its biggest yet for Ukraine and hailed by Zelensky as a "powerful support."

"Now is the time for us to determine the end of this war this year. This year, we can make the aggressor's defeat irreversible," said the Ukrainian leader.

In the western city of Aachen, several hundred Ukraine supporters rallied holding blue balloons and wearing yellow-and-blue flags around their shoulders.

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'As long as necessary'

Ukrainian forces have been training troops and stockpiling Western-supplied munitions and hardware that analysts say will be key to reclaiming territory captured by Russia.

Germany, once accused of reticence in supplying military gear to Ukraine, has become the second-biggest contributor of tanks, rockets and anti-missile systems to the country, after the United States.

Early in the conflict, Kyiv had accused Germany of being too accommodating to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

But on the eve of Zelensky's visit, Berlin said it would send Ukraine more firing units and launchers for the Iris-T anti-missile system, 30 additional Leopard 1 tanks, more than 100 armored combat vehicles and over 200 surveillance drones.

Scholz on Sunday reiterated Berlin's backing. "We will support you for as long as it is necessary," he told Zelensky.

Zelensky said he would urge Scholz to support Ukraine's bid for fighter jet deliveries, though he did not specify if he was seeking aircraft directly from Germany.

'Inaction'

On the front line, Kyiv said Ukrainian forces had captured more than 10 Russian positions on the outskirts of the flashpoint town of Bakhmut.

Russia said two of its military commanders had been killed in combat near the town, where fighting has been raging for days.

The head of Russia's private Wagner mercenary group Yevgeny Prigozhin again accused the Russian army of inaction around Bakhmut.

In a post published by his press service, Prigozhin slammed the "airborne forces" for not backing his men as the Defense Ministry had claimed.

"I didn't see them... I don't know where they are and who they are helping," said Prigozhin.

Elsewhere, Moscow said Russian forces had struck Western arm depots and Ukrainian troops in the western city of Ternopil and the eastern town of Petropavlivka.

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