Ceann Comhairle,

The events of the past week have rightly caused anger and disgust across our continent and across the world.

Vladimir Putin’s invasion of Ukraine is unprovoked, illegal and is a blatant disregard of international law and, most importantly, the sanctity of human life.

It is the act of an autocratic and dangerous bully with no regard for any interests but his own.

I think it is important to say that this is Putin’s war, for we know there are many Russian people who are as horrified by what he is doing as we are.

The images from Ukraine are truly horrifying.

Of families fleeing their homes for safety.

Of bombs ripping through cities and towns.

Of doctors fighting in vain to save the life of a six year old girl wearing her pyjamas.
Those doctors were right to demand that the images of that dying girl be shown to Vladimir Putin.

Nothing so encapsulated the horror of war.

And we must be clear: nobody is responsible for this war but Vladimir Putin and those who surround him in a discredited and morally bankrupt regime.

They are responsible for the death and destruction being visited upon a proud country whose only desire is freedom, the freedom to choose their own path, something we in this House recognise.

But in Ukraine right now, we see the best of the human spirit in President Zelensky and his people, fighting for that freedom and the right to manage their own destiny.

We see it in the members of the Ukrainian community here returning to help their country at its time of need.

We should be proud, Ceann Comhairle, that they desire to be part of our European Union, our Union of free nations working together for mutual benefit.

A Union, as we know Ceann Comhairle, in which smaller nations and larger nations share peace and prosperity equally.

But that imposes on us here in Ireland and in the European Union a responsibility to do all we can to help Ukraine and its people.

This morning, I briefed the Cabinet on discussions I have been having with EU Justice and Home Affairs colleagues on what we can do, as well as the potential implications of the invasion of Ukraine.

These include the need to be vigilant against potential security issues as well as cyber threats.

Here in Ireland, we have already lifted Visa requirements to allow Ukrainian people who want to seek safety here do so as quickly and easily as possible.

Prior to the lifting of the visa requirement for Ukraine nationals, the Department of Justice, in co-operation with the Department of Foreign Affairs, was working to ensure that it assisted Irish citizens and their family members in Ukraine speedily and with flexibility.
This included applications for non EEA family members of Irish citizens, which were processed swiftly and humanely, with no backlog of applications.

Family re-unification visas for the family members of Irish nationals were granted in eight out of eight completed applications made over the days before the invasion.

We have also worked to help many families expecting babies through surrogacy in Ukraine who found themselves in an unimaginable situation and we will continue to do so.

Since I introduced the Visa waiver on Friday 25 February, a total of 143 Ukrainians have arrived in the state up to 6.00pm yesterday.

However, it should be noted that many of those who travelled were already resident in the State and had travelled back to the State for reasons other than escaping the conflict in Ukraine. We will keep the situation under review as events transpire.

But that is an emergency measure and we must do more.

And we will act in co-operation with our colleagues across the EU.

I will meet colleagues again on Thursday and it is likely that we will activate the EU’s Temporary Protection Directive.

This is designed to provide a coordinated response to a mass influx of displaced persons to standardise the giving of temporary protection across EU member states and to ensure that all member States play their part.

This measure has not previously been used by the EU but the initial view is this might be the right mechanism to help those leaving Ukraine.

As I have said, the government is clear that Ireland will play is part in assisting Ukraine and its people, and has a clear record of helping those in need.

In recent months, Ireland has opened the Afghan Admission Programme to help family members of the Afghan community here from Afghanistan. This programme was the only one of its kind in Europe.

Through the Irish Refugee Protection Programme, Ireland has also offered refugee protection to over 500 Afghan nationals, as well as meeting ongoing commitments in relation to Syrian refugees.
Previous governments also introduced the Syrian Humanitarian Admissions Programme (SHAP), which offered temporary Irish residence to vulnerable persons who are present in Syria.

It is not possible at this point to be precise about numbers of Ukrainian people who will come here under this Directive, but it is likely to be significant.

The numbers fleeing Ukraine are growing daily with now over 650,000 estimated to have fled the country. Significant numbers of displaced persons are locating themselves in neighbouring territories. Over 280,000 had fled to Poland alone by last Saturday.

But I have no doubt, Ceann Comhairle, that the Irish people will welcome and shelter all of those who come here.

As a people, we have never been found wanting – and we will not be found wanting now.

The activation of the Temporary Protection Directive would involve creating a simplified protection route to process the numbers of people who could come to Ireland.

The Department of Justice has already started work on this.

Rather than being required to apply for international protection those arriving would instead access a simplified process to receive temporary residency permission for 1 year initially, which may be extended for further periods, potentially up to three years.

The permission would provide an immediate right of access to the labour market, housing, social welfare, healthcare, education, training and other supports.

This will not remove the right of those persons to apply for International Protection.

Whatever the method used to provide refuge, there are implications for a number of government departments and agencies including:

- the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth as the State would be required to ensure that persons eligible for temporary protection have access to suitable accommodation where needed on arrival.
• the Department of Housing and local authorities as the State would be required to ensure those arriving have access to suitable longer-term accommodation or be supported to obtain such accommodation
• the Department of Social Protection as those received in Ireland would have entitlement to social welfare supports
• Department of Education as children must have access to education
• Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science for access to further and higher education, and to vocational training
• Department of Health and HSE as those arriving would be entitled to access healthcare

Given the potential implications for a wide range of departments, the Department of the Taoiseach is convening interdepartmental meetings in the coming days to further assess the implications of the activation of a temporary protection measure.

This includes the potentially significant resource and staffing implications, and to seek to develop an approach to support Thursday’s discussions at the JHA Council.

Ceann Comhairle, the EU and the West generally have been united in their strength and resolve in responding to Putin’s aggression and to supporting the Ukrainian people.

It is important that that message of unity and solidarity goes out from this House today too, and I have no doubt it will.

From our perspective here in Government, we are also taking action to help Ukraine and its people.

I know we will have the support of the House and the Irish people.