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Redefining Europe: How the war in Ukraine transformed the European Union

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Abstract

Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine profoundly transformed the EU and its approach to its Eastern neighbourhood as well as to its own geopolitical role. The EU responded with sanctions, military aid, and financial support for Ukraine, while reviving enlargement policy. These shifts mark a departure from past approaches, redefining the EU's role in European security. Moving forward, the EU can use these instruments to contribute to shaping the outcome of the war. Failing to do so would raise huge risks for the EU's cohesion.

Keywords: EU, Ukraine, Russia, European defence, Enlargement

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Redefining Europe: How the war in Ukraine transformed the European Union

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked a watershed moment for the European Union. Confronted with the largest military conflict on European soil since World War II, the EU was forced to reconsider longstanding assumptions regarding the security of its Eastern neighbours, the nature of its relationship with Russia, and its own role in European and global security.

More than three years into the conflict, the EU has not only adapted to this new geopolitical reality but has begun to redefine its identity and purpose within it. Through unprecedented sanctions on Russia, sustained military and financial support for Ukraine, and the reactivation of its enlargement policy, the Union has emerged as a central actor in both the defence and reconstruction of Ukraine. These actions signify a transformation of the EU from a predominantly economic and normative power into a more assertive strategic player on the global stage.

Looking ahead, the EU retains significant leverage through its economic weight, institutional mechanisms, and emerging military and defence tools. Whether it can deploy these assets in a coherent and unified manner will determine not only the outcome of the war in Ukraine but also the credibility and influence of the EU as a global strategic actor for years to come.

The Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine Has Profoundly Transformed the European Union

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has profoundly transformed the European Union, reshaping its strategic outlook and pushing it to re-evaluate its external policy instruments. The war exposed the limitations of the EU's prior approach to both Russia and the Eastern Partnership countries, catalysing a shift toward more robust and geopolitically grounded foreign and security policy.

Prior to 2022, the EU's stance toward Russia and its Eastern neighbourhood was marked by internal inconsistencies and policy fragmentation. Member states most obviously diverged on how to engage with Moscow: while the dividing line is often described as a geographic radius, with Russia's neighbours most reluctant to engage, it is actually more accurate to distinguish countries which thought that some form of partnership could be built with Russia, and those who saw Russia as a threat that should be deterred. Countries like Poland, Sweden and the Baltic states consistently warned of the Kremlin's revanchist ambitions, while others such as Germany, Austria or Italy pursued engagement strategies, underpinned by economic interests. Countries like France or Finland tried to maintain channels of communication and use them to address challenges to European and global security. The Nord Stream pipelines symbolised European divisions: Germany saw it as a way to anchor Russia to Europe, through increased interdependences, but overlooked the dependencies it created for its own economy, whose competitiveness relied on access to cheap Russian gas. This overdependence on Russian gas and the risks of weaponisation it entailed were consistently criticised by countries like Poland or the Baltic states. The belief that economic ties would moderate Russia's behaviour proved to be a strategic miscalculation.

Similarly, the Eastern Partnership—launched in 2009 to promote political association and economic integration with six post-Soviet states—suffered from divergent visions among EU members. While some member states, including the initiators of the Eastern Partnership policy (Sweden and Poland) saw it as a first step towards future enlargement and as an instrument to extend the EU’s influence in the former Soviet space, others adamantly refused any accession perspective for Eastern partners and advocated for an approach of this region that would avoid confronting Russia. As a result, the EU’s engagement with Eastern Europe often appeared tentative, reactive, and ambiguous.

The full-scale invasion changed everything. Confronted with an unambiguous act of aggression that challenged European peace and security, the EU responded with unprecedented unity and decisiveness. Within 24 hours of the attack, the EU had adopted its first package of sanctions against Russia—an act of collective resolve that was meant to signal a new era in EU foreign policy. Subsequent sanctions targeted Russia’s central bank, energy exports, oligarchs, and strategic industries, aiming not just to punish Moscow but to degrade its capacity to sustain the war.

Equally unprecedented was the EU’s decision to provide direct military assistance to Ukraine. Just three days after the invasion, on 27 February, the EU decided to use the European Peace Facility ¹(EPF), an instrument previously used to equip armies in developing countries with non-lethal gear, to fund the supply of lethal weapons to the Ukrainian armed forces. As of early September 2025, the EU and its member states have committed over €63.2 billion in military aid to Ukraine, ranging from ammunition and drones to advanced air defence systems. The EU’s role has mostly focused on financing this effort, while the bulk of the military assistance has effectively been carried out by its member states. This marks a significant departure from the EU’s traditional identity as a civilian power and underscores its growing capacity as a defence and security actor. The European Union Training Mission in Ukraine (EUMAM Ukraine) also represents a significant step in the EU’s commitment to supporting Ukraine’s defence capabilities. Launched in 2022, the mission aims to provide comprehensive military training to Ukrainian Armed Forces personnel, focusing on both individual skills and collective unit-level tactics. The creation of this mission marks a significant shift in the EU’s approach: since 2014, the EU had deployed a civilian mission in Ukraine in the framework of its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), to support Ukraine’s security sector reform, whose mandate excluded working with the Ukrainian armed forces. As of January 2025, 70,000 soldiers had been trained as part of EUMAM Ukraine. Establishing a military training mission, even if it is mainly operating outside of Ukraine, is therefore an additional testimony to the EU’s commitment to strengthening Ukraine’s defence capabilities.

The EU has also mobilised its financial and humanitarian capabilities on a massive scale. By mid-2025, the EU and its institutions had pledged more than €85 billion in total support for Ukraine. This includes emergency macro-financial assistance, refugee aid, infrastructure restoration, and civil society support. In 2023, the launch of the Ukraine Facility—a €50 billion

¹ European External Action Service (EEAS) (2024). A Security and Defence approach fit for the future. European Peace Facility (EPF), Strategic Communications, 28 February. Available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/european-peace-facility-epf_en

multi-year financial instrument for 2024–2027—signalled the EU’s long-term commitment to Ukraine’s recovery and reform. These funds are not simply aid; they are investments in Ukraine’s future alignment with the EU’s norms and structures.

Perhaps the most transformative shift has occurred in the EU’s enlargement policy. The decision to grant Ukraine and Moldova candidate status in June 2022 was more than symbolic—it reflected a strategic recalibration of the EU’s approach to enlargement. Ukraine’s accession is now seen not just as a matter of economic and institutional integration, but as a geopolitical imperative. The creation of the European Political Community, a platform that allows leaders from across Europe – except Russia and Belarus – to discuss common geopolitical challenges is an additional testimony to this geopolitical awakening. Ukraine’s accession is now seen as essential to stabilising the European continent and anchoring a key partner within the EU’s legal and political frameworks. According to a 2025 Eurobarometer survey², 60% of EU citizens supported the decision to grant Ukraine candidate status, with support particularly strong in Eastern and Nordic member states. The underlying assumption is that integrating Ukraine and Moldova into the EU will reduce their vulnerability and enhance European security overall. That, in turn, will require the EU to become a real security actor.

This transformation also carries implications for the EU’s own identity. No longer confined to its traditional role as a trade and normative power, the EU has begun to develop the tools and mindset of a geopolitical actor. The war has accelerated the development of defence cooperation, joint procurement initiatives, and the strategic autonomy debate. Whether this transformation will endure in the face of future political and economic pressures remains to be seen—but the trajectory has undeniably shifted.

Moving Forward: The EU’s Role in Shaping the Outcome of the War and Post-War Order

Though the European Union is not a direct participant in negotiations between Ukraine, Russia, and the United States, it nonetheless possesses a wide array of tools capable of influencing the trajectory and outcome of the conflict. These instruments—economic, military, diplomatic, and institutional—give the EU an opportunity to shape not only Ukraine’s future, but also the broader security architecture of Europe.

One of the EU’s most powerful tools has been its sanctions regime. Since 2022, the EU has adopted 18 successive sanctions packages targeting Russia’s financial, energy, defence, and technological sectors. The sanctions aim to achieve a dual objective: to weaken Russia’s ability to sustain its war effort and to increase the political and economic costs of its aggression. Over time, these sanctions have deepened Russia’s economic isolation, contributed to capital flight, and reduced access to critical components for its military-industrial complex. While enforcement remains incomplete and evasion continues through third countries, the sanctions represent a sustained and strategic effort by the EU to apply pressure over the long term. Crucially, sanctions may also serve as a form of leverage. They can be recalibrated or intensified depending on the behaviour of the Russian state, offering the EU a role in future settlement

² European Commission (2025). Standard Eurobarometer 103 - Spring 2025. European Union, 28 May. Available at: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3372>

efforts even though it is not seated at the negotiation table. They also act as a (potentially challenging) test of EU unity: continued commitment to sanctions demonstrates the Union's resolve, while premature relaxation could signal division and embolden Russia to further undermine European security.

Beyond sanctions, the EU's ongoing military and financial support for Kyiv is key in enabling Ukraine to continue defending itself and to exert agency in determining the terms of any future settlement. Knowing that it can rely on continued assistance, Ukraine can make its own choices and, if necessary, refuse unacceptable Russian demands. This assistance gives Kyiv the material means to resist Russian aggression and the political autonomy to negotiate from a position of relative strength. Concerns remain regarding the ability of Europeans to at least partially compensate for a reduction or full withdrawal of US assistance; but they have already clearly signalled that they are willing to step up their assistance and provide continued support to Ukraine, including by investing in local military-industrial capacities, as Ukraine is aiming to meet its own defence needs through domestic production. This assistance is not only material but political. By providing reliable support, the EU empowers Ukraine to resist coercive diplomacy and reject any settlement that compromises its territorial integrity or sovereignty. It also lays the groundwork for a future European security order in which Ukraine is embedded, rather than isolated.

In the medium to long term, the EU – and European countries more broadly – also holds the key to ensuring the sustainability of any peace agreement through credible security guarantees. While NATO membership for Ukraine remains a contentious and unresolved issue, the EU and its member states can play a leading role in offering credible alternatives or complements. Commitments such as long-term military aid, training, intelligence-sharing, and security pacts with individual member states can contribute to the acceptability of a deal by the Ukrainian government and the Ukrainian public. Therefore, they can also be an element of leverage for Europeans, who should be able to define the conditions under which they can commit to long-term Ukrainian security. Such guarantees will be essential in making any negotiated settlement acceptable and durable in Ukrainian eyes and in signalling resolve, in order to deter Russia from attacking again.

However, reconstruction and EU accession provide the EU's most powerful tool for shaping post-war Ukraine: the promise of a better future. The Ukraine Facility, along with other pre-accession tools, offers a structured pathway for rebuilding Ukraine's economy and aligning its institutions with EU standards. It already plays a key role in supporting Ukraine's recovery and reconstruction and should become even more central to Ukraine's long-term resilience and prosperity. The promise of EU membership serves as a powerful incentive for further reforms, including in the judiciary and anti-corruption institutions, even as the country is still at war. When the war ends, EU accession will provide a desirable horizon for Ukrainians to return to Ukraine or stay in the country and rebuild it. Yet, for the EU to fully realise its potential in shaping the post-war order, it must address a number of emerging internal divisions. As the war drags on, unity on sanctions is showing signs of erosion, especially after the Trump administration sent some mixed signals regarding possible sanctions relief. If the US were to lift its own sanctions on Russia, pressure would rise within some member states and at the EU level to resume some form of engagement with Russia, e.g. in sectors such as energy and trade, without any change in Russia's behaviour that could justify such a move. Similarly, diverging

views persist on the pace and conditionality of Ukraine's accession process, with some members concerned about rule of law standards and institutional readiness, and others pressing for an accelerated path driven by geopolitical necessity.

Moreover, strategic disagreements are surfacing over the future direction of European defence policy. These debates are further complicated by uncertainty about the future of US policy and a possible US disengagement from European security. Some member states advocate for focusing on strengthening the EU's own defence capabilities and reducing reliance on external actors, while others prioritise continued support for Ukraine as the best way to secure Europe. The commitments taken at the NATO summit in the Hague in June 2025, which envision raising defence spending to 5% by 2035 while allowing allies to include their support to Ukraine's defence, offer an opportunity to bridge this gap. But they could also be a mere attempt to mask these divergences, as illustrated by the Spanish refusal to take this commitment, and to basically delay the difficult arbitrages.

If left unaddressed, these divisions may deepen with time and risk not only weakening Ukraine's position but also fragmenting the EU's own political cohesion, which is already affected by the rise of populist governments like those of Viktor Orban in Hungary or Robert Fico in Slovakia. In contrast, a unified and strategic approach—anchored in shared values and long-term security interests—can transform the EU into a true geopolitical power.

Conclusion: A Defining Moment for the EU

While the European Union may not determine the war's endgame through direct diplomacy, it has the power to shape its context, contours, and consequences. Through sanctions, military and financial support, long-term security guarantees, and the promise of accession, the EU can ensure that any future resolution to the war reflects not only the sovereignty and aspirations of Ukraine but also the strategic interests of the European continent.

The choices made by EU leaders over the next few years will determine not only the fate of Ukraine but the Union's own trajectory as a global actor. This is a moment of transformation and a rare opportunity to redefine the EU's role in a world increasingly shaped by power politics and strategic competition.

The war in Ukraine has already changed Europe. If the EU can maintain its unity, adapt its institutions, and rise to the challenge of geopolitical leadership, it will emerge from this crisis not just stronger, but more relevant and resilient than ever before.

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