

President Zelensky criticizes the allied response to Russia's buildup.



By Roger Cohen and David E. Sanger

Feb. 19, 2022

MUNICH — In an appeal that was at times bitterly critical of the West, President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine urged allies on Saturday to begin imposing sanctions on Russia now rather than wait for an invasion, and he took aim at repeated American declarations that an attack would happen within days.

“What are you waiting for?” Mr. Zelensky asked a large audience at the annual meeting of the Munich Security Conference, which he attended despite warnings that his absence from Kyiv, the Ukrainian capital, could give Russia an opportunity to strike. “We don’t need your sanctions after” the economy collapses and “parts of our country will be occupied.”

By turns grateful for allied unity and frustrated by its apparent ineffectiveness, Mr. Zelensky described Europe’s security architecture as “brittle,” even “obsolete,” as he portrayed the plight of his country since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014.

He was emphatic that no deal to avert the crisis should be struck with Russia that did not include his country.

“It’s important for all our partners and friends to not agree about anything behind our back,” he said. “We’re not panicking. We’re very consistent that we are not responding to any provocation.”

Mr. Zelensky’s remarks contrasted with Vice President Kamala Harris’s portrayal earlier in the day of a united and vigorous NATO alliance that had shown its resolve at a time when Europe’s security was under “direct threat.”

A key element of the West’s strategy has been to expose Russian plans, and to make public their intelligence estimates about when Russian forces are expected to move across the Ukrainian border. But Mr. Zelensky argued that the daily predictions of an imminent invasion, most recently from President Biden on Friday, were scaring off investors, “crushing” the national currency, and terrorizing his population.

“Just putting ourselves in coffins and waiting for foreign soldiers to come in is not something we are prepared to do,” he said. “We cannot say on a daily basis that war will happen tomorrow.”

Mr. Zelensky carefully navigated around one of the central complaints from President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia: that NATO would not give a “written guarantee” that it would never let Ukraine into the Western alliance. Mr. Zelensky made clear he would not back down on seeking membership, but blamed the West for foot-dragging on Ukraine’s interest in joining.

“We are told the doors are open,” Mr. Zelensky said, referring to NATO. “But so far, the strangers are not allowed. If not all members are willing to see us, or all members do not want to see us there, be honest about it. Open doors are good, but we need open answers.”

Ukraine, he added, does not need “years and years of closed questions” from NATO.

Mr. Zelensky repeatedly said he wanted to meet Mr. Putin, who has been curtly dismissive of that possibility and indeed of the entire Ukrainian government. Mr. Putin has made clear that he views Ukraine as part of Russia, or at least that the two countries form one “historical and spiritual space,” as he put it in a 5,000-word disquisition on “the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians” published last summer.

Mr. Zelensky sounded bitter as he portrayed the West as having failed to live up to the commitments it made in 1994, when it offered vague security guarantees in return for Ukraine’s decision to give up a huge arsenal of nuclear weapons. The weapons had been left in silos on Ukrainian territory after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

When Russia annexed Ukraine’s Crimean Peninsula in 2014, he said, the signatories of the 1994 agreement, called the “Budapest Memorandum,” pretended it did not exist. “We have lost parts of our territory which are bigger in territory than Switzerland, Netherlands or Belgium.”

“We will protect our country,” Mr. Zelensky said, “with or without support.”

Appealing for calm, he said he had enjoyed breakfast in Kyiv and intended to be back home in time for dinner.

This material is distributed by Yorktown Solutions, LLC on behalf of the All-Ukrainian Industry Association “Federation of Employers of the Oil and Gas Industry.” Additional information is available at the Department of Justice, Washington, D.C.