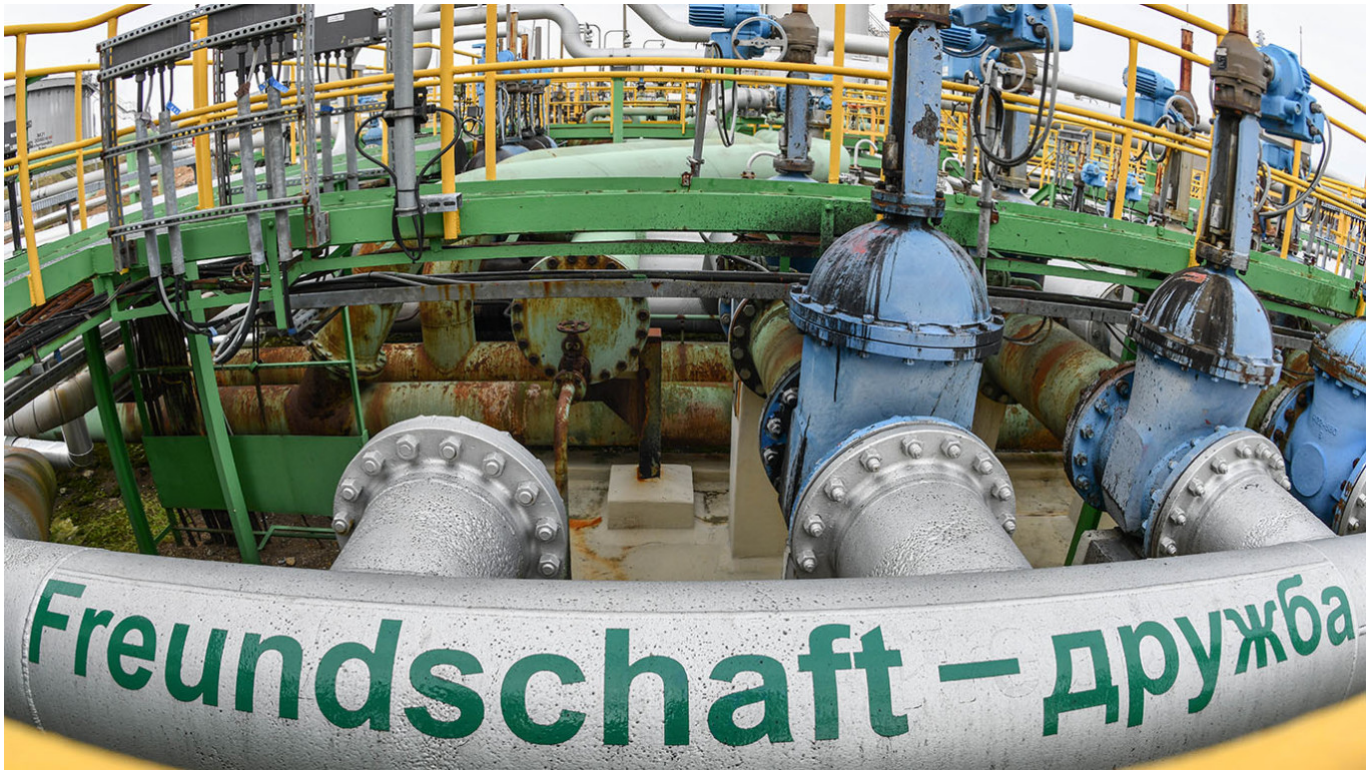
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EU Offers to Help Repair Pipeline Carrying Russian Oil to Hungary

By AFP

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Patrick Pleul / dpa-Zentralbild / dpa / TASS

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said Tuesday that the bloc will help repair a damaged pipeline that pumps Russian oil through Ukraine to Hungary, coming after tensions between Hungary and Ukraine escalated over delays in restoring flows.

The dispute has intensified in recent days, with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán using the issue to block an EU loan of 90 billion euros ($104 billion) to Ukraine and a new round of sanctions against Russia.

In a letter to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, von der Leyen and European Council President Antonio Costa said they hoped a "rapid repair" of the pipeline would allow the bloc to move forward with both the loan and sanctions package.

"The EU has offered Ukraine technical support and funding. The Ukrainians have welcomed

and accepted this offer," von der Leyen said in a statement released alongside the correspondence.

"European experts are available immediately," she said.

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Hungary and Slovakia have accused Ukraine of deliberately delaying the reopening of the Druzhba pipeline, which officials in Kyiv claim was damaged by Russian strikes in January.

Ukraine had initially resisted EU involvement, with Zelensky calling attempts to link pipeline repairs to wartime support "blackmail."

But the letters published Tuesday suggest Kyiv has softened its stance as pressure from Brussels mounted.

Zelensky said Ukraine would accept "necessary technical support and funding" to complete repairs and would task the head of state energy firm Naftogaz to coordinate with EU officials.

A European Commission spokesperson said Brussels is now "confident" that progress in issuing the loan to Ukraine could be made soon, "ideally" before a summit of EU leaders on Thursday.

The dispute between Hungary and Ukraine over the Druzhba pipeline came to a head as global energy markets tightened amid war in the Middle East. Governments are scrambling to boost energy supplies and ease soaring prices.

Orbán, who maintains an amicable relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin, has called on the EU to suspend sanctions on Russian oil and gas.

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