



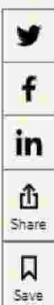
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War in Ukraine

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Italy to join forces with France in supplying air defences to Ukraine

Italy's defence minister **Guido Crosetto** says 'Ukraine and our allies will be happy'

Italy's premier Giorgia Meloni, left, with defence minister Guido Crosetto © Alessandra Tarantino/AP

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Italy is poised to join forces with France and provide a state-of-the-art missile defence system to Ukraine, as the country's rightwing prime minister Giorgia Meloni seeks to affirm her solid support for Kyiv.

In an interview, defence minister **Guido Crosetto** said Rome was committed to fulfilling Ukraine's requests for weapons to shore up its defences.

Kyiv has asked Italy and France to provide it with their SAMP-T missile defence system to help protect critical infrastructure and cities from the regular barrage of Russian missiles hitting Ukraine.

Crosetto said that an upcoming package of Italian military aid, now being prepared by Meloni's government, was "probably" going to include "weapons of defence against Russian missile attack". He declined to offer specifics, citing Italy's longstanding policy of keeping details of its military aid to Kyiv secret. But he did say that any decision on the air defences would be taken in conjunction with Paris.

Speaking in Paris on Tuesday, Ukraine's defence minister Oleksiy Reznikov said he welcomed "the progress on the SAMP-T system".

A French defence official confirmed that "technical discussions have advanced considerably".

Although the details have not been confirmed, Italy is expected to provide the missile launchers, while France would supply the rockets. France's defence ministry announced this week that the two countries late last year ordered 700 Aster missiles which are used by this system.

Germany and the US have agreed to each supply one Patriot system to Ukraine, while the Netherlands said it would send part of a system — two launchers and missiles.

"Italy will meet requests that have been made by Ukraine within the limits of its possibilities and the means that it has," Crosetto said.

"We will give everything we can give without jeopardising Italian defence. Ukraine and our allies will be happy about it."

The premature collapse of the Mario Draghi government last year — and the subsequent election of a rightwing coalition — raised concerns among allies that Italy's support for Kyiv could falter, given the country's traditional pacifism and the past pro-Russia sympathies of Meloni's coalition partners.

Such concerns were further fuelled just before the government's installation in October when Silvio Berlusconi, leader of Forza Italia, recounted a recent birthday exchange of "sweet letters" and gifts with Putin.

But Meloni's Brothers of Italy party, of which Crosetto is a key co-founder, has repeatedly expressed its determination to support the Ukrainians in their fight against Russian invaders.

"If we stop helping Ukraine, probably — in I don't know how long — Russia would conquer all of Ukraine," Crosetto said. "We'd have Russian tanks on the border with European countries."

Crosetto said he and Brothers of Italy at present saw little scope for peace talks given Russia's continued aggression. "Instead of seeking . . . peace, Russia has increased its troops and its tanks," Crosetto said.

But the minister, who up until taking office was the president of the Italian defence industry association, said he was sympathetic to Germany's chancellor Olaf Scholz, whose hesitation over transferring German-made Leopard 2 tanks to Ukraine was a source of frustration and angst within Ukraine and among its allies.



"It was right that Germany was given time to decide," said Crosetto.

"Each country must be given the necessary time for democratic process... in reaching decisions."

Yet despite the west stepping up its provision of weapons to Ukraine, Crosetto expressed pessimism about Kyiv's prospects of regaining all its captured territory, given Putin's willingness to absorb massive casualties to hold on to gains.

"I think Putin would be willing to sacrifice all his young men in order not to withdraw more than he has already retreated so far," Crosetto said.

But Crosetto said the west's failure to support Ukraine's military would be a dangerous signal that western countries were no longer able to "guarantee respect for international rules" and that rogue nations and other bad actors would be able to get their own way.

"It has already happened in Afghanistan," Crosetto said. "If it were to happen in the heart of Europe, it would be the end of the west."

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