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## Research Report

# The tipping point: An emerging model of European security with Ukraine and without Russia

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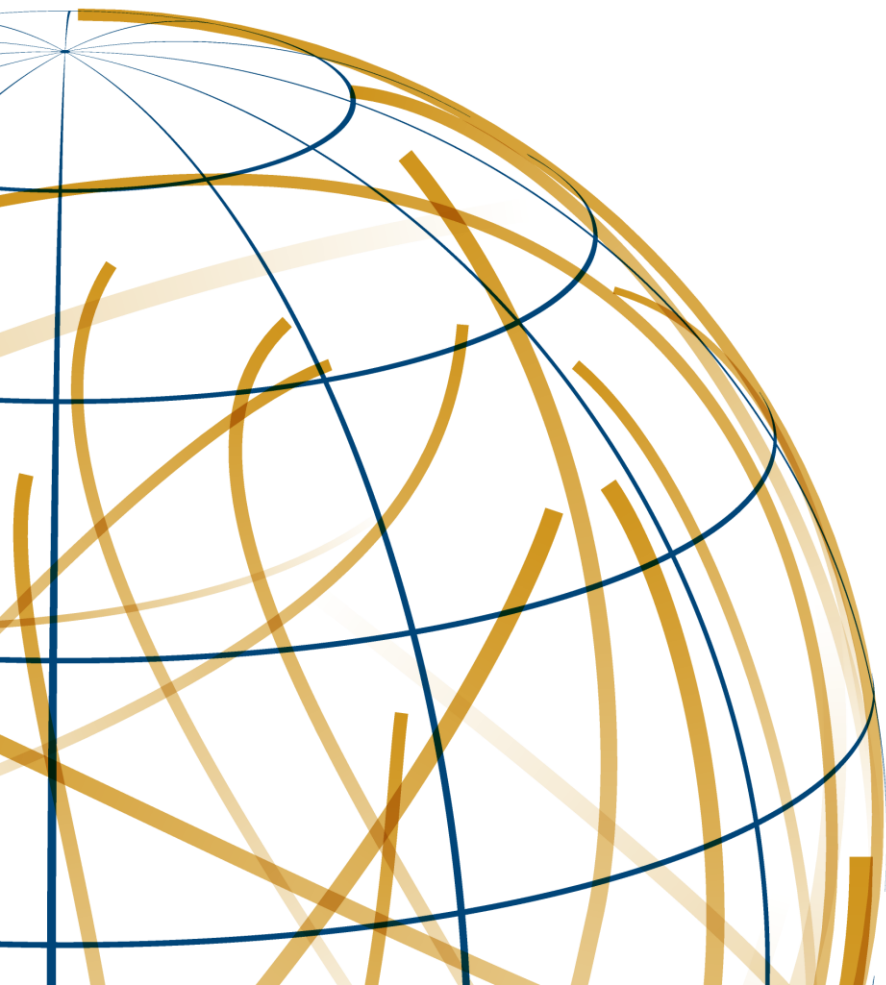
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SWP Research Paper

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*Céline Marangé and Susan Stewart (eds.)*

# The Tipping Point: An Emerging Model of European Security with Ukraine and without Russia



Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik  
German Institute for  
International and Security Affairs

SWP Research Paper 5  
November 2025, Berlin

- This joint study by the SWP and the Institute for Strategic Research (IRSEM, Paris) starts from the premise that Ukraine's and Russia's visions of European security are fundamentally incompatible.
- Ukraine aims to join existing Western structures and contribute to their reinforcement, whereas Russia intends to gain control of Ukraine and undermine the foundations of the European and transatlantic security architecture.
- A vast majority of European actors see Russia as a serious threat to European security and democracy. This means that Europe's main external focus will be on deterring and defending itself from Russia in at least the medium term.
- A critical mass of actors views NATO and the EU as the principal pillars of security in Europe. They intend to find ways to strengthen both organisations while ensuring that the United States remains involved in protecting European security.
- A large consensus has emerged around consolidating a "European pillar of NATO". At the same time, the EU has managed to become a recognised and influential actor in the field of European security with surprising rapidity.
- Minilateral and ad hoc formats such as the "Nordic-Baltic 8" and the "Coalition of the Willing" are gaining traction, in part because they allow the consensus requirements of larger organisations to be circumvented, thus providing more flexibility.
- There is broad agreement on continuing Ukraine's integration into both the EU and NATO. However, not only the degree of commitment to Kyiv, but also the tempo of Europe's actions will determine the extent to which Ukraine becomes part of the European security order.

**SWP Research Paper**

*Céline Marangé and Susan Stewart (eds.)*

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**Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik  
German Institute for  
International and Security Affairs**

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## Table of Contents

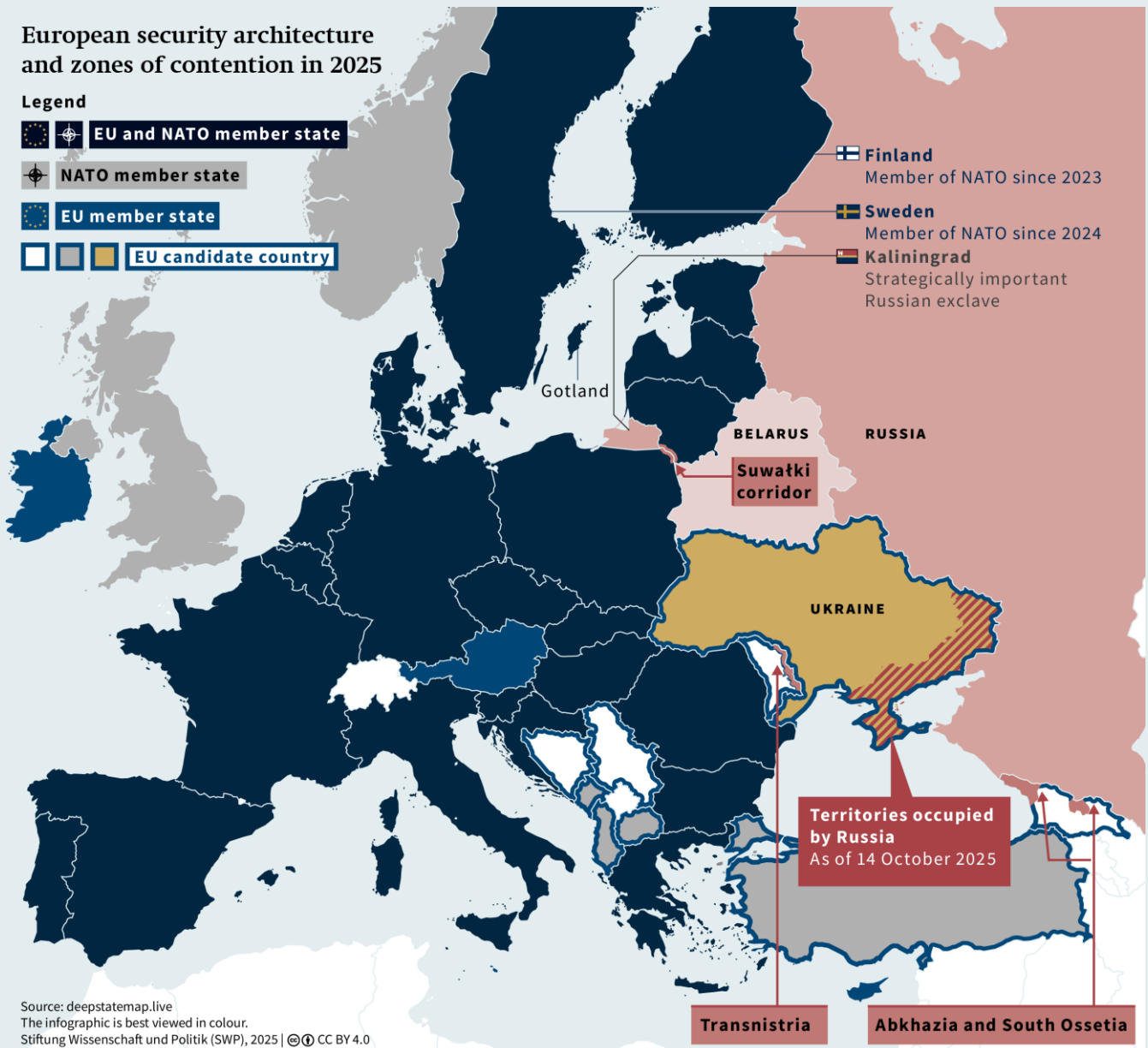
5	<b>Introduction: European Security in Light of Incompatible Ukrainian and Russian Objectives</b> Céline Marangé and Susan Stewart
9	<b>Russia against the European Security Order: From Contestation to Coercion</b> Céline Marangé
16	<b>Ukraine: Joining and Strengthening the West</b> Susan Stewart
23	<b>The European Union: “Pax Europeae” with Ukraine but without Russia</b> Barbara Lippert
30	<b>United Kingdom: Strong Supporter of Ukraine and Leader on European Security Outside the EU</b> Nicolai von Ondarza
36	<b>The Nordics: Deterring Russia, Preserving the Transatlantic Link</b> Barbara Kunz and Aino Esser
43	<b>Poland: Solidifying Europe’s Security Order with Cracks inside the House</b> Kai-Olaf Lang
50	<b>France: Strengthening Europe to Deter Russia and Become Self-reliant</b> Céline Marangé
57	<b>Germany: Shifting Away from Russia and towards Ukraine</b> Susan Stewart
63	<b>Italy: Keeping the US in to Keep Ukraine Going</b> Marco Siddi
69	<b>Turkey: Strategic Ambiguity and Transactional Diplomacy in the Rebuilding of European Security</b> Sinem Adar and Yaşar Aydın
75	<b>Slovakia: One Country, Two Approaches to European Security</b> Tomáš Strážay
81	<b>Hungary: Towards the End of Its Russian Orientation?</b> András Rácz
88	<b>Conclusion: Russia Is out, Ukraine Is in – the Future of European Security</b> Céline Marangé and Susan Stewart
95	<b>Appendix</b>
95	Abbreviations
96	The Authors

## Map

### European security architecture and zones of contention in 2025

#### Legend

-  EU and NATO member state
-  NATO member state
-  EU member state
-  EU candidate country



Céline Marangé and Susan Stewart

# Introduction: European Security in Light of Incompatible Ukrainian and Russian Objectives

Ukraine's and Russia's visions of the future European security order differ fundamentally. Ukraine is seeking to join existing Western institutions in order to deter Russia, ensure its own security and prosperity, and become part of a values-based community. Determined to prevent this from happening, the Russian leadership is aiming to change the balance of power in Europe by weakening Western institutions and societies through both military and hybrid means. Among other recent aggravating factors is the uncertainty surrounding Washington's commitment to European security.

In a rapidly evolving and increasingly dangerous international environment, the question arises as to where and how some European actors are positioning themselves regarding the intentions of Ukraine and Russia. The way they view the places of Ukraine and Russia within a future security architecture reveals much about their security preferences, defence priorities, and their overall approach to the European security order. An analysis of their motivations and policies towards Kyiv and Moscow can help identify sources of (dis)agreement, and thus assist with anticipating the direction that the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) are likely to follow in the coming years.

## Taking stock of the growing challenges to security and democracy in Europe

The risks and dangers for Europe are mounting and coalescing, for at least four reasons. First, the ruthless strategy of attrition being applied by Russia against Ukraine is yielding worrisome results. Although Ukraine has been highly innovative in the military sphere — notably in drone production — the country has experienced difficulties recruiting soldiers and

countering new air and land assaults. The Russian army has been gaining ground, albeit at high human cost, and methodically weakening Ukraine. The Kremlin assumes that it can subdue Ukraine by relentlessly launching new ground offensives, intensifying indiscriminate strikes against civilian and critical infrastructure, and maintaining a state of permanent insecurity in the country.

Second, Russian leaders are already waging war against European countries through hybrid means. They claim that what they deem the “collective West” is already at war with Russia. Since 2022, they have increased strategic signalling and taken ever-bolder actions to exert pressure. According to multiple sources, Russian services have recently resorted to acts of arson and sabotage, as well as to assassination attempts in Europe, while intensifying their disinformation and subversion activities aimed at undermining democratic institutions and fuelling social discontent.<sup>1</sup> Undoubtedly, AI-generated deepfakes and

<sup>1</sup> Julian E. Barnes, Lara Jakes and Christopher F. Schuetze, “U.S. Uncovers Russian Plot to Assassinate C.E.O. of German Arms Maker”, *The New York Times*, 11 July 2024; Julian E. Barnes, “Russia Steps Up a Covert Sabotage Campaign Aimed at Europe”, *The New York Times*, 26 May 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/26/us/politics/russia-sabotage-campaign-ukraine.html>; Secretariat-General for National Defence and Security, *War in Ukraine: Three Years of Russian Information Operations*, VIGINUM report (Paris, February 2025), [https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/files/2025-02/20250224\\_TLP-CLEAR\\_NP\\_SGDSN\\_VIGINUM\\_War%20in%20Ukraine\\_Three%20years%20of%20Russian%20information%20operations\\_1.0\\_VF.pdf](https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/files/2025-02/20250224_TLP-CLEAR_NP_SGDSN_VIGINUM_War%20in%20Ukraine_Three%20years%20of%20Russian%20information%20operations_1.0_VF.pdf); Mark Galeotti, *Gangsters at War: Russia's Use of Organized Crime as an Instrument of Statecraft* (Geneva: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, November 2024), <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/gangsters-at-war-russias-use-of-organized-crime-as-an-instrument-of-statecraft/>.



undetectable manipulations will serve as new tools to attack Western democracies.

Third, the country that used to present itself as the beacon of the free world now openly promotes illiberalism and appears to endorse Moscow's views about its war on Ukraine. In that regard, the speech given by Vice President J. D. Vance at the Munich Security Conference in February 2025 was another wake-up call for Europe. The support of the United States (US) for the regime of Viktor Orbán in Hungary, as well as its endorsement of far-right parties in Germany, Romania, and Poland ahead of recent elections leaves no doubt: The populist trend that has taken hold in Washington is not only jeopardising democracy in the US, but also in Europe, and it is depriving the transatlantic relationship of its values-based component.

Fourth, the prospect of a broader war in Europe cannot be ruled out. The maximalist goals set by Moscow regarding the possibility of a ceasefire clearly indicate that it is in no hurry to enter into negotiations and broker a peace deal. Russia seems to be preparing for a long war, as indicated by its cooperation with North Korea and Iran, its continuous recruitment efforts, the militarisation of its youth, the transition to a wartime economy, and the sharp rise in defence spending (at least 7.2 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2025).<sup>2</sup> Finally, the war in the Middle East — in addition to accentuating international tensions — precludes the possibility of a lasting drop in the price of oil, which could have altered the course of this conflict.

### Evaluating rising uncertainty about the American commitment to European security

The degradation of international relations is resulting in a high level of uncertainty, making it necessary to assess possible developments and elaborate on ways to steer them in favourable directions. At the same

time, this very uncertainty creates difficulties with producing a valid and lasting analysis, because numerous factors are unknown or evolving. This concern is especially pertinent with regard to the US since the arrival in power of the second Trump administration in January 2025. American foreign and security policy has become more unreliable and unpredictable. Although the America First policy could imply restraint in the international arena, Donald Trump's repeated reproaches concerning US allies are already eroding Western security arrangements in Europe.

The willingness of the Trump administration to overturn established US policies has been especially visible in the case of its approach towards Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Trump's position has been sympathetic to — and accommodating of — Russia's demands, in sharp contrast to his predecessor, Joe Biden. In fact, Trump has, to a large extent, reversed the US' Russia policy of previous decades, opting to pressure the party under attack rather than the aggressor. The Russia-friendly approach taken by Trump and some of his chosen mediators entails serious risks for Kyiv, as negotiation processes have been handled in an extremely unprofessional manner.

Furthermore, there have been indications that the Trump administration could simply bow out of the negotiations and severely reduce arms deliveries to — and intelligence sharing with — Kyiv. This would require European actors to fill these gaps in Ukraine, while simultaneously taking more responsibility for their own defence — although it will take years, if not decades, before Europeans are able to acquire these military capabilities. Both scenarios — continuation of a Russia-friendly trajectory and abandonment of the Ukrainian dossier — would have major implications for European security. The current US policy has taken numerous countries in Europe by surprise. Those most supportive of Ukraine have combined their efforts to ramp up assistance to Kyiv and encourage Washington to take European interests into account.

The transactional approach of the Trump administration — focusing on short-term benefits — has other immediate implications for Europeans: Washington has much less interest in long-term engagement in Europe, and thus it is urging European states to sharply increase defence spending (to 5 per cent of their GDP).<sup>3</sup> Some actors now fear that the US could

<sup>2</sup> Heli Simola, "Russia Further Increases Military Expenditure at the Expense of Other Financing Needs", *Bank of Finland Bulletin* (Blog), 4 October 2024, <https://www.bofbulletin.fi/en/blogs/2024/russia-further-increases-military-expenditure-at-the-expense-of-other-financing-needs/>; Julian Cooper, *Preparing for a Fourth Year of War: Military Spending in Russia's Budget for 2025* (Stockholm: SIPRI, April 2025), <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2025/sipri-insights-peace-and-security/preparing-fourth-year-war-military-spending-russias-budget-2025>.

<sup>3</sup> At the NATO summit in The Hague on 24–25 June 2025, the NATO allies agreed to spend 5 per cent of their GDP on

withdraw troops from Europe or even abandon the continent. Others wonder whether the US would come to the rescue, should Russia launch a kinetic attack against a NATO member state bordering its territory. The swarm of Russian drones over Polish territory in September 2025 and the NATO response to this incursion have only reinforced the salience of this question. In addition, the priority being given to dealing with China and the efforts to contain the war in the Middle East have further jeopardised the security guarantees believed to be implied by Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. It is worth mentioning that US allies in Asia face similar challenges.

## Mapping out the differences in approaches towards Russia and Ukraine

In this phase of heightened tensions, in which traditional political positioning can no longer be taken for granted, it is useful to understand how the debate on Russia and Ukraine as well as their relationship to European security is being conducted in various European contexts. Indeed, having a nuanced comprehension of the positions of the actors involved and the criteria they are applying with regard to a future European security order can help in devising feasible solutions and avoiding paralysis and failure. It is particularly revealing to focus on how these actors view the future roles of Ukraine and Russia in the European security order, since this sheds light on key differences, but also on possible crucial points of convergence.

In the following chapters, we make a distinction between “security architecture” and “security order”. The architecture concerns the institutional settings (e.g. EU, NATO, OSCE), including their component parts and internal functioning. The security order pertains to the normative framework, that is, a set of rules and principles in which the institutions are embedded. Among them are the core principles of the United Nations Charter (1945), the Helsinki Final Act (1975), and the Charter of Paris (1990), such as the inviolability of borders and the sovereign equality of states. Both concepts (architecture and order) are

defence-related expenses in the upcoming 10 years – 3.5 per cent for military expenditures and 1.5 per cent for infrastructure projects of a dual-use nature. See NATO, “2025 NATO Summit”, 25 June 2025, <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/235800.htm>.

relevant for the current study. However, depending on the actor, the relative emphasis on one or the other may vary.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine forced most European actors to revise their long-held assumptions about European security and Russia’s intentions. It was made crystal clear to most European capitals that the Kremlin was no longer willing to adhere to the above-mentioned fundamental principles of the European security order. This raised the issue of either abiding by these principles by containing Russia and strengthening the existing security paradigm, or discarding them in order to pursue a new security architecture together with Russia. Ukraine’s reaction to Russia’s war of aggression has shown that Ukrainians are willing to defend these principles due to a strong sense of the value of freedom, thus supporting the idea of a European security order excluding Russia.

The approaches of other European states (as well as the EU) to this fundamental question of principles differ greatly, demonstrating the complexity of the European landscape with regard to questions about security on the continent and beyond. This publication aims to map this complexity in order to assess which types of security architecture could emerge in the upcoming years, and which are less likely. One hypothesis is that most of the European actors examined in this study are defining their positions towards Russia and Ukraine according to how they traditionally viewed the role of the US in European security and how they are currently assessing its decoupling from Europe and its rapprochement with Moscow.

## Defining the goal and approach of the publication

Rather than trying to provide a monolithic vision of any given actor, the chapters aim at outlining how the debate concerning Russia and Ukraine is structured in each case before delving into the respective views on: 1) Moscow’s intentions and the contours of a possible relationship with Russia; 2) Ukraine’s role in European security and possible scenarios regarding a ceasefire; 3) key assumptions and preferences regarding a future European security order/architecture; and 4) actions taken by the actor in question to support or hinder the development of a particular European security order/architecture. What sets this endeavour apart and offers added analytical value is not only the comparison of different actors’ approaches, but also

the exploration of their views about the roles of Ukraine and Russia in European security.

We opted for a selection of actors that are likely either to advance the development of a reshaped European security architecture or to function as potential spoilers with regard to the emergence of this architecture. These include not only the EU and a variety of key member states, but also the United Kingdom, Norway, and Turkey. Unfortunately, not all actors in these categories could be included. For example, the Baltic states, which have been crucial supporters of Ukraine, have not been analysed, nor have other actors with more divided societies or (potentially) ambiguous positions, such as Romania and Bulgaria. We nonetheless believe that it is possible to reach valid conclusions about the spectrum of positions held by a wide variety of influential European actors based on the cases explored below. An analysis of the stances adopted by Ukraine and Russia serves as the starting point for our study.

On the basis of the chapters on the individual actors, we discuss in the conclusion whether a certain number of actors are coalescing around or hindering a particular type of security architecture in Europe. Based on the power balance among the actors investigated, we sketch a likely scenario for the development of a new security order/architecture in Europe in the next three to five years, in particular for the roles of Ukraine and Russia therein. Finally, we embed these results in a larger transatlantic and international context and assess the roles of key external actors and their likely impact on this scenario.

Our overarching goal is to contribute to the ongoing debate about European security<sup>4</sup> by narrowing the scope of feasible options for its evolution. Our analysis is based on the positions of a variety of key actors concerning the respective roles of Ukraine and

Russia in a future European security order/architecture. Thus, we address the implications of the irreconcilable nature of Ukraine's and Russia's visions and evaluate the likelihood of various European responses to this incompatibility in the short and medium terms.

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to the authors of this collective endeavour for their outstanding contributions and lively participation during our spring workshop. We are lucky to have gathered a team of such dedicated researchers. We also warmly thank the colleagues and friends who commented on the early drafts of our chapters and conclusion for their insightful and knowledgeable advice. Finally, we convey our deepest appreciation to Johanna Flach, our research assistant on this project, for her valuable assistance, and our genuine thanks to Robert Furlong and Daniel Kettner for their meticulousness and rigour.

4 For a few recent contributions to this vibrant debate, see e.g. Suzana Anghel and Mario G.H. Damen, *The Future European Security Architecture. Dilemmas for EU Strategic Autonomy* (Brussels: European Parliamentary Research Service, March 2025), [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2025/765785/EPRS\\_STU\(2025\)765785\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2025/765785/EPRS_STU(2025)765785_EN.pdf); Ondřej Ditrych and Martin Laryš, "What Can European Security Architecture Look Like in the Wake of Russia's War on Ukraine?", *European Security* 34, no. 1 (2025): 44–64, doi: 10.1080/09662839.2024.2347221; Camille Grand et al., *Preventing the Next War: A European Plan for Ukraine*, Policy Brief (Berlin: ECFR, 20 June 2025), <https://ecfr.eu/publication/preventing-the-next-war-a-european-plan-for-ukraine/>.

Céline Marangé

# Russia against the European Security Order: From Contestation to Coercion

Russia has accumulated a long list of grievances with Western countries. Since the late 1990s, as the post–Cold War European security architecture was taking shape, Moscow has consistently framed these new arrangements as detrimental to its security. Its re-criminations were primarily related to security issues, such as enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the erosion of arms control regimes, yet they were equally rooted in a refusal to relinquish Russia's status as the dominant power in the post-Soviet region. Among the most acute political irritants were the “colour revolutions” and the geopolitical status of Ukraine. In Moscow, security concerns have always been tightly intertwined with identity quests regarding Russia's status in the international arena and its role in the Eurasian space. Therefore, it would be a mistake to believe that Vladimir Putin's motives and intentions in Ukraine are purely security-related, and that if he were to obtain territorial concessions and “security guarantees”, he would curb his revisionist ambitions.

## **The Kremlin's ultimate objective is the wholesale revision of the post–Cold War European security architecture.**

Three and a half years into a full-fledged war that has led to more than a million dead and wounded, the Kremlin is openly endorsing a revanchist and imperialist agenda that is translating into uninhibited violence in Ukraine, hybrid manoeuvres in Europe, and unbridled propaganda globally. Its ultimate objective is not the attainment of tactical security gains, but rather the wholesale revision of the post–Cold War European security architecture and the dismantling of the liberal norms underpinning it. Indeed, Russia is pursuing a grand design of disrupting NATO and the European Union (EU) from without (through war) and from within (through subversion).

## **The Russian conception of security: A radical incompatibility**

Before 2022, it was widely accepted — and I personally assumed — that Russia's leadership promoted a grand strategy that was fundamentally defensive in nature though offensive in practice. They deployed, so went the argument, “policies aimed at regaining global status and asserting regional dominance, implicitly taking, as a reference point, the position that Moscow used to enjoy during the Cold War and increasingly resorting to military means and strategic intimidation”.<sup>1</sup> It is still being debated as to whether Russia's grand strategy under Putin changed course or whether it had been misinterpreted from the very beginning. In any case, Russia's all-out war of aggression against Ukraine has made it clear that its grand strategy is, in fact, both offensive in nature and aggressive in practice, and that the dissatisfaction relates not only to the European security architecture, but also to the very foundations of the post-war liberal international order.

The current Russian leadership does not share the vision of cooperative security that has been at the heart of the European project since its inception in 1950, namely the idea — espoused by Europe's founding fathers — that cooperation is necessary and desirable to break the cycle of endless violence and ensure long-lasting peace. At the end of the Cold War, after the signing of the Charter of Paris for a New Europe in November 1990, European leaders assumed that this vision could guide pan-European security. Yet, Russia now *de facto* rejects the United Nations (UN) principle of the sovereign equality of states, which proclaims that each country — whether small or large, weak or powerful — is free to choose its own

1 Céline Marangé, “Russia”, in *Comparative Grand Strategy in the Modern Age: A Framework and Cases*, ed. Thierry Balzacq, Peter Dombrowski and Simon Reich (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 50–72 (51).

political regime and alliance system, although it had adhered to that principle in a variety of legally binding international instruments. In a typical distortion of reality, the Russian minister of foreign affairs, Sergey Lavrov, even recently defended the concept.<sup>2</sup>

Regarding European security, there were at least two perspectives in Moscow before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The more moderate of the two reactivated the old concept of the “indivisibility of security” (*nedelimost' bezopasnosti*), arguing in favour of concertation mechanisms and the temporary neutrality of countries in between. Prof. Andrey Zagorski, the head of the Department for Disarmament and Conflict Resolution Studies at the Institute of World Economy and International Relations of the Russian Academy of Sciences (IMEMO), advocated a middle way: Rather than seeking to enact new rules, it would be better to clarify existing ones in a number of areas of common interest, while re-instilling a culture of transparency and mutual consultation, and postponing discussions on the most difficult issues until a later date.<sup>3</sup>

The second perspective, which has been gaining prominence since 2022 and now dominates the debate on security and geopolitics in Moscow, promotes a “spheres of influence” worldview and an essentialist view of history. Proponents of the “sphere of influence” narrative refuse to consider post-Soviet countries as being fully sovereign and pretend not to understand why Central European countries subjected to Soviet rule and military occupation for decades sought security guarantees with NATO in the 1990s. They remain implicitly committed to the “doctrine of limited sovereignty”, laid down by Leonid Brezhnev after the crushing of the Prague Spring in 1968 to restrict the right of Warsaw Pact countries to depart from the Soviet model. For them, power is exercised through domination, while security is achieved by maintaining control over the margins, both directly and indirectly.

Furthermore, since March 2023, Russia is officially defined in its Foreign Policy Concept as a “civilisation-

state like no other” (*samobytnoe gosudarstvo-tsivilizatsiya*). The notion of a “civilisation state” implicitly opposes that of a nation-state and underpins a hierarchy of countries based on their size, culture, and history. The underlying idea is that states which claim to be a civilisation should be granted a sphere of influence in their former preserve and special prerogatives in the new world order to come.<sup>4</sup> This serves to justify a new imperialism and is, in fact, a deliberate assault on the UN Charter and the Helsinki Final Act, in particular on the principle of the sovereign equality of states.

## The rejection of the post–Cold War order: The crux of the problem

Since the late 1990s, the deterioration in relations with Western countries had been gradual until the radical move of invading Ukraine. Russia is the world’s largest country. It has 11 time zones and accounts for one-eighth of the world’s land mass. It has inherited 75 per cent of the Soviet Union’s territory and nuclear arsenal, but current Russian authorities — who were trained as Cold Warriors (and/or KGB agents) and who experienced the collapse of the Soviet Union as a personal humiliation — seem to feel that their country was downgraded and amputated compared to what it was in imperial and Soviet times. For them, this event equated the loss of superpower status, the disappearance of a value system that had been presented as eternal, an overhaul of their mental map, and the search for a new international positioning — in short, problems of identity.

A major bone of contention has thus been the role of the United States (US) in Europe and NATO’s continued existence (in contrast to the Warsaw Pact’s dissolution in July 1991). Both NATO and EU enlargements have been perceived in Moscow as means to reduce Russia’s freedom of action in what the Russians call their “near abroad”. In his famous Munich speech in February 2007, Putin declared that “NATO expansion does not have any relation [...] with

2 Sergey Lavrov, “Pravovym fundamentom mnogopolynogo mira dolzhen stat’ Ustav OON” [The UN Charter Must Become the Legal Foundation of a Multipolar World], *Rossiia v Global’noy Politike*, 4 February 2025, <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/ustav-oon-lavrov/>.

3 See Rachel Ellehuus and Andrei Zagorski, *Restoring the European Security Order* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 2019), [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/190313\\_EllehuusandZagorski\\_RestoringEuropeanOrder.pdf](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/190313_EllehuusandZagorski_RestoringEuropeanOrder.pdf).

4 Andrey Lipskiy, “Missiya gosudartva-tsivilizatsii — peredel mirovogo poriadka” [The Mission of the Civilization-State Is to Remake the World Order], *Novaia Gazeta*, 7 April 2023, <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2023/04/07/missiia-gosudarstva-tsivilizatsii-peredel-mirovogo-poriadka>; see also Céline Marangé, “Après l’Ukraine, la Russie prépare la guerre d’Europe”, *Le Grand Continent*, 24 February 2025, <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2025/02/24/poutine-prepare-la-guerre-deurope/>.



ensuring security in Europe”, and that it constituted “a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust”.<sup>5</sup>

The situation further escalated in the first half of 2008 when Putin’s second term as president ended and he shifted to the position of prime minister. In February 2008, Russia condemned the recognition of Kosovo by the US, the United Kingdom, Turkey, and France. At the NATO summit in Bucharest in April 2008, Washington wanted to grant Ukraine and Georgia a Membership Action Plan, which Berlin and Paris opposed for fear of upsetting Moscow. As a compromise, it was decided to offer the prospect of membership but without a fixed date. The communiqué stated: “NATO welcomes Ukraine’s and Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO.”<sup>6</sup>

In a speech delivered in Berlin in early June 2008, the newly elected president, Dmitry Medvedev, proposed instead to enforce the principle of the “indivisibility of security” by concluding a “European Security Treaty”, which would address NATO enlargements, the US plan to establish new bases in Eastern Europe, and nuclear arms control. The draft of the treaty asserted that “no nation or international organization operating in the Euro-Atlantic region [was] entitled to strengthen its own security at the cost of other nations or organizations.” This initiative was met with scepticism and almost left unanswered.<sup>7</sup>

Later in June, the European Council discussed the “Eastern Partnership”, which was aimed at all former Soviet countries in the EU neighbourhood except Russia. Initiated by Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski, with the support of Carl Bildt of Sweden, the project called for a gradual opening of European mar-

kets in exchange for strengthening the rule of law and democratic values. The Russian regime regarded this potential development as a political and economic threat for its own influence and governance model, as well as a resurgence of old power struggles between Russia, Poland, and Sweden. In August 2008, the war in Georgia broke out: It was a first warning shot.

## The Russian vision of strategic stability: Status symbol and real concerns

Another reason for discord has been strategic stability. According to Moscow, the first blow dates to December 2001, a few months after 9/11, when the US announced its withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty on defensive arms control. Signed by Brezhnev and Richard Nixon in 1972 as part of the SALT I negotiations on offensive weapons, this treaty prohibited the construction and deployment of missile defence systems at sea, in the air, and in outer space; on land, it authorised the installation of such systems in only two types of sites: around the capital and near a launch zone for intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), which are capable of carrying strategic nuclear warheads.

With the end of the ABM Treaty, the US set up the Missile Defense Agency in 2002 and pursued the development of several anti-missile systems, taking advantage of earlier research, notably within the framework of the Strategic Defense Initiative, launched by Ronald Reagan in 1983 to accelerate the arms race against the Soviet Union. From the outset, the American missile shield project aroused suspicion in Moscow, where it was assumed that the project was not designed to protect against Iran, but to be directed against Russia. In the same Munich speech, Putin noted that “missile weapons with a range of about five to eight thousand kilometres that really pose a threat to Europe do not exist in any of the so-called problem countries.”<sup>8</sup>

The Russian side contended that the missile defence systems deployed in Europe undermined Russia’s nuclear deterrence, since it was believed that the anti-ballistic missiles could shoot down a strategic missile in flight. Russian experts also maintained that Russia was exposed to massive non-nuclear air strikes against civilian and military entities. As explained

5 President of Russia, “Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy”, Munich, 10 February 2007, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>.

6 NATO, “Bucharest Summit Declaration, Issued by the Heads of State and Government Participating in the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Bucharest on 3 April 2008”, press release (Brussels, 3 April 2008), [https://www.nato.int/cps/fr/natohq/official\\_texts\\_8443.htm?selectedLocale=en](https://www.nato.int/cps/fr/natohq/official_texts_8443.htm?selectedLocale=en).

7 President of Russia, *The Draft of the European Security Treaty* (Moscow, 9 November 2009), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/6152>. The EST was discussed at the General Assembly of the United Nations in September 2008, in the French city of Evian in October 2008 and at the OSCE annual conference in Vienna in June 2009.

8 President of Russia, “Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference” (see note 5).

by the Russian military theorist Andrey A. Kokoshin, “during the past 20 – 25 years, there has been discussion about the issue of damaging targets of the strategic nuclear forces with non-nuclear [weapons] – about the ‘involvement’ of high-precision, long-range non-nuclear weapons in a sudden ‘disarming’ strike against the adversary’s strategic nuclear forces.”<sup>9</sup> Russia had concerns specifically about the Aegis Ashore system that was located in Romania and Poland and being used to intercept the ballistic missiles. It had additional concerns that Tomahawk cruise missiles could be placed in the launchers at the site in Poland and be used offensively.

Threat perception results from one’s assessment of adversaries’ intent *and* capability to harm. It is fair to recognise that the Russians had a point as regards capabilities. As an American physicist recently demonstrated with learned calculations, the lethality of US long-range conventional cruise missiles are comparable to US nuclear-armed ballistic missiles. In particular, he shows that precision missiles can destroy a silo even without impacting it directly, due to the ground motion induced by the conventional explosion.<sup>10</sup>

Following his accession to the White House in 2009, Barack Obama attempted a “reset” and cancelled the deployment of US long-range missile interceptors. In 2010, Moscow and Washington even signed the New Start strategic nuclear arms reduction treaty. The same year, however, NATO allies decided to develop an expanded ballistic missile defence capability to counter any ballistic or nuclear threats from Iran. NATO’s Secretary General invited Russia to join the project in order to jointly build and operate the same security system.<sup>11</sup> The proposal went unheeded. The breakup was already complete by the end of the 2000s.

## The militarisation of foreign policy as a sign of increasing frustration

Retrospectively, it appears that 2010 was a pivotal year. On the one hand, Moscow announced its intention to create a regional organisation to supplant (and imitate) the EU in the post-Soviet space: the future Eurasian Economic Union. On the other hand, it launched a 10-year, €400 billion rearmament plan that included strategic weapons capable of penetrating missile defence systems. The chronology of events of this decade reveals a staunch determination to create strategic surprises and take military risks with the aim of regaining power and status, both regionally and globally.

The first surprise was the annexation of Crimea and the destabilisation of the Donbas. In late November 2013, the Ukrainian president, Viktor Yanukovich, abandoned the Association Agreement with the EU under pressure from Moscow. Seeing the EU as a promise for the future, Ukrainian civil society mobilised for three months until Yanukovich fled. In retaliation, Russia annexed Crimea in March 2014, ensuring it would retain the port of Sevastopol – home to Russia’s Black Sea fleet – and fomented unrest in Eastern Ukraine,<sup>12</sup> subsequently sustaining a high-intensity conflict. The Minsk II Agreements were concluded in February 2015. Over the years, they became a growing source of exasperation for Putin, since they were never implemented the way he intended. The war continued as Russia provided arms and money to the Donbas separatists.

The second surprise came in September 2015, when the Russian army intervened in the Syrian civil war to save the crumbling regime of Bashar al-Assad and indirectly confront the US in the Middle East. In the following years, the Russian private military company Wagner also started to operate in eastern Libya and other parts of Africa. In Europe, the Russian military stepped up strategic signalling in the Baltic Sea region, using ballistic missile submarines and strategic bombers; it also deployed tactical nuclear weapons near the borders of the EU, such as Iskander ballistic missiles with dual capability. To reduce its dependence on Western countries and promote its vision of a “multi-

9 Andrey A. Kokoshin, *Voprosy prikladnoy teorii voyny* [Questions of Applied Theory of War] (Moscow, 2019), 67.

10 Ryan Snyder, “Assessing the Lethality of Conventional Weapons against Strategic Missile Silos in the United States, Russia, and China”, *Science & Global Security* 32, no. 1 – 3 (2024), [https://scienceandglobalsecurity.org/archive/2024/09/assessing\\_the\\_lethality\\_of\\_con.html](https://scienceandglobalsecurity.org/archive/2024/09/assessing_the_lethality_of_con.html).

11 NATO, “‘One Security Roof’ from Vancouver to Vladivostok”, press release (Brussels, 30 March 2010), [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_62391.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_62391.htm).

12 See the interview given by former FSB operative and future military blogger Igor Girkin, alias Strelkov, to far-right journalist Alexander Prokhanov, “Kto ty Strelkov?” [Who Are You, Strelkov?], *Zavtra*, 20 November 2014, <https://zavtra.ru/blogs/kto-tyi-strelok>.

polar world order”, Russia turned to the East and strengthened its ties with China.

Against this backdrop, the erosion of arms control continued. For years, the US and Russia could not even agree on a shared list of items to put on the agenda for arms control negotiations. In 2019, the US, followed by Russia, withdrew from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, signed in December 1987 by Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan to ban land-based missiles with ranges from 500 to 5,500 km, both conventional and nuclear. The INF’s demise was linked to two problems: Russia’s failure to comply with the treaty and China’s growing military capabilities with the build-up of its nuclear arsenal and deployment of intermediate-range missiles positioned against Taiwan. Nevertheless, Russian experts were still pondering solutions for preserving arms control in the late 2010s.

In February 2021, Russia and the US renewed *in extremis* the New Start Treaty for five years. During the negotiations, Moscow was eager to find arrangements for missile shields and non-nuclear strategic weapons, in particular high-precision conventional weapons.<sup>13</sup> This focus suggested that, in the event of a high-intensity conflict, the Russian side still feared losing air superiority and being subjected to high-precision strikes deep inland, including decapitation strikes on its centres of power. For its part, Washington insisted on the need for better control of the large number of Russian tactical nuclear warheads, and for clarifications on the conditions of their use. This focus suggested that the American side assumed the existence of a Russian nuclear doctrine that advocated “escalating to de-escalate” with limited nuclear strikes. In other words, it speculated that Moscow could lower the nuclear threshold by using “tactical” nuclear weapons to avoid a conventional defeat.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Aleksey G. Arbatov, “Sleduyushchiy dogovor SNV: missiya vpolnima?” [Next New Start Treaty: Can the Mission be Accomplished?], *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie (NVO)*, 18 March 2021, [https://nvo.ng.ru/realty/2021-03-18/1\\_1133\\_dialog.html](https://nvo.ng.ru/realty/2021-03-18/1_1133_dialog.html).

<sup>14</sup> For a state of the debate, see Nikolai N. Sokov, “Russian Military Doctrine Calls a Limited Nuclear Strike ‘De-Escalation’: Here Is Why”, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 8 March 2022, <https://thebulletin.org/2022/03/russian-military-doctrine-calls-a-limited-nuclear-strike-de-escalation-heres-why/>, and Emmanuelle Maitre, “‘Escalate to De-escalate’: interrogations sur l’existence du concept dans la doctrine nucléaire russe” (Paris, Fondation pour la Recherche stratégique, December 2017), <https://www.frstrategie.org/programmes/observatoire-de->

A few months before the invasion of Ukraine, Moscow’s relations with Washington seemed to have somehow stabilised. The Biden administration had waived some sanctions related to Nord Stream 2. Joe Biden and Putin had met in Geneva in June 2021 for a summit meeting. Yet, in December 2021, Russia suddenly presented “security demands” in the form of two draft treaties with NATO and the US. As a veiled ultimatum, it requested written guarantees certifying that Ukraine and Georgia would not join NATO, that all Western military aid to Ukraine and military co-operation with NATO countries would cease, and that NATO military drills near Russia’s borders would end. Moscow also required the return of NATO to “its 1997 borders”, that is, those that existed before the EU and NATO enlargements to Central European countries and the Baltic States.

**The full-scale invasion of Ukraine was not merely prompted by classic security concerns, but rather by identity motivations.**

### Revanchism and imperialism as primary motivations

Despite this staging, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine was not merely prompted by classic security concerns, but rather by identity motivations. Undoubtedly, Putin wanted to demonstrate NATO’s weakness by trying to impose a new *fait accompli*. It is certainly no accident that the “security demands” came 30 years, month for month, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and that the offensive began 15 years, month for month, after the Munich speech against “American unilateralism”. Yet, he also intended to reassert his dominance over a country that he sees as an inalienable part of Russia. He repeatedly stated that, in his view, Russians and Ukrainians are “one people”, that Ukraine as a nation does not exist, and that Ukraine as a state should never have existed.<sup>15</sup>

To subjugate Ukraine, the Kremlin has used military power with increasing brutality, targeting civilians with drones and missiles in intentional air terror

la-dissuasion/escalade-escalate-interrogations-sur-l’existence-concept-dans-doctrine-nucleaire-russe-2017.

<sup>15</sup> President of Russia, Article by Vladimir Putin “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians” (Moscow, 12 July 2021), <https://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.



campaigns. It assumes that it can win a war of attrition by launching new ground offensives and maintaining a state of permanent insecurity in the rear. In 2023, Sabine Fischer, a senior researcher at SWP, observed: “Russia continues to wage war against Ukraine with the aim of destroying that country. Even though it remains far from achieving its goals, the Putin regime shows no willingness to compromise. Moscow is playing for time: the political leadership still believes that it can militarily exhaust Ukraine and corrode the international support for Kyiv.”<sup>16</sup> This analysis remains fully valid in 2025.

Putin continues to insist on his maximalist goals. In June 2024, he laid down his conditions for a ceasefire, requesting a ban on Ukraine’s NATO membership, its “demilitarization”, and its “denazification”, meaning at the very least regime change in Kyiv. In March 2025, after Donald Trump’s openings and concessions, additional conditions were set: Before contemplating a ceasefire, Moscow now required “security guarantees” for itself, the lifting of sanctions, the dropping of all legal proceedings for war crimes, the return of Russian frozen assets, and the recognition of Russian sovereignty over all occupied territories within their administrative borders. The latest demand would imply nothing less than evacuating territories controlled by the Ukrainian army and handing over the cities currently under Kyiv’s control of Zaporizhzhia, Kramatorsk, Slavyansk, as well as Kherson, which was liberated by the Ukrainian Armed Forces in the fall of 2022. These cities could then serve as bridgeheads for new large-scale offensives.

To deter and coerce the Europeans, Russia is applying an escalatory strategy in all domains, combining strategic signalling, nuclear intimidation, political subversion, information warfare, and hybrid attacks. This includes sabotage, arsons, assassination attempts, disinformation campaign, and now drone incursions into NATO airspace. Russia has also tightened ties with Iran and North Korea to obtain weapons as well as to pressure the US, since this contributes to the growing interconnection of operation theatres.

Nuclear threats are aimed at exerting escalation dominance and dissuading Western policymakers. Leading experts with intelligence backgrounds and ties to the Kremlin regularly explain that it is urgent

to restore the fear of nuclear escalation. Sergey Karaganov, an anti-Western hawk who chairs the Council for Foreign and Defense Policy, outright advocates the use of a pre-emptive tactical nuclear strike.<sup>17</sup> Dmitry Trenin, the former director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, asserts for his part: “As for possible Russian nuclear strikes on NATO countries, hypothetically speaking, Washington is unlikely to respond to these strikes by attacking Russia for fear of its retaliation against the US,” which would “dispel the myth built for decades around Article 5” and “lead to the deepest crisis in NATO, perhaps even to its collapse”.<sup>18</sup>

**The war on Ukraine has significantly radicalised the Russian regime while transforming the Russian economy and society towards what seems to be a point of no return.**

Indeed, the war on Ukraine has significantly radicalised the Russian regime while transforming the Russian economy and society towards what seems to be a point of no return. Russia’s military expenditure reached \$149 billion in 2024 — a 38 per cent increase from 2023.<sup>19</sup> The defence budget is set to rise by 25 per cent in 2025. According to Russian military expert Pavel Luzin, in January 2025, the Russian army had 700,000 killed, wounded, and missing in action, including 5,400 dead officers.<sup>20</sup> However, it is reconstituting forces at a fast pace: In 2024, it managed to incorporate 300,000 recruits and to integrate North Korean fighters. It is recruiting volunteers and prepar-

**16** Sabine Fischer, *Diplomacy in the Context of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine: Continuation of War by Other Means*, SWP Comment 53/2023 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, November 2023), doi: 10.18449/2023C53.

**17** Sergey Karaganov, “Tiazhkoe, no neobkhodimoe reshenie” [A Difficult but Necessary Decision], *Rossiia v Global’noy Politike*, 13 June 2023, <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/tyazhkoe-no-neobkhodimoe-reshenie/>.

**18** Dmitry Trenin, “Ukrainskiy konflikt i yadernoe oruzhie” [Conflict in Ukraine and Nuclear Weapons], *Rossiia v Global’noy Politike*, 20 June 2023, <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/ukraina-yadernoe-oruzhie/>.

**19** Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), “Unprecedented Rise in Global Military Expenditure as European and Middle East Spending Surges”, press release (Stockholm, 28 April 2025), <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2025/unprecedented-rise-global-military-expenditure-european-and-middle-east-spending-surges>.

**20** Pavel Luzin, *Russia’s Year of Truth: The Soldier Shortage* (Washington, D.C.: Center for European Policy Analysis, January 2025), <https://cepa.org/article/russias-year-of-truth-1-the-soldier-shortage/>.

ing new mobilisations.<sup>21</sup> The militarisation of education is also an indicator of the regime's long-term intentions. At least 1.7 million Russian minors are enrolled in the Youth Army (*Yunarmiya*), where they receive political indoctrination and learn how to use Kalashnikovs and drones.<sup>22</sup>

In sum, Russian authorities claim to be engaged in a zero-sum game reminiscent of the brinkmanship episodes from the Cold War. Before considering any ceasefire, they keep requesting a return to the “root causes” of the war, as if the aggression against Ukraine did not result from their expansionist ambitions and imperial fantasies, but from an alleged right to self-defence and a sense of exceptionalism. As in Soviet times, they are asserting a vision of European security implying the law of the strongest and the recognition of spheres of influence. Therefore, it seems illusory – and hazardous – to believe that Moscow could be “appeased” with “serious negotiations” which would satisfy its alleged “legitimate security needs”. Not surprisingly, the Alaska summit between Trump and Putin, convened in August 2025 to achieve a ceasefire in Ukraine, did not bring tangible results. There are reasons to contend that Putin's ultimate objective is to dismantle NATO and implode the EU so he can go down in history as the one who erased the humiliation of the defeat in the Cold War and of the dismantling of the empire and who, like his most illustrious predecessors, “gathered Russian lands” and imposed his dominion. As long as he is in power and his regime exists, Russia will in all likelihood continue to dedicate vast resources to the destruction of Ukraine and to confront EU countries across all domains, posing a long-lasting threat to Europe's security *and* democracy.

21 Margarete Klein, *How Russia Is Recruiting for the Long War: Covertly Mobilising Volunteers While Preparing for a New Round of Compulsory Mobilisation*, SWP Comment 24/2024 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, June 2024), doi: 10.18449/2024C24.

22 Jonna Alava, “From Patriotic Education to Militarist Indoctrination – Disciplinary Power and Silent Resistance in Russia after the Onset of the War against Ukraine”, *Problems of Post-Communism* (2025): 1 – 12.

Susan Stewart

# Ukraine: Joining and Strengthening the West\*

After the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Ukrainians are more convinced than ever of the need to join Western institutions, especially the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). They see Russia's hostility emerging from a historically rooted imperialism that will not disappear after the departure of Vladimir Putin. They thus view themselves as being at the forefront of Europe's defence of its own security and values — preferably together with the United States (US), but without it if necessary. Ukraine believes it has much to contribute to European security — militarily, but also with regard to food and energy. It thus sees Western assistance as being in the long-term interest of the countries providing it, but does not take this support for granted.

## A clear foreign policy orientation since 2014

A major turning point in Ukraine's position on the European security order occurred in 2014. Starting in November 2013 there were major protests in Kyiv and other cities against then-President Viktor Yanukovich, because he had refused to sign an Association Agreement with the EU at the Eastern Partnership summit in Vilnius, as originally planned. Shortly before the summit, Yanukovich received an offer from Russian President Vladimir Putin, promising him significant economic benefits if he renounced deeper cooperation with the EU.<sup>1</sup> The protests became known as the “Euromaidan” in the West, but they are usually

referred to as the “Revolution of Dignity” in Ukraine. They broadened into demonstrations against corruption within Yanukovich's personal circle and the Ukrainian government, and they culminated in Yanukovich fleeing to Russia and snap presidential and parliamentary elections. Shortly after Yanukovich took flight, Russia illegally occupied and annexed the Crimean Peninsula and took de facto control over parts of the Donbas in eastern Ukraine.<sup>2</sup>

In the course of 2014, Ukraine and the EU signed the Association Agreement, and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) included in it entered fully into force in 2017. Although Ukraine's relations with NATO were active, their pace and momentum were very different from those of its relations with the EU. At the NATO summit in Bucharest in 2008, it had been decided that both Ukraine and Georgia would enter the Alliance, but no date was specified. This decision was less a positive step and more a compromise between those countries that were pushing for Ukraine (and Georgia) to be given a Membership Action Plan (MAP) and those that opposed this step (including France and Germany). In Ukraine itself, attitudes towards NATO were divided. However, because of Russia's invasion in 2014, which had resulted in more than 14,000 deaths even before the full-scale war began in February 2022, Ukrainians began to support NATO membership more strongly.<sup>3</sup>

\* I would like to thank Julia Kazdobina for her very helpful comments on a previous draft of this chapter.

1 Christoph Pauly et al., “How the EU Lost Ukraine”, *Spiegel International* (online), 25 November 2013, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/how-the-eu-lost-to-russia-in-negotiations-over-ukraine-trade-deal-a-935476.html>.

2 The exact mode of this control has been the subject of much debate. For a recent well-researched account, see Serhiy Kudelia, *Seize the City, Undo the State: The Inception of Russia's War on Ukraine* (Oxford, 2025).

3 For a detailed assessment of casualties between 2014 and 2022, see International Crisis Group, “Conflict in Ukraine's Donbas: A Visual Explainer” (continually updated), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/content/conflict-ukraines-donbas-visual-explainer>. For the development of public support for NATO membership over the years, see Anna Anisimova, *Ukraine and NATO – Evidence from Public Opinion Surveys*, Policy Brief (Stock-

In 2017 legislation established membership in NATO (and the EU) as a foreign policy objective of Ukraine. In 2019 this goal was anchored in the Ukrainian Constitution.<sup>4</sup> In 2020 President Volodymyr Zelensky approved Ukraine's National Security Strategy, which reinforced the country's intention of joining NATO. In the preparatory phases of NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept, Ukraine advocated for its accession in conjunction with the formulation of the document.

### **Starting in 2014, Ukraine pursued a relatively consistent policy aiming at membership in both NATO and the EU.**

Thus, starting in 2014 and until the full-scale Russian invasion on 24 February 2022, Ukraine pursued a relatively consistent policy aiming at membership in both NATO and the EU. This indicates two things. First, Ukraine took a fairly conservative approach towards integration into Western institutions and to European security. Kyiv did not call into question the existing architecture, but simply attempted to become a part of it. Second, both the EU and NATO were associated with security for Ukraine. Even though NATO was much more clearly connected to hard security, the EU — as an organisation based within a Western political and economic framework — represented certain values as well as prosperity. Acceptance into the EU would be an important aspect of belonging to the Western club, and thus of escaping the Russian sphere of influence and the accompanying dangers involving security. It was also, of course, not lost on Ukraine that those Central and Eastern European countries that had previously joined the EU had, in fact, also become NATO members in the process.

### **Relations with Russia: From (inter)dependence to rejection**

This increasing emphasis on integration into Western organisations should not disguise the fact that Ukraine

maintained significant relations with Russia in multiple areas. In fact, it could be argued that its complex relations with Russia were the primary reason for its growing interest in joining Western structures.

Without delving too far back into history, it is evident even from the paragraphs above that Ukraine was politically and economically dependent on as well as intertwined with Russia — not to mention the myriad cultural and societal connections. Even though Kyiv had made numerous attempts to regulate and shape its relations with Moscow following its independence in 1991, the fact that Yanukovich preferred Putin's proposition in the run-up to the Eastern Partnership summit in 2013 is indicative of several things. First, the kleptocratic regime in Ukraine meant that Yanukovich was dependent on generating revenue to be distributed among his cronies, so Putin's offer of quick economic benefits was attractive to him. Second, Russia held powerful types of leverage over Ukraine (economic, political, military, etc.), which made it difficult for Yanukovich to refuse Putin's proposal.<sup>5</sup> Third, the Ukrainian style of governance and the socialisation of its leaders were much closer to their Russian equivalents than to those in the EU, meaning that Yanukovich (and other high-ranking Ukrainian politicians and officials) were more comfortable dealing with their Russian than with their EU counterparts.

Clearly these various connections and perceptions did not disappear simply because Yanukovich fled to Russia. Even though there was a sharp turn towards the West under President Petro Poroshenko (elected in May 2014), relations with Russia persisted. Poroshenko continued to govern in an oligarchic manner (indeed being an oligarch himself), so the links to and similarities with Russia that derived from this regime type by no means vanished. In addition, numerous opposition parties and blocs with pro-Russian positions were present in parliament and on the local level. Official institutions remained to some extent infiltrated by Russian citizens or people working closely with them, both formally and informally.

holm: Free Network, October 2023), <https://freepolicybriefs.org/2023/10/30/ukraine-nato-public-opinion/>.

<sup>4</sup> This was done previously as well, during the presidency of Viktor Yushchenko (2005–2010). However, it was revoked under Yanukovich. The constitutional changes in 2019 were in large part an element of Petro Poroshenko's campaign to be re-elected president, but since then they have gained new salience in light of the full-scale Russian invasion and ensuing international developments.

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Oleksandr Sushko, *The Impact of Russia on Governance Structures in Ukraine*, Discussion Paper 24/2008 (Bonn: German Development Institute, 2008), [https://www.idos-research.de/uploads/media/DP\\_24.2008.pdf](https://www.idos-research.de/uploads/media/DP_24.2008.pdf); Rilka Dragneva and Kataryna Wolczuk, "Between Dependence and Integration: Ukraine's Relations with Russia", *Europe-Asia Studies* 68, no. 4 (June 2016): 678–98.

Personal ties to Russia through relatives, employment, or cultural affinities were common, especially for Ukrainians living close to the Russian border.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, Moscow (and Putin personally) reacted extremely negatively to the Euromaidan, the ousting of Yanukovych, and the fact that the new Ukrainian authorities began pursuing a much more pronounced integration with the West. The Russian side adopted a narrative claiming that the Euromaidan was instigated by the West (the US in particular, with the EU following suit), that the transition to a new president and government was not being pursued in a legal manner, and that the entire process should be seen as a “coup d’état” carried out by ultranationalists and neo-Nazi extremists.<sup>7</sup> Under these circumstances, Ukrainian-Russian relations could not continue at the same level as before, and the problems were clearly not only on the rhetorical level. Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea and covert occupation of parts of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts meant that relations between Kyiv and Moscow became markedly more hostile. Russia’s approach to the Minsk Agreements of 2014 and 2015 — designed from a Western point of view to manage or even resolve the conflict regarding the Donbas — clearly indicated that Moscow was not willing to respect Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. Once it became evident to the Russian side that they would not be able to manipulate President Zelensky (after his election in 2019) or coerce him into accepting Russia’s demands, the relationship deteriorated further.

### **Russia’s full-scale invasion fundamentally changed Ukraine’s relationship to Russia on multiple levels.**

Nonetheless it would appear that very few people in the Ukrainian elite and society believed that Russia would launch the full-scale invasion that began on 24 February 2022. This event and the ensuing all-out war have fundamentally changed Ukraine’s relationship to Russia on multiple levels. Not only are the two armies engaged in brutal combat with enormous

(though as of yet undisclosed) human losses. Parties deemed pro-Russian have been banned, and numerous politicians have moved to Russia, with some being deprived of their Ukrainian citizenship.<sup>8</sup> Pro-Russian media have been prohibited or forced out of Ukraine’s media landscape. Trade with Russia (and Belarus) has also plummeted.<sup>9</sup> On the societal level, many Ukrainians have cut off contact with friends and relatives in Russia. The use of the Ukrainian language in daily life has surged, even among those who were accustomed to speaking Russian primarily, and significantly more people who previously identified as Russian now characterise themselves as Ukrainian.<sup>10</sup> Many Russian cultural and historical figures are now viewed negatively, and there is resentment that Russian citizens have failed to protest against the war en masse.

These developments presage an extremely difficult relationship with Russia for generations to come. In Ukraine, the assumption is that Moscow is intent on taking control of the entire country, thereby destroying the Ukrainian state and nation. The Ukrainian narrative that Ukraine is protecting European security order implies a further assumption — that Russia is not simply interested in subjugating Ukraine, but is in fact in a larger war with the West, and it will therefore go on to challenge one or more NATO countries militarily if it is not stopped in Ukraine. As for domestic developments, the conviction predominates that the Russian elite and society are imperialistic. Therefore, the replacement of Putin, even with a Russian opposition politician, would not resolve the problems in Moscow’s relationship with Ukraine and the West. Thus, only a clear and crushing defeat of Russia by military means could bring about the possibility for positive change. The idea that Russia could be destabilised and potentially collapse is not necessarily

<sup>6</sup> For Russian tactics in these various domains, see Ihor Hurak and Paul D’Anieri, “The Evolution of Russian Political Tactics in Ukraine”, *Problems of Post-Communism* 69, no. 2 (2022): 121–32 (published online on 1 October 2020).

<sup>7</sup> See David Marples, “Russia’s Perceptions of Ukraine: Euromaidan and Historical Conflicts”, *European Politics and Society* 17, no. 4 (2016): 424–37.

<sup>8</sup> See Mykyta Vorobiov, *Whatever Happened to Ukraine’s Pro-Russians?* (Washington, D.C.: Center for European Policy Analysis, September 2024), <https://cepa.org/article/whatever-happened-to-ukraines-pro-russians/>.

<sup>9</sup> Sławomir Matuszak, *A Year of War in Ukraine’s Foreign Trade* (Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies, February 2023), <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2023-02-08/a-year-war-ukraines-foreign-trade>.

<sup>10</sup> See Volodymyr Kulyk, “Language Shift in Time of War: The Abandonment of Russian in Ukraine”, *Post-Soviet Affairs* 40, no. 3 (2024): 159–74. For identity shifts, see Razumkov Centre, *The Identity of Ukrainian Citizens: Trends of Change* (Kyiv, June 2024), <https://razumkov.org.ua/en/component/k2/the-identity-of-ukraine-s-citizens-trends-of-change-june-2024>.



viewed as a negative scenario in Kyiv. Rather, the disintegration of the Russian Federation into smaller independent units could be seen as an opportunity to get rid of a country that relies on its enormous land mass and exploitation of its natural resources (including its population) to terrorise and subdue others.<sup>11</sup>

## Ukraine with the West against Russia

Ukraine envisions a European security order that does not include Russia. As one of its primary functions, this order should seek to deter Russia militarily and protect its members from malign Russian influence in all its forms. Although institutionally Ukraine does not see the need for innovation, being content to join the main existing institutions of this order (NATO and the EU), there is nonetheless a widespread belief that these entities can be made more fit for purpose. What is more, Kyiv sees many ways in which Ukraine can contribute to this process – and in fact is already doing so.

From a Ukrainian perspective, the country is doing more to deter Russia at the moment than NATO and EU member states, in the sense that it is sending soldiers into battle and that hundreds of thousands of people (both military personnel and civilians) have died or been seriously injured in trying to stop the Russian advance. This does not mean that Ukrainians are not grateful for the military (and other) assistance granted by Western states. They appreciate this support enormously, but the sacrifice of human lives is nonetheless seen as a more significant contribution, since military equipment can be replaced, whereas individual lives are lost forever.

Therefore, the perception in Ukraine is that, as a NATO and EU member state, it will provide a huge boost to the military capabilities of these organisations. This is due in particular to the size and battle-trained nature of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, as well as to the experience they have acquired while combatting Russian warfighting tactics, especially concerning drone warfare. In fact, Ukraine has already begun to contribute its expertise.<sup>12</sup> In addition,

Ukraine has perhaps more experience than any current EU or NATO member state in coping with various forms of Russian hybrid attacks, from cyberattacks to myriad types of disinformation and propaganda. Finally, the rapid expansion of the defence industry in Ukraine and its innovative capacity are seen as tremendous advantages that the country would bring to the EU and NATO.<sup>13</sup>

Beyond these areas, Ukraine sees itself as well-positioned to contribute with regard to both food and energy security.<sup>14</sup> As an agricultural powerhouse, Ukraine can help to ensure the autonomy of those European countries bound together in Western alliances as a supplier of grain and numerous other foodstuffs. Although these are currently sources of discord in certain bilateral relationships, particularly with Poland, from the Ukrainian point of view the larger picture indicates that these resources will add to the EU's competitive advantage in the coming years.<sup>15</sup>

In the energy realm, Ukraine also believes it has quite a bit to offer – or will have after an initial phase of reconstruction.<sup>16</sup> Although the country has halted the transit of gas from Russia to the EU, Ukraine has its own gas resources, which are to some extent untapped. In addition, there is significant potential to further develop renewable sources of energy, in particular wind and solar. Kyiv has also

how-to-defend-against-russia/; Taras Kuzio, *Russia's War Transforms Ukraine into a World-Leading Military Producer* (Washington, D.C.: The Jamestown Foundation, 5 October 2025), <https://jamestown.org/program/russias-war-transforms-ukraine-into-a-world-leading-military-producer/>.

<sup>13</sup> Pavlo Verkhniatskyi, "The Ukrainian Army Is Now Europe's Most Credible Security Guarantee", *Ukraine Alert* (Blog), 17 April 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/the-ukrainian-army-is-now-europes-most-credible-security-guarantee/>.

<sup>14</sup> Svitlana Taran and Philipp Lausberg, *Economic Security: The Strategic Argument for Ukraine's EU Membership* (Brussels: European Policy Centre, February 2024), <https://www.epc.eu/publication/Economic-security-The-strategic-argument-for-Ukraines-EU-membership-57c2cc/>.

<sup>15</sup> This opinion is also shared by some analysts outside Ukraine. See e.g. Jean-Jacques Hervé, *European and Ukrainian Agriculture Are Mutually Complementary* (Paris: Fondation Robert Schuman, 2 July 2024), <https://server.www.robert-schuman.eu/storage/en/doc/questions-d-europe/qe-755-en.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> Giulia Cretti et al., *Integrating Ukraine's Energy Sector into the EU: Forging Ties That Will Hold in the Future*, Policy Brief (The Hague/Kyiv: Clingendael/Dixi Group, September 2024), [https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2024-09/EU-Ukraine\\_Energy\\_Cooperation.pdf](https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2024-09/EU-Ukraine_Energy_Cooperation.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> See e.g. Alexander Query, "Danilov: 'Ukraine's National Interest is Russia's Disintegration'", *The Kyiv Independent* (online), 6 February 2023, <https://kyivindependent.com/danilov-ukraines-national-interest-is-russias-disintegration/>.

<sup>12</sup> David Kirichenko, "Drone Superpower Ukraine Is Teaching NATO How to Defend against Russia", *Ukraine Alert* (Blog), 2 October 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/drone-superpower-ukraine-is-teaching-nato->

succeeded in exporting electricity (especially prior to the full-fledged invasion), thanks in large part to its network of nuclear power plants. Beyond the energy domain, Ukraine possesses other critical resources, as the discussion about the “minerals deal” with the US has made evident. Although the feasibility of accessing some of these resources (due to both geological and war-related constraints) is unclear, from a Ukrainian perspective they represent an advantage the country would provide to the EU and NATO, in particular with regard to achieving strategic autonomy.<sup>17</sup>

**Kyiv is convinced that integrating a victorious Ukraine into the EU and NATO will give these organisations numerous advantages.**

Thus, for Ukraine, the rest of Europe (and indeed the West) should bolster support for its military now, not only to deter Russia and thus ensure European security, but also because integrating a victorious Ukraine into the EU and NATO will provide these organisations with numerous military and economic advantages, even while adding to existing competition in various sectors.

**A more diverse foreign policy approach**

Even though the US is obviously a crucial actor within Western institutions, and NATO in particular, it is equally clear that the second Trump administration has called the American role in these institutions fundamentally into question. Like many actors in the West, Ukraine has difficulty conceiving of a US that is more of an adversary than a partner. Although Ukrainian foreign policy is generally flexible and pragmatic, the fact that US support has been key to Ukrainian military successes up to this point means that Kyiv is extraordinarily reluctant to switch to a strategy based on the assumption that the US can no longer be relied upon.

Thus, Ukrainian politicians continue to attempt to influence Donald Trump and other relevant US actors in order to convince them to adopt the Ukrainian perspective on the war. However, they are not willing

to cross certain red lines and accept whatever is proposed by the US side. This is evidenced not only by Zelensky’s reaction to criticisms by Trump and Vice President J. D. Vance in the Oval Office in February 2025, but also by (successful) Ukrainian efforts to negotiate a “minerals deal” that would provide advantages to both sides.<sup>18</sup> Zelensky’s warnings to the US negotiating team not to exceed its competence by promising that Ukraine will acknowledge some of its regions as Russian territory also fall into this category.<sup>19</sup> In general, Ukraine is willing to engage in negotiations on ending the war but is unwilling to capitulate. Since Moscow seems intent on obtaining capitulation from Kyiv, Ukrainians are prepared to continue fighting.

Ukraine made a significant effort to reach out to the countries of the so-called Global South, in particular in the context of the “Peace Formula”, a collection of 10 points presented by Zelensky in the fall of 2022 that were intended to serve as the basis for a just and lasting peace.<sup>20</sup> Since they included general issues such as energy security, food provision, nuclear safety, and environmental protection, the Ukrainian side believed that many states in the Global South would be supportive. In addition, the assumption was that these countries would also be interested in a world order based on the tenets of international law, including state sovereignty and territorial integrity. To some extent these efforts were successful. Ukraine significantly increased its degree of interaction with numerous states and several meetings were organised, for example the “Peace Summit” in Bürgenstock (Switzerland) in July 2024. The meetings were well-attended, but it quickly became clear that the original idea of persuading the involved states to take Ukraine’s side and put pressure on Russia to end the war was unrealistic. Many of the countries approached

<sup>18</sup> Gracelin Baskaran and Meredith Schwartz, *What to Know about the Signed U.S.-Ukraine Minerals Deal* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 2025), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/what-know-about-signed-us-ukraine-minerals-deal>.

<sup>19</sup> Dan Sabbagh and Rachel Savage, “Zelenskyy Says Ukraine Cannot Accept US Recognition of Crimea as Russian”, *The Guardian* (online), 24 April 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/apr/24/zelenskyy-says-ukraine-cannot-accept-us-recognition-of-crimea-as-russian>.

<sup>20</sup> For the text of the 10 points, see Government of Ukraine, *What Is Zelenskyy’s 10-Point Peace Plan?* (Kyiv, 17 September 2024), <https://war.ukraine.ua/faq/zelenskyy-10-point-peace-plan/>.

<sup>17</sup> Danilo Bilek, “Ukraine’s Metals the US, EU and Russia Want Access To”, *Deutsche Welle* (online), 9 February 2025, <https://www.dw.com/en/ukraine-russia-war-mineral-wealth-us-eu-v2/a-71531476>.

were not interested in spoiling their relationships with Moscow and were inclined to remain more or less neutral. The Peace Formula and the corresponding efforts gradually began to take a back seat to other foci.

Perceptions about China among the Ukrainian elite have varied over the years, including during the period of the full-scale Russian invasion. On the one hand, China has been a major importer of Ukrainian grain. On the other hand, Ukraine has to some extent sabotaged its relations with China by 1) reneging on deals made during the Yanukovich period, and 2) refusing the Chinese offer to invest in the helicopter producer Motor Sich due to US opposition at the time.<sup>21</sup> Since February 2022 the Ukrainian attitude towards Beijing has included a variety of positions. At certain times Kyiv hoped to persuade China to pressure Russia to stop the war and/or considered Beijing a potential mediator. More recently there has been growing frustration at China's reluctance to get involved, its covert support of Russia's war effort, and evidence of Chinese mercenaries recruited by Russia.<sup>22</sup> There is thus no coherent Ukrainian stance on China, and Kyiv's initial hopes about Beijing's position with regard to the war have not been realised. In this sense, the developments have been similar to those concerning the Global South. Apparent statements by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi — that China prefers to avoid a Russian defeat in Ukraine — have only contributed to Ukraine's irritation with the Chinese role in the war.<sup>23</sup>

21 See "China Sues Ukraine for Breach of \$3-bn Loan-for-Grain Contract", *Domain B*, 4 March 2014, <https://www.domain-b.com/economy/world-economy/china-sues-ukraine-for-breach-of-3-bn-loan-for-grain-contract>. On Motor Sich, see Alla Hurska, *Inbox: The Battle for "Motor Sich"* (Washington, D.C.: CEPA, November 2020), <https://cepa.org/article/inbox-the-battle-for-motor-sich/>; "Ukrainian Court Seizes Aerospace Company Motor Sich from Chinese Investors", *RFE/RL* (online), 21 March 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-seizes-motor-sich/31161801.html>.

22 Katherine Spencer, "Kyiv Accuses China of Deepening Involvement in Russia's Ukraine War", *Ukraine Alert* (Blog), 29 April 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/kyiv-accuses-china-of-deepening-involvement-in-russias-ukraine-war/>.

23 "China Can't Abide a Russian Loss in Ukraine, Beijing's Foreign Minister Tells EU", *Kyiv Post* (online), 4 July 2025, <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/55666>.

## Conclusion: Prepared for a long fight

Thus, although Ukraine continues to devote considerable resources to its relationship with the US under the Trump administration and has not given up on receiving additional American support, Kyiv has nonetheless turned further towards Europe. Ukraine has repeatedly emphasised its commitment to the democratic and humanitarian values being promoted by many in Europe — and the West more broadly — and pointed out Russia's blatant infringement of these values. As the US has shown signs of adopting Russia's positions, European actors — as defenders of these values — are becoming more important to Ukraine with regard to establishing a values-based security order, which will find ways to hold Russia accountable for its repeated and severe violations of international law. The recent creation of a special tribunal under the aegis of the Council of Europe to address the crime of aggression and thereby combat impunity at the highest political level is one instance of this approach.<sup>24</sup>

However, this does not mean that the questions concerning immediate and ongoing military support and the provision of security guarantees in the case of a temporary ceasefire have become less significant. Here again, since the participation of the US in these issues has been called into question, Ukraine has been working closely with those European states involved in a "Coalition of the Willing" to deter Russia and defend European security within and through Ukraine. This is seen as a necessary step towards laying the foundations for a secure Europe, in which Ukraine can enter existing institutions and significantly contribute to the establishment of a more robust European security architecture.

**There is still a strong determination to continue the fight for Ukraine's sovereign existence, regardless of the degree of external support.**

Nonetheless, it is important to point out that, despite widespread exhaustion in all spheres of

24 Council of Europe, "Ukraine and the Council of Europe Sign Agreement on Establishing a Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression against Ukraine", press release, Strasbourg, 25 June 2025, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portall/-/ukraine-and-the-council-of-europe-sign-agreement-on-establishing-a-special-tribunal-for-the-crime-of-aggression-against-ukraine>.



Ukrainian society, there is still a strong determination to continue the fight for Ukraine's sovereign existence, regardless of the degree of external support. One piece of evidence for this is found in surveys indicating that there is much more opposition to reducing the size of the Ukrainian army than to giving up on membership in NATO or the EU.<sup>25</sup> Especially after experiencing a major pro-Russian shift in US policy since the inauguration of Trump in January 2025, Ukraine is increasingly aware of the need to rely on its own resources. This means that further Russian advances into Ukraine will not lead to a situation of a stable takeover. Rather, Ukraine is in the battle for the long haul and is unwilling to accept defeat, with or without foreign assistance. However, the ideal development path for Ukraine remains integration into Western institutions and the joint defence of Europe against Russia, together with NATO and the EU.

**25** See e.g. The Economist, *Ukrainian Citizens' Attitudes Survey: Research Results* (London, March 2025), <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2025-03/ukrainian-citizens-survey-ipsos-the-economist-march-2025-tabulated-report.pdf>.

Barbara Lippert

# The European Union: “Pax Europeae” with Ukraine but without Russia

The EU remains a zone of peace, democracy and prosperity in Europe. It adheres to the basic principles of international law, particularly those of the Helsinki Final Act, which it wants to maintain as the normative basis of Europe’s security order. The EU attracts other European states that seek membership in order to escape instability and war on the continent. For the first time, EU enlargement has become a geopolitical issue. Following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the uncertainty over the future of the transatlantic security alliance, the EU and its member states are having to adapt to imminent security threats. Thus, the EU has changed its policy towards both Russia (from cooperation to containment) and Ukraine (from association to membership). At the same time, it wants to shape the newly emerging security order so that a “Pax Europeae for the 21st century — one that is [...] managed by Europe itself” can be established.<sup>1</sup> The stakes and ambitions are high.

## 1989–2022: From unity and peace to division and war

### Dual enlargement and its limits

From the end of the East-West conflict in 1989 until 2022, the EU<sup>2</sup> saw itself as a cornerstone of Europe’s security order. In post-Wall Europe, the EU capitalised on the peace dividend: Internally, it pushed forward with economic and political integration and more

than doubled the number of its members. Beyond its borders it extended its own rules by forging relationships — from cooperation and association to membership — with reform-oriented European neighbours.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the EU champions cooperation in multilateral settings and with or within international, regional and global organisations that share the EU’s own principles.<sup>4</sup>

The Charter of Paris for a New Europe, which heralded a “new era of democracy, peace and unity in Europe” and included the concept of “equal security for all our countries”,<sup>5</sup> was more vision than reality in 1990. During that decade, the EU developed its Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) against the backdrop of the US’ ongoing commitment to the security of its European allies. Former countries of the Warsaw Pact first joined NATO (from 1998) and then the EU (from 2004). Collective defence was provided by the alliance, not the Union. Throughout this period, the EU contributed both politically and economically to the European security order. Its major assumption was that over time and at different speeds, there would be growing political, economic and societal convergence with EU standards. Peace was seen as the result of shared interests in stability, prosperity and freedom, underpinned by growing interdependence. However, the success of this approach was limited owing to regional and country-specific problems related to the political and socio-economic transformation as well as bilateral and intra-state conflicts. While the EU sought to help resolve ethno-territorial conflicts — for example, in the Southern Caucasus and mostly in cooperation

1 European Commission, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the award ceremony of the International Charlemagne Prize of Aachen”, Aachen, 29 May 2025, <http://bit.ly/456kTl1> (accessed 8 August 2025).

2 Here the term “EU” refers to its institutions and representatives, particularly the European Council, the Council of the EU and the European Commission. The rhetoric and actions of the individual EU member states are beyond the scope of this chapter.

3 See Article 21(1) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU).

4 Ibid.

5 Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, *Charter of Paris for a New Europe*, Paris, 19–21 November 1990, <http://bit.ly/444szCi> (accessed 7 May 2025).

with the OSCE — overall it maintained a low profile in conflict solution and mediation.<sup>6</sup>

Though rightly praised as the most successful foreign policy tool of the EU, enlargement was often wrongly seen as a wholesale substitute for a genuine foreign and security policy<sup>7</sup>. In order to make a “united and peaceful continent”<sup>8</sup> reality, the EU had to acknowledge the key role of the US in European security.<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, the Union provided security in a broader sense — as a primarily civilian power without military backup that offered all neighbours market access, funding and dialogue. While the Lisbon Treaty (2008) hails the “historic importance of the ending of the division of the European continent and the need to create firm bases for the construction of the future Europe”, that order was already being steadily eroded. The root cause was Russia’s approach to and intervention in the EU’s neighbourhood.

### The “Russia first” policy and Eastern Partnerships

In the EU’s approach to the post-Soviet countries, Russia has always been a special case. Even after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, it remained an empire with the mission and posture of a great power. It was also one of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, a large military (nuclear) power and a country with rich energy resources.

With the exception of the Baltic states, the post-Soviet countries were not offered a so-called European perspective. The path to EU membership was open only to Central, Eastern and Southeast European countries. In 1994 the EU concluded partnership and cooperation agreements (PCAs) first with Ukraine and then with Russia. Both countries were of strategic importance, but Russia mattered more to the EU. The PCA with Russia aimed at “promoting the integration

of Russia into a wider area of cooperation in Europe”<sup>10</sup> and, ultimately, at the establishment of a free trade area between the European Union and Russia. The Common Strategy of the European Union on Russia of June 1999, whose main goal was to ensure consensus within the EU on its Russia policy, envisaged “enabling Russia to integrate into a common economic and social space in Europe”.<sup>11</sup> It proposed a framework for a permanent policy and security dialogue designed to “bring interests closer together and to respond jointly to some of the challenges to security on the European continent”.<sup>12</sup> But Russia gave the EU and its EU-centric approach the cold shoulder. The Kremlin, which, in effect, was being run by then Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, stated in October 1999 that it would seek neither EU membership (which the EU had never contemplated) nor association with the Union for the next decade and that it wanted to secure its full sovereignty.<sup>13</sup>

Tensions between the EU and Russia increased over Putin’s Chechnya policy as well as the Kremlin’s interference in what Russia called its near abroad. Brussels was critical of efforts to establish a Russian centre of gravity alongside that of the EU because it feared this would amount to a hegemonic reconstruction of the Soviet Union.<sup>14</sup> Brussels and Moscow took very different approaches to their shared neighbourhood. The EU’s approach was functional: it offered political cooperation and (sectoral) economic integration within

6 Not Frozen! *The Unresolved Conflicts over Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh in Light of the Crisis over Ukraine*, ed. Sabine Fischer, SWP Research Paper 9/2016, Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, September 2016.

7 Barbara Lippert, “EU-Erweiterungspolitik in der Zeitenwende: Zäsur oder business as usual?”, *Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft* 33, no. 3 (2023), 475–85.

8 Council of the European Union, *European Security Strategy. A Secure Europe in a Better World*, Brussels, December 2003, <http://bit.ly/4nsXmIs> (accessed 23 June 2025), 27.

9 Ibid.

10 “Agreement on Partnership and Cooperation Establishing a Partnership Between the European Communities and their Member States, of one Part, and the Russian Federation, of the Other Part”, *Official Journal of the European Communities*, no. L327/3 (28 November 1997), <http://bit.ly/4n4gJkr> (accessed 7 May 2025)

11 European Council, *Common Strategy of the European Union on Russia* (Cologne, June 1999), 9, <http://bit.ly/3ZHniiU> (accessed 23 June 2025).

12 Ibid., 10.

13 *Medium-term Strategy for the Development of Relations between the Russian Federation and the EU (2000–2010)* (October 1999), Unofficial translation, <http://bit.ly/3HK6KR4> (accessed 12 May 2025): “As a world power situated on two continents, Russia should retain its freedom to determine and implement its domestic and foreign policies, its status and advantages of an Euro-Asian state and the largest country of the CIS, independence of its position and activities at international organizations.”

14 Mats Braun, “The European Union and the Eurasian Economic Union — Three Rationalities of Interaction and the Problem of Non-democratic Regionalism”, *Journal of European Integration* 47, no. 4 (2024), 581–600.

the framework of a European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). Russia’s approach was geopolitical: it aimed at an exclusive sphere of influence. While the EU realised that competition over the integration of neighbouring countries was intensifying, it underestimated Russia’s determination to prevent a pro-Western orientation in Ukraine and elsewhere through hybrid warfare. Still intent on averting any direct disputes with Russia over their shared neighbourhood, the EU opened a separate framework called Eastern Partnership for building stronger relations with six eastern neighbours, including Ukraine as the largest and strategically most important of those states. This “enlargement-lite” approach allowed for “everything but institutions” and thus excluded membership. Despite growing divergences in interests and principles, the EU and Russia agreed to reframe relations through the four “common spaces” (2005).<sup>15</sup> However, EU policy towards Russia remained controversial within the Union. Most new members from Central, Eastern and Northern Europe perceived Russia as a revisionist power and threat to the EU.

**In 2016, the EU began to change its view of Russia and revise its global strategy.**

In the wake of Russia’s political and military interventions in Georgia in 2008 and in Ukraine in 2013–14, the EU changed its Eastern policy. It abandoned what had been criticised as a “Russia first policy” and treated the six eastern partnership countries as states in their own right. That shift became evident in the so-called five principles, which included boosting ties with Russia’s former Soviet neighbours and strengthening EU resilience to Russian threats.<sup>16</sup> In 2016, the EU began to change its view of Russia and revise its global strategy: “Russia’s violation of international law and the destabilisation of Ukraine, on top of protracted conflicts in the wider Black Sea region, have challenged the European security order at its core.”<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> European Commission, “EU/Russia: The four ‘common spaces’”, Brussels, 18 March 2005, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/memo\\_05\\_103](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/memo_05_103) (accessed 24 September 2025).

<sup>16</sup> The other principles were the full implementation of the Minsk agreements (including sanctions), selective engagement with Russia on certain issues such as counter-terrorism and support for people-to-people contacts.

<sup>17</sup> European Union, *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy*, June 2016, <http://bit.ly/4nfo6FJ> (accessed 23 June 2025).

Five years later, in 2021, the EU made more assertive statements on its approach towards Russia and presented a new threefold approach: push back against human rights violations and constrain Russia’s attempts to undermine EU interests but at the same time engage with Russia on key challenges.<sup>18</sup> However, Chancellor Merkel and President Macron failed to gain support in the European Council for preparing an EU-Russia summit in summer 2021 to explore how to re-engage with Moscow; notably, it was the Baltic states, Sweden and the Netherlands that opposed the initiative.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the EU did not give up on diplomacy and cooperation, but nor was it ready to deal with a *fait accompli* from Russia or to confront Moscow directly. It was not until 2022 that the EU fully realised that Russia was turning into an anti-EU actor and becoming the biggest challenge for European security.

## Watershed moment 2022

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was the watershed moment in the EU’s relations with Russia and Ukraine as well as with its Eastern neighbourhood. It led to a “new security situation in Europe which is a major shift in its strategic environment”.<sup>20</sup> The EU underlined that NATO “remains the foundation of collective defence for its members”<sup>21</sup> (24 of which are also members of the EU) and that both “transatlantic and EU-NATO cooperation are key to our overall security”.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, the EU redoubled its efforts to strengthen and expand the substance of its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and the defence capacities of its member

*Policy*, June 2016, <http://bit.ly/4nfo6FJ> (accessed 23 June 2025).

<sup>18</sup> European Commission, *Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council on EU-Russia Relations – Push Back, Constrain and Engage* (Brussels, 16 June 2021), <http://bit.ly/45XK8qk> (accessed 7 May 2025).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Peter Ludlow, “24-25 June: The EU and the UN, Covid-19, LGBTI and Russia”, *European Council Studies*, Post-Summit Briefing, no. 6 (2021): 7.

<sup>20</sup> European Council, *European Council Conclusions, 24–25 March 2022* (Brussels, 25 March 2022).

<sup>21</sup> Council of the EU, *Informal Meeting of the Heads of State or Government, Versailles Declaration 10 and 11 March 2022* (Versailles, 11 March 2022).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

states. Three-and-a-half years into the war, the following observations can be made.

## EU policy on Russia: Decoupling and containment

*Russia as a neo-imperialist threat.* The EU perceives Russia's war against Ukraine as the greatest current threat to the European security order. Both President von der Leyen and High Representative Kallas (as well as Borrell before her) refer to Russia as an existential threat more explicitly than do Council statements, which adopt the more diplomatic, agreed formula.<sup>23</sup> The common position of the EU (repeated in almost all European Council conclusions) is that Russia is "grossly violating international law and the principles of the UN Charter and undermining European and global security and stability".<sup>24</sup> The prevailing assumption is that Russia continues to act like an empire and thinks in terms of exclusive spheres of influence: "Putin wants Russia to dominate its neighbourhood again. Putin has not given up on Russia's imperialist ambitions. And that is the problem: Russia is still behaving [like] an empire, and Putin wants to rebuild the empire — be it the Tsar empire or the Soviet empire."<sup>25</sup> In his "Pax Europae" speech, Commissioner Kubilius approvingly quoted a US scholar who concludes that "Europe can live without Russia, as can the United States. The West can afford to lose Russia, nice as it would be to have a peaceful Russia alongside it."<sup>26</sup> Thus, Kubilius envisions a security order in Europe (Pax Europae) without Russia.

- 23** European External Action Service, "Defence: Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Kaja Kallas at the Annual Conference of the European Defence Agency" (Brussels, 22 January 2025), <http://bit.ly/4nb0qma> (accessed 5 May 2025); and id., "Russia: Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the EP Plenary on Russia's presidential elections", Brussels, 10 April 2024, <http://bit.ly/40azoBc> (accessed 5 May 2025); "Russia 'Most Direct Threat to World Order', von der Leyen Says at EU-Japan Summit", *Euractiv*, 12 May 2022, <http://bit.ly/43OFrhj> (accessed 5 May 2025).
- 24** European Council, *European Council Conclusions, 24 February 2022* (Brussels, 24 February 2022).
- 25** European External Action Service, "Defence: Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the EU Defence night, in the margins of the NATO Summit" Washington, D.C., 10 July 2024, <http://bit.ly/4kHfpSR> (accessed 5 May 2025).
- 26** Michael Kimmage, "Putin Has Lost Something Worse Than a War", *New York Times*, 24 June 2025; and European

*First Kyiv, then Riga or Tallinn?* There seem to be different opinions within the EU regarding the likelihood of the domino effect. The implicit thinking is that Russia will not stop once it has the chance to push forward: "Our failure to deter [Russia's hybrid actions] sends a dangerous signal to any aggressor. Weakness invites them in. That is very clear."<sup>27</sup> This does not necessarily mean that the war against Ukraine is a prototype for Russian troops to invade other neighbouring countries. Several scenarios and likely targets are being discussed; they include provocation and intervention by hybrid means — for example, in the Baltic states.<sup>28</sup>

## The EU wants to eliminate any grey zones between Russia and the EU.

*The EU thinks Russia will remain a revisionist and expansionist power.* According to Commissioner von der Leyen, "Russia's target is not only Donbas, the target is not only Ukraine, the target is the stability in Europe and the whole of the international peace order."<sup>29</sup> For this reason, the EU wants to eliminate any grey zones between Russia and the EU.<sup>30</sup> This is a clear indication of a new geopolitical thinking or rhetoric, at least. That is why in spring 2022 Brussels very quickly offered Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova the prospect of future membership. It thereby signalled to Moscow that these countries can belong to the West(ern bloc) if they so wish. The EU shares NATO's outlook that Russia can be deterred. Today

Commission, "Speech by Commissioner Kubilius at the Tocqueville Conversations: 'The Future of Europe: From Pax Americana to Pax Europae'", Brussels, 28 June 2025, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech\\_25\\_1661](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_25_1661) (accessed 24 September 2025).

**27** European External Action Service, "Foreign Affairs Council: Press remarks by High Representative Kaja Kallas after the Meeting", Brussels, 27 January 2025, <http://bit.ly/3FGYDV3> (accessed 6 May 2025).

**28** European Parliament, *Russia's Disinformation and Historical Falsification to Justify Its War of Aggression against Ukraine*, Strasbourg, 23 January 2025, <http://bit.ly/3HI7iai> (accessed 6 May 2025).

**29** European Commission, "Press Statement by President von der Leyen on Russia's Aggression against Ukraine" (Brussels, 24 February 2022), <http://bit.ly/3FFcHyk> (accessed 6 May 2025).

**30** Ursula von der Leyen, panel discussion "Europe's Finest Hour? Building a Defense Union in Challenging Times", the Munich Security Conference, 17 February 2024, from minute 21:10, <http://bit.ly/3Ttg7aq> (accessed 12 May 2025).

deterrence and readiness are key concepts of the EU’s strategy to counter Russian threats.

*Sanctions and isolation.* The EU sees sanctions as a means of weakening Russia economically and thereby reducing its ability to prolong the war. While it is not pursuing a strategy of regime change, it is seeking to isolate Russia both globally and regionally. At the same time, it welcomes Ukraine’s appeal to countries of the Global South to take a stance if not against Russia, then at least not pro-Russia. Accordingly, the EU thinks that for a long time, its relations with Moscow will be characterised not only by very limited dialogue and contacts but also by mistrust and non-cooperation. The ultimate goal is to contain Russia and confront it where necessary. On the economic front, sanctions and continued decoupling are favoured to minimise the risk of future dependence, not least in energy security. However, some EU governments may push for “normalisation” out of purely economic and commercial (or even political) reasons, beginning with the relaxation of sanctions against Russia and the renewal of bilateral trade and investment.

## EU policy on Ukraine: Enlargement and military support

The EU’s Ukraine policy — military support, reconstruction assistance and political and socio-economic integration with Europe — is geared towards anchoring Ukraine in the EU as a (would-be) member.

*Enlargement as containment.* In what is a first, the next round of EU enlargement will be aimed at containing Russia and countering the Kremlin’s stated interests and claims. This is in stark contrast with the 2004 “Big Bang” enlargement, when both the EU and NATO sought to implement measures aimed at confidence-building between the West and Moscow and made gestures towards that goal. Along the lines of a more traditional enlargement policy, the EU subscribes to the accession of Ukraine and Moldova but without any short cuts or special membership conditions. Gradual integration is intended to soften the dilemma between the geopolitical urgency to enlarge and the merit-based approach, which makes enlargement conditional on meeting all the obligations of membership. Nonetheless, these countries will face uncertainty over their EU prospects and their security for some time to come.

## The EU realises that Ukraine is, in effect, already part of the NATO/EU security system.

*Security cooperation commitments.* The EU no longer views Ukraine as a buffer state, as it did at the time of the ENP and the Eastern partnership. It realises that the country is, in effect, already part of the NATO/EU security system. This has serious implications. The first is that security guarantees for Ukraine will be provided either by NATO (through membership or the equivalent of Article 5 of the NATO Treaty) or through a subset of countries willing to deter Russian aggression and defend Ukraine against future attacks from Russia. The EU’s security cooperation agreement with Ukraine of June 2024 does not include an equivalent of Article 5 guarantees or commitments. Instead, it offers a mechanism for swift consultations in the event of future aggression by Russia or other (unnamed) hostile countries, similar to the bilateral agreements Ukraine has signed with individual EU member states. It also refers to the need for NATO and the EU to adopt a comprehensive and coordinated approach in the pre-accession period. And it reaffirms that the EU and its member states are making crucial contributions to “Ukraine’s immediate and long-term security and resilience” through multiple forms of assistance.<sup>31</sup> The twenty-six countries that currently form a coalition of the willing have failed to address questions such as the deployment of troops in Ukraine to safeguard a future agreement, despite President von der Leyen’s assertion that the EU has a “clear roadmap”.<sup>32</sup>

*Military support and gradual integration.* The EU has established and developed a number of mechanisms and instruments to support Ukraine militarily. The European Peace Facility (EPF) is its main mechanism for supplying Ukraine with lethal and non-lethal military equipment; more than half of its current €17 billion budget is earmarked for Ukraine. In addition, the EU has established the Military Assistance Mission in support of Ukraine. Under EUMAM Ukraine, Ukrainian soldiers receive training on EU soil in combined

31 “Joint Security Commitments between the European Union and Ukraine”, 27 June 2024, <http://bit.ly/4nfjU98> (accessed 23 June 2025).

32 Henry Fory, “Europe Has ‘Pretty Precise’ Plan to Send Troops to Ukraine, von der Leyen Says”, *Financial Times*, 31 August 2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/8ade14ca-7aa1-4413-887b-59712037665c> (accessed 24 September 2025).



arms combat and the use of Western weapon systems. Furthermore, the Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP), which is part of the EU's three-track ammunition plan, aims to increase the capacities of arms industries in member states and accelerate the production of ammunition and missiles. Despite its shortcomings, ASAP can be seen as an emblematic project that responds to Ukraine's imminent needs and, at the same time, strengthens the defence industries of member states through financial commitments. Moreover, Ukraine is granted almost equal treatment with EU member states under the Security Action for Europe (SAFE) instrument, which supports joint defence procurement among EU and partner countries.<sup>33</sup> The underlying logic of these various instruments is that Ukraine forms a common security area with the EU (and NATO) and thus should eventually become part of a collective defence system.

*EU and NATO.* The EU and NATO enlargement processes continue to follow their own institutional logics and timetables. Though intended to complement each other, they are not tied at the hip. Currently, there is no NATO membership for Ukraine in sight, which poses a fundamental problem for the EU's enlargement strategy compared with previous enlargement rounds and the planned enlargement to the Western Balkans. However, beyond the ongoing integration of Ukraine into CFSP policies and programmes, the EU could unilaterally extend its mutual assistance clause (Article 42(7) TEU) and thereby signal its genuine commitment to conducting accession negotiations with Ukraine in good faith.<sup>34</sup>

## Conclusions: Contours of a new security order for Europe

The EU recognises that Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine signifies the collapse of Europe's cooperative security order, in whose establishment the Union played a pivotal role and from which it derived considerable benefits. Russia is an existential challenge not least because it threatens the functioning and

legitimacy of the political order in the EU and its member states through disinformation and hybrid manoeuvres. While the EU is averse to decisions about the formation of a new European security order being made without the direct participation of "Europe", it is finding it difficult to assert its influence and its role as a significant contributor to the evolving security order. Today, only the initial contours of that new order are evident, along with the blind spots in thinking about it or rolling out what is meant by "Pax Europaea". Nonetheless, one thing is clear: the EU wants to be the anchor of the future security architecture.

**The EU's capacity to integrate the volatile periphery to the East and Southeast will be a test case for the Union as security provider.**

Today it seems that the new European security order will bear many similarities to that of the Cold War era, when bloc politics prevailed. It makes a big difference, however, that the US is now an unreliable and unpredictable actor and no longer the backbone of a free Europe. Moreover, the nature and scope of future US-Russia relations remains uncertain. As evidenced by their provision of military assistance to Ukraine, the EU and its member states are opposed to the establishment of a Russian hegemony — one that extends to the delineation of exclusive spheres of influence within Europe. The EU's capacity to integrate the volatile periphery to the East and Southeast will be a test case for the Union as security provider.

A critical juncture for the European security order will be when the war in Ukraine ends (and on what terms). Should the US show a preference for aligning with Russian interests and positions rather than those of Ukraine, Europe is likely to face prolonged instability. Such a scenario would give rise to a Europe characterised by levels of security that differ from country to country. It is imperative to consider the potential ramifications of US and Russian actions in the context of any "deal" on a ceasefire or peace talks. Will these nations delineate — or indeed impose — their vision of a new security order in Europe/Eurasia concurrently? There is a strong interest among European leaders (E3/Weimar plus) in having a robust mandate and a functioning mechanism to monitor and control the implementation of an accord on a ceasefire or peace talks.

<sup>33</sup> Nicolai von Ondarza, *Contours of an EU Partnership and Alliance Strategy*, SWP Comment 29/2025, Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, June 2025, doi: 10.18449/2025C29.

<sup>34</sup> Barbara Lippert, *From Marginal to Central: The Foreign and Security Dimension of EU Enlargement Policy*, European Analysis Paper, Stockholm: Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies [SIEPS], September 2024, <http://bit.ly/3FRXsCd> (accessed 23 June 2025).

Now is not the time for the EU to seek an equidistant position between Washington and Moscow. Rather, the priority of most EU members is to maintain the alliance with the US for as long as possible (probably through a far stronger European pillar in NATO). Amid current geopolitical tensions, the prevailing uncertainty will only intensify the pressure on European countries to unite and accelerate efforts to achieve the level of military preparedness needed to become more independent from Washington. During the current transition phase, such efforts are aimed at deterring Russian aggression and ensuring the US remains a presence in Europe. Meanwhile, at least some EU member states could deepen their cooperation/integration and reach out to the UK and other allies to foster European strategic autonomy and sovereignty.<sup>35</sup> It would take a quantum leap of faith or even revolution within the EU for the Pax Americana to be replaced by a “Pax Europeae”, which, according to Commissioner von der Leyen, should be “shaped and managed by Europe itself” — hence by an “independent Europe”.<sup>36</sup> And it will be challenging for the EU and require daring to try to keep up with the pace and depth of the ongoing changes in and around Europe.

35 Raphael Bossong, Kai-Olaf Lang, Barbara Lippert and Nicolai von Ondarza, *Turning the EU into a Life Insurance Policy*, SWP Comment 24/2025 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, May 2025), doi: 10.18449/2025C24.

36 European Commission, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the award ceremony of the International Charlemagne Prize of Aachen” (see note 1).



Nicolai von Ondarza

# United Kingdom: Strong Supporter of Ukraine and Leader on European Security Outside the EU

The Russian invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent changes to the European security order came at a time when the United Kingdom was seeking to reconfigure its own place in Europe. Having formally left the European Union in 2020, London put strong emphasis on the UK's continued relevance for European security in its "Integrated Review 2021". Even at this time, the UK identified Russia as the "most acute threat to our security",<sup>1</sup> despite the document foreseeing an "Indo-Pacific tilt" in response to the intensifying geostrategic competition between the US and China. At the same time, the UK's first post-Brexit security strategy was pierced by what one observer called "an EU-shaped hole"<sup>2</sup>: the relevance of the EU as a security actor was completely ignored and the focus was turned instead on NATO and improving the UK's multilateral and bilateral security ties across Europe. Nevertheless, London has sought to pressure its European allies into providing support for Ukraine, stressing that country's independence, territorial integrity and sovereignty as well as the long-term prospect of its becoming a member of NATO and the EU. And since the return of Donald Trump to the White House, the UK has played a pivotal role in keeping the US engaged in support of Ukraine and, together with France, forming a "coalition of the willing".

1 HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, Policy Paper (London, 16 March 2021), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy> (accessed 13 May 2025).

2 Rem Korteweg, "UK Integrated Review: A Basis for More Euro-British Cooperation?", *Atlantisch Perspectief* 45 (2021) 2, 39–45, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48638218> (accessed 13 May 2025).

## The UK's self-perceived role in the European security architecture

The UK's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine has been shaped by three main factors. The first was the domestic political upheavals post-Brexit. Over the past three-and-a-half years, there have been four different prime ministers from two different parties: Boris Johnson, Liz Truss (who lasted less than two months in office) and Rishi Sunak from the Conservative Party and, since July 2024, Keir Starmer from the Labour Party. Each of them made small changes to the priorities of UK foreign and security policy, including with regard to China and, more important for the European security architecture, towards the EU.

### When Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the UK's disentanglement from the EU post-Brexit was at its peak.

The second main factor was the level of UK-EU cooperation and coordination on foreign, security and defence policy. When Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the UK's disentanglement from the EU post-Brexit was at its peak. The Boris Johnson government had rejected any kind of structural cooperation with the Union on foreign, security and defence policy in the 2020 negotiations on the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA). Instead, it had focused on strengthening its relationship with the US (for example, through the 2021 Australia, US and UK defence partnership [AUKUS]<sup>3</sup>), its multilateral engage-

3 Claudia Major and Nicolai von Ondarza, "Afghanistan, AUKUS and Albion", *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, 30 September 2021, <https://ip-quarterly.com/en/afghanistan-aukus-and-albion> (accessed 13 May 2025).

ment, particularly in Northern Europe (for example, through the Joint Expeditionary Force [JEF]), and its network of bilateral foreign, security and defence partnerships (including with Poland, Germany and other EU countries<sup>4</sup>).

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the UK government's approach towards cooperating with the EU on European security changed. Initially, such cooperation was on an *ad hoc* basis; but later, it intensified over the imposition of sanctions — often via multilateral institutions such as the G7 or in the trilateral format of the US, the EU and the UK — and extended towards other areas. Among other things, the UK (while still under Conservative leadership) requested to join the EU's Military Mobility initiative, launched under the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) instrument, and exchanged information with the EU on the training of the Ukrainian armed forces. After the Labour Party had come into power, the United Kingdom aimed to conclude an EU-UK security pact that would provide for deeper cooperation under a wide definition of security.<sup>5</sup> At the EU-UK summit in London in May 2025, that goal was achieved with the signing of the Security and Defence Partnership.

In addition to focusing on bilateral formats, NATO and the EU-UK relationship, London turned its sights on the European Political Community (EPC). At first, it was wary about the Macron-led initiative, which it saw as being too close to the EU. That view changed when first Liz Truss and then both the Sunak and Starmer governments embraced the EPC as a framework for informal multilateral contacts aimed at coordinating policy, including on Ukraine. In July 2024, the UK hosted the fourth meeting of the EPC, at which support for Ukraine topped the agenda (alongside migration).<sup>6</sup>

### Unlike in many other European countries, there is no major political force in the UK questioning support for Ukraine.

The third major factor shaping the UK's actions has been the internal support for Ukraine and its confrontational stance towards Russia. Boris Johnson's unequivocal backing of Ukrainian independence and sovereignty was one of the core tenets of his foreign policy, while each of his three successors made a clear commitment upon assuming office to continuing to support Ukraine. Unlike in many other European countries, there is no major — or even minor — political force in the UK questioning support for Ukraine; and that includes Nigel Farage's Reform UK party, which, despite its leader's earlier public sympathy for Vladimir Putin, has refrained from criticising the Ukrainian cause owing to the lack of a pro-Russia constituency in the UK.

Indeed, the British public continues to approve military and financial aid for Ukraine: in late 2024, a majority among all the major parties — including Reform UK — believed the UK's support for Ukraine was right.<sup>7</sup> The fundamental drivers for this stance include moral empathy, perceived national interest and historical memory. Britons see the war through a moral lens: a democracy has been attacked by an authoritarian regime, which elicits strong sympathy and a sense of duty to help. But strategic interests play a role, too. According to a recent survey of global attitudes towards the Ukraine war, around three-quarters of the British public believe that standing up to Putin in Ukraine will protect Europe and prevent a wider war; as a result, the UK topped the rankings alongside Poland and the Nordic countries.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> For an overview of UK bilateral security agreements in Europe, see Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), "UK Defence and Security Relationships across Europe", project overview page, n.d., <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/projects/european-security-transformation-programme/uk-defence-and-security-relationships-across-europe> (accessed 13 May 2025).

<sup>5</sup> Luigi Scazzieri, *Towards a UK-EU Security Pact* (London, Brussels and Berlin: Centre for European Reform [CER], 6 August 2024), <https://www.cer.eu/insights/towards-uk-eu-security-pact> (accessed 13 May 2025).

<sup>6</sup> Jannike Wachowiak and Peter Jurkovic, *The European Political Community* (London, 8 July 2024), <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/explainers/the-european-political-community/> (accessed 13 May 2025).

<sup>7</sup> Gideon Skinner, *British Public Opinion about the Conflict in Ukraine, Three Years On* (London: Ipsos UK, 23 February 2025), <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/british-public-opinion-about-conflict-ukraine-three-years> (accessed 13 May 2025).

<sup>8</sup> Ipsos, *Global Attitudes to the War in Ukraine: A 29-Country Global Advisor Survey* (Paris, April 2025), <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2025-05/global-attitudes-to-the-war-in-ukraine-april-2025-ipsos.pdf> (accessed 13 May 2025).

## Supporting an independent and sovereign Ukraine

On the question of Ukraine's place in the European security architecture, the UK has consistently supported an independent and sovereign Ukraine that is able to make its own decisions about its security anchoring. That support is evident not least from the military aid provided by London. Although — or perhaps because — it played no direct part in the Minsk negotiations, the UK was one of the few European allies to provide military aid to Ukraine before February 2022. Indeed, the British anti-tank weapons delivered just before the invasion were crucial for Ukraine's initial repelling of the Russian attack. Together with the US, the UK also provided public intelligence warnings of the invasion as early as November 2021.<sup>9</sup> In the early stages of the invasion, the UK was the largest European provider of military aid to Ukraine and on several occasions stood at the forefront of demonstrating willingness to send advanced weapon systems and later Storm Shadow long-range missiles to Ukraine. When British stockpiles eventually began to run low, others stepped up; nonetheless, the UK still ranks second among the Europeans, after Germany, in terms of overall military aid to Ukraine. In terms of GDP, however, UK aid has consistently been surpassed by that of Central and East European countries such as Poland and the Baltics.<sup>10</sup> Also significant is the UK-led training initiative for the Ukrainian armed forces, which — set up independently of any EU efforts beginning in 2015 — has provided training to more than 70,000 Ukrainian troops. And in March 2025, London, together with Germany, took over from the US the co-leadership of the group of NATO countries coordinating military aid to Ukraine.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> James Landale, "Russia Faces Consequences If Ukraine Invaded — Truss", *BBC News* (online), 11 December 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-59616743> (accessed 13 May 2025).

<sup>10</sup> House of Commons Library, *Detailed Timeline of UK Military Assistance to Ukraine (February 2022 to Present)*, Research Briefing CBP-9914, 2 May 2025, <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9914/CBP-9914.pdf> (accessed 13 May 2025).

<sup>11</sup> Shona Murray, "US No Longer to Chair NATO-Led Group of Key Military Allies", *Euronews*, 11 April 2025, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/04/11/us-no-longer-to-chair-nato-led-group-of-key-military-allies> (accessed 13 May 2025).

At the structural level, the UK gave expression to its ongoing support for Ukraine in the bilateral security agreement signed in January 2024. It was the first G7 country to sign such an agreement following that group's stated commitment to deepening bilateral security ties with Ukraine.<sup>12</sup> Significantly, the agreement is aimed at security cooperation and does not include a mutual defence clause. One year later, the UK (under the Starmer government) and Ukraine signed a 100-year partnership agreement, which is founded on the already established security cooperation and signals London's long-term willingness to work with Ukraine.<sup>13</sup> The agreement was signed in January 2025, so after Donald Trump had been re-elected as US president but before he assumed office.

Together, these two agreements underscore the three main commitments made by the UK as part of its broader position on Ukraine's place within the European security order. First, building on the foundations of the European and global rules-based order, London remains fully committed to the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine. To underscore this position, the agreements include references to the UN Charter, the Helsinki Final Act, the Paris Charter and the principle of the inviolability of borders.

Second, the UK has made a clear commitment to the Euro-Atlantic future of Ukraine. Although the UK itself has left the EU, it nonetheless supports Ukraine's membership of both NATO and the European Union. Within the Atlantic alliance, London has been much more vocal than Washington, Berlin or Paris in insisting that "Ukraine's rightful place is in NATO", as Rishi Sunak put it.<sup>14</sup> For example, at the NATO summit in Vilnius in 2023, the then British prime minis-

<sup>12</sup> United Kingdom and Ukraine, *Agreement on Security Co-operation between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and Ukraine*, signed London, 12 January 2024, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65a14a6ae96df50014f845d2/UK-Ukraine\\_Agreement\\_on\\_Security\\_Co-operation.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65a14a6ae96df50014f845d2/UK-Ukraine_Agreement_on_Security_Co-operation.pdf) (accessed 13 May 2025).

<sup>13</sup> HM Government, "UK and Ukraine Sign Landmark 100-Year Partnership to Deepen Security Ties", press release, 16 January 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-and-ukraine-sign-landmark-100-year-partnership-to-deepen-security-ties-and-strengthen-partnership-for-future-generations> (accessed 13 May 2025).

<sup>14</sup> Cristina Gallardo, "Ukraine's 'Rightful Place' Is in NATO, Says Rishi Sunak", *Politico Europe*, 1 June 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-volodymyr-zelenskyy-rishi-sunak-uk-rightful-place-is-in-nato/> (accessed 13 May 2025).

ter lobbied for the final summit declaration to state that Ukraine could join the alliance “when Allies agree and conditions are met”.<sup>15</sup> UK governments have repeatedly argued that NATO membership would provide the clearest security guarantee for Kyiv and ensure the greatest stability for the European security architecture. In the UK-Ukraine agreements, Ukraine’s NATO membership is described as an “effective contribution to peace and stability in Europe” (Part I [3] of the UK-Ukraine Agreement on Security Cooperation) and its path towards NATO as “irreversible” (Pillar 2 [8] of the UK-Ukraine 100-Year Partnership Agreement).

Third, as regards the long-term future, the partnership agreement does not include a full mutual assistance clause but it does provide for a consultation mechanism “within 24 hours” in the event of any future Russian armed attack against Ukraine (Part VIII [2], UK-Ukraine Agreement on Security Cooperation). In such a case, the UK commits itself to providing Ukraine with “swift and sustained security assistance” across all domains and imposing economic sanctions on Russia. While this is not comparable in scope to Article 5 of the NATO treaty, it is nonetheless a far-reaching commitment of support.

## Following Trump’s return: UK efforts to keep the Americans on board

Two aspects are notable in the UK’s response to the changing position of the US approach towards Ukraine and the direct US-Russia talks after Donald Trump returned to the White House. On the one hand, London repeatedly stressed the principle that there should be no talks about Ukraine without Ukraine and no negotiations on European security without the involvement of the Europeans. To this end, it has closely coordinated with major European allies – most notably, France, Germany, Poland, Italy and Spain.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, the UK has used its direct links to the White House to try to perform a mediatory or “bridge” function. While EU Europeans may have reservations about this, the British efforts to mediate

between the White House and Ukraine following the row between Trump and Zelensky in the Oval Office at the end of February 2025 were notable.<sup>17</sup> The UK government has also stressed that Russian aggression should not be rewarded by accepting Russian control over Ukrainian territory. From its point of view, a lasting peace would be possible only if Ukraine is fully involved in the talks and agrees to any substantive changes and Russia is deterred from attacking again.

**For the UK, the main aim of the ‘coalition of the willing’ is to get a seat at the table for any negotiations between the US and Russia over the future of Ukraine.**

On the other hand, London has assumed a leadership role, together with France, in building a European “coalition of the willing” that aims to eventually help secure a peace agreement. For his part, Starmer has stressed the UK’s willingness to deploy troops in Ukraine, albeit on condition of a US backstop for such a force.<sup>18</sup> The exact shape, tasks and conditions for establishing such a force remain open. For the UK government, the main aim of the coalition is to get a seat at the table for any negotiations between the US and Russia over the future of Ukraine. So far, this “convening power” has resulted in a series of high-level summits in Paris and London involving representatives of the EU and NATO as well as Turkey and global partners such as Australia and Canada. It was at these meetings that the leadership role of the UK and France in the coalition was formalised.

So far, these attempts have not proved decisive. Neither the UK nor its partners have been able to convince the Trump administration to put more pressure on Russia. No ceasefire has materialised. In August 2025, the Trump administration hinted at the possibility of a backstop but is not yet part of the coalition of the willing. Although the preparations continue, as long as there is no ceasefire or peace agreement in sight, the coalition of the willing remains a largely

<sup>15</sup> NATO, *Vilnius Summit Communiqué*, issued by Heads of State and Government, 11 July 2023, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_217320.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_217320.htm) (accessed 13 May 2025).

<sup>16</sup> Auswärtiges Amt, “Gemeinsame Erklärung der Außenministerinnen und -minister ... in Warschau”, press release, 19 November 2024, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/newsroom/2685616-2685616> (accessed 13 May 2025).

<sup>17</sup> Damian Grammaticas and Megan Fisher, “UK Helped Ukraine and US Reach Ceasefire Deal — Government Sources”, *BBC News* (online), 12 March 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/ce34zg70exxo> (accessed 13 May 2025).

<sup>18</sup> Aleks Phillips and Joe Pike, “Starmer Says US ‘Backstop’ Needed for Ukraine Deal”, *BBC News* (online), 18 February 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cn4z4w3v5y8o> (accessed 13 May 2025).

theoretical planning exercise — albeit one that aims to become operational as quickly as possible if a ceasefire were to emerge.

## Confronting Russia

The UK's relations with Russia had been fraught well before the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In 2018, the UK accused Russia of carrying out an assassination attempt in Salisbury, England, against a former Russian spy and his daughter. Together with its allies, London subsequently imposed sanctions against Russia and expelled a large number of Russian diplomats. Russia responded by expelling an equal number of diplomats from the respective countries.<sup>19</sup> Thus, even before February 2022, the British political elite saw Russia as an acute direct threat to both the UK's interests and its security.<sup>20</sup>

Deterrence and containment are the hallmarks of the UK's approach towards Russia. Whereas London stresses its respect for the people, culture and history of Russia, its stated aim since 2021 has been to actively deter and defend against threats emanating from Russia, including by strengthening East European allies.<sup>21</sup> In this context, it specifically mentions Ukraine. In 2023, the UK not only reconfirmed that Russia poses the “most acute direct threat”; it also emphasised that “our collective security now is intrinsically linked to the outcome of the conflict in Ukraine”.<sup>22</sup>

This assessment is based on the view that Putin has consolidated an authoritarian, expansionist regime in Russia and has “no genuine interest in peace” unless forced by Ukrainian military strength to take part in

serious negotiations. Following Washington's recent efforts to negotiate a ceasefire, the UK has sought — both publicly and privately — to persuade the US to bring pressure to bear on Russia, stressing the latter's refusal to accept an unconditional ceasefire.

The UK government currently has no high-level direct diplomatic contact with Russia. While the British embassy in Moscow remains open, its staff has been significantly slimmed down owing to sanctions and counter-sanctions.<sup>23</sup> Where contacts exist at the ministerial level — for example in multilateral fora such as the United Nations or the OSCE — the UK government seeks to use them to hold Russia to account.<sup>24</sup> And as far as the coalition of the willing is concerned, diplomatic activity is entirely focused on Ukraine, the US and European allies, with no known direct interaction with Russia having taken place so far. For its part, Russia has publicly rejected even the very idea of any military force being deployed by the coalition; and Putin has declared that Western troops in Ukraine would be “legitimate targets” for Russia.<sup>25</sup>

## Developing the European security architecture

Overall, the UK's position on Russia and Ukraine is driven by four main tenets. Despite the political upheavals in Whitehall over the past few years, these tenets have remained remarkably consistent, albeit with minor changes as regards cooperation with the EU post-Brexit.

The first tenet is the definition of Russia as an acute direct threat to both the UK and its allies. Even before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, London was among the most outspoken of the European allies about Moscow's actions vis-à-vis Central and Eastern

<sup>19</sup> Duncan Allan, *Managed Confrontation: UK Policy Towards Russia after the Salisbury Attack*, Chatham House Research Paper (London: Chatham, House, 30 October 2018), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2018/10/managed-confrontation-uk-policy-towards-russia-after-salisbury-attack> (accessed 13 May 2025).

<sup>20</sup> HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, policy paper (London: Cabinet Office, 16 March 2021), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy> (accessed 13 May 2025).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Cabinet Office, *Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a More Contested and Volatile World*, Policy Paper (London, 13 March 2023), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/integrated-review-refresh-2023-responding-to-a-more-contested-and-volatile-world> (accessed 13 May 2025), 8.

<sup>23</sup> Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, “Statement: Foreign Office Summons Russian Ambassador — 12 March 2025”, press release, 12 March 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/statement-foreign-office-summons-russian-ambassador-12-march-2025> (accessed 13 May 2025).

<sup>24</sup> James Cleverly, “OSCE Reinforced Permanent Council, September 2023: Foreign Secretary's Statement”, Vienna, 26 September 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/osce-reinforced-permanent-council-september-2023-foreign-secretarys-statement> (accessed 13 May 2025).

<sup>25</sup> Paul Kirby, “Putin rejects Western security in Ukraine, warning troops would be target”, *BBC News*, 5 September 2025, online: <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/czxwl15w2qko> (accessed 12 September 2025).



Europe. This is in line with its perception of a European security order geared towards confrontation — one in which the primary interest of the UK and its allies is to deter and defend against Russian aggression. The inclusion of Russia in the European security architecture is regarded as unrealistic, at least for the foreseeable future.

The second tenet is that deterrence is still best provided through NATO and the alliance with the United States. This remains the case under the second Trump administration. As part of its efforts to keep the US engaged in Europe, the UK adopted a “NATO first” approach in its June 2025 Strategic Defence Review. Further, it was a strong supporter of Finland and Sweden joining the alliance and even gave bilateral security guarantees when the process was ongoing (and at one point had stalled). The UK perceives itself as a leader within the European pillar of NATO and is seeking to increase its own defence spending and boost bilateral defence ties with key European allies such as France, Germany, Poland and the North European members of the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF). It also sees fora such as the European Political Community (EPC) playing an auxiliary role in safeguarding support for Ukraine and deterrence against Russia.

The third tenet is that Ukraine needs strong military, financial and political support so that it can defend its independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity against Russia. The UK strongly supports Ukrainian membership of NATO (and the EU) as a long-term goal to secure Kyiv’s place in the European security order. Though stopping short of a mutual defence clause, its security agreement with Ukraine pledges an immediate response in the event of any future Russian attack and codifies UK support for Ukraine’s NATO membership.

**The UK has taken on a twin co-leadership position – in the coordination of military assistance in NATO and in assembling a ‘coalition of the willing’.**

Finally, the UK perceives itself as a leading actor in European security, including through its support for Ukraine. As noted above, it has been at the forefront of providing direct military aid to Ukraine, run its own large-scale training programme for the Ukrainian armed forces and been willing to push the boundaries in the provision of new weapon systems to Ukraine. Its twin co-leadership role — together with Germany

in the coordination of NATO military assistance for Ukraine and together with France in assembling the coalition of the willing — is aimed at strengthening Ukraine and deterring future Russian aggression, including against NATO member states. The (re-)integration of Russia into a more cooperative European security order is not currently part of its vision.

The UK’s leadership ambitions are threatened on two fronts, however. First, London is struggling to significantly increase its defence funding. Although it is one of the few European NATO allies to have consistently met the target of 2 per cent of GDP, fiscal conditions are currently precarious in the UK. To fund an increase to 2.5 per cent by 2027, the government has had to cut development aid by 40 per cent. Further increases towards meeting the new NATO goal of 3.5 per cent of GDP would require hiking taxes, taking on new debt and/or cutting elsewhere — all measures that would be extremely difficult for the UK government to implement. Second, the Trump administration appears to be resisting calls by its European allies to bring pressure to bear on Russia. If the UK wants to play a strong leadership role in European security, it will need to find a balance between its bid to keep the Americans on board and its support for European or even EU-led initiatives.

Barbara Kunz and Aino Esser

# The Nordics: Deterring Russia, Preserving the Transatlantic Link

The Nordic countries — Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Denmark<sup>1</sup> — are united in their very similar threat perceptions and policy preferences within a shared security environment. The aim of this chapter is to explore these commonalities, highlighting the Nordics' perceptions of and approaches to Russia, Ukraine, and the future of the European security order. It examines the Nordics' closely aligned threat perceptions of Russia, and how an increasingly confrontational relationship is acknowledged as the most likely trajectory for the foreseeable future. In this context, bolstering regional security ties and strengthening bilateral security cooperation with the United States (US) are among the top priorities for all Nordic countries. Moreover, the analysis underscores the Nordics' unequivocal support for Ukraine as well as the pivotal role it occupies in Nordic conceptions of the future European security order. After exploring the Nordics' common security environment and threat perceptions, the chapter examines the trajectory of Nordic-Russian relations. From there, it proceeds to analyse Nordic takes on Europe's security order and the role Ukraine should play in it.

## A shared security environment

The shared security environment of the Nordics encompasses the Baltic Sea Region and the Arctic. These two theatres, although connected, present very different features with distinct military challenges that shape each country's security debate in slightly different ways. Norway is more focused on the High North, whereas Finland and Sweden's key concern is security in the Baltic Sea Region. Denmark, given its geographic location and Greenland, has strong security interests in both theatres, in which the common

denominator is the challenge posed by Russia — considered by all Nordic countries to be the main threat to their security. A feature that sets Finland and Norway apart from the others is that they share land borders with Russia, which *inter alia* implies a history of day-to-day cross border cooperation that is different from those of Sweden and Denmark.

What is more, given especially the High North's significance in global geopolitics, few things in the Arctic are ever “only regional”. Notably, military developments there directly impact strategic stability, primarily due to the significance of the Kola Peninsula to Russia's nuclear deterrence strategy. This is also what explains the interest of the US in the High North, as early-warning facilities in Greenland are of direct relevance to US homeland security.

As small states with strong small-state identities, the Nordics are acutely aware of the importance of international law. In emphasising their adherence to the international rules-based order, the Nordics see themselves in opposition to not only Russia but also China, which is perceived as a key partner and backer of Russia that is interested in reshaping the rules-based order in its favour and advancing its hegemonic ambitions in Asia.

## Russia is the biggest threat, and change is not in sight

All Nordic countries regard Russia as the biggest threat to their own and Europe's security, and it is widely viewed as seeking to undermine the European security order. The Russian regime is perceived as aggressive and in pursuit of a sphere of influence. Its war against Ukraine is therefore not considered to “merely” be about Ukraine, but as one element of Russia's broader hostility against the West, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the US, and Europe.

<sup>1</sup> This chapter does not cover Iceland, the fifth Nordic country.

The present intensity of threat perceptions can be traced back to the annexation of Crimea in 2014, which was a strategic shock to the Nordics, despite heightened concerns since the Georgian War in 2008. The readiness and scale of aggression were unexpected and highlighted especially the vulnerability of the Baltic Sea Region to the military threat posed by Russia. Sweden and Denmark, in particular, which had shifted their focus to expeditionary operations (such as in Afghanistan) at the expense of “traditional” territorial defence in the aftermath of the Cold War, have had to refocus their attention to their immediate neighbourhoods. Nordic threat perceptions reached a new peak with the invasion of Ukraine, leading Finland and Sweden to apply for NATO membership and Denmark to reconsider its opt-out from the European Union (EU)’s Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).

In both official analyses and the respective national debates, change for the better is not expected in the foreseeable future. Rather, it is considered likely that the threat posed by Russia will grow. The Nordic countries anticipate an intensification of sabotage and influence campaigns as well as aggressive and threatening behaviour in the short and medium term.<sup>2</sup> The risk of a direct military attack is generally perceived as low in the short term<sup>3</sup> – chief among

the reasons for this assessment is the concentration of Russian forces in Ukraine and the required time it would take to regroup and reinforce them following an end to the hostilities in Ukraine. The Finnish Security and Intelligence Service further cited Russia’s desire to re-establish trade relations with European countries as a barrier to armed conflict.<sup>4</sup> Beyond the short term, however, the threat of military conflict is especially prominent in Finnish security debates. Finland’s NATO accession was significantly motivated by fears of renewed territorial transgressions by its neighbour and the possibility of having to face this military threat again, largely with only its own capabilities.<sup>5</sup> In addition, Finland’s susceptibility to nuclear coercion was a core consideration. Since 2022, perceptions of Russia’s military threat have remained high, as reflected both in Finland’s most recent defence policy report and in Russia’s increased military presence along Finland’s border.<sup>6</sup>

## Relations with Russia will be confrontational for the foreseeable future

Given the threat posed by Russia, attempts to improve relations are not on the agenda, at least as long as President Vladimir Putin is in power. Official Nordic analyses operate on either the explicit or implicit assumption that the current Russian regime is stable.<sup>7</sup>

2 See Danish Defence Intelligence Service, *Intelligence Outlook 2024: An Intelligence-based Assessment of the External Conditions for Danish National Security and Interests* (Copenhagen, 22 January 2025), [https://www.fe-ddis.dk/en/produkter/Risk\\_assessment/riskassessment/Intelligenceoutlook2024/](https://www.fe-ddis.dk/en/produkter/Risk_assessment/riskassessment/Intelligenceoutlook2024/); Harri Mikkola, Matti Pesu, Tuomas Iso-Markku and Charly Salenius-Pasternak, *Miten Suomi turvataan? Analyysi kansallisen turvallisuuden kulmakivistä* [How Is Finland Secured? An Analysis of the Cornerstones of National Security.] (Helsinki: The Finnish Institute of International Affairs [FIIA], 2025), <https://fiia.fi/julkaisu/miten-suomi-turvataan>; Norwegian Intelligence Service, *Focus 2025: The Norwegian Intelligence Service’s Assessment of Current Security Challenges* (Oslo, 5 February 2025), [https://www.etterretningstjenesten.no/publikasjoner/focus/focus2025\\_contents](https://www.etterretningstjenesten.no/publikasjoner/focus/focus2025_contents); Government Offices of Sweden, *National Security Strategy* (Stockholm, 8 July 2024), <https://www.government.se/information-material/2024/07/national-security-strategy/>.

3 See current information on the security situation on Krisinformation, <https://www.krisinformation.se/en/hazards-and-risks/disasters-and-incidents/2022/oro-for-omvarldslaget/about-the-safety-situation>; The Security Policy Analysis Group, *Danish Security and Defence towards 2035* (Copenhagen, September 2022), [https://www.fmn.dk/global-assets/fmn/dokumenter/strategi/rsa/-regeringens\\_security-](https://www.fmn.dk/global-assets/fmn/dokumenter/strategi/rsa/-regeringens_security-policy-report_uk_web-.pdf)

[policy-report\\_uk\\_web-.pdf](https://www.fmn.dk/global-assets/fmn/dokumenter/strategi/rsa/-regeringens_security-policy-report_uk_web-.pdf); Mikkola, Pesu, Iso-Markku and Salenius-Pasternak, *Miten Suomi turvataan?* (see note 2); Matthew Blackburn and Julie Wilhelmsen, *Trump II: A New Trajectory in Russia Relations for NATO Nordic States* (Oslo: Norwegian Institute of International Affairs [NUPI], 2025), <https://www.nupi.no/en/publications/cristin-pub/trump-ii-a-new-trajectory-in-russia-relations-for-nato-nordic-states>.

4 See Finnish Security and Intelligence Service, *National Security Overview 2025* (Helsinki, 4 March 2025), <https://katsaus.supo.fi/en/russia-is-reorienting-globally>.

5 Matti Pesu and Tuomas Iso-Markku, “Insufficiency of Informal Alignment: Why Did Finland Choose Formal NATO Membership?”, *International Affairs* 100, no. 2 (2024), 569–88, doi: 10.1093/ia/iaae006.

6 See Lauri Nurmi, “Uusi selonteko vahvistaa – Venäjän hyökkäys Suomeen on mahdollinen” [New Government Report Confirms – A Russian Attack on Finland Is Possible], *Iltaalehti*, 19 December 2024, <https://www.iltalehti.fi/paakirjoitus/a/72db887c-59c9-4cb3-b17d-dec6bc8a14fb>.

7 See Danish Defence Intelligence Service, *Intelligence Outlook 2024* (see note 2); Norwegian Intelligence Service, *Focus 2025* (see note 2); Finnish Security and Intelligence Service, *National Security Overview 2025* (see note 4).



For instance, the Danish Defence Intelligence Service highlights the lack of any remaining opposition forces or civil movements that could challenge the current leadership, and the near totality with which Putin's regime retains its hold on the state apparatus as well as social and economic institutions.

**A confrontational approach is now the only serious option being considered for relations with Russia.**

In light of Nordic threat perceptions, a confrontational approach is now the only serious option being considered for relations with Russia. No viable short-term improvement of diplomatic relations is being entertained in the official discourse.<sup>8</sup> Instead, the emphasis has been first and foremost on holding Russia's military and political leadership accountable for its violations of international law, notably in Ukraine.<sup>9</sup> Deterrence is consequently at the heart of the approaches in all four countries and is planned to be achieved by: building up appropriate military forces, increasing defence cooperation, and investing in societal resilience and decreasing vulnerabilities.

Yet, when it comes to the exact modalities of practising deterrence, there are some differences between Norway, to some extent Denmark, and the other Nordics. Norway has a long-standing tradition of balancing deterrence with military reassurance of Russia – a policy that has been in place since 1949. The main objective is to prevent any actions that Russia may perceive as threatening and require a reaction. Norwegian policies, for instance, used to include restrictions on Allied overflights in Norwegian airspace and activities by foreign forces close to the land border between the two countries.<sup>10</sup> Respective guide-

lines have been adapted continually over the past decades as the security situation has evolved; since 2022, the focus has shifted from reassurance to deterrence. That said, restrictions on nuclear weapons within Norwegian territory in peacetime remain in place, as stated in official Norwegian policy. Norway moreover continues cooperation with Russia in five safety-related areas, *inter alia* engaging in "classic" risk reduction in the High North (including on a "hotline" between Russia's Northern Fleet and Norway's Joint Headquarters that is tested weekly), making it somewhat of an outlier in Europe, where many countries refuse to engage in dialogue. Norway also continues working with Russia in managing fisheries in the Barents Sea.

Like Norway, Denmark has had a tradition of seeking to deter Russia, while also balancing this deterrence by promoting a lowering of tensions.<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, Denmark prohibited the stationing of Allied Forces and nuclear weapons on its territory, with the notable exception of Greenland, which houses one of the largest US air bases outside of the US. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, however, restrictions have been loosened. For example, the signing of the bilateral Defence Cooperation Agreement between Denmark and the US in late 2023 allows for the stationing of US troops at three mainland Danish air bases.

In contrast, Sweden and Finland explicitly joined NATO without any restrictions, including when it comes to nuclear weapons on their territories. One reason, especially in the case of Finland, is owed to limited strategic depth, which makes geographical limitations on Allied troops rather meaningless. As to nuclear weapons, current Finnish legislation prohibits the transport, manufacture, possession, or detonation of nuclear weapons on Finnish territory. However, President Alexander Stubb has signalled potential changes to the law to allow for effective deterrence, as Russian nuclear coercion was a central

<sup>8</sup> Swedish Prime Minister's Office, *National Security Strategy* (Stockholm, July 2024), <https://www.government.se/information-material/2024/07/national-security-strategy/>; Finnish Security and Intelligence Service, *National Security Overview 2025* (see note 4).

<sup>9</sup> See "Nordic-Baltic Joint Statement on the Russian Federation's Ongoing Aggression against Ukraine" (Vienna, 3 April 2025), <https://www.stjornarradid.is/efst-a-baugi/frettir/stok-frett/2025/04/03/Nordic-Baltic-joint-statement-on-the-Russian-Federations-ongoing-aggression-against-Ukraine-/>.

<sup>10</sup> For more details, see Per Erik Solli, "Nordic Security Policies and Strategies", *The Barents Observer*, 4 February 2024, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/opinions/nordic-security-policies-and-strategies/118700>. See also Barbara Kunz, *Deterrence, Reassurance and Military Restraint – The Nordics*

*in Their Security Environment*, Deep Cuts Issue Brief 18 (Hamburg: Institut für Friedensforschung und Sicherheitspolitik an der Universität Hamburg [IFSH], October 2024), <https://deepcuts.org/publications/issue-briefs/deterrence-reassurance-and-military-self-restraint>.

<sup>11</sup> Anders Wivel, "In War and Peace: Security and Defence Policy in a Small State", in *The Oxford Handbook of Danish Politics*, ed. Peter Munk Christiansen, Jørgen Elklit and Peter Nedergaard, Oxford Handbooks (online edition, Oxford Academic, 6 August 2020), doi: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198833598.013.26.

concern that motivated Finland's NATO application.<sup>12</sup> These Finnish decisions also need to be seen against the backdrop of forced neutrality during the Cold War ("Finlandisation") based on a "friendship treaty" with the Soviet Union.

In Sweden, the lack of restrictions has been met with some public debate, as the country traditionally positioned itself against nuclear weapons but has no domestic legislation that would prohibit their stationing, as in Finland. However, the predominant take in the Swedish debate is focused on deterring Russia, and restrictions would be seen as limiting its options in this regard. This is also in line with widespread ideas about Russia being Sweden's "traditional enemy" — an adversarial relationship that goes back centuries.

None of the countries discussed in this paper has any intentions to resume dialogue with Russia (beyond the limited cooperation that continues between Norway and Russia, as described above). No near-term normalisation of relations is to be expected. President Stubb and Minister of Foreign Affairs Elina Valtonen nevertheless have expressed that a resumption of relations would be desirable in the long term due to the immutability of Finland's long, shared border with Russia.<sup>13</sup> However, any rapprochement has been made contingent upon ending the war in Ukraine.

12 See Mika Lehto, "Haavisto ja Stubb eri mieltä ydinaseiden liikuttelusta Suomessa — 'Olisi järjetöntä lähteä rajaamaan'" [Haavisto and Stubb in Disagreement about the Transportation of Nuclear Weapons through Finland — "It Would Be Senseless to Limit Our Options"], *Iltasanomat*, 2 February 2024, <https://www.is.fi/politiikka/art-2000010200031.html>.

13 See Maiju Ylipiessa, "Stubb: Suomessa pitää varautua poliittisten suhteiden avaamiseen Venäjälle — 'Mikään ei poista sitä tosiasiaa'" [Stubb: Finland Must Prepare for the Reopening of Political Ties with Russia — "Nothing Changes This Fact"], *Suomenmaa*, 1 April 2025, <https://www.suomenmaa.fi/uutiset/stubb-suomessa-pitaa-varautua-poliittisten-suhteiden-avaamiseen-venajalle-mikaan-ei-poista-sita-tosiasiaa/>; Päivi Happonen, "Ulkoministeri Elina Valtonen: Putinille ei ole aika nyt soittaa" [Foreign Minister Elina Valtonen: Now Is Not the Time to Call Putin], *YLE*, 5 April 2025, <https://yle.fi/a/74-20154004>.

## Preserving, not rethinking the European security architecture

From a Nordic perspective, the European security architecture is not the problem — Russia seeking to undermine it is. Creating a new European security architecture is therefore not on Nordic agendas. All four countries are therefore best described as status quo forces whose key interest is in deterring Russia. Looking forward, the bandwidth of the Nordic security debate(s) is relatively limited and primarily focused on the respective regional contexts: the Baltic Sea Region and/or the Arctic and the High North. Consequently, there is little discussion of the European security architecture.

### **Nordic capitals are reluctant to give up on the transatlantic link and the hopes that (security) relations may improve after 2028.**

A functioning NATO is still the widely held preference. Given the obvious dependencies on the US, European strategic autonomy continues to be controversial. This is despite broad acceptance of the need for Europe to reduce this dependence and take action to that effect, such as significantly increasing defence spending. Other formats, such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the European Political Community,<sup>14</sup> are not considered serious options when it comes to providing security for the Nordic region and Europe more broadly. Both receive very little attention in current Nordic debates, which are strongly focused on NATO. Even since Donald Trump's return to the White House, the Nordics have been relatively careful when it comes to drawing (public) conclusions for European security — despite Trump's threats to "get" Greenland "one way or another", which directly affects one member of their group. Nordic capitals are highly reluctant to give up on the transatlantic link and the hopes that (security) relations may improve after 2028. These desires also prevent any radical approaches to rethinking the European security order.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, none of the Nordics was ever a proponent of European strategic autonomy in an EU context. Norway (and Iceland) are not EU members, although there are more voices in favour of

14 See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European\\_Political\\_Community](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_Political_Community).

rethinking this attitude in Norway. Denmark had opted out of the Union's CSDP until it changed its approach in the aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Sweden was very much focused on the US, even prior to joining NATO. This also holds true for Finland, which nevertheless showed more interest in initiatives such as France's to give article 42.7 of the Lisbon Treaty more substance, that is, to clarify the meaning of the mutual defence clause in an EU context. However, since NATO enlargement, the Alliance has been the main multilateral "game in town". This is illustrated by the EU's own positioning, for example as described in its March 2025 White Paper on Defence. These developments are in line with Nordic preferences and make the CSDP and the EU more attractive forums for defence cooperation, thereby considerably reducing concerns about duplication and even competition. In sum, the EU is broadly seen as an important forum that is nonetheless secondary to NATO when it comes to security and defence.

Against the backdrop of strong Atlanticist preferences, NATO is thus at the core of the approaches to security by the Nordic countries. Norway and Denmark are founding members of NATO. Finland and Sweden joined the Alliance in the aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, with high expectations when it comes to enhancing their security, but also a willingness and ability to make significant contributions to the Alliance. In both cases, the decisions to apply for membership should in fact not be seen as U-turns in their approaches to security and defence. Rather, both Finland and Sweden have had long-standing track records of engaging in close cooperation with NATO, which further intensified in the aftermath of Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014.

However, the transatlantic security relationship, in a Nordic context, is not only about NATO. All four Nordic countries have strong bilateral ties with the US that have been cultivated over decades. The respective bilateral Defence Cooperation Agreements, all of which have been concluded or updated in recent years, serve as concrete examples.<sup>15</sup> Defence industrial cooperation with the US also goes back decades and forms an important basis for close bilateral transatlantic ties.

<sup>15</sup> For more details, see again Kunz, "Deterrence, Reassurance and Military Restraint" (see note 10).

Another key feature in the approaches taken by the Nordic countries to their security is sub-regional cooperation in various formats: NORDEFCO involves the Nordics, NB8 involves the Nordics and the Baltic States, or again the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force that developed into a highly appreciated forum for cooperation beyond expeditionary operations. Moreover, there is extensive bilateral cooperation among the Nordics themselves, for example among the Finnish and Swedish navies. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has triggered heightened interest in regional security cooperation, and NATO accession by Finland and Sweden has removed some long-standing obstacles. As of 2025, Nordic defence cooperation has thus reached unprecedented levels in a variety of fields and settings, and there exists a shared ambition to integrate even further.

This web of deep regional cooperation notwithstanding, and despite the geographic vicinity, Northern Europe does not have a sub-regional security architecture that involves Russia. Existing dialogue formats were never meant to serve as forums for discussions about security (i.e. the Arctic Council, the Council of the Baltic Sea States, and the Barents Euro-Arctic Council), and even non-security-related cooperation has largely been upended by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This is unlikely to change anytime soon.

### **Ukraine should be fully integrated into the European security architecture**

Although generally focused on their immediate geographic vicinity and the threats faced there, the Nordics' support for Ukraine and its integration into existing Euro-Atlantic security structures is extremely strong. When it comes to the country's role in a future European security architecture, they are also aligned in supporting its membership in both the EU and NATO. For instance, in a joint statement on the third anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion, the prime ministers and presidents of the eight Nordic and Baltic countries (the so-called NB8, i.e. Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Denmark, as well as Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) and Ukraine declared in February 2025: "We also emphasise our unwavering support for Ukraine's integration into the European Union. We welcome the impressive commitment and reform progress that Ukraine has demonstrated amid Russia's full-scale military aggression.

We fully support Ukraine's path towards EU membership, including through opening as many clusters as possible, and hopefully all, in 2025. Together, we also continue to support Ukraine on its irreversible path to full Euro-Atlantic integration, including NATO membership."<sup>16</sup>

In the same statement, they underline that "Ukraine should be given strong security guarantees". None of the Nordic governments has yet come forward with concrete proposals, in particular on how any security guarantees provided for Ukraine can be made credible in order to provide a deterrent effect. Yet, all of the Nordic countries have announced their willingness to be part of a "Coalition of the Willing".

The Nordic countries stand among the top supporters of Ukraine, as measured by the Ukraine Support Tracker of the Kiel Institute for World Economy.<sup>17</sup> Denmark is noted for its total allocations to Ukraine, ranking second when allocations are measured relative to gross domestic product (GDP). The other Nordic countries do not trail far behind, with Finland coming in fifth, Sweden sixth, and Norway seventh for total allocations by GDP. Furthermore, they have all signed 10-year bilateral agreements on security cooperation and long-term support with Ukraine; the agreements were initiated as part of the G7 joint declaration of support for Ukraine in 2023.<sup>18</sup> While not amounting to security guarantees, these bilateral agreements signal a more robust commitment to Ukrainian defence. The Nordic countries are focusing their efforts in several areas, including by supporting Ukraine's ammunition production and supply; training military personnel; and strengthening innovation and collaboration in Ukraine's defence industry.<sup>19</sup> A

recent example of the latter is financial investments in drone technologies, both in their procurement and development.

### **The Nordic countries believe a strong Ukraine that can assert itself against Russia is essential for lasting peace in Europe.**

In a more long-term perspective, the Nordic countries believe a strong Ukraine that can assert itself against Russia is essential for lasting peace in Europe.<sup>20</sup> Ukraine is seen as fighting for the rules-based order and against the assertion of great power politics over the independence and sovereignty of smaller states. In the event of a peace deal between Russia and Ukraine, Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen foresees a Ukrainian army of 500,000 to 1,000,000 soldiers to form Europe's first line of defence,<sup>21</sup> while President Stubb anticipates that Ukraine will take the lead in any future European security arrangement.<sup>22</sup> Sustained support for Ukraine should therefore also be viewed as support for the Nordics' preferred security architecture. The offering of substantial assistance to Ukraine has been among the key foreign policy measures taken by the Nordic countries to prevent

[www.government.se/contentassets/645176cd1d524bf5b39978096937f098/nordefco-declaration-29-30-april-2024.pdf](https://www.government.se/contentassets/645176cd1d524bf5b39978096937f098/nordefco-declaration-29-30-april-2024.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> Lars Løkke Rasmussen, "Now Is the Time for Europe Really to Step Up on Ukraine — The Future of the Post-1945 Security Order Hangs in the Balance", *Financial Times*, 24 February 2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/30d4f37c-fa79-4623-8670-ac8ef836e573>; Danish Defence Intelligence Service, *Intelligence Outlook 2024* (see note 2); Swedish Prime Minister's Office, *National Security Strategy* (see note 8); the Security Policy Analysis Group, *Danish Security and Defence towards 2035* (see note 3); Swedish Security Service, *Report, 2023–2024* (Stockholm, 2024), <https://sakerhetspolisen.se/ovriga-sidor/other-languages/english-engelska/press-room/swedish-security-services-annual-assesments/the-security-service-2023-24/pdf-version.html>.

<sup>21</sup> See John Irish and Elizabeth Pineau, "Europeans Back Strong Ukraine Army, Differ on Future 'Reassurance Force'", *Reuters*, 27 March 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukraines-allies-meet-with-new-aid-security-assurances-mind-2025-03-27/>.

<sup>22</sup> See "Address by President of the Republic of Finland Alexander Stubb at the Support Ukraine Plenary Session in Kyiv, Ukraine, on 24 February 2025" (Helsinki: President of the Republic of Finland, 26 February 2025), <https://www.presidentti.fi/en/address-by-president-of-the-republic-of-finland-alexander-stubb-at-the-support-ukraine-summit/>.

<sup>16</sup> Government Offices of Sweden, "Joint Statement of the Leaders of Ukraine and Nordic-Baltic Eight on the Third Anniversary of Russia's Full-scale Aggression Against Ukraine", Kyiv, 24 February 2025, <https://www.government.se/statements/2025/02/joint-statement-of-the-leaders-of-ukraine-and-nordic-baltic-eight-on-the-third-anniversary-of-russias-full-scale-aggression-against-ukraine/>.

<sup>17</sup> See "Ukraine Support Tracker", *Kiel Institute for the World Economy*, <https://www.ifw-kiel.de/topics/war-against-ukraine/ukraine-support-tracker/>.

<sup>18</sup> Mykhailo Soldatenko, "Getting Ukraine's Security Agreements Right" (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 8 July 2024), <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/07/getting-ukraines-security-agreements-right?lang=en>.

<sup>19</sup> See "NORDEFCO Ministerial Meeting in Faroe Islands, 29–30 April 2024" (Tórshavn, 30 April 2024), <https://>

Russia from fulfilling its expansionist ambitions and restructuring the European security architecture.

Concomitantly, an end to the war that is unfavourable to Ukraine (e.g. without security guarantees or prevents Ukraine from joining Western security and political arrangements) is seen as vindicating Moscow's use of military force and raising the threat level for the rest of Europe. In line with this perception, the Nordic countries have made their support for Ukraine one of their top foreign policy priorities — a commitment that is likely to continue beyond current election cycles.

### **Preserve, invest, defend: Nordic priorities for European security**

With their debates and policies being structured by the threat posed by Russia, the Nordic countries are seeking to preserve the existing European security architecture and putting a strong focus on their immediate neighbourhood: They are investing in their own defence and deepening cooperation with each other (both minilaterally and bilaterally) to strengthen the European pillar of NATO. They are also continuing to work towards preserving close bilateral ties with the US, following a pattern of decades-old cooperation.

Although a broader European dimension is generally lacking in Nordic debates, bringing Ukraine into this existing security order — and notably the EU and NATO — is a declared Nordic priority. This is believed to be the only way to guarantee the country's security and future in light of an aggressive Russia. Therefore, from a Nordic perspective, supporting Ukraine is equivalent to protecting Europe as a whole.



Kai-Olaf Lang

# Poland: Solidifying Europe's Security Order with Cracks inside the House

For Poland, Russia has always been an existential issue. After 1989, Poland's foreign policy was considerably shaped by the quest for achieving independence from Russia and protection against the potential threats that it posed. Having joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU), Poland tried to export and "upload" its threat assessments and its proposals to strengthen European security into the discourses, institutions, and policies of the West. But its intentions to revive traditional "collective defence NATO", fortify the Eastern flank of the Alliance substantially, and offer the prospect of EU membership to Ukraine were only embraced by partners after Russia's increasing aggressiveness and the full-scale invasion of February 2022. Since then, Poland has been calling for the following: a decoupling from Russia, the effective defence of NATO and its Eastern periphery, the containment of Russia, and support for Ukraine's sovereignty. It believes Ukraine should join the EU and obtain assistance with improving its security and resilience towards Russia. However, apart from Russia's aggressiveness, Poland will have to come to terms with uncertainties in transatlantic relations and growing domestic controversies about Ukraine.

## Russia from a Polish perspective: Neo-imperial revisionism of a declining power

Throughout most periods in its history, Poland's assessment of Russia has made it distrustful and sceptical. Hence, it came as no surprise that Poland's foreign, security, and Eastern policies since 1989 — after Poland had regained its sovereignty — rested on the quest for security and protection from Russia. Apart from fringe movements, all relevant Polish actors tried to anchor Poland in the West in order to pull the country out of Russia's sphere of influence. Poland's membership in NATO in 1999 marked its

inclusion in the transatlantic solidarity community and particularly the security guarantees on the part of the United States (US), which has always been seen as the only efficient safeguard of the country's security. Even though Poland went through periods of pragmatism in its approach to Russia,<sup>1</sup> conflict and friction were characteristic of the relations between both countries following the end of the Cold War. History, energy, geopolitics, and security policy were the main areas of dispute.<sup>2</sup>

One hallmark of Poland's Eastern policy, called the Jagiellonian approach, has been a permanent source of conflict. Poland put particular emphasis on cooperation with its immediate Eastern neighbours, especially Ukraine, Lithuania, and for quite some time also Belarus. With these nations, Poland has been united in the old Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the *Rzeczpospolita*.<sup>3</sup> Poland's revitalisation of old cultural, economic, and political ties in a new environment was a nuisance to Russia, since Poland's efforts also had a strong geostrategic dimension. Poland intended to establish a cordon sanitaire or a cordon

1 In 2007, Poland's Prime Minister Tusk announced that "we will cooperate with Russia such as it is". Between 2011 and 2014 trilateral meetings between German, Polish, and Russian foreign ministers — the so-called Kaliningrad triangle — took place; Exposé premiera Donalda Tuska, in: 2. posiedzenia Sejmu (Obrady w dniu 23 listopada 2007 r.) [Exposé of Prime Minister Donald Tusk, in: 2<sup>nd</sup> Session of the Sejm, 23.11.2007], p. 24, [https://orka2.sejm.gov.pl/StenoInter6.nsf/0/6372FE4B9619C127C125739D0053E245/\\$file/2\\_a\\_ksiazka.pdf](https://orka2.sejm.gov.pl/StenoInter6.nsf/0/6372FE4B9619C127C125739D0053E245/$file/2_a_ksiazka.pdf).

2 Foreign Ministry, "Speech by Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski at the Brzezinski Lecture Series" (Bologna, 20 September 2024), <https://sais.jhu.edu/faculty-research/research-centers-institutes-and-initiatives/zbigniew-brzezinski-initiative/brzezinski-lecture-series-2024>.

3 Christopher Reeves, "The Jagiellonian Idea and Poland's Eastern Policy: Historical Echoes in Today's Approach", *Politeja* 51, no. 6 (2017): 141 — 64.



démocratique, if not a group of countries that would join the structures of the West.

### **Moscow considered Warsaw as one of the most important movers and shakers of the existing geopolitical status quo.**

With growing integration competition in Eastern Europe between the EU and NATO on the one hand, and Russia on the other hand, Moscow considered Warsaw as one of the most important movers and shakers of the existing geopolitical status quo, which would ensure Russian hegemony in Eastern Europe. At least since the Ukrainian Orange Revolution in 2004 — the year when Poland entered the EU and started to become a key Eastern policy actor in the bloc — for Moscow, Poland has been a challenge to Russia's ambitions. Most prominently, in 2009 Poland (together with Sweden) co-launched the EU's "Eastern Partnership" — a cooperative framework for Eastern European and South Caucasus countries.

After Russia's full-scale invasion, Poland felt vindicated in its pessimism about Russia. Warsaw discerns at least three broader motivations that have shaped, and will continue to shape, Russia's behaviour.

- First, Russia is seen as a declining power trying to counteract its downfall through neo-imperial revanchism. In this context, Russian revanchism is regarded not only as an effort to control territory, but also an attempt to undo political developments towards democracy and the rule of law as well as to rewrite history in order to delegitimise and weaken Poland internationally.<sup>4</sup> The implication for Poland is to "do whatever it takes to not become a Russian colony".<sup>5</sup>
- Second, Polish politicians, experts, and the public discourse consider Russia to be an aggressive neighbour that does not hesitate to resort to kinetic or non-kinetic means to attack nearby countries — or more broadly the West. Poland sees itself as the target of hybrid warfare from Russia's closest ally, Belarus. The attack on Ukraine — together with

Russia's armaments programmes and bellicist rhetoric — is seen as proof that Russia is also prepared to attack NATO countries militarily. On various occasions, Prime Minister Donald Tusk has declared that Europe is in a "pre-war era" and must be prepared for a military conflict with Russia.<sup>6</sup>

- Third, looking at expert discourses and assessments, the prevailing Polish point of view is that, in recent years, Russia's political system has been moving from an authoritarian to a totalitarian mode of governance, or a "neo-totalitarian project". Moreover, even for a Russia after Vladimir Putin, there is little hope for reforms. It seems instead that anti-Western and "patriotic" narratives, the besieged-fortress effect, and the interests of the military-industrial complex will not only make it difficult to loosen the tight grip on society, but also to turn away from a combative posture in international affairs.

### **How to deal with a restive Russia: Decouple, contain, and defend!**

Bearing in mind Poland's assessment of Russia and its broader threat perception, Poland has drawn clear conclusions about how the approach to Russia should look: Decoupling, containment, and defence are the main guidelines of Warsaw's preferred posture and refer not only to Poland's foreign and defence policies, but also to Poland's objectives for what partners in NATO and the EU are supposed to do.

Decoupling means limiting economic and business interactions to a minimum. Notwithstanding some important sectoral interests, for Poland itself, Russia has not been a key trading partner since 1989. However, prior to that, Poland was highly dependent on Russian oil and gas imports. It took the country more than two decades to build infrastructure that would allow it to considerably reduce the share of imports from Russia and finally be free of the country. With the expiration of the so-called Yamal Treaty in late 2022, Poland was able to replace gas imports from

4 S. Żaryn, "Putin używa rewizjonizmu historycznego do szerzenia kłamliwych oskarżeń pod adresem Polski" [Putin Uses Historical Revisionism to Spread False Accusations against Poland], *dzieje.pl*, 21 July 2023, <https://dzieje.pl/wiadomosci/wiceszef-msz-falszowanie-historii-bron-ktorej-putin-uzywa-w-wojnie-hybrydowej>.

5 Foreign Ministry, "Speech by Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski" (see note 2).

6 Lili Bayer, "Europe Must Get Ready for Looming War", *The Guardian*, 29 March 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/mar/29/europe-must-get-ready-for-looming-war-donald-tusk-warns>; "Premier Tusk mówi wprost. 'Żyjemy w epoce przedwojennej'" [Prime Minister Tusk Speaks Plainly. "We Are Living in a Pre-War Era"], *Business Insider*, 7 March 2024, <https://businessinsider.com.pl/wiadomosci/premier-tusk-mowi-wprost-zyjemy-w-epoce-przedwojennej/yrs6r4n>.

Russia entirely<sup>7</sup> and also ended its oil imports in spring 2023.

Containment from a Polish angle is the attempt to halt Russian expansionism to neighbouring states. Basically, Poland is following the idea of de-imperialising Russia by ensuring geopolitical plurality in Eastern Europe and other areas that once belonged to the Soviet Union or the Tsarist Empire. The case of Belarus and its sliding into subordination under Russian dominance has proved to be both a defeat for Poland (which had tried to counteract the further integration of the neighbouring country with Russia) and a warning signal that Russia can successfully extend its supremacy up to Polish borders: Belarus is not only the source of the weaponisation of migration, but also a potential staging area for military action against NATO members. For Poland the “Brest gate” — the lowlands alongside the border region with Belarus — could be an axis of attack for Russian forces. Moreover, the vicinity of Russia’s Kaliningrad exclave — with its anti-access and area-denial capabilities and potential military action directed at the “Suwałki corridor” (the region around the land border between Poland and Lithuania) — is also a priority challenge for Poland’s defence posture on its Eastern flank.

After Russia’s full-scale attack on Ukraine, Poland altered its security calculus: After a years-long plea for better deterrence, it swiftly began to call for better defence. Russian atrocities in the occupied territories within Ukraine had implications for Poland’s military doctrine: With the help of allies and through its own intensified efforts, potential Russian aggression could be pushed back at the border and not from within its own territory.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, Poland appreciated the upgraded deployment of US troops (since the beginning of the war, around 10,000 soldiers), at the same time boosting national defence spending, acquiring new weapon systems, and planning to expand the number of soldiers in the armed forces from 148,000 in 2015

and 205,000 in 2024 to 300,000 by 2030.<sup>9</sup> With regard to the Eastern flank of NATO, Poland has been an advocate of substantial reinforcements along the entire vulnerable periphery of the Alliance.

## A sovereign Ukraine as a safeguard against Russian imperialism

There is no doubt that Ukraine — with its size, its potential, and its place on the map — has always been the cornerstone of Poland’s Eastern policy, and in a way also of Poland’s strategy towards Russia. Poland’s neo-Jagiellonian Eastern policy rested on the existence of a strong, independent, and Western-oriented Ukraine and what was called a “strategic partnership” with Ukraine. It would be an exaggeration to speak of a Warsaw-Kyiv axis, but even before Poland joined NATO and the EU, the country became a sort of “advocate” for Ukraine in the West. During the Orange Revolution, Poland’s president, Aleksander Kwaśniewski, played an important role as a mediator to help try and avoid an escalation of the domestic conflict in Ukraine. After 2014 Poland argued for a tough response to Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, whereas it criticised the Minsk Agreements as permissive and indulgent to Russia. The leitmotif of Poland’s approach has always been the effort to ensure geo-strategic plurality in the former Soviet space and Eastern Europe, that is, to maintain sovereign states, par-

<sup>7</sup> Considerable imports of LPG gas (Poland is one of the biggest consumers of this type of fuel in the EU) continued until the end of 2024.

<sup>8</sup> The national-conservative party Law and Justice, which was in power from 2015 to 2023, has accused the liberal-conservative governments of Donald Tusk before 2015 of having accepted a military doctrine that regarded the Wisła River in the centre of the country as the main defence line in case of an attack from the East.

<sup>9</sup> These figures include both professional soldiers, other active soldiers and the so-called Territorial Defence Force WOT. The more cautious objective of 300,000 was defined by Minister of Defence Mariusz Błaszczak under the national-conservative government, which has been in charge since the end of 2023. Prime Minister Tusk has called for an army of reservists, with the armed forces being able until 2026 to train 100,000 men a year. See “300-tysięczna armia? Rezerwy, demografia, pieniądze” [An Army of 300,000? Reserves, Demography, Money], *defence24.pl*, 11 May 2025, <https://defence24.pl/polityka-obronna/300-tysieczna-armia-rezerwy-demografia-pieniadze>; “Ilu mamy ‘żołnierzy pod bronią’, a ilu rekrutujemy co roku. Najnowsze dane”, [How Many Soldiers Do We Have under Arms, and How Many Do We Recruit Each Year? Latest Data], *konkret24*, 6 March 2025, <https://konkret24.tvn24.pl/polska/wojsko-polskie-ilu-mamy-zolnierzy-pod-bronia-ilu-rekrutujemy-co-roku-najnowsze-dane-st8336534>.

ticularly Ukraine, whose independence is seen as a safeguard against Russian imperialism.<sup>10</sup>

Under the current circumstances, maintaining Ukraine's independence and helping it with its attempts to become a part of the West are particularly relevant. Therefore, from the beginning of the war, Poland has not only been a top humanitarian and political supporter, but also a military backer of Ukraine — swiftly providing substantial weaponry to its neighbour under attack. Poland also signed a new bilateral security agreement with Ukraine in July 2024, which includes promises of military aid and various aspects of defence cooperation. However, it does not entail formal security guarantees.<sup>11</sup> In the past, Poland was in favour of Ukraine's accession to NATO. Although since 2022 its position appears to have become more cautious. For example, in the run-up to NATO's 2024 summit, Poland's foreign minister, Radosław Sikorski, described an invitation for Ukraine to join NATO as a "complicated affair" and expressed doubts about the readiness of Polish society to accept security guarantees for their neighbour.<sup>12</sup>

The longer the war lasts and the more intensive Polish solidarity with Ukraine becomes, the more visible the signs of fatigue and even dissatisfaction in Poland with its Eastern neighbour will be. The hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians in Poland are an important factor for Poland's economy, but Ukrainian refugees (and to some extent also Ukrainians that had come to Poland before 2022) are becoming less and less popular among Poles. In general, substantial parts of society regard Ukraine and Ukrainians as ungrateful and demanding. Positive opinions about Ukrain-

ians among Poles dropped from almost two-thirds in early 2023 to 55 per cent at the beginning of 2025.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the process of EU enlargement and establishing stronger relations between the EU and Ukraine has had a palpable impact on certain groups in Poland. Farmers and lorry drivers have protested competition from Ukraine after markets were opened to Ukrainian agricultural products and transport services.

The emotional issue regarding the politics of memory plays an increasingly important role. Especially the massacres of Ukrainian nationalists against Polish civilians in Volhynia, Eastern Galicia, and elsewhere during the Second World War have complicated bilateral relations. Karol Nawrocki, who won the Polish presidential elections in June 2025, declared that he did not see Ukraine in NATO or the EU as long as the country does not come to terms with its "very brutal crime against 120,000 Poles".<sup>14</sup>

### **The Polish government will have to reconcile this "Ukraine fatigue" with the strategic interests of Poland.**

Irrespective of these developments, the Polish government and the president will continue to back Ukraine in broad political terms: as a logistical hub for its neighbour; as a diplomatic voice for financial and military support on the part of the EU as well as European and Western states; and as a voice for Ukraine's security. Poland's strategic interest in the existence of a sovereign Ukrainian state will continue to be part of the country's security policy consensus. However, the Polish government will have to reconcile this "Ukraine fatigue" with the strategic interests of Poland.

10 The President of the Republic of Poland, "Orędzie Prezydenta przed Zgromadzeniem Narodowym" [Address by the President before the National Assembly] (Warsaw, 11 March 2022), <https://www.prezydent.pl/aktualnosci/wypowiedzi-prezydenta-rp/wystapienia/oredzie-prezydenta-andrzejadudy-przed-zgromadzeniem-narodowym,50393>.

11 Chancellery of the Prime Minister, Republic of Poland, *Agreement on Security Cooperation between the Republic of Poland and Ukraine* (Warsaw, 8 July 2024), <https://www.gov.pl/web/premier/polsko-ukrainskie-porozumienie-w-dziedzinie-bezpieczenstwa>.

12 Jędrzej Bielecki and Jerzy Haszczyński, "Sikorski o zaproszeniu Ukrainy do NATO: Wątpię, żeby opinia publiczna w Polsce była gotowa" [Sikorski on Inviting Ukraine to Join NATO: I Doubt That Public Opinion in Poland Is Ready for This], *Rzeczpospolita*, 21 March 2024, <https://www.rp.pl/dyplomacja/art40039341-sikorski-o-zaproszeniu-ukrainy-do-nato-watpie-zeby-opinia-publiczna-w-polsce-byla-gotowa>.

13 Mateusz Czmiel, "Co Polacy myślą o Ukraińcach? Jest zmiana nastrojów, mamy nowy sondaż" [What Do Poles Think about Ukrainians? There Has Been a Change in Sentiment, There Is a New Poll], *wiadomosci*, 4 February 2025, <https://wiadomosci.wp.pl/co-polacy-mysla-o-ukraincach-jest-zmiana-nastrojow-mamy-nowy-sondaz-7121308143356704a>.

14 "Ważna deklaracja Nawrockiego ws. Ukrainy. 'Na dziś nie widzę jej w UE i NATO'" [Nawrocki's Important Statement on Ukraine. "As of Today, I Do Not See It in the EU and NATO"], *Business Insider*, 8 January 2025, <https://businessinsider.com.pl/wiadomosci/wazna-deklaracja-nawrockiego-ws-ukrainy-na-dzis-nie-widze-jej-w-ue-i-nato/qb9e5nt>.

## Reinforcing Europe's security order: Keeping the US in, enabling Europe, and fortifying an independent Ukraine

Poland has been supportive of strengthening, adapting, and ameliorating the existing security order rather than building a new one. This means deepening (not necessarily broadening, at least not in the short term) NATO, particularly by improving Alliance capabilities and the capacity to swiftly respond through a more effective defence on the Eastern flank and not accepting any restriction on overcoming military asymmetries vis-à-vis Russia. After Poland had argued for a long time that the NATO-Russia founding act had ceased to exist due to Russia's behaviour, since 2022 Poland has given priority to defence and deterrence over any form of dialogue with — or inclusion of — Russia in multilateral fora. "Peace through strength" also seems to be a guideline for Poland's strategic outlook. This slogan implies that there will not be any restrictions on its own preparedness for potential aggression from Russia. For example, Poland has decided — together with the Baltic States — to withdraw from the "Ottawa Convention", which bans the use of anti-personnel landmines. In the common declaration, the four ministers justified their decision, clearly emphasising the spirit of that step: "Our countries are prepared and can use every necessary measure to defend our territory and freedom."<sup>15</sup>

NATO and the US continue to be seen as the main and indispensable security partners for Poland as well as the core element of Europe's security order. Hence, Poland is interested in maintaining the US as a "European power". This means that Poland — in its dialogue with the US — is trying to point out what it considers to be the interests of the US in order to maintain its engagement in Europe, arguing that both Russia and China are threats to US primacy, and that both sides of the Atlantic need each other more than ever.<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, Poland, which has been traditionally prudent when it comes to EU defence efforts

— as they were regarded as a possible way to hollow out transatlantic bonds — now sees added value in these policies. First, a stronger "Europe" in defence matters — be it the "European pillar" of NATO or the security and defence components of the EU — can be used as proof of Europe's new seriousness regarding relations with the US. Second, the EU can contribute to Poland's and Europe's security in a way that NATO cannot — such as making investments in infrastructure, "military mobility", energy security, and efforts towards societal resilience. New EU financial schemes to bolster European defence production and security in general are particularly attractive for Poland.

### Poland certainly does not want to replace the US as the lender of last resort for its or Europe's security.

Poland certainly does not want to replace the US as the lender of last resort for its or Europe's security. But Warsaw is consistently establishing new European partnerships for defence cooperation. For example, Poland has ordered modern weapon systems such as air defence systems and three frigates from the United Kingdom. Both sides also intend to conclude a new defence accord.<sup>17</sup> In May 2025, Poland and France signed a bilateral treaty that puts the focus on defence and security and could open the path to Polish armaments purchases from France and cooperation in the field of nuclear energy.<sup>18</sup> Poland also entertains close ties with the Baltic States and the Northern European countries. At the end of 2024, Poland's prime minister took part in a meeting of the Nordic-Baltic Eight group. All these countries are like-minded partners, share similar threat perceptions, and have traditionally taken a hard line towards Russia.

Poland's view on Germany is more ambivalent. Germany's *Zeitenwende* — evidenced by the halt to Russian gas imports, the decision to permanently deploy a brigade to Lithuania, and the willingness to

<sup>15</sup> Ministry of National Defence, Republic of Poland, "Statement by the Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian, and Polish Ministers of Defence on Withdrawal from the Ottawa Convention", press release (Warsaw, 18 March 2025), <https://www.gov.pl/web/national-defence/statement-by-the-estonian-latvian-lithuanian-and-polish-ministers-of-defence-on-withdrawal-from-the-ottawa-convention>.

<sup>16</sup> Foreign Ministry, "Speech by Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski" (see note 2).

<sup>17</sup> Prime Minister's Office, United Kingdom, "UK and Poland to Launch New Defence and Security Treaty in Warsaw", press release (London, 16 January 2025), <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-and-poland-to-launch-new-defence-and-security-treaty-in-warsaw>.

<sup>18</sup> Chancellery of the Prime Minister, Republic of Poland, *Traktat o wzmocnionej współpracy i przyjaźni między Rzeczpospolitą Polską a Republiką Francuską [Treaty on Enhanced Cooperation and Friendship between the Republic of Poland and the French Republic]* (Warsaw, 9 May 2025), <https://www.gov.pl/web/premier/traktat-polsko-francuski>.

increase defence spending — was acknowledged and viewed with hope, yet many in Poland still regard Germany as hesitant (when it comes to arms supplies for Ukraine) and timid. For the time being, bilateral armaments cooperation also remains limited — Poland's large modernisation deals are with US or Korean companies. Above all, for many Polish observers, there is a risk that, in a post-war situation, Germany might weaken its defence and armaments ambitions and slide back to a politics of compromise and inclusion vis-à-vis Russia.

All of this is intensified by the domestic political divisions in Poland. Whereas the centre-right and centre-left are sceptical of Germany but are encouraging Berlin to assume more leadership and responsibility in Europe, the national-conservative camp considers Germany to be an unreliable rival rather than a partner. Hence, a close relationship between Poland and the US — particularly under the Trump administration — is a necessity and an opportunity, as it can also serve to hedge German influence in Europe. Of course, there are different approaches between the current government and the national-conservative camp (which includes the current president and the main opposition party, Law and Justice). The government prefers a Euro-Atlantic posture that amalgamates strong security ties with the US and the priority for deepened NATO defence on the one hand, and a growing Europeanisation of Polish and European security (not as a substitute, but as a stimulus for transatlantic cooperation) on the other. The national-conservative camp, however, aims at deepening ties with the US, while looking with some hesitance at EU defence efforts, which it sees as an attempt to centralise security policies of member states.

Before the first visit of Poland's new president to the US at the beginning of September 2025 (his first-ever foreign visit as a president), Nawrocki's security advisor emphasised that Poland's objective of building one of the strongest European armies will not be possible without making the rotating deployments of US forces permanent. According to his assessment, there is a shared common Polish-American security interest, because "[a] permanent U.S. presence in Poland is essential to protect Europe and strengthen America's global stance against coordinated adversaries".<sup>19</sup> Given the possible reductions in US troop

numbers in Europe, Nawrocki considered it a great success that the American president announced during their bilateral meeting that US soldiers will be staying in Poland, and that the US might even increase their numbers.<sup>20</sup> The government was more cautious, arguing that binding commitments will only be made after the Global Force Posture Review defines concrete parameters. Moreover, Donald Trump's peace initiatives, his inconsistent rhetoric on Russia, the diplomatic engagement of the US with Belarus, and particularly the wavering signals given by the US after the incursion of Russian drones into Poland's airspace in September 2025 have not reassured adherents of a Euro-Atlantic orientation. This is especially because European allies were quick to condemn Russia's activities and send reinforcements to Poland and the Eastern flank.

### Building a security order that is more European, but not less American

Poland's preferred arrangement for a robust and resilient security order in Europe is based on a strengthened and capable NATO with a robust Eastern flank, embedded in strong transatlantic relations and a sustained US military presence in Europe. Poland supports additional European efforts in security and defence that — in an ideal scenario — would reinforce US-European bonds and not dilute them. In practice, Poland's worries about a possible downgrading of US commitments to European defence have increased, so Warsaw is looking for new partnerships in Europe and a new role for the EU. An indication of Poland's unease is debates about securing a nuclear shield for Poland. Whereas Poland's president, Andrzej Duda, was in favour of including Poland in NATO's "nuclear sharing" programme, others — including Prime Minister Tusk — have expressed interest in French proposals to extend its own nuclear capabilities to protect European allies. Tusk himself declared in March 2025 that anything which is conducive to the better defence of Poland "will be implemented and

19 Sławomir Cenckiewicz, "Polish National Security Advisor: Poland Needs US Troop Presence", *Newsweek*, 3 September 2025, [https://www.newsweek.com/polish-national-](https://www.newsweek.com/polish-national-security-advisor-poland-needs-us-troop-presence-opinion-2123898)

[security-advisor-poland-needs-us-troop-presence-opinion-2123898](https://www.newsweek.com/polish-national-security-advisor-poland-needs-us-troop-presence-opinion-2123898).

20 Seb Starcevic, "Trump Pledges Not to Pull US Troops out of Poland", *Politico*, 3 September 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/donald-trump-defense-us-troops-poland-war-ukraine/>.



used”, and that Poland “would be safer if we had our own nuclear arsenal”.<sup>21</sup>

As for Ukraine, Poland has taken a rather cautious stance on NATO membership, at the same time emphasising the need for continued political, financial, and military support for their neighbour while — albeit vaguely — arguing for effective security guarantees by the West, if possible with US security backstops. However, Poland leaves no doubt about its position on Ukraine's accession to the EU, which — due to the rather long-term prospect of Ukraine's NATO membership — has paramount significance, also for the geopolitical order in Europe.<sup>22</sup>

All in all, Russia's war against Ukraine has made many strategic objectives — for which Poland has fought many years — a reality, or at least achievable: NATO has returned to making collective defence a priority and boosted its engagement on the Eastern flank; Ukraine (and Moldova) is on the EU accession track; and Europe is rediscovering the relevance of geopolitics and defence. However, the combination of longstanding trends in the global outlook of the US — that is, pulling attention and resources away from Europe — and the volatility of the Trump administration are undermining important fundamentals of the old order: While Poland is coming closer towards a Russia-proof European security order, the main pillar of this very order, namely strong transatlantic bonds, has developed some cracks.

21 Chancellery of the Prime Minister, Republic of Poland, *Premier w Sejmie: Nadzieja nie zastąpi strategii* [Prime Minister in the Sejm: Hope Is No Substitute for Strategy] (Warsaw, 7 March 2025), <https://www.gov.pl/web/premier/premier-w-sejmie-nadzieja-nie-zastapi-strategii>.

22 It is true that Polish politicians, particularly from the national-conservative camp, but also from the government coalition, have conditioned Ukraine's EU accession to the regulation of bilateral historic issues. Also, friction about the import of Ukrainian agricultural goods or competition from lorry drivers has caused doubts in Poland about a speedy Ukrainian membership. Notwithstanding future complications for the accession process, the geostrategic relevance of Ukraine's EU membership will give additional, security-related arguments that help to overcome potential domestic resistance.



Céline Marangé

# France: Strengthening Europe to Deter Russia and Become Self-reliant

France's political and administrative elites have long been deaf to the warnings of their Central and Eastern European allies about Vladimir Putin's bellicosity and imperialism. For a long time, Russia was perceived as a key component of the European security architecture, given its military might and its status as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. Engaging Russia was supposed to ensure a balance in international relations and foster France's prestige and autonomy of action.<sup>1</sup> The full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the relentless war of attrition that has taken place since then has reversed this course dramatically. Russia is now seen in Paris as a long-term and acute threat to Europe's security and France's stability and democracy. Defending Ukraine's sovereignty and reinforcing Europe's strategic solidarity appear to be the best guarantee for deterring Russia and safeguarding the European security order.

## The need for engagement with Russia: A long-standing belief

For many years, French leaders believed that Russia's security interests, as defined in Moscow, had to be accommodated. President Jacques Chirac (1995–2007) supported the entry of Russia into the Council of Europe in 1996 and into the G7 in 1997. Before the enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1999, he insisted on setting up a NATO–Russia Council, as he believed that it would help erase the divided line established at Yalta “once

and for all”.<sup>2</sup> After Putin's sudden rise to power in 2000, he was keen on mentoring him (Putin was the only foreign head of state to attend Chirac's funeral in 2019). Out of concern for Moscow, Paris and Berlin later opposed President George W. Bush's plan to grant a Membership Action Plan to Ukraine and Georgia at the NATO summit in Bucharest in April 2008. A few months later, the war broke out in Georgia. Although it was a wake-up call in Central European capitals, it only reinforced in Paris the idea that Russia “needed to be respected”. President Nicolas Sarkozy (2007–2012) became involved in brokering a ceasefire that was never enforced.<sup>3</sup> Soon after, Paris endorsed the Eastern Partnership — the cooperation framework between the European Union (EU) and six post-Soviet countries, promoted by Poland and Sweden — but President Sarkozy remained primarily committed, though unsuccessfully, to advancing the Union for the Mediterranean that he had championed a year earlier.

A first awakening occurred in 2014 after the annexation of Crimea and the destabilisation of the Donbas. Paris agreed to impose sanctions on Russia and exclude it from the G8. After heated debate, President François Hollande (2012–2017) cancelled the delivery of the two *Mistral* helicopter carriers that President Sarkozy had authorised in 2010, despite sharp criticism from some NATO allies. In line with the policy of engagement, however, he seized the opportunity on the 70th anniversary of D-Day to bring together the Ukrainian and Russian presidents and the German chancellor. Together they set up the “Normandy

1 Céline Marangé and Susan Stewart, *French and German Approaches to Russia: Convergence Yes, EU Compatibility No*, Research Paper (London: Chatham House, 30 November 2021), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-11/2021-11-30-french-german-approaches-russia-marange-and-stewart.pdf>.

2 NATO, *Documents on the NATO-Russia Summit* (Paris, 27 May 1997), <https://www.nato.int/docu/comm/1997/970527/home.htm>.

3 President of Russia, “Press Statement Following Negotiations with French President Nicolas Sarkozy”, press release (Moscow, 12 August 2008), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/1072>.

format". In February 2015, the four countries concluded the Minsk II Agreements to end the war in the Donbas.<sup>4</sup> The war continued, as did the Minsk negotiations, and France continued to oppose the granting of NATO membership to Ukraine and resisted adding any geopolitical or security dimension to the Eastern Partnership.

After President Emmanuel Macron's election in 2017, a change in approach towards Russia slowly occurred, although the overall strategy of continuing to engage Russia had remained up until February 2022. Ahead of the election, his team had faced, like in the United States (US) in 2016, a hacking attack that had led to embarrassing leaks, while fake news that was intended to damage his reputation surfaced just before election day. A few weeks after his inauguration, he nevertheless invited Putin to Versailles, where an exhibition on "Peter the Great, a Tsar in France" was coincidentally taking place. During the joint press conference following the meeting, Macron abruptly described RT and Sputnik as "agencies of propaganda", somehow setting the tone for his subsequent "at the same time" policy.

In 2018, Paris reacted weakly to the Skripal poisoning and later sought deconfliction with Russian forces in Syria during the Hamilton operation, which was launched to destroy the chemical weapons of the Bashar al-Assad regime. In August 2019, Macron invited Putin again, this time to the fort of Brégançon, the official summer retreat of French presidents, on the eve of the G7 summit in Biarritz. This unannounced invitation was aimed at favouring a reset, while ensuring that Europe would take part in the envisaged negotiations on arms control, as Paris believed that the American withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, however justified, undermined European security interests.<sup>5</sup>

To impose his views on a supposedly sceptical administration, President Macron warned against what he called the "deep state", presumably hostile to Russia, in a speech at the yearly Ambassadors' Conference that same month.<sup>6</sup> He named Ambassador

Pierre Vimont "*Special Envoy for the architecture of security and trust with Russia*". This distinguished diplomat, associated with the approach of "constructive engagement", had just published a report arguing that the crisis of multilateralism should lead towards an effort to "work together to form a security architecture for the entire [European] continent", notably by "addressing the underlying causes of today's conflicts" and "reviving the spirit of Helsinki".<sup>7</sup>

However, nothing came of this open-door policy: The Russian negotiators had nothing to offer and made no overtures. It soon became clear that their sole aim was to arouse American interest and sow discord among Europeans, since "for Moscow, the EU does not exist".<sup>8</sup> Macron's disappointment was soon followed by Putin's disillusionment. At the Normandy Format Paris summit in December 2019, the Russian president wanted to present himself as a mediator in the conflict between Kyiv and "the DNR and LNR representatives" and win concessions from Volodymyr Zelensky, who had been elected a few months earlier on the promise of ending the war. However, despite the Minsk Agreements, Russia was treated for what it was: a party to the conflict. Putin saw that Zelensky resisted his pressure and that neither Macron nor Merkel had any intentions of forcing him to give in. Franco-Russian meetings in a "2+2" format became less frequent thereafter. Nonetheless, it was still assumed in Paris that channels of communication had to be kept open.

## The shock of the invasion and the end of illusions

When Moscow presented security demands in the form of two draft treaties with NATO and the US in December 2021, President Macron sought to become involved and avoid war. Russian leaders demanded written guarantees that Ukraine and Georgia would not join NATO, that all Western military aid to Ukraine and military cooperation with NATO countries would cease, and that NATO drills near Russia's

4 Marie Dumoulin, *Ukraine, Russia, and the Minsk Agreements: A Post-Mortem* (Paris: European Council on Foreign Relations, February 2024), <https://ecfr.eu/article/ukraine-russia-and-the-minsk-agreements-a-post-mortem/>.

5 Interview with a French high-ranking diplomat, Paris, Quai d'Orsay, 8 August 2023.

6 Présidence de la République, "Speech by the President of the French Republic at the Conference of Ambassadors" (Paris, 27 August 2019), <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel->

[macron/2019/08/27/discours-du-president-de-la-republique-a-la-conference-des-ambassadeurs-1](https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2019/08/27/discours-du-president-de-la-republique-a-la-conference-des-ambassadeurs-1).

7 Pierre Vimont, *Report for the "Leaders for Peace" Forum* (Normandie pour la paix, 2019), [https://www.normandiepouirlapaix.fr/sites/default/files/2019-08/Leaders-paix\\_ra\\_inside\\_Version%20EN.pdf](https://www.normandiepouirlapaix.fr/sites/default/files/2019-08/Leaders-paix_ra_inside_Version%20EN.pdf).

8 Closed-door seminar with a diplomat directly involved in the talks, Paris, 21 June 2023.

borders would end. They also requested the withdrawal of US nuclear weapons from Europe. Finally, they required NATO to return to “its 1997 borders”, that is, before the enlargements to include the countries of Central and Eastern Europe — which would have meant a complete overhaul of the European security architecture and violated NATO’s founding treaty.

In the weeks leading up to the invasion of Ukraine, the prevailing opinion in French governing circles and among international relations experts was that the Russians were bluffing and using the military build-up on Ukraine’s borders to extract concessions, whereas Americans were exaggerating the threat. Some even suspected the latter of repeating the 2003 hoax that led to the invasion of Iraq. The French intelligence community correctly assessed the state of the Russian army’s preparedness, noting that it did not have the means to occupy the whole of Ukraine, but it wrongly deduced from that premise that the Kremlin had no intention of invading.

The full-scale invasion of February 2022 provided a stinging rebuttal to any potential benefits of engagement. Together with its NATO allies and European partners, Paris immediately took several decisions to support Ukraine and punish Russia. Preparing sanctions in advance made it possible to act swiftly and freeze the assets of the Russian central bank. The French army increased its numbers within NATO’s Enhanced Forward Presence while rapidly deploying troops in Romania and carrying out strategic signalling flights. Since then, Paris has supported, and sometimes driven, EU and NATO initiatives to provide financial and military assistance to Ukraine. At the same time, President Macron’s words and actions have often raised questions in Ukraine and Central Europe. In June 2022, for instance, he declared that we should not “humiliate Russia so that the day the fighting stops, we can build a way out through diplomatic channels”.

Since the invasion, however, French authorities have completely reversed a number of earlier positions. In May 2022, Macron proposed to set up the European Political Community to foster cooperation between countries that share core European values. In June 2022, he energetically supported granting EU candidate country status to Ukraine and Moldova. In June 2023, during the GLOBSEC Forum in Bratislava, he announced his willingness to “change course” and deepen his partnerships with Central European coun-

tries.<sup>9</sup> In July 2023, at the NATO summit in Vilnius, France showed that it was willing to consider Ukraine’s membership in NATO, while Berlin and Washington opposed the idea. In December 2023, Paris took an active role in convincing hesitant member states to accept opening EU accession negotiations with Ukraine. This change in approach was prompted by the desire to restore France’s credibility in Europe and assert Europe as a geopolitical actor on the international stage.<sup>10</sup>

France has also considerably increased its military assistance to Ukraine. Between 24 February 2022 and 1 May 2024, France delivered military equipment worth €3.035 billion to Ukraine, plus a further €2.1 billion through the European Peace Facility (EPF).<sup>11</sup> Among these armaments were surface-to-air missiles and air defence systems, as well as light tanks and CAESAr self-propelled howitzers. The French Armed Forces trained more than 18,000 infantry soldiers in France and Poland, and provided *Mirage 2000-5* fighter jets and training to dozens of Ukrainian pilots.

### **France’s turnaround mainly stemmed from the genuine realisation of the Kremlin’s ultimate goals and brutal ways.**

In a nutshell, France’s turnaround was not the result of tactical calculations, as often assumed in Berlin and elsewhere, but mainly stemmed from the genuine realisation of the Kremlin’s ultimate goals and brutal ways. This course should persist at least

9 Présidence de la République, “Globsec Summit in Bratislava: Closing Speech by the President of the French Republic” (Bratislava, 31 May 2023), <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2023/06/01/globsec-summit-in-bratislava>.

10 See Dimitri Minic, *La politique russe d’Emmanuel Macron: étapes et racines d’une nouvelle approche, 2017–2024* (Paris: Institut Français des Relations Internationales [IFRI], April 2024), <https://www.ifri.org/fr/notes/la-politique-russe-demmanuel-macron-etapes-et-racines-dune-nouvelle-approche-2017-2024>; David Cadier, *Changes in France’s Policies towards Ukraine and Russia: Implications for Central Europe* (Brussels: Think Visegrad, 2023), [https://think.visegradfund.org/wp-content/uploads/Changes-in-France-s-policies-towards-Ukraine-and-Russia\\_Implications-for-Central-Europe-Cadier-IIR.pdf](https://think.visegradfund.org/wp-content/uploads/Changes-in-France-s-policies-towards-Ukraine-and-Russia_Implications-for-Central-Europe-Cadier-IIR.pdf).

11 “Soutien de la France à l’Ukraine: plus de 1 milliard d’euros supplémentaire en 2024”, *French Ministry of Armed Forces*, 6 June 2024, <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/actualites/soutien-france-lukraine-plus-1-milliard-deuros-supplementaire-2024>.

until the next presidential elections in April 2027. It is worth noting that the president's positions are in tune with French public opinion, which is steady as regards support to Ukraine. A 2024 survey shows that the French largely subscribe to the Ukrainian contention that "Russia attacked Ukraine for no other reason than an imperialist desire to reconstitute greater Russia, that Ukraine is exercising its legitimate right to defend itself, and it is in fact contributing to the defence of Europe, its values and its democratic system".<sup>12</sup> Another survey carried out in mid-2025 indicates that French society agrees that Moscow poses a threat to EU countries' sovereignty (72 per cent of respondents believe so), while distrust of Putin is widely shared among the public across the political spectrum, with the exception of the far right (for instance, 79 per cent do not trust him to respect a future ceasefire).<sup>13</sup>

### A larger consensus on Russia's destructive intentions

Awareness about Russia's aggressiveness has significantly grown in France. Within government, it is now widely recognised that the Kremlin not only wants to destroy Ukraine — its army, its economy, its ability to exist as an independent and sovereign nation-state — but also to revise the European security architecture and to reshape and "de-Westernise" the international order. Three dangers are identified. First, the risk of a vertical or horizontal escalation is seen as particularly dangerous — albeit, for the former, increasingly unlikely. As France is the only nuclear power among the EU member states, such scenarios imply a specific responsibility for Paris. Second, there are the threats to democracy. Russia has used information warfare and political subversion in Europe to manipulate elections and delegitimise democracy, but also to sow discord and fan the flames of mistrust towards authorities (for instance, recent information attacks targeted the Chief of the Defence Staff and the Chief of Staff of the French Army).

<sup>12</sup> Laurent Cordonier, *Pénétration en France des récits étrangers sur les conflits contemporains* (Paris: Étude de la Fondation Descartes, November 2024), [https://www.fondationdescartes.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Etude\\_recits\\_conflits\\_FD\\_2024.pdf](https://www.fondationdescartes.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Etude_recits_conflits_FD_2024.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> Institut français d'opinion publique (Ifop), *Le regard des Français sur le conflit entre la Russie et l'Ukraine* (unpublished survey, data seen by author, September 2025).

Third, there are the dangers posed by covert and overt operations intended to coerce European leaders, weaken social cohesion in European countries, and undermine France's position in the world. This includes cyberattacks, sabotage, espionage, arbitrary detention of French nationals, overflights of the territories of allies, and hostile demonstrations against French and allied forces.<sup>14</sup> More prosaically, this also materialises through coffins abandoned near the Eiffel Tower, pigs' heads left outside Paris mosques, and red hands put on the walls of the Holocaust memorial in Paris. Finally, the actions of Russian military companies in sub-Saharan Africa also contributed towards raising the alarm about Russia's *modus operandi*.

On the question of what relations should be established with Russia, opinions differ according to political affiliations, but also to the time frame under consideration. Some leading political figures such as Sarkozy continue to believe that an agreement is hypothetically possible.<sup>15</sup> Noting that Russia will always be Europe's neighbour and a nuclear power, they believe that it will be necessary, when the time comes, to restore a "constructive relationship". Some politicians argue that Russia does not represent a direct military threat to France, only to its neighbours. Others advocate for a negotiated solution, implying a policy of engagement with Russia, speculating for some unspecified reason that it is in Russia's interest to find a way out of the conflict in Ukraine.

In government, however, the prevailing view is that it is doubtful Putin will end the war in Ukraine unless he is compelled to do so due to a crushed economy or military difficulties, and that, in all cases, he will only increase his policy of confrontation with the West through hybrid means. One also casts doubt on the sustainability of any ceasefire agreement in Ukraine, given the Kremlin's military relentlessness and maximalist aims, and his rapprochement with North Korea, Iran, and China. In these circumstances, the best option has been so far to enhance Europe's defence and deterrence capabilities, which means moving forward from a position of strength by re-introducing strategic ambiguity and blurring red

<sup>14</sup> La République Française, *National Strategic Review 2025* (Paris, 13 July 2025), [https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/files/files/Publications/20250713\\_NP\\_SGDSN\\_RNS2025\\_EN\\_1.pdf](https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/files/files/Publications/20250713_NP_SGDSN_RNS2025_EN_1.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, "Nicolas Sarkozy: 'Nous avons besoin des Russes et ils ont besoin de nous'", *Le Figaro*, 25 July 2023.

lines, maintaining sanctions and increasing economic pressure, and reinforcing the Ukrainian army and Europe's eastern flanks.

Since the 2024 snap parliamentary election in France, the government coalition can be censured by the far-left and far-right parties if they jointly opt for a no-confidence motion. Prone to anti-liberal stances, these two extremes tend to deny the radical nature of Russia's intentions, albeit with some new nuances. The *France Insoumise* and the French Communist Party usually downplay Russia's responsibilities by blaming NATO and the US for "provoking Russia". They sometimes ask for a miraculous "peaceful outcome" while, as in Soviet times, advocating for disarmament. The *Rassemblement National* (National Rally), once an overtly pro-Russia party, now claims that it has "always defended a clear and efficient line of support for Ukraine, victim of an illegal and unjustified war of aggression waged by Russia [which], by violating Ukraine's territorial sovereignty with impunity, threatens international order, as well as world peace, while constituting a multidimensional threat against France's interests".<sup>16</sup> Its position remains at best ambiguous, since its voters are often receptive to Russian narratives, and its challenger, Éric Zemmour's *Reconquête*, is outright hostile to Ukraine. In general, French far-right populists reject EU and NATO membership for Ukraine, criticise arms shipments, rule out boots on the ground, and call for concessions from Kyiv's side.

### A defensive posture to strengthen European security

There may be disagreements in Paris about the danger posed by the Russian regime. There is, however, an agreement on the need to reinforce the existing European security order. No one is calling for a revision of Europe's security architecture, which would mean reconsidering the role of NATO and the EU in Europe and relinquishing the principles that define the international order and the post-Cold War European security order. For the moment, the priority is to preserve the existing architecture and defend demo-

cratic institutions, with an emphasis on Europe's responsibility and independence from the US.

Since the beginning of Donald Trump's second term in early 2025, Europeans have faced a twofold challenge. Not only has the US confirmed that it is going to disengage from Europe, but the new American administration seemed to take an illiberal turn and align itself with Russia in early 2025. It voted with Moscow and Pyongyang on a United Nations General Assembly resolution on Ukraine, openly favoured the German far-right party AfD on the eve of the German parliamentary elections, and supported populist pro-conspiracy and anti-EU presidential candidates in Poland and Romania. Therefore, the credibility of NATO Article 5 on collective defence is being called into question, whereas new threats to democratic institutions must be mitigated. These uncertainties are compelling Europeans to increase defence spending and build the capabilities to rely on themselves over the long term.

**Paris sees a confirmation of its prior strategic assumptions, notably on the need to reinforce "European strategic autonomy".**

Paris sees in this situation a confirmation of its prior strategic assumptions, notably on the need to reinforce "European strategic autonomy", which has been a declared French policy objective for many years, and notably a key ambition of President Macron's since 2017. This approach implies promoting a European pillar within NATO, heightening NATO members' operational readiness, and building a strong European defence technological and industrial base (DTIB) that includes Ukraine. France is also strengthening its deterrent posture and reopening discussions on extending nuclear deterrence to Europe, while fostering its cooperation with key military partners such as the United Kingdom (UK) and Poland. In July 2025, France and Britain thus decided to deepen their nuclear cooperation and coordination in response to the Russian threat.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, Paris also wants to reinforce its autonomy and resilience by accelerating rearmament and

<sup>16</sup> Rassemblement National, "European Parliament Resolution on Ukraine, 'The National Rally Reiterates Its Support for Ukraine'", 17 July 2024, <https://rassemblementnational.fr/communiqués/resolution-du-parlement-europeen-sur-lukraine-le-rassemblement-national-reitere-son-soutien-a-lukraine>.

<sup>17</sup> The United Kingdom and the French Republic, "Northwood Declaration: 10 July 2025 (UK-France Joint Nuclear Statement)", press release (London, 10 July 2025), <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/northwood-declaration-10-july-2025-uk-france-joint-nuclear-statement>.



relocating some production — particularly of gunpowder and ammunition — and by preventing the Russian secret services and disinformation machine from destabilising the country. Notable initiatives include the creation of Viginum, a department within France's Secretariat General for National Defence and Security, tasked with detecting, documenting, and publicising foreign interference. Meanwhile, France has maintained some economic ties with Russia. In 2024, Russia accounted for 34 per cent of France's liquefied natural gas (LNG) import mix, and imports of Russian LNG increased by 81 per cent.<sup>18</sup> Natural gas represented only 13 per cent of France's energy mix though.

### A proactive approach to secure Ukraine's future

Ukraine is increasingly seen as the first line of defence against Russia. It is generally assumed in Paris that Ukraine's military defeat would probably fuel Russian expansionism and lead the Kremlin to push its advantage further or test the credibility of Article 5. At the same time, it has been clear since the failed counter-offensive of 2023 that the Ukrainian army will not be able to reconquer militarily the territories lost since 2014 — a subject long taboo in Ukraine, where this objective had helped cement national cohesion after 2022. Testifying at a public hearing in mid-2023, General Jacques Langlade de Montgros, the director of French military intelligence, declared that “the hypothesis of a *status quo* on the front line [was] more likely than that of a breakthrough or collapse by one of the two belligerents, given that they [were] so worn down and that the war [was] taking place over a long period of time as well as in a structured strategic depth on both sides”.<sup>19</sup> Since then, both warring parties have suffered significant losses and scaled up weapons manufacturing, but Russia has been able to sustain high recruitment levels with a mix of incentives and coercion, and to increase drastically its air attacks against critical infrastructure.

Consequently, French authorities highlight the need to act decisively to preserve Ukraine's sovereignty. In their view, preventing a military defeat requires a bold strategy to change the unfavourable circumstances that have emerged, both on the battlefield and in the realm of geopolitics. In November 2024, following the US and the UK, they authorised the Ukrainian army to use French long-range missiles to strike military targets in Russia. In February 2025, the incident in the Oval Office with President Zelensky precipitated a debate on security guarantees that led London and Paris to set up a “Coalition of the Willing”. As seen in Paris, the first security guarantee consists in strengthening the Ukrainian army by improving training and enhancing the Ukrainian DTIB. Other guarantees cover air, sea, and land domains: Re-establishing air supremacy over the western part of Ukraine would allow for a resumption of commercial flights and boost the economy; clearing the Black Sea of mines would increase freedom of navigation and facilitate grain exports; and deploying a second-line contingent after a ceasefire would show Europe's resolve to Washington and deter Moscow from unleashing new massive attacks. In early September 2025, President Macron announced that 26 countries have committed to being part of a “reassurance force” that would guarantee Ukraine's security after the end of hostilities.

It is notable that support for Ukraine has not eroded in French society since 2022. According to a recent survey, 61 per cent of French people support Ukraine's gradual integration into NATO, 75 per cent believe that solid security guarantees are necessary for a ceasefire to be respected, and 57 per cent are in favour of France joining the “Coalition of the Willing” to ensure compliance with the ceasefire.<sup>20</sup> Still, if French troops were to be deployed in Ukraine, the decision would be taken by the president alone, but a confirmation vote by the National Assembly would be required after four months. Hence, political turmoil and budgetary constraints may impede the leadership that Paris recently showed together with London to guarantee Ukraine's security in the future.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> “European LNG Tracker”, Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis, ongoing, <https://ieefa.org/european-lng-tracker>.

<sup>19</sup> Assemblée Nationale, *Report by the National Defence and Armed Forces Commission of the National Assembly n°94* (Paris, 12 July 2023), [https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/dyn/16/comptes-rendus/cion\\_def/116cion\\_def2223094\\_compte-rendu.pdf](https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/dyn/16/comptes-rendus/cion_def/116cion_def2223094_compte-rendu.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> Ifop, *Le regard des Français* (see note 13).

<sup>21</sup> Barbara Kunz, *Can France Lead? European Security in Times of Transatlantic Crisis* (Helsinki: Finnish Institute of International Affairs, May 2025), [https://fiia.fi/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/BP413\\_Can-France-lead.pdf](https://fiia.fi/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/BP413_Can-France-lead.pdf).



**Paris believes that to deter Russia and safeguard Europe, it is of crucial importance to ensure that Ukraine retains its Euro-Atlantic trajectory.**

In sum, the significant shifts in France's approaches towards Russia — from engagement to confrontation — derive from a clear assessment of the Kremlin's intentions and means. Russia is rearming at a fast pace and could pose a "real threat" to Europe within five years, given its "combat experience, huge mass and capacity for endurance", as the French Chief of Defence Staff, General Thierry Burkhard, warned before handing over his charge to his successor in summer 2025.<sup>22</sup>

Paris believes that in order to deter Russia and safeguard Europe, it is of crucial importance to ensure that Ukraine retains its Euro-Atlantic trajectory, and that European countries take greater responsibility for their own security. Therefore, France is striving to reinforce the existing European security architecture, notably by strengthening the European pillar within NATO, advocating for EU strategic autonomy and technological sovereignty, and forging strong bilateral ties with the UK and Poland in the realm of defence.

<sup>22</sup> "France's Top General Says Russia Could Attack in Five Years", *The Economist*, 31 July 2025, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2025/07/31/frances-top-general-says-russia-could-attack-in-five-years>.

Susan Stewart

# Germany: Shifting Away from Russia and towards Ukraine\*

Germany has profited enormously from the post – Cold War security order in Europe and is therefore finding it difficult to move away from this model. At the same time, Berlin has been slowly but surely abandoning its previous “Russia first” approach with regard to the Eastern neighbourhood. Starting in 2012 – but intensifying in 2014 and especially in 2022 after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine – Germany began shifting towards offering increased support for Ukraine and sharper condemnation of Russia. This shift remains contested in some spheres of politics, business, and society, not least for historical reasons. Nonetheless, Berlin now sees Ukrainian security as linked to European security overall, and it perceives Russia as a serious threat to that security. In particular, the actions of Donald Trump and his administration since January 2025 have given Germany a strong incentive to take on a more substantial role in defining and defending security in Europe.

## From “Russia first” to lethal weapons for Ukraine

In previous decades, Germany was known for its close relationship to Russia and its “Russia first” approach in the Eastern neighbourhood, which not only prioritised relations with Moscow but also often viewed relations with the other countries of the region through a Russian prism. Some of these countries, and Ukraine in particular, were seen primarily as “buffer states” constituting a sort of bridge between the European Union (EU) and Russia. This was reinforced by the fact that Russia was the legal successor state to the USSR. This status is one reason why the Germans projected onto Russia not only gratitude for the relatively smooth

transition to a reunified Germany in 1989 – 1990, but also their own guilt for the crimes Germany committed during the Second World War, whereas other post-Soviet states were seen as less relevant.

The hallmark of the German-Russian relationship was cooperation in the energy realm, continuing a tradition that had begun during Soviet times. In particular, the Nord Stream pipelines became symbolic of the closeness between the two countries, and of German willingness to ignore the concerns of partners and allies regarding energy issues.<sup>1</sup> It goes without saying that the German Ostpolitik of the 1970s under Willy Brandt left a lasting mark that affects Berlin’s approach to Russia and other post-Soviet republics to this day. However, in recent decades, this phase of Ostpolitik was often idealised, with the co-operative aspects of it being emphasised, while the complementary policy of deterrence – a necessary foundation for the détente-related component of Ostpolitik – was ignored.

However, there was a major shift in policy in 2014 following Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea, which came as a shock in Berlin and was harshly criticised. As a result, Germany did not just support but actively pushed for the introduction and maintenance of sanctions against Russia. Even if these sanctions look rather inadequate in hindsight, they represented a surprising and significant shift in the German approach at the time. Nonetheless, cooperation in the energy sphere continued, not only because it was strongly supported by many in the then-ruling coalition, but also because Germany’s economy and its planned shift towards renewable sources of energy were predicated on a stable phase in which German businesses could count on affordable imports from Russia, especially of natural gas. Trust in Russia as an energy supplier was high

\* I would like to thank Sabine Fischer and Pia Fuhrhop for their extremely helpful comments on a previous draft of this chapter.

1 Susan Stewart, “Germany”, in *National Perspectives on Russia: European Foreign Policy in the Making?* ed. Jackie Gower et al. (London: Routledge, 2013), 13 – 29.

because experience since the 1970s had shown deliveries to be reliable. Due to this long-term cooperation, strong networks had developed and created vested interests in continuing the relationship on both sides — not to mention that Moscow was pursuing geopolitical goals through its energy exports, and therefore had an additional incentive to maintain them.

### **A mix of criticism, sanctions, and cooperation characterised Germany's Russia policy prior to February 2022.**

Thus a mix of criticism, sanctions, and cooperation characterised Germany's Russia policy until February 2022. The full-fledged Russian invasion of Ukraine produced another, more significant shift in Berlin's approach to Moscow. In his *Zeitenwende* speech at the end of February 2022, then-Chancellor Olaf Scholz declared a major change in priorities, including a much stronger emphasis on hard security and the German Armed Forces. A special financial allocation of €100 billion for defence purposes (the so-called *Sondervermögen*) was announced.<sup>2</sup> Many aspects of the energy relationship with Russia came to an abrupt halt. This was in part because Moscow decided to stop gas deliveries, which Berlin managed to replace surprisingly rapidly, but also because of quick and effective German efforts with regard to oil and coal imports.<sup>3</sup> By the spring of 2022, Berlin also began to deliver various types of weapons to Ukraine so that it could defend itself against Russia.<sup>4</sup> In addition, Scholz — if reluctantly — agreed to support Ukraine's

application for EU membership, paving the way for Kyiv to receive candidate status in June 2022.

### **Gradually evolving assumptions about Russia**

Although criticism of Russia in official political circles had increased starting in 2012, especially within the Green Party and parts of the CDU, it was the full-fledged invasion of Ukraine that led German officials and coalition politicians across the board to adopt a new and much harsher approach. This attitude was fuelled by sympathy for Ukraine as a courageous victim of brutal Russian aggression and generated concrete support for Kyiv.

However, not all political actors were prepared to make this shift, and some took longer than others to do so. Despite the urgency of the situation, there was only a gradual ramping up of military support for Ukraine, accompanied by constant debate on what type of support to provide, how much to send, how quickly to do so, etc. This was accompanied by an unprecedented discussion about the inadequate state of the German Armed Forces. In addition, some actors within the ruling coalition — but in particular certain parties in opposition to it — were less willing to criticise Russia and much less inclined to provide Ukraine with military assistance. This latter attitude was especially present in the far-left party Die Linke, while the far-right AfD not only rejected arms deliveries to Ukraine, but also advocated for retaining the energy relationship with Russia.<sup>5</sup> In the face of the outbreak of a full-scale war in Europe, the strong pacifist streak in German society made itself felt via demonstrations, in certain media, and in parts of the political sphere. In this situation, political and societal differences between East and West Germany became even more palpable than before, regarding both support for Ukraine and cooperation with the United States (US).<sup>6</sup> These differences stem not only from contrasting views about Russia but even more from a strong anti-American sentiment in the east

2 German Federal Government, "Regierungserklärung von Bundeskanzler Olaf Scholz am 27. Februar 2022" (Berlin, 27 February 2022), <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/regierungserklaerung-von-bundeskanzler-olaf-scholz-am-27-februar-2022-2008356>. *Zeitenwende* can be translated as "turning point".

3 German Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy, "Habeck: 'Deutschland reduziert Energie-Abhängigkeit von Russland mit hohem Tempo. Müssen aber weiter besonnen agieren'", press release, Berlin, 25 March 2022, <https://www.bmwk.de/Redaktion/DE/Pressemitteilungen/2022/03/20220325-habeck-deutschland-reduziert-energie-abhaengigkeit-von-russland-mit-hohem-tempo-muessen-aber-weiter-besonnen-agieren.html>.

4 Christoph Hasselbach, "Schwere Waffen aus Deutschland für die Ukraine", *Deutsche Welle* (online), 26 April 2022, <https://www.dw.com/de/deutschland-will-nun-doch-schwere-waffen-an-die-ukraine-liefern/a-61600263>.

5 "Für Frieden in der Ukraine! Positionspapier der AfD-Bundestagsfraktion zum Russland-Ukraine-Krieg", n.d., <https://afdbundestag.de/positionspapier-ukraine-krieg/>.

6 Thomas Nawrath and Sascha Stone, *Old German Fissures Re-Open in Ukraine* (Washington, D.C.: Center for European Policy Analysis, March 2023), <https://cepa.org/article/old-german-fissures-re-open-on-ukraine/>.

of Germany and a greater degree of scepticism towards democracy.<sup>7</sup>

**Germany is engaged in supporting Ukraine in the military, financial, political, and humanitarian spheres, as well as with reconstruction.**

Despite this mixed picture in the political and societal realms, official policy was to renounce almost all relations with Russia. Together with other actors, Germany engaged in supporting Ukraine in the military, financial, political, and humanitarian spheres as well as with reconstruction. But concerns about provoking Russia, escalating the violence, and becoming a party to the conflict kept Berlin from giving Ukraine its full support. Germany took the US as a point of orientation in this regard and, like the Americans, was worried about the risk of nuclear escalation. There were also concerns about the possible consequences of a total defeat of Russia — the potential disintegration of the country, the destabilisation of Europe, and the danger of nuclear weapons falling into the wrong hands.

The degree to which Ukrainian and European security are linked remained an open question for official Berlin. Numerous experts on European security, as well as some politicians, emphasised the strong likelihood of a Russian kinetic attack on a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in the coming years. There was also increasing recognition of the seriousness of Russia's hybrid attacks — in the cyber realm as well as with regard to the sabotage of infrastructure, such as underwater cables in the Baltic Sea. This has gone hand in hand with a growing awareness about the nature and methods of disinformation (by Russia especially, but also other actors) and their consequences. Underpinning these concerns was an increasingly prevalent belief that Russia is an imperialist and revisionist power that not only intends to gain control over Ukraine (or even to restore the USSR) but also to destroy the way of life in the

West — in particular with regard to existing freedoms and democratic values.<sup>8</sup>

However, these assumptions have not achieved consensus within German society. Those in favour of restoring relations with Russia have simply been keeping a low profile, for example in the business sector, while others (opposition politicians, some civil society actors) argue against “demonising” Russia.<sup>9</sup> German mainstream media, which have consistently described and explained Russia's aims vis-à-vis Ukraine and the rest of Europe, have been targeted by more Russia-friendly actors as spreading disinformation. Thus, the media sphere has become increasingly fragmented, with a minority of actors advocating for a better relationship with Russia — despite its aggressive and destructive behaviour — and turning to social media and outlets that support this slant. Overall, fears about Russian actions and their potential consequences for Germany are widespread. In December 2024, 65 per cent of Germans were seriously concerned that Russia would attack other European countries beyond Ukraine, and 61 per cent believed that Germany could become directly involved in the war in Ukraine.<sup>10</sup> And although support for Ukraine has remained generally high, more nuanced analyses show that the population is divided, with 33 per cent being firm supporters, 33 per cent more reluctant supporters, and 20 per cent “friends of Russia”.<sup>11</sup>

In general, the official position during the initial years of the war was to assume that Russia would continue to pursue an aggressive foreign policy and carry out repression internally, at least under the

<sup>8</sup> See e.g. German Bundestag, “Intelligence Services See Growing Threat from Russia”, press release, Berlin, 14 October 2024, <https://www.bundestag.de/presse/hib/kurzmeldungen-1024388>.

<sup>9</sup> See e.g. “‘Dämonisierung bringt keine Lösung’: AfD-Chefin Alice Weidel plädiert für Ausgewogenheit in der Beurteilung des Ukraine-Krieges”, *Die Weltwoche* (online), 1 April 2024, <https://weltwoche.ch/daily/daemonisierung-bringt-keine-loesung-afd-chefin-alice-weidel-plaediert-fuer-ausgewogenheit-in-der-beurteilung-des-ukraine-krieges/>.

<sup>10</sup> Jens Thureau, “DeutschlandTrend: Angst der Deutschen vor Russland”, *Deutsche Welle*, 19 December 2024, <https://www.dw.com/de/deutschlandtrend-furcht-der-deutschen-vor-russland/a-71111884>.

<sup>11</sup> A. Dienes et al., *Security Radar 2025: Die Ukraineunterstützung in Deutschland* (Bonn: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, April 2025), [https://peace.fes.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Projects/Security-Radar/2025/Country-Briefings/Security-Radar-2025\\_Country-Briefing\\_DE.pdf](https://peace.fes.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Projects/Security-Radar/2025/Country-Briefings/Security-Radar-2025_Country-Briefing_DE.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Universität Trier, “Democracy in Danger? Election Study in East German States Shows Mistrust in the State”, press release, Trier, 17 October 2024, <https://nachrichten.idw-online.de/2024/10/17/democracy-in-danger-election-study-in-east-german-states-shows-mistrust-in-the-state>.

regime of Vladimir Putin. Nonetheless, the underlying idea appeared to be that it was too dangerous to push Moscow beyond a certain point and that, since Russia will remain Europe's neighbour, it would be necessary to find a *modus vivendi* that allows for peaceful coexistence, or even certain forms of co-operation. This would entail Russia not "winning" the war, but presumably also not losing in a fashion that could be destabilising for Europe. The question of Russia's place in a future European security order was generally left open during this period, thereby continuing the more tactical – rather than strategic – crisis management approach that had been pursued since 2014.

However, Chancellor Friedrich Merz seems to be taking a tougher line against Moscow. He has spoken repeatedly about Russia's hybrid threats against Germany and indicated that "we must fear that Russia will extend its war beyond Ukraine".<sup>12</sup> As a result of what he called "terror against the civilian population" by Russia, the German government decided to lift all restrictions on Ukraine's use of weapons provided by Germany, including on Russian territory. Berlin also agreed to support the Ukrainian defence industry through joint ventures. More recently, the chancellor came out in favour of a plan proposed by the president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, to allow Ukraine to utilise frozen Russian assets located in Europe. These statements and actions appear to point to a strengthening of the shift Germany has undertaken in past years towards more determined support for Ukraine and more resolute opposition to Russia. This is indirectly confirmed by the fact that Russian media and officialdom have recently intensified disinformation campaigns against Merz.<sup>13</sup>

12 "Bundeskanzler Merz warnt: 'Müssen befürchten, dass Russland den Krieg über die Ukraine hinaus fortsetzen wird'", *Die Welt* (online), 24 June 2025, <https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article256298278/bundeskanzler-merz-warnt-muessen-befuerchten-dass-russland-den-krieg-ueber-die-ukraine-hinaus-fortsetzen-wird.html>.

13 Iva Tsoy, "Russian Spy Agency Disinfo Campaign Targets German Chancellor Merz, Claims Nazi Family Ties Fuel 'Obsession' to Send Ukraine Taurus Missiles", *The Insider*, 8 September 2025, <https://theins.ru/en/antifake/284745>; Nette Nöstlinger and James Angelos, "No, Merz Didn't Shoot a Mommy Polar Bear and Cubs ... It Was Russian Fake News", *Politico*, 8 September 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-friedrich-merz-target-russia-disinformation/>.

## A strong attachment to the previous European security architecture

Germany has reaped tremendous benefits from the status quo ante (prior to the second Trump administration in the US), and therefore has not been inclined to work towards changing it. With the US as the primary security provider for Europe, an emphasis on globalisation and free trade in the international economic sphere, and ongoing opportunities for Berlin to influence decisions within the EU due to the country's political and economic weight, Germany has experienced decades of positive development. Berlin has also been able to exercise its preference for multi-lateral formats within the framework that existed up until recently, even if some of those formats (e.g. the United Nations and the OSCE) have been experiencing major difficulties for some time now. As for Russia, until 2022 it was viewed as a difficult but necessary partner, and the idea that European security could not be maintained without Russia was a recurring mantra in Berlin.

Therefore in 2014, despite a significant shift in Germany's approach to Russia, no desire arose to alter the institutions, values, and policies underpinning European security in any major fashion. Many German politicians remained interested in pursuing the integration of Russia into the European security order, and they believed that this was a feasible goal. After 2014 there was no fully articulated Russia policy, but rather a series of actions in crisis management mode, including the sanctions and the Normandy Format (underpinning the Minsk Agreements), in which Berlin had a major role to play. Furthermore, Germany continued to emphasise the possibility of "selective engagement" with Russia, one of the "five principles" of the EU's approach to Russia. Civil society contacts between Russia and Germany were also viewed positively and given political backing. Despite Moscow's clear violations of many principles spelt out in the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997, German officials insisted on the necessity of continuing to adhere to this document, indicating their hope that the NATO-Russia relationship could keep developing, and that a link between Russia and the existing security order in Europe could be preserved or even deepened. Arms control initiatives involving Russia were also pursued, notably during Germany's OSCE Chairpersonship in 2016.

At the same time, discussions about hard security were largely absent in the German context outside of



narrow official and expert circles, and even those about other components of security and their relationship to the European security architecture remained rather abstract. In 2023 Germany did produce its first-ever National Security Strategy. Although this was an important milestone, there was concern that the document did not sufficiently prioritise clear and strategic goals in a form that could serve as a useful guide for elaborating future policy steps.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the strategy is rarely cited by politicians as providing the basis for decisions relating to security policy.

Thus, it was not primarily the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 that led to serious reflection about the future of (and possible necessary changes in) the European security order, but rather the rhetoric and actions of Trump and his administration in the US starting in January 2025. The *Zeitenwende* described by Scholz in February 2022 had in many ways failed to materialise. The pronouncements and initial actions of Trump and his team arguably led to a more substantive response because they were seen as having more direct effects on European (and German) security than the war in Ukraine.

### **The plans for the future do not seem to involve major institutional changes in the European security architecture.**

Furthermore, the early parliamentary elections in Germany allowed for a new political start and called forth a strong response regarding the transatlantic relationship and German/European defence. Nonetheless, the plans for the future do not seem to involve major institutional changes in the European security architecture, despite Merz' characterisation of the current phase as a "change of epochs", or *Epochenbruch*.<sup>15</sup> Rather, the idea is to invest significantly more in defence and to coordinate security and defence-related decisions much more closely with European

partners, instead of altering existing institutions. Thus, the "European pillar" within NATO should be strengthened and bi- or multilateral projects between EU member states should be taken forward. A more meaningful role for the EU in these issues is seen positively, although the involvement of non-EU states such as the United Kingdom (UK) and Norway is also welcomed.

The current coalition agreement between the CDU, CSU, and SPD repeatedly emphasises the clear links between Ukraine's security and that of the rest of Europe. However, Chancellor Merz has clearly stated that he believes NATO (and EU) membership for Ukraine is possible only once the war has ended.<sup>16</sup> Like numerous other countries, Germany has signed a security agreement with Ukraine, meaning that a relationship in this area is foreseen for the long term. The coalition agreement promises stronger support (including in the military sphere) for Ukraine, "so that it [Ukraine] can defend itself against the Russian aggressor effectively and assert itself in negotiations".<sup>17</sup> "Material and political security guarantees" are also mentioned.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, reticence remains regarding sending troops for a reassurance or deterrence force and providing certain types of weapons, in particular the Taurus missile system.

Despite this hesitation, the German government under Merz has largely abandoned the cautious approach taken by former Chancellor Scholz. Merz has clearly indicated his intention to play a leading role in foreign and security policy, not only through his rhetoric but also by establishing a reformatted National Security Council. His support in coordinating the trip of several European leaders (including himself) to the US to accompany Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky on his visit to the White House in August 2025, as well as his rapid and concrete pledge to join with other NATO partners in purchasing US arms for Ukraine, further confirm this intention. Moreover, with Trump as US president, adopting the American position on Russia and Ukraine has ceased to be a viable option.

<sup>14</sup> See e.g. Der Beirat der Bundesregierung Zivile Krisenprävention und Friedensförderung, *Stellungnahme zur Nationalen Sicherheitsstrategie – Empfehlungen des Beirats der Bundesregierung Zivile Krisenprävention und Friedensförderung* (Berlin, Juli 2023), <https://beirat-zivile-krisenpraevention.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Beirat-ZKP-Stellungnahme-zur-Nationalen-Sicherheitsstrategie-barrierefrei.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> German Federal Government, "Foreign Policy Keynote Speech by Chancellor Friedrich Merz at the 2025 Körber Global Leaders Dialogue" (Berlin, 23 January 2025), <https://www.cdusu.de/themen/aussenpolitische-grundsatzrede>.

<sup>16</sup> "Merz würde Ukraine erst nach Kriegsende in EU und Nato aufnehmen", *Die Zeit* (online), 12 April 2025, <https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2025-04/friedrich-merz-ukraine-nato-eu-beitritt>.

<sup>17</sup> CDU, CSU and SPD, *Verantwortung für Deutschland: Koalitionsvertrag zwischen CDU, CSU und SPD. 21. Legislaturperiode des Deutschen Bundestages* (Berlin, 5 May 2025), 125, 3982–83, [https://www.spd.de/fileadmin/Dokumente/Koalitionsvertrag\\_2025\\_bf.pdf](https://www.spd.de/fileadmin/Dokumente/Koalitionsvertrag_2025_bf.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 127, 4021.



Initial actions by the coalition make it clear that Germany will invest significantly more in its military, as well as in defence-related infrastructure. Not only has Berlin signed on to spending 5 per cent of its gross domestic product in these spheres in the NATO context, but the decision by the previous Bundestag to approve €500 billion for expenditures on infrastructure and environmental goals and to release the “debt brake” for defence-related purposes has paved the way for major investments in these areas in the immediate future. However, although this spending is intended to strengthen Europe and demonstrate German willingness to take on added responsibility for European security, the goal is clearly to do so while keeping the US as involved as possible.<sup>19</sup>

### **Conclusion: Increasing linkages between Ukrainian and European security**

Since Germany was essentially satisfied with the previous European security order and Berlin’s role in it, the prevailing inclination is to attempt to modify this construct in order to keep it functional, rather than discarding it in favour of a new security architecture. This approach has become more difficult with the arrival of the second Trump administration, which is not only much less disposed to continue the same level of support for European security (including Ukraine’s), but also represents a fundamental challenge to the values and character of the security order that has existed until very recently. The implications of this for German officials include cooperating more closely with other European powers in order to reduce Europe’s dependence on the US in the security realm. However, since this dependence is likely to persist for some time — despite serious European efforts to advance on this front — the German approach involves attempts at keeping the US on board while engaging more strongly than before, both in various forms of cooperation at the EU level and in coalitions of European states. Potentially, it could also rejuvenate the Franco-German relationship and the Weimar (plus) format, both of which have suffered from difficulties in recent years. Merz’ first two trips abroad — to Paris and Warsaw — confirm this intention.

However, Berlin seems to be entering into these discussions without necessarily having a strategic compass to guide its decisions. In past years, or even decades, German foreign and security policy has suffered from a lack of spaces for strategic thinking. Although some documents with a more strategic focus have recently been produced (not only the National Security Strategy but also a strategy on China), they are not always adequate to underpin policy decisions, especially in a rapidly changing environment.<sup>20</sup> The German tendency to orient policy along the lines of US approaches in some areas has also hindered the emergence of independent strategic thinking. Finally, the historical context in which Germany is embedded has made it prone to emphasise multilateral formats and cooperation with other actors, rather than pursue a leadership role — even if there have been exceptions, especially in the economic realm.

### **The Merz government has established a clear link between Ukrainian and European security.**

The goal of the coalition government under Merz is clearly to overcome these hurdles and position Germany as a strategic actor in the field of European security. He and his foreign and defence ministers have repeatedly characterised Russia as a major threat to Germany and Europe for the foreseeable future, and they have established a clear link between Ukrainian and European security. The conditions are also now in place for major defence spending efforts. Nonetheless, political, bureaucratic, and societal obstacles remain, not to mention the difficulties that the German economy is currently facing, which will influence not only public support for the current government but also Germany’s weight in the European and transatlantic arena. Given the strong tendencies towards multilateralism in Berlin, the positions taken by other key European players, such as France, Poland, and the UK, will be crucial in the ongoing shift of German policy towards a strategic role in a European security architecture that is directed against Russia and includes Ukraine. A defining feature of the Merz government will be the extent to which Germany is successful in playing this role.

19 “Europa muss handlungsfähig werden”, *CDU Website*, 26 February 2025, <https://www.cdu.de/aktuelles/aussen-und-sicherheitspolitik/europa-muss-handlungsfahig-werden/>.

20 Chancellor Merz has indicated his intention to produce a new national security strategy within the first year of his term. See German Federal Government, “Foreign Policy Key-note Speech” (see note 15).

Marco Siddi

# Italy: Keeping the US in to Keep Ukraine Going

Russia's attack against Ukraine on 24 February 2022 upended more than half a century of predominantly cooperative Italian-Russian relations. In a similar manner to the German *Ostpolitik*, Italy's policy towards Moscow had been shaped by trade, energy imports, and political dialogue. The dominant view among Italian leaders of all political orientations was that a stable European security system could only be achieved with Russia's inclusion. Relations with Ukraine were considered important, particularly given its role as a key transit country for Italy's energy imports, but less strategic than those with Russia. The military escalation of February 2022 led to a radical transformation of Italy's stance, which now strives for energy decoupling from Russia, containment of its expansionism, and support of Ukraine's military efforts and statehood. Regarding a possible peace deal, Italy currently advocates the preservation of Ukraine's independence with international security guarantees, even if outside the framework of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

## **While reiterating her support of Ukraine, Meloni has endorsed Trump's erratic diplomacy regarding the Russo-Ukrainian conflict.**

Rome prefers to maintain the existing European security order, including a strong military presence of the United States (US). Italy has traditionally been favourable to a stronger European defence, but the government being led by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni values relations with Donald Trump and is sceptical about the effectiveness of a European security order without solid US guarantees. While reiterating her support of Ukraine, Meloni has endorsed Trump's erratic diplomacy regarding the Russo-Ukrainian conflict.

## **Before the “storm”: Italy's quest of cooperation with Russia and Ukraine**

During the Cold War, Italy was one of the first Western European countries to sign long-term energy supply contracts with the Soviet Union. Supported by Italian banks, several leading Italian businesses such as carmaker FIAT and energy company ENI made large investments in the USSR. Beyond pure profit seeking, these investments were driven by the belief that economic ties contributed to alleviating tensions in relations between the West and the Soviets, and thus had positive repercussions on the political and security spheres.<sup>1</sup>

Post – Cold War Italian leaders broadly shared the view that a stable European security architecture could only be achieved with — rather than against or without — Russia. Hence, they were among the most ardent supporters of Russia's integration into Western structures. This stance was upheld regardless of the political orientation of Italian governments. Silvio Berlusconi (prime minister in 1994 – 95, 2001 – 06, and 2008 – 11) personalised the relationship by developing a close friendship with Vladimir Putin. However, relations were also good under centre-left and centrist governments. After Russia's annexation of Crimea, Italy aligned with the European Union (EU)'s stance and endorsed sanctions but simultaneously supported energy trade and political ties with Moscow.<sup>2</sup>

Prior to 2022, Italian leaders attempted to navigate the tense periods in relations between the West and Russia by seeking to position themselves as mediators

1 Valentina Fava, “Between Business Interests and Ideological Marketing: The USSR and the Cold War in Fiat Corporate Strategy, 1957 – 1972”, *Journal of Cold War Studies* 20, no. 4, (2018): 26 – 64.

2 Marco Siddi, “Italy's ‘Middle Power’ Approach to Russia”, *The International Spectator* 54, no. 2 (2019): 123 – 38.

and speaking out in favour of maintaining the partnership with Russia. When NATO's eastern enlargement was decided in the 1990s and early 2000s, Italy was one of the members that qualified its support with the request for a simultaneous upgrade of the Alliance's relationship with Russia. This position was shared by other members of the Alliance and eventually adopted, paving the way for the establishment of the NATO-Russia Council at the Rome summit in May 2002. Italy also supported the prompt resumption of relations between the EU, NATO, and Russia in the months after the August 2008 war between Russia and Georgia.<sup>3</sup>

Italian leaders pursued the role of bridge builders between the West and Russia also after Russia's annexation of Crimea. Matteo Renzi supported the Franco-German mediation of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in the Donbas within the Normandy format, and argued that sanctions were a reversible measure intended to bring Russia to the negotiating table. While Italy held the rotating EU presidency in the second half of 2014, Renzi put forward a proposal to solve the Donbas conflict by keeping the region under Ukrainian sovereignty while granting language and minority rights to the Russophone population through an international agreement; the proposal, according to Renzi, was rejected by Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko.<sup>4</sup> Under Renzi's leadership, in 2016, Italy also opposed British and French proposals to impose new EU sanctions on Russia regarding its bombing campaign in Syria. The logic was that Russia should progressively be brought back to the European security system, rather than be alienated further through additional sanctions.<sup>5</sup>

The government of the Five Star Movement and the far-right League, in office in 2018–19, adopted clear pro-Moscow rhetoric and viewed Russia as a security partner. Their coalition agreement argued that Russia was “an increasingly important economic and trade partner” and advocated the lifting of EU sanctions. It

also stated that Russia “poses no military threat, but is a potential partner for NATO and the EU” and “should be rehabilitated as a strategic interlocutor for the resolution of regional crises (Syria, Libya, Yemen)”.<sup>6</sup> These views were shared by only a small minority of members of the Western alliance and did not lead to policy change.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, Russian leaders reciprocated with recurrent praising of the bilateral friendship and symbolic gestures, most notably the much-publicised airlift of Russian aid to Italy during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, in March 2020.<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile, before 2022, Italian-Ukrainian relations were mostly cordial and focused on economic cooperation. In the 2010s, Italy was the third-largest trade partner of Ukraine within the EU after Germany and Poland, importing mostly metallurgical and agricultural products and exporting primarily machinery and consumer goods.<sup>9</sup> Ukraine was also a key transit country for Italian imports of Russian gas. However, due to the strategic energy relationship, market size, and diplomatic and military weight, Russia remained Italy's main reference in the post-Soviet space.

## From partner to “unfriendly country”

Italy's stance on Russia began to harden in 2021, after Mario Draghi assumed the post of prime minister with the support of a broad coalition of parties. In March 2021, the Italian police arrested an Italian navy captain accused of spying on behalf of Russia and

3 Riccardo Alcaro, “Italy”, in *National Perspectives on Russia: European Foreign Policy in the Making?* ed. M. David, J. Gower and H. Haukkala (Abingdon, 2013), 67–85.

4 Matteo Renzi's Statements at a Conference Organised by the Italian Chamber of Commerce, Bangkok, 29 November 2022, <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2022/12/01/nel-2014-luكرانيا-rifiuto-accordo-sul-Donbas-putin-non-e-un-pazzo-ha-una-strategia-per-la-prima-volta-renzi-contestualizza-il-conflitto/6891759/>.

5 Interview with Italian Diplomat at the Italian Embassy in Moscow, 28 October 2016.

6 Movimento Cinque Stelle e Lega Nord, *Contratto per il governo del cambiamento* [Contract for the Government of Change] (Rome, 17 May 2018), 18, [https://www.ansa.it/documents/1526568727881\\_Governo.pdf](https://www.ansa.it/documents/1526568727881_Governo.pdf).

7 “Conte ha sempre rinnovato le sanzioni alla Russia, ma il suo governo aveva promesso di cancellarle” [Conte Has Always Renewed Sanctions against Russia, But His Government Had Promised to Lift Them], *Pagella Politica* (online), 29 April 2022, <https://pagellapolitica.it/fact-checking/conte-rinnovo-sanzioni-russia-contraddizione>.

8 Henry Foy and Michael Peel, “Russia Sends Italy Coronavirus Aid to Underline Historic Ties”, *Financial Times* (online), 23 March 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/b1c5681e-6cf9-11ea-89df-41bea055720b>.

9 Ukraine's embassy in Italy, “Lo stato dei rapporti economico-commerciali e di attività degli investimenti tra Ucraina e Italia” [The State of Economic-Trade Relations and Investment Activity between Ukraine and Italy] (Rome, 2020), <https://web.archive.org/web/20201029161833/https://italy.mfa.gov.ua/it/partnership/174-torgovelyno-jekonomichne-spivrobitnictvo-mizh-ukrajinoju-ta-italijeju>.

expelled two Russian diplomats. The government chose to publicly denounce the case, thereby attracting the attention of the national and international press. However, on broader issues, Draghi initially maintained a cautious stance. In mid-December 2021, as Russia was concentrating troops on its border with Ukraine and proposing two new security treaties to the US and NATO, Draghi argued that Moscow was not disengaging from the West, and that Putin wanted “to explore all the possibilities of diplomacy to reach a balanced solution”.<sup>10</sup>

Draghi’s position changed radically when Russia launched a large-scale attack on Ukraine in February 2022. In the months following the attack, he played a central role in shaping the EU’s efforts to impose sanctions on Moscow and attempted to reduce Italy’s imports of Russian energy drastically. Noting Rome’s turn towards a pro-Ukrainian stance and full endorsement of EU sanctions, Russia included Italy in a list of “unfriendly countries” — a significant change in rhetoric compared to earlier bilateral relations.<sup>11</sup>

At the same time, Italy accompanied its condemnation of Russia and support of Ukraine with an autonomous diplomatic initiative to pursue conflict resolution through negotiations. In May 2022, the Draghi government presented a four-point peace plan to United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres to resolve the conflict. While the plan received little international attention and was soon put aside,<sup>12</sup> it is a useful document to understand Italian views on ending the conflict and on the future of European security. The first step in the plan was a ceasefire and the demilitarisation of the front lines. The second step reiterated Ukraine’s neutral status, with its security guaranteed by a group of countries yet to be identified; the details of this part of the plan would be discussed at a peace conference. Thirdly, a bilateral agreement between Russia and Ukraine would clarify the future of Crimea and Donbas and address cultural

and language rights and guarantees concerning the free movement of people, goods, and capital. The plan indicated that Crimea and Donbas would have almost complete autonomy, including in questions of defence, but would be part of Ukraine. The fourth point called for a multilateral peace agreement between the EU and Russia that would require a staged withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine and the winding down of Western sanctions against Moscow.<sup>13</sup>

Some commentators argued that the plan also intended to assuage Italian public opinion, which was largely in favour of seeking a ceasefire from the early stages of the conflict.<sup>14</sup> Italian leaders and diplomats knew from the start that their plan had little chance of being accepted, as the Istanbul peace talks between Russia and Ukraine had recently failed, and a new escalatory phase of the conflict had begun. Nonetheless, their “ownership” of the ideas included in the proposal should not be dismissed. The plan revealed that, even in the tense months following Russia’s full-scale attack on Ukraine, Italian policymakers continued to believe that an end to the conflict could only come through a negotiated ceasefire. They thought that concessions had to be made to Russia, including accepting Ukraine’s neutrality and substantial autonomy for Crimea and the Donbas region. They also maintained the view that Western sanctions should be wound down if Russia implemented a staged military withdrawal from Ukraine.

## Responding to allies’ expectations and the domestic debate

In Italy, several mainstream political parties of different political orientations were sceptical of the Western policy of increasing military support to Ukraine and confronting Russia. This affected Italian leaders’ stance on the conflict and on ways to resolve it. On the one hand, allies expected them to align with the Western stance, which was increasingly shaped by the US and its key role as the main supplier of military aid to Ukraine. On the other hand, they were being pressured domestically by parties that were less

<sup>10</sup> Hannah Roberts, “Draghi Plays Down Risk of Putin Invading Ukraine”, *Politico* (online), 15 December 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/italy-draghi-argue-putin-seek-diplomacy-stand-off-ukraine/>.

<sup>11</sup> “Russian Government Approves List of Unfriendly Countries and Territories”, *Tass* (online), 7 March 2022, <https://tass.com/politics/1418197?gsid=3397ed44-a968-4ef1-b73e-e65f1e17d5eb>.

<sup>12</sup> Riccardo Alcaro and Nona Mikhelidze, *Not Yet Time for Diplomacy: Lessons from Italy’s Ill-Conceived Peace Plan for Ukraine*, IAI Commentary (Rome: Istituto Affari Internazionali, June 2022), <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaicom2225.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Eric Sylvers, “Italy Circulates 4-Point Peace Plan”, *Wall Street Journal* (online), 20 May 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/livecoverage/russia-ukraine-latest-news-2022-05-20/card/italy-circulates-4-point-peace-plan-h2o9EfwULf6P1mwDbjdn>.

<sup>14</sup> Alcaro and Mikhelidze, *Not Yet Time for Diplomacy* (see note 12).

critical of Russia and a predominantly pacifist public opinion that supported a diplomatic path to end the conflict.

Draghi's ardent support of sanctions and military aid to Ukraine was arguably one of the reasons for his government's demise, particularly as he lost the backing of the League, Berlusconi's Forza Italia, and the Five Star Movement — parties that were either perceived as pro-Russian (the League and Berlusconi) or as critical of arms supplies being delivered to Ukraine (the Five Stars).<sup>15</sup>

Initially, the election of a right-wing coalition government under Meloni's leadership in October 2022 raised concerns among Italy's allies about its alignment with Western foreign policy. Not only did her government include the pro-Russian League and Berlusconi, she herself had condemned the EU's post-2014 sanctions against Russia on several occasions and praised Putin as a defender of European values and Christian identity in her autobiography, published in 2021.<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, Meloni's government did not depart from Draghi's Russia policy. Whereas in 2021 she had stressed the necessity of a diplomatic agreement with Russia and rejected EU sanctions, after the invasion she switched to supporting sanctions, voted in favour of military aid to Ukraine, and advocated ending Italy's energy dependence on Russia. She also supported Ukraine's application to join the EU, agreeing to the opening of accession talks in December 2023. She continued to send military support to Ukraine (including the valuable SAMP/T air-defence system) and, together with other G7 countries, signed a bilateral security pact with Kyiv.<sup>17</sup> Her government largely mirrored its predecessor's stance in opposing Russia's aggression and upholding Ukraine's sovereignty. Meloni emphasised Italy's alignment with the EU and NATO on these matters.

Her stance was likely also motivated by her desire to be perceived as "reliable" by transatlantic allies, at a time when Italy was receiving much-needed billions in post-Covid recovery funds from the EU. By aligning with the US and European allies on fundamental

security issues, Meloni may have also hoped to obtain a higher threshold of tolerance from the Biden administration and EU leaders on her illiberal domestic policies, including anti-equality measures and restrictions on the freedom of public media. This calculation appears to have worked, as she received praise from her Western allies even while implementing such policies at home.<sup>18</sup>

Meloni's government chose to align with transatlantic allies, despite the ambivalent stance of the Italian public. On the one hand, Moscow's invasion of Ukraine had a significant impact on Italian public opinion regarding Russia. IPSOS polls showed that, in 2022, 36 per cent of Italians perceived Russia as the greatest global threat, a substantial increase from the 8 per cent recorded in 2021. However, only 32 per cent of Italians supported arms deliveries to Ukraine. A poll from March 2024 revealed that only 45 per cent of Italians supported sanctions against Russia, a decrease from 57 per cent a year earlier, while 38 per cent opposed sanctions and 17 per cent remained neutral.<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, a Pew survey showed that 40 per cent of Italians prioritised maintaining access to Russian oil and gas reserves over adopting a confrontational stance towards Moscow.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, surveys on Italians' opinions concerning the Russo-Ukrainian war between January 2022 and June 2023 revealed that, while they worried about the conflict, other issues such as climate change, the economic situation, and immigration were perceived as more urgent. A compromise was increasingly seen as the only means of ending the war, while pluralities and sometimes majorities believed that Ukraine should make territorial concessions to Russia.<sup>21</sup> Lim-

15 Carlo Bastasin, *Italy Loses Draghi as Its Leader – for Now*, Commentary (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, July 2022), <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/italy-loses-draghi-as-its-leader-for-now/>.

16 Giorgia Meloni, *Io sono Giorgia. Le mie radici le mie idee* [I Am Giorgia. My Roots, My Ideas] (Milan, 2021).

17 Riccardo Alcaro and Nathalie Tocci, "The Janus Face of Italy's Far Right", *Survival* 66, no. 5 (2022): 7–22.

18 Ibid.; see also Marco Siddi, "The Politics of Forgetting and Foreign Policy", *Verfassungsblog* (Blog), 10 February 2025, <https://verfassungsblog.de/the-politics-of-forgetting-and-foreign-policy/>.

19 "Russia-Ucraina, le ultime news e sondaggi: opinioni degli italiani" [Russia-Ukraine, Latest News and Surveys: Italians' Opinions], IPSOS, 1 March 2024, <https://www.ipsos.com/it-it/russia-ucraina-ultime-news-italiani-riducono-timori-scoppio-terza-guerra-mondiale-3-monitoraggio-ipsos>.

20 Moira Foigan, Jacob Poushter and Shena Gubbala, "3. Attitudes Toward Russian Oil and Gas" (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2023), <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2023/07/10/attitudes-toward-russian-oil-and-gas/>.

21 Pierangelo Isernia, Sergio Martini and Claudio Cozzi-Fucile, "Between Prudence and Selfishness: Pooling the Polls on What Italians Think of the Ukraine War", *Contemporary Italian Politics* 16, no. 3 (2024): 340–52.



ited approval by the public explains why the Meloni government opted to channel its support to Ukraine by stealth, shrouding military supplies in secrecy. I also publicly opposed Ukraine's use of weapons provided by Italy against targets on Russian territory.

### An Italian vision of post-conflict European security?

Overall, Meloni's and Italy's positions on how to end the Russian-Ukrainian war and reorganise the European security architecture are constrained by the country's limited international weight, the positions of more influential allies, and a predominantly pacifist public opinion. Yet, a set of preferences emerges clearly. Italy is keen on preserving the existing security system, which has served the country well; this includes especially the transatlantic alliance and European integration, the two long-standing pillars of Rome's foreign policy. The desire to pursue both foreign policy vectors — together with Meloni's ideological proximity to Trump — explains why Italy has tried to defuse recent US-EU tensions and opposed an escalation of tariffs and hostile rhetoric. As Trump persists in treating the EU as an economic adversary, the limits of this strategy are evident.

Meloni subscribed to Trump's request to raise defence spending to 5 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) by 2035, despite Italy's limited spending capabilities (public debt reached 135 per cent of GDP in 2024) and a very critical public opinion. As Italy's defence budget was 1.5 per cent of GDP in 2024, Italy will need to spend €60–70 billion over the next 10 years to meet the 5 per cent target, and it is unclear where the resources will be found.<sup>22</sup> The government has attempted to downplay the issue, arguing that the target is achievable and could be met also by including other existing expenditures (including the coast-guard and the financial police) in the defence budget. This casts doubts on the credibility of Italy's commitment.

Italy is particularly interested in the southern — rather than the eastern — dimension of both NATO and the EU's external action; the Mediterranean

region has long been Rome's most immediate security concern. While Italian leaders are genuinely concerned about Russia's use of military force and flagrant violations of international law, it would not be unthinkable for them to make some concessions to Russia with regard to Ukraine if these are conducive to de-escalating the conflict. This partly emerges from Italy's 2022 peace plan, particularly from the proposal of granting substantial autonomy to Donbas and Crimea.

**If the Trump administration is willing to make concessions to Moscow, it is unlikely that Meloni will oppose them.**

Meloni's stance on the war has always revolved around that of the US. If the Trump administration is willing to make concessions to Moscow, it is unlikely that she will oppose them. Indeed, some analysts have noted how Meloni has adjusted her rhetoric on the conflict since Trump's election.<sup>23</sup> Whereas other European leaders have been critical of Trump's attempts to negotiate with Russia, she has supported the tycoon's diplomacy. Speaking at the Italian Senate in March 2025, Meloni stated that she “supported Trump's efforts for peace” and dismissed the proposal of deploying troops of European NATO members to Ukraine as “very complex, risky and ineffectual”.<sup>24</sup> She also criticised the EU's ReArm Europe plan.

Furthermore, Italian leaders do not appear to fully share the same assumptions about Russia's perennially imperialist and aggressive nature as some of their allies. This theoretically makes it easier for them to endorse a negotiated settlement with Russia. While Meloni has at times used the rhetoric of her more “hawkish” allies — arguing for instance that Italy “counted on Ukraine's victory” in the war against Russia — she has been far less consistent in her positions, recently stating that she had never used the

<sup>23</sup> Maurizio Mascitti, “Lo slittamento di Giorgia Meloni sull'Ucraina” [Giorgia Meloni's Slippage on Ukraine], *Appunti – di Stefano Feltri* (Blog), 24 March 2025, <https://appunti.substack.com/p/lo-slittamento-di-giorgia-meloni>.

<sup>24</sup> Cited in Lorenzo Stasi, “Meloni al Senato: Sosteniamo lo sforzo di Trump per la pace. Truppe europee in Ucraina? Opzione rischiosa e poco efficace” [Meloni in the Senate: We Support Trump's Peace Efforts. European Troops in Ukraine? A Risky and Ineffective Option], *L'Espresso*, 18 March 2025, <https://lespresso.it/c/politica/2025/3/18/meloni-comunicazioni-senato-consiglio-europeo/53314>.

<sup>22</sup> Carlo Canepa and Massimo Taddei, “Quanti miliardi costerà all'Italia l'aumento della spesa militare” [How Many Billions Will the Increase in Military Spending Cost Italy?], *Pagella Politica*, 27 June 2025, <https://pagellapolitica.it/articoli/costo-italai-aumento-spesa-difesa-nato>.



word “victory”, and that achieving “the necessary deterrence to reach peace” was always her goal.<sup>25</sup> Overall, she has been reticent about her views on Russia’s ultimate goals in the war; her statements suggest that negotiations with Russia should be pursued, but Moscow has not been serious about achieving peace so far.

Nonetheless, even since Trump’s election, Meloni has reiterated her “firm and total condemnation of [Russia’s] brutal aggression of Ukraine” and her “utmost support of the Ukrainian people”. She advocated “solid and effective security guarantees for Ukraine, Europe and also our American allies, who cannot afford to sign an easily breachable agreement”.<sup>26</sup> Although Meloni did not clarify what kind of security guarantees she envisaged for Ukraine, her rejection of European troop deployments without US participation implies that, for her, US military involvement remains essential to achieving a stable ceasefire.

**The Meloni government is  
sceptical about Europe’s ability to  
achieve strategic autonomy.**

Likewise, a new European security architecture without or with less US involvement is undesirable for Italy. The Meloni government is sceptical about Europe’s ability to achieve strategic autonomy. This was highlighted by Rome’s decision to seek a deal over the provision of encrypted satellite communications with US company Starlink, despite widespread concerns over Elon Musk’s and the US government’s capacities to control and potentially switch off communications via Starlink.<sup>27</sup> Critics argue that no European alternative will ever emerge if EU countries sign up to Starlink.

Finally, the Italian government has sent clear signals to Washington regarding its readiness to cool relations with China in the context of growing US-Chinese strategic competition. In 2024, Rome decided

to exit an agreement signed with Beijing in 2019 on Italy’s participation in the Belt and Road Initiative. The move was meant to show to Washington that Italy is a reliable and useful ally, rather than just a beneficiary of US security guarantees with a low defence budget. The ultimate goal is to keep the US involved in the European and Mediterranean security system. However, it is questionable if these Italian goodwill gestures will play a role in Washington’s broader and increasingly self-interested geopolitical calculations.

<sup>25</sup> Carlo Canepa, “Meloni smemorata: ha parlato più volte della ‘vittoria’ dell’Ucraina” [Meloni Forgetful: She Has Repeatedly Spoken of Ukraine’s ‘Victory’], *Pagella Politica* (online), 19 March 2025, <https://pagellapolitica.it/articoli/meloni-smemorata-parola-vittoria-guerra-ucraina>.

<sup>26</sup> Cited in Stasi, “Meloni al Senato” (see note 24).

<sup>27</sup> “Italy’s Defence Minister Says Decision on Musk’s Starlink Should Be Technical”, *Reuters* (online), 15 April 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/italys-defence-minister-says-decision-musks-starlink-should-be-technical-2025-04-15/>.

Sinem Adar and Yaşar Aydın

# Turkey: Strategic Ambiguity and Transactional Diplomacy in the Rebuilding of European Security

A confluence of economic, geopolitical, and domestic factors shapes Ankara's stance regarding the war in Ukraine. Since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its invasion of Ukraine on various fronts in early 2022, including in Donbas, Ankara has been committed to Ukraine's territorial integrity and national sovereignty. At the same time, Turkey has hedged its bets, protected its security and economic interests, while being cautious not to confront Russia. Although Moscow is not considered a primary threat, Ankara does not view an assertive Russia as being favourable to its interests. Enhanced defence and security cooperation with Ukraine is, in this regard, seen as a means of containment. Since the end of the Cold War, maintaining the balance of power in the Black Sea in Ankara's favour has been central to Turkey's Black Sea policy. The regional ownership principle and Turkey's control over the Straits are two pillars of this strategy. Convinced that European security is impossible without Ankara's engagement — given the challenges arising from the recalibrated approach of the United States (US) to the war in Ukraine under the second Trump administration — Turkey is seeking to be actively involved in revising the European security architecture. Turkey's approach to European security remains pragmatic and transactional, focusing on Ankara's economic, security, and regional interests alongside domestic power calculations, and it is likely to continue this way in the future.

## Black Sea: Regional ownership without Russia?<sup>1</sup>

For Ankara, the period following the end of the Cold War was filled with opportunities and anxieties. The fall of the Soviet Union was perceived as a strategic moment to position Turkey as a bridge between the “West” and the “East” and enhance its regional power status. With the backing of its Western allies, particularly the US, Ankara branded itself as a model Muslim democracy for the newly independent states in Central Asia. Already a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Turkey's integration into European structures — including the Customs Union Agreement with the European Union (EU) in 1995 and its recognition as a candidate for full membership in 1999 — deepened during this period. Ankara was also supportive of both EU and NATO enlargement. Particularly the latter was regarded as essential to maintaining NATO's relevance for European security against the backdrop of Turkish anxieties about a diminishing role for NATO in the post–Cold War era.

The 1990s — and especially the 2000s — marked a period of regional cooperation for Ankara. In line with the spirit of the time, Turkish policy prioritised economic cooperation, promoting interdependence, transnationalism, and multilateralism as the cornerstones of regional stability. In this context, Ankara

1 Mustafa Aydın and Aslı Aydıntaşbaş, *Bridging the Bosphorus: How Europe and Turkey Can Turn Tiffs into Tactics in the Black Sea*, Policy Brief (Berlin: European Council on Foreign Relations, March 2025), <https://shorturl.at/nmrsk> (unless otherwise stated, all links were accessed on 22 April 2025); Daria Isachenko, *Turkey in the Black Sea Region: Ankara's Reactions to the War in Ukraine against the Background of Regional Dynamics and Global Confrontation*, SWP Research Paper 12/2023 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, October 2023), doi: 10.18449/2023RP12.

also had friendly relations with Moscow and Kyiv. However, changing conflict dynamics in and around the Black Sea in the late 2000s made it challenging for Turkey to uphold its regional cooperation policy. For instance, Ankara's efforts to promote the Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform — envisioned to include Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Russia, and Turkey — never materialised after the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008.

If regional cooperation was one pillar of Turkey's Black Sea policy in the post-Cold War era, neutrality has been the second. While Turkey promoted Euro-Atlantic integration and simultaneously engaged with Russia through regional initiatives, it was also careful to avoid confrontation, given that Ankara heavily relied, and continues to rely, on Moscow to meet its energy needs. Its long-standing objections under the 1936 Montreux Convention<sup>2</sup> to the presence of non-littoral states — particularly the US — in the Black Sea, reflect its efforts to steer clear of conflict with Russia. This is also tied to Ankara's efforts to maintain the power balance in the Black Sea and confine it to regional dynamics.

Yet, in this regard, Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea was a critical point, as Moscow's control over the Black Sea significantly altered the balance. Moreover, as the conflict in and around the Black Sea has escalated, the reputational costs of adhering to the Montreux Convention have arguably increased for Ankara, especially in light of requests from its NATO allies, particularly the US, for concessions.<sup>3</sup> Regardless, Ankara adhered to its conventional position after Russia invaded Ukraine's territory on various fronts and prohibited the use of the Turkish Straits by belligerent states for naval traffic.<sup>4</sup> Then-Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu also declared that all littoral and non-littoral countries were discouraged from sending warships through the Straits.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, Turkey denied passage through the Bosphorus in December

2023 to two former Royal Navy minehunters that the United Kingdom (UK) had gifted to Ukraine. The following month, Ankara signed an agreement with Romania and Bulgaria — two Black Sea littoral states — to clear floating mines in the region.

## Balancing between Russia and the West

Turkish decision-makers view the war first as a conflict between Ukraine and Russia. Ankara has consistently condemned Russia's occupation and annexation of Ukrainian territory ever since the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014. The cultural and historical affinity of Turkey's ruling elites with the Crimean Tatars in Ukraine and Ankara's perception of Kyiv as a counterbalancing actor in the Black Sea are what primarily shape Ankara's commitment to Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty.

**Ankara regards Moscow not only as a potentially dangerous neighbour and a strategic competitor, but also as a counterbalance to its Western allies.**

Still, Turkey does not consider Russia to be a primary threat, despite the reference in the June 2025 Hague Summit Declaration of NATO — which Turkey signed — to “the long-term threat posed by Russia to Euro-Atlantic security”.<sup>6</sup> Ankara regards Moscow not only as a potentially dangerous neighbour and a strategic competitor, but also as a counterbalance to its Western allies. Upon being asked about Russia's withdrawal from the Black Sea Grain Initiative, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's comment that he trusts Russia “as much as the West” shows this dual scepticism.<sup>7</sup>

In the last decade, Turkey's relations with its Western allies have deteriorated due to Ankara's authoritarian turn, unilateral foreign policy, and transactional diplomacy — as was evident, among other things, in Turkey's foot-dragging over Sweden's bid for NATO membership. The mistrust predates Erdoğan but has taken a sharp turn under his leadership. Ankara believes that it cannot rely on its Western allies, as was confirmed by the perceived lack of solidarity

2 The Convention can be accessed at the link: <https://shorturl.at/eiHvx>.

3 Daria Isachenko and Göran Swistek, *The Black Sea as Mare Clausum: Turkey's Special Role in the Regional Security Architecture*, SWP Comment 33/2023 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, June 2023), doi: 10.18449/2023C33.

4 “Turkey Recognizes Russia's Invasion of Ukraine as a ‘War’, Says Will Implement Montreux Convention”, *Duvar English*, 28 February 2022, <https://shorturl.at/Jsr19>.

5 “Türkiye Warns All Countries against Warships Going through Turkish Straits”, *Anadolu Agency*, 28 February 2022, <https://shorturl.at/3SB81>.

6 NATO, “The Hague Summit Declaration”, press release (The Hague, 25 June 2025), <https://tinyurl.com/pf8nzb2d>.

7 Andrew Wilks, “Turkey's Erdogan Says He Trusts Russia as Much as He Trusts the West”, *Associated Press*, 19 September 2023, <https://rb.gy/mz2sv0>.

during the 2016 attempted coup and the US partnership with the People's Defense Units (YPG) dating back to the period between 2014 and 2016 as part of the international coalition against the Islamic State (ISIS) in Syria.<sup>8</sup> Russia's swift post-coup support to Ankara gave Turkey room to manoeuvre in Syria and fostered ongoing transactional cooperation, despite standing on opposing sides in numerous areas of strategic rivalry, including in Syria, Libya, and the Caucasus.

As a reflection of its frustration with its Western allies, primarily the US, and its aspirations to balance relations, Ankara views the war in Ukraine also as one between the West and Russia. Turkey's general critique of the post–Cold War global order and its advocacy for recalibrating relations between the West and the so-called Global South contribute to this view. In a TV interview aired in October 2022, İbrahim Kalın, then-Spokesperson of the Presidential Office and the current head of the National Intelligence Organisation (MİT), observed that “Russia calls for a new agreement to reconfigure the power balance at the international level with the awareness that the post–Cold War unipolar order does not function.”<sup>9</sup>

### Hedging economic and security interests with Kyiv and Moscow

Ankara has economic and security interests with both Kyiv and Moscow.<sup>10</sup> Ukraine represents a growing market for Turkish defence exports across land, air, and maritime sectors. Kyiv also contributes to their production. Ukrainian engines power Baykar's Akıncı and Kızılelma drones.<sup>11</sup> Owned by President

Erdoğan's son-in-law and one of Turkey's largest defence companies, Baykar is also constructing a drone production facility near Kyiv.<sup>12</sup> Turkish officials and analysts view the defence relationship with Ukraine as strategic, given that it is not merely limited to exports, but includes co-production and technology development.<sup>13</sup> Especially since the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014, defence and security cooperation between the two countries has become more prominent.

Yet, bilateral relations go far beyond the defence sector. Since the end of the Cold War, trade has been a constant pillar. In early 2022, the two countries signed a free trade agreement, although it has not yet been implemented. Turkish construction companies are active in Ukraine and eyeing reconstruction contracts.<sup>14</sup> Ankara also played a central mediating role in the 2022 Black Sea Grain Initiative, facilitating Ukrainian grain exports to global markets. As such, Ankara also promoted itself as a humanitarian actor on the global stage.<sup>15</sup> Russia withdrew from the initiative in July 2023.

Moscow is Turkey's second-largest import partner (after China), supplying natural gas, crude oil, and coal. Bilateral trade between the two countries surged in 2022 by nearly 200 per cent, primarily driven by increased energy imports.<sup>16</sup> Turkey has refrained from joining the EU's sanctions regime, adhering instead to its long-standing policy of only implementing sanctions authorised by the United Nations Security Council. Yet, it has also become a “strategic pit stop” for Russian fuel products, enabling Moscow to circumvent sanctions.<sup>17</sup> Russia owns, builds, and has the

8 Ankara sees the YPG as an affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which Turkey, the EU, and the US consider a terrorist organisation.

9 “Murat Çiçek ile Yüz Yüze/Cumhurbaşkanı Sözcüsü İbrahim Kalın” [Face to Face with Murat Çiçek/President's Spokesperson İbrahim Kalın], 24 TV, 11 October 2022, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n8OFcbwEB\\_4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n8OFcbwEB_4).

10 It should be noted that the term “Turkey First” is not an official designation employed by Turkish policymakers, diplomats, or academic experts; rather, it is an external analytical construct to characterise certain aspects of Turkish foreign policy.

11 Arda Mevlutoglu, “Turkish-Ukrainian Defence Cooperation: Drones, Engines, and More”, *Politics Today*, 22 December 2022, <https://kntn.ly/106071b7>.

12 “Turkey's Drone Maker Baykar Begins to Build Plant in Ukraine”, *Reuters*, 7 February 2024, <https://kntn.ly/af3ec5d1>.

13 Can Kasapoglu, “Turkey and Ukraine Boost Mutual Defense Ties”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor* (The Jamestown Foundation) 17, no. 162 (2020), <https://kntn.ly/a76f6166>.

14 “Ukraine's Reconstruction and the Development of Bilateral Relations: Volodymyr Zelensky Meets with Turkish Government and Business Representatives”, *President of Ukraine Official Website*, 13 March 2025, <https://kntn.ly/84c154b4>.

15 Diyar Guldogan, “Türkiye Helped Prevent Global Hunger Crisis with Black Sea Grain Deal: President Erdogan”, *Anadolu Agency*, 16 October 2023, <https://kntn.ly/e2d74b05>.

16 “Turkey Is Strengthening Its Energy Ties with Russia”, *New York Times*, 9 December 2022, <https://kntn.ly/9eeaac28>.

17 “How Turkey Became Putin's ‘Pit Stop’ for Selling Camouflaged Fuel to the EU”, *Politico*, 15 May 2024, <https://kntn.ly/8e53f1c3>.

operation rights over Turkey's first nuclear power plant, which is strategically located in the Mediterranean city of Mersin.<sup>18</sup>

## Recalibration of Turkish policy vis-à-vis Russia?

Ankara's exclusive control over the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus, coupled with its NATO membership, has so far enabled Turkey to maintain a degree of flexibility in navigating the space between Russia, Ukraine, and its Western allies. The Montreux Convention has allowed Turkey to maintain a position of power in relation to both its Western allies and Russia. At the same time, NATO membership has permitted Turkey to perform a balancing act between them. Consequently, the expectations in the immediate aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 — that this new phase would see Turkey align with its Western allies — did not come to fruition.

On the contrary, relations between Turkey and Russia grew stronger. The struggle for survival among Turkey's ruling elites may have also played a role in this. Shortly before the 2023 parliamentary and presidential elections in Turkey, Ankara and Moscow reportedly reached a deal that allowed the former to defer payments for a US\$600 million natural gas bill to the latter until 2024.<sup>19</sup> This deferral eased the pressure on Turkey's foreign reserves, which had been depleted by Ankara's insistence on an unorthodox monetary policy. The transfer of US\$15 billion of the Russian state corporation Rosatom to its subsidiary in Turkey for the completion of the Akkuyu nuclear power plant in 2022 — along with Vladimir Putin's offer that same year to make Turkey an energy hub — were also seen by experts as signs of Russia's support for Erdoğan.<sup>20</sup>

Erdoğan and his alliance won the 2023 elections, renewing their mandate to rule the country until 2028. Relations with Russia have since taken on an

ambiguous form. A week before Russia's withdrawal from the Black Sea Grain Initiative in July 2023 and without prior notification to Russia, Ankara returned to Ukraine five Ukrainian commanders of the Azov Regiment who had been held in Turkey as part of a prisoner exchange brokered by Turkey. Ankara approved Sweden's NATO membership bid a day earlier after postponing it for more than a year. Throughout 2023 and 2024, Turkey-Russia trade volumes declined as US (and UK) sanctions on Russia tightened.<sup>21</sup> This decline was partly the result of secondary US sanctions on the Russian state-owned energy corporation Gazprom and partly due to Turkey's efforts to diversify its energy sources. Recently, Ankara also reached agreements with US companies for liquified natural gas (LNG) supplies. In December 2024, alongside the UK, Turkey was the top destination for US LNG cargoes.<sup>22</sup>

Meanwhile, Putin's planned visit to Turkey in 2023 has not been realised to this day, reportedly because the Russian president demanded to fly to Turkey with Russian fighter jet escorts. Recently, Russia has also questioned Turkey's neutrality due to its weapon deliveries to Ukraine.<sup>23</sup> Lastly, the Astana format — involving Turkey, Russia, and Iran in Syria — effectively came to an end with the fall of Bashar al-Assad after a group of rebels led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham launched an offensive in December of 2024.

## Trump 2: Paradigm shift for Turkey?

Whether this series of events indicates a recalibration of Turkish policy towards Russia remains unclear. Ankara's cautious approach in not overtly confronting Russia, combined with its balancing act between Moscow and its Western allies, serves to maintain its regional power status and is structural. Yet, the regime's efforts to shape Turkish foreign and security policy for its own survival should not be overlooked. The authoritarian turn in the political system fosters a blatantly transactional attitude. In the face of an economic crisis and having reached the limits of its

<sup>18</sup> Elisabeth Gosselin-Malo, "Turkey's Russian-built Nuclear Plant Could Amplify Moscow's Regional Influence", *Al-Monitor*, 22 November 2022, <https://kntn.ly/ef88c853>.

<sup>19</sup> "Exclusive: Turkey Defers \$600 Million Russian Energy Payment under Deal", *Reuters*, 10 May 2023, <https://kntn.ly/3ddb9a3>.

<sup>20</sup> "Putin Lends Support for Erdogan Two Weeks Ahead of Turkey's Crucial Election", *The Arab Weekly*, 28 April 2023, <https://the arabweekly.com/putin-lends-support-erdogan-two-weeks-ahead-turkeys-crucial-election>.

<sup>21</sup> "Turkish Imports of Russian Oil Drop Nearly Fourfold after New Sanctions", *The Kyiv Independent*, 28 February 2025, <https://kntn.ly/083ae3b1>.

<sup>22</sup> "Turkey Top Destination for US LNG in December", *Global LNG Hub*, 26 February 2025, <https://kntn.ly/a7b436cb>.

<sup>23</sup> "Russia Criticizes Turkey for Supplying Weapons to Ukraine while Offering to Broker Peace", *Euronews*, 1 November 2024, <https://kntn.ly/69ef8e05>.



ambitions to develop an autonomous defence industry, it is no coincidence that Ankara has been seeking to improve its relations with its Western allies, particularly the US, since the 2023 elections. The EU is Turkey's largest export partner, and Ankara still needs its Western allies to procure high-technology and economies-of-scale defence industry components.<sup>24</sup>

Against this backdrop, Ankara sees both opportunities and risks in the Trump administration's approach to the war in Ukraine. On the one hand, Washington's determination to end the conflict is welcomed and viewed as a chance to eliminate the "mentality inherited from the Cold War based on hostility between the US and Russia".<sup>25</sup> Turkish officials have reiterated their offer to host negotiations,<sup>26</sup> emphasising their familiarity with Russia's and Ukraine's positions. Experts close to the Turkish government expect that a peace agreement between Ukraine and Russia would not only enhance Turkey's prestige, but also bring significant economic benefits, particularly by positioning Turkey as a key energy corridor between Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Middle East, and Europe.

On the other hand, Washington's asymmetrical approach<sup>27</sup> to Russia might risk disrupting Turkey's long-standing efforts to ensure a balanced power configuration in the Black Sea. Despite Ankara's criticism of the international order, it is unclear how much Turkey would welcome a revisionist upheaval steered by the US (and Russia). Especially in the Black Sea, Turkey is inherently a *status quo* actor.

In addition, given NATO's centrality to Turkey's security identity and geopolitical posturing, any future scenario that sees NATO weakened is a sufficient reason for Ankara to be worried. Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan described the shift

in US policy as a "wake-up call for us [Europeans] to unite and design our own centre of gravity".<sup>28</sup> He added that Turkey would want to be part of "a new European security architecture if NATO unravels".<sup>29</sup>

### Ankara seeks a seat at the table and aims to actively shape the revision of the European security architecture.

In fact, statements by Turkish officials emphasising EU membership as a strategic priority for Turkey or questioning Europe's "ability to maintain security without Turkey"<sup>30</sup> likely stem from anxiety about being left out. At the same time, the Turkish leadership considers itself to be in a favourable position — not least because of the geopolitical imperatives of the Trump administration. Convinced that European security is impossible without its engagement, Ankara seeks a seat at the table and aims to actively shape the revision of the European security architecture along three dimensions: a) maintaining NATO's relevance, b) enhancing defence and security cooperation with the EU in an institutionalised manner, and c) participating in European defence industry initiatives and frameworks.<sup>31</sup> Ankara has also shown interest in providing security guarantees to Ukraine — including the deployment of a peacekeeping force — should there be a comprehensive peace agreement with Russia. In principle, Ankara supports Ukraine's NATO membership while calling for a "realistic approach".<sup>32</sup>

24 Sıtkı Egeli et al., *From Client to Competitor: The Rise of Türkiye's Defence Industry* (London: The International Institute for Strategic Studies [IISS], May 2024), <https://kntn.ly/8256387d>.

25 Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Interview of H.E. Hakan Fidan, Minister of Foreign Affairs, CNN Turk", 9 April 2025 (in Turkish), press release (Istanbul, 9 April 2025), <https://kntn.ly/3b47ae29>.

26 Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye, "Türkiye Offers to Host Possible Ukraine-Russia Talks", press release (Istanbul, 24 February 2025), <https://tinyurl.com/yzfs45uc>.

27 Sabine Fischer, "Everything about Ukraine without Ukraine": *Peace Negotiations in Trump's Brave New World*, SWP Comment 14/2025 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, April 2025), doi: 10.18449/2025C14.

28 "The Ex-spymaster Shaping Turkey's Rise", *Financial Times*, 5 March 2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/b0d1d1ba-7689-4b65-8a54-613c0d30d4e7>.

29 Ibid.

30 "European Security 'Not Possible' without Türkiye: President Erdogan", *Anadolu Agency*, 25 March 2025.

31 "Fidan: If a New European Security Architecture Is to Be Established, It Cannot Be Done without Turkey" (in Turkish), *Independent Türkçe*, 27 February 2025; "President Erdoğan: 'Only Turkey Can Save the EU from the Deadlock It Has Fallen Into — from Economy to Defense, from Politics to International Reputation'" (in Turkish), *Anka Haber Ajansı*, 24 February 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/y45rh6jv>.

32 "Turkey Urges Realism on Ukraine's NATO Bid, Cites Security Concerns", *Anadolu Agency*, 24 February 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/536wwd2h>.



## Conclusion: A flexible partner in flux?

Even though it is unlikely that Turkey can still mediate between Kyiv and Moscow, the Trump administration's haste in pressuring Ukraine into ending the war, its efforts to normalise relations with Russia, and its calls for Europeans to assume greater responsibility for their own security — and that of Ukraine — have certainly brought Turkey back into the European debate on the future of the European security architecture. In February 2025 Ankara joined the London Summit of the “Coalition of the Willing”, an initiative proposed by the UK and France to strengthen support for Ukraine, including participating in a peacekeeping mission, provided it is based on a framework agreed upon by both parties. Turkey also reportedly declared its willingness to “assume responsibility for the maritime dimension” of a multinational military deployment in Ukraine.<sup>33</sup>

As NATO's second-largest army and the state with the longest coastline on the Black Sea, Turkey plays a strategic role. Its control over the access of warships to the Black Sea in times of war, as stipulated in the Montreux Convention, further underscores its significance. Turkey's growing defence industry — particularly its competitive edge in ammunition and unmanned aerial vehicles<sup>34</sup> — and its defence ties with various EU member states and Ukraine add to Ankara's relevance in discussions over a revised European security architecture.

Still, marked by strategic ambiguity and transactional diplomacy, Turkey is positioning itself as a pragmatic actor rather than a predictable ally in the evolving European security architecture. Although Ankara has aligned with NATO on key issues, such as supporting Ukraine's territorial integrity and facilitating grain exports, and is a loyal contributor to NATO missions, it has simultaneously deepened its economic and energy ties with Moscow. This dual-track approach allows Turkey, to a certain extent, to preserve its autonomy, leverage its geostrategic value, and extract concessions from both sides. As European security continues to be reshaped, Turkey is more likely to act as a flexible, interest-driven partner than

an outright veto player. Notably, there has been limited domestic debate in Turkey over whether Russia should be integrated into or excluded from a future European security framework. Ultimately, Ankara's willingness to cooperate will depend less on shared values than on the extent to which the calculations about its economic, security, and regional influence are accommodated.

33 “Planning for a Ukraine Cease-Fire, Turkey Hosts Talks on Black Sea Security”, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 16 April 2025, <https://kntn.ly/b9fd4b37>.

34 James Hackett and Ben Schreer, eds., *Building Defence Capacity in Europe: An Assessment*, (London: IISS, 2024), 59 and 70, <https://tinyurl.com/47kc6t3h>.

Tomáš Strážay

# Slovakia: One Country, Two Approaches to European Security

The escalation of Russia's aggression against Ukraine in February 2022 and consequent developments have significantly weakened the consensus on foreign and security policy priorities in Slovakia. Instead of one voice, two distinct approaches to security and defence policy have emerged. The same applies to the position of Ukraine within the European security architecture and the perception of Russia's place within it. The parties of the current government coalition, which came to power after the September 2023 elections, represent one point of view. The second perspective comes from the opposition parties, precisely those belonging to the "democratic" camp.<sup>1</sup>

## The 2023 elections as a turning point

With the exception of two periods (2010–2012 and 2020–2023), the Direction – Slovak Social Democracy (SMER – SSD) party has dominated all the governments established since 2006. These governments generally supported Slovakia's membership in the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and did not undermine it. This was also thanks to the fact that the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs was led by a professional diplomat who enjoyed a certain degree of autonomy in decision-making. Although critical voices within the government directed at the EU and NATO – as well as openly pro-Russian statements – have appeared in the past, these were mostly directed at the electorate and used as a mobilisation strategy for the significant pro-Russian segment of the population.

The positive views about Russia held by a significant part of the population are connected to the origins of Slovak nationalism, which has historically been based on a pro-Russian and anti-Western

worldview that is underpinned by a romanticised perception of Russia as a protector of all Slavic countries and guardian of "traditional" values. To some extent, such a view can be considered an expression of dissatisfaction with the country's economic and political situation, as well as a protest against the existing world order dominated by the collective West. Although the number of respondents with positive views about Russia decreased after 22 February 2022, it has remained at around 30 per cent in 2025.<sup>2</sup>

Prime Minister Robert Fico employed a "double-faced" policy, adopting different narratives on Russia in Brussels and at home. Even after the annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the military conflict in Donbas, the government did not reach a consensus on directly labelling Russia as a threat. This was also the reason why – despite all the changes to the global security environment – Slovakia had been following outdated security and defence strategies since 2007. New strategies were only adopted after the centre-right government was created in 2020.<sup>3</sup>

Between 2020 and 2023 Slovakia had three governments and three different prime ministers. Despite internal turbulence, the governments remained consistent in their foreign and security policy priorities. Following Russia's escalation of aggression against

<sup>2</sup> See Central European Institute of Asian Studies, *Navigating Uncertainty: Central European Public Opinion on Geopolitics in 2025* (Bratislava, 2 April 2025), <https://ceias.eu/central-europe-geopolitics-public-opinion-2025/>; see also Erika Harris, "Nation before Democracy? Placing the Rise of the Slovak Extreme Right into Context", *East European Politics* 35, no. 4 (2019): 101–20.

<sup>3</sup> Government of the Slovak Republic, *Security Strategy of the Slovak Republic* (Bratislava, 2021), [https://www.enisa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/ncss-map/strategies/additional-documents/SK\\_SECURITY\\_STRATEGY\\_2021\\_en.pdf](https://www.enisa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/ncss-map/strategies/additional-documents/SK_SECURITY_STRATEGY_2021_en.pdf); Government of the Slovak Republic, *Defence Strategy of the Slovak Republic* (Bratislava, 2021), [https://www.mosr.sk/data/files/4291\\_defence-strategy-of-the-slovak-republic-2021.pdf](https://www.mosr.sk/data/files/4291_defence-strategy-of-the-slovak-republic-2021.pdf).

<sup>1</sup> The focus is on those political parties that pass the 5 per cent threshold, according to various polls.

Ukraine in February 2022, Slovakia became one of the leaders in the processes that helped Ukraine to defend itself. Slovakia was the first country to provide Ukraine with its S-300 Soviet-type anti-aircraft missile system and its MiG-29 jets. It also exported artillery ammunition and other types of military equipment to Ukraine. It is estimated that Slovakia provided Ukraine with more than €1 billion worth of military equipment between February 2022 and December 2024.<sup>4</sup> In addition to providing practical support, Slovakia has actively backed Ukraine's ambitions to become an EU member state after being given candidate country status in June 2022. It was then Prime Minister Eduard Heger who raised this issue with his EU counterparts.<sup>5</sup>

The full-scale war between Russia and Ukraine has contributed significantly to the increase in political polarisation in Slovakia. The fact that the Slovak population is susceptible to conspiracy theories has made Slovakia fertile ground for the spreading of pro-Kremlin narratives.<sup>6</sup> The dissemination of misinformation by representatives of the SMER party also contributed to Fico's fourth electoral victory. SMER's manifesto set out the main elements of Slovakia's foreign and security policy under the new government, emphasising a sovereigntist peace policy oriented towards all four corners of the world (East, West, North, and South); the limiting of assistance to Ukraine to humanitarian aid and non-lethal military equipment; and opposing the separation of Russia from Europe with a new iron curtain.<sup>7</sup> These principles also form the backbone of the manifesto of the coalition government of SMER with Voice – Social Democracy (HLAS) and the Slovak National Party

(SNS), which was formed after the 2023 elections.<sup>8</sup>

The prime minister and his government fully identify with the concept of a foreign policy that presents Slovakia as a “bridge” between the West and the East, represented particularly by Russia. This concept was first pursued in the 1990s by the authoritarian prime minister at the time, Vladimír Mečiar, and it was denoted by its objection to the pro-Western, integrationist approach taken by the democratic opposition. Even nowadays, these two concepts continue to characterise the persisting dichotomy in Slovakia's foreign and security policy.

### Diverging views on cooperation with Russia

The current government coalition cannot be perceived as a monolith, as it consists of three different parties – the nationalist-conservative SMER and the even more radical SNS on the one hand, and the slightly more moderate HLAS party on the other. HLAS's electorate is visibly more pro-EU and, to a limited extent, pro-NATO.

The democratic opposition is made up of Progressive Slovakia (PS), Freedom and Solidarity (SaS), the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH), and the (populist) Slovakia Movement (Hnutie Slovensko). The right-wing extremist Republika party significantly differs from the rest, as it opposes Slovakia's EU and NATO memberships and openly supports Russia's aggressive attack on Ukraine. Despite its popularity in the polls – with support oscillating around 10 per cent – Republika failed to enter parliament after the 2023 elections, as it did not pass the 5 per cent threshold.

All three parties and their representatives are pursuing a cooperative policy towards Russia. Both SMER and SNS would disagree with the statement that Russia's aggression was unprovoked. They highlight the problematic nature of NATO's eastward expansion but also point to Ukraine's alleged failure to protect the rights of its ethnic Russian population as a key reason for Russia's military action. In a 2024 poll, only 41 per cent of respondents said Russia was mainly

4 See Alexander Duleba, “The Two Faces of Robert Fico: Slovakia and Russia's War against Ukraine”, *Osteuropa* 74, no. 11 – 12 (2024): 81 – 92, <https://biblioscout.net/journal/oe>.

5 “Slovakia Pushes for ‘Special Track’ for Ukraine toward Joining EU”, *Politico*, 27 February 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/slovakia-pushes-for-new-eu-track-for-ukraine/>.

6 According to a 2020 poll conducted by GLOBSEC, 56 per cent of Slovaks believed in conspiracy theories and misinformation narratives. This percentage was far higher than in the other nine East-Central European countries. See Dominika Hajdu and Katarína Klingová, *Voices of Central and Eastern Europe: Perceptions of Democracy & Governance in 10 EU Countries* (Bratislava: GLOBSEC, 23 June 2020), <https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/publications/voices-central-and-eastern-europe-perceptions-democracy-governance-10-eu>.

7 SMER, *Manifesto* (Bratislava, 3 April 2023), <https://www.strana-smer.sk/aktuality/blogy/post/volby-2023>.

8 Government of the Slovak Republic, *Programové vyhlásenie vlády Slovenskej republiky 2023 – 2027* [Programme Statement of the Government of the Slovak Republic 2023 – 2027], [https://www.vlada.gov.sk/site/assets/files/1694/programove\\_vyhlasenie\\_vlady\\_sr.pdf](https://www.vlada.gov.sk/site/assets/files/1694/programove_vyhlasenie_vlady_sr.pdf).

responsible for starting the war against Ukraine. Meanwhile, 31 per cent said the West had provoked Russia, while 20 per cent said Ukraine was responsible for oppressing the Russian-speaking population.<sup>9</sup> Both parties would assign Russia an important role in the future European security architecture, arguing that it has always shaped European security. Generally, a return to multilateralism — in which Russia would play an integral role — could be seen as the preferred option. In this context, the minister of foreign and European affairs even suggested that Russia “should perhaps be forgiven”.<sup>10</sup> As an example, he cited the reintegration of Germany into the international system after the Second World War.

Although all the democratic opposition parties take a critical stance on Russia, some differences in their approaches can be identified. For instance, the KDH mention Russia’s position as a “partner not only to Slovakia, but to the entire EU” in its election programme, but the authors of the document admit that, for the time being, this is just wishful thinking.<sup>11</sup> The Slovakia Movement describes Russia as a country that is historically and culturally close to Europe and believes that any form of dialogue with Russia should not be ruled out in the future. Sanctions against Russia are considered an instrument of pressure that should lead to a ceasefire and peace, and no party in the opposition has challenged them on this point. The SaS party is even considering the option of expelling Russia from the UN Security Council if other partners are willing to do so.<sup>12</sup>

## Ukraine – friend or foe?

Although the rhetoric of most government representatives, including the prime minister himself, has become increasingly offensive towards Ukraine, the real impact on Slovak-Ukrainian relations has not been as destructive as one might expect. It is a fact that Slovakia continues to deliver military equipment to Ukraine on a commercial basis.<sup>13</sup> The Slovak military industry has experienced a remarkable boom, particularly in terms of ammunition production.<sup>14</sup> Unlike Budapest, Bratislava has agreed to EU-level sanctions packages against Russia, despite questioning their effectiveness.

**Foreign policy is a victim of domestic policy since the government needs the support of the pro-Russian segment of the population.**

However, prior to his trip to Paris in February 2024, Prime Minister Fico revealed the details of a closed-door meeting of European leaders regarding assistance to Ukraine that was organised by the French president, Emmanuel Macron. This cost Slovakia its participation privileges in this informal group of like-minded countries.<sup>15</sup> Since then, Slovakia has not been invited to any meetings or initiatives aimed at supporting Ukraine. Trips to Russia by the

9 GLOBSEC, *GLOBSEC Trends 2024: CEE: A Brave New Region?* (Bratislava, 30 April 2024), <https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/GLOBSEC%20TRENDS%202024.pdf>.

10 “Rusku by sme možno mali odpustiť, vyhlásil Blanár. Na jeho slová ostro reagoval šéf ukrajinskej diplomacie” [Perhaps We Should Forgive Russia, Blanár Declared. The Head of Ukrainian Diplomacy Reacted Sharply to His Words], *Pravda*, 30 June 2025, <https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/757696-rusku-by-sme-mozno-mali-odpustit-vyhlasil-blanar-na-jeho-slova-ostro-reagoval-sef-ukrajinskej-diplomacie/>.

11 KDH, *Manifesto* (Bratislava, 2023), <https://kdh.sk/volebny-program-kdh/>.

12 SaS, *Manifesto* (Bratislava, 2023), <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1LtK9nyf9R11KKWEbGn3ro3I0zAqbavwk/view>.

13 According to the SME Daily, Slovakia delivered at least €112 million worth of military equipment to Ukraine between October 2023 and June 2024. See Michal Katuška, “Prečo Fico napriek sľubom vojenskú pomoc Ukrajině úplne nezastaví?” [Why Is Fico Not Completely Stopping Military Aid to Ukraine Despite His Promises?], *SME Daily*, 1 November 2023, <https://domov.sme.sk/c/23238526/ukrajina-vojna-pomoc-slovensko-fico-nova-vlada.html?ref=av-center>.

14 Office of the Government of the Slovak Republic, “Premiér: Nastal obrovský rozmach obranného priemyslu a výroby munície v SR” [Prime Minister: There Has Been a Huge Boom in the Defense Industry and Ammunition Production in Slovakia], press release (Bratislava, 29 May 2025), <https://www.vlada.gov.sk/tlacove-spravy/premier-nastal-obrovsky-rozmach-obranneho-priemyslu-a-vyroby-municie-v-sr/>.

15 Office of the Government of the Slovak Republic, “Premiér: V Paríži bola čisto bojová atmosféra, nepadlo ani slovo o mieri” [Prime Minister: There Was a Purely Combative Atmosphere in Paris, Not a Word Was Said about Peace], press release (Bratislava, 26 February 2024), <https://www.vlada.gov.sk/tlacove-spravy/premier-v-pari-bola-isto-bojov-atmosfera-nepadlo-ani-slovo-o-mieri-90/?csrt=2273581930451321120>.

prime minister and members of his team, as well as deputies from SMER and SNS, together with the participation of the Russian ambassador in government-organised events, have also damaged Slovakia's image as a committed partner and ally to other EU and NATO members. In this case, foreign policy is a victim of domestic policy, as the government needs to maintain the support of the pro-Russian segment of the population to remain in power.

Supporting Ukraine with all necessary means is a non-negotiable issue for the democratic opposition parties. Recognising Ukraine as a sovereign country with clearly defined borders is considered a prerequisite for future talks on a post-war security order in Europe. Under the current circumstances, all parties of the democratic opposition agree that it will be difficult to restart a dialogue with Russia on security issues.

Finally, there are disagreements within the current coalition and with the political opposition regarding Ukraine's future. SMER and HLAS would support Ukraine's accession to the EU if it were to meet the criteria. On the other hand, SNS opposes such an approach. All three parties are united in their rejection of Ukraine's possible NATO membership. The government also opposes sending troops into Ukrainian territory as part of a future security guarantee. SMER and SNS perceive Ukraine as an unstable neighbour and troublemaker, particularly regarding its role in cutting Slovakia off from Russian gas and oil. This position is based on accepting Russia's narratives regarding the war in Ukraine and its origins. However, the situation in Ukraine is also viewed as an opportunity for Slovak companies to engage in post-war reconstruction. Emerging business opportunities and the development of Eastern regions in Slovakia that border Ukraine are considered incentives for the government to continue supporting Ukraine's EU membership.

Membership of Ukraine in the EU is widely supported among the parties of the democratic opposition because Ukraine could provide additional security guarantees for the country. However, these parties and their representatives are more cautious when Ukraine's accession to NATO is mentioned. The Slovakia Movement, for instance, prefers a gradual integration of Ukraine into NATO.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Hnutie Slovensko/OLANO, *Manifesto* (Bratislava, 2023), <https://www.obycajniludia.sk/volebny-program-2023/>.

## The EU and NATO as the main playgrounds

Prime Minister Fico has addressed the changing world order in his statements, noting that new powers are gaining more influence. This is also used to legitimise his “four directions” foreign policy. Therefore, adjusting multilateralism to the new geopolitical reality is considered a must, as it would enable big countries in the Global South to have a stronger influence on global affairs. However, Slovakia supported the conclusions of the 2025 Hague Summit without comment and committed to fulfilling agreed-upon goals, including increasing defence spending to 5 per cent of GDP. The government also supports the strengthening of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) while preserving the “specificities” of individual member states.<sup>17</sup> Slovakia's ambition to become a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council for the 2028–29 term shows that the organisation is still highly credible for the country.

Compared to other government counterparts, HLAS emphasises the importance of the EU and NATO as vital spaces for Slovakia and guarantors of its security and economic prosperity. This position is intended to appeal to more moderate supporters of the government. All three coalition partners also emphasise strengthening domestic defence capabilities and the ability to maintain a strong, operational army as an integral part of collective defence.

### Political parties in the democratic opposition camp consider NATO to be the backbone of European security.

Political parties in the democratic opposition camp consider NATO to be the backbone of European security and want to make Slovakia an active member of the alliance again. They share the same values as the other members and support the goals adopted at the 2025 NATO summit in The Hague. According to them, strengthening Slovakia's defence capabilities is inseparable from Slovakia's active engagement in NATO and its constructive participation in decision-making processes.

They strongly support the strengthening of the EU's CSDP and its strategic autonomy, but not at the expense of a well-functioning NATO. Complementarity could therefore be the leading principle that charac-

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.



terises the relationship between the EU and NATO. To strengthen the EU and its efforts to become a more autonomous actor, the leading opposition party — Progressive Slovakia — proposes introducing qualified majority voting to foreign and security policy areas.<sup>18</sup> However, this approach is not supported by others. For instance, KDH builds its EU policy on the strengthening of the sovereignty of member states through joint actions.

Though the fourth Fico government has not officially challenged Slovakia's membership in either the EU or NATO, it is impossible to overlook the increasing number of verbal assaults on both organisations. These attacks primarily aim to mobilise voters with pro-Russian, anti-EU, anti-Ukrainian, anti-NATO, and generally anti-Western sentiments. However, an increase in the intensity of this rhetoric and further radicalisation could create a spillover effect with negative consequences for Slovakia's membership in both organisations. Despite continuously using anti-EU and anti-NATO rhetoric, the government will most likely avoid actions that directly threaten Slovakia's memberships in the EU and NATO. Participation in NATO will nevertheless be limited to "must do" activities. Even so, a significant portion of government officials, including the president, recognise that, under the current circumstances, neutrality is not a viable option.

## Recognition of the US role, different attitudes on China

Attitude towards the United States (US) changed significantly with the election of Donald Trump as president in 2024. SMER and SNS politicians replaced the active spread of anti-Americanism throughout the electorate with efforts towards a strongly cooperative approach to the new president's administration. This is mostly due to the fact that the representatives of both parties identify with Trump's authoritarian policy-making as well as agreed with his initial attitude regarding Ukraine.

President Trump's initiative to negotiate a peace agreement between Russia and Ukraine is also sup-

ported. The cancellation of the Agreement on Defence Cooperation between the Government of the United States and the Government of the Slovak Republic — a framework agreement to implement all facets of defence cooperation that the US was offering to its partners (including investments in the partners' defence capabilities and infrastructure),<sup>19</sup> concluded by the previous Slovak government at the beginning of 2022 and rejected by SMER, HLAS, and SNS — is no longer on the agenda. The only party that continues to call for withdrawal from the treaty is (smallest) SNS.<sup>20</sup>

Despite the challenges posed by the new administration of President Trump, the US is regarded as a key partner by the democratic opposition, especially with regard to security. Opposition political parties agree that maintaining US engagement in NATO is strategically important and necessary. At the same time, EU member states should strive to strengthen their own capabilities, become adequate partners to the US in NATO, and achieve greater autonomy in general.

The Slovak government perceives China as an important global actor, primarily in economic terms. The first two significant investments by Chinese investors have been in the automotive and electromobility sectors but neither has been finalised. The prospect of other major investments from China is questionable. Nevertheless, Prime Minister Fico called his trip to China in 2024 the most important visit of the year.

By emphasising a values-based foreign policy, the opposition parties are also addressing relations with China. They all perceive China as an important economic partner as well as a global competitor and systemic rival. KDH uses the strongest language. In their election manifesto, they openly refer to China as a long-term, complex threat to the West.<sup>21</sup> The Slovakia Movement would prefer to pursue closer relations with Taiwan than with China.<sup>22</sup>

19 Ministry of Defence of the Slovak Republic, *Agreement on Defense Cooperation between the Government of the United States and the Government of the Slovak Republic* (Bratislava, 12 January 2022), <https://www.mosr.sk/50871-en/dohoda-o-spolupraci-v-oblasti-obrany-medzi-vladou-slovenskej-republiky-a-vladou-spojenych-statov-americkych/>.

20 "We will analyze the possibility of cancelling the bilateral treaty on military and defence cooperation with the US." See SNS, *Manifesto* (Bratislava, 2023), [https://www.sns.sk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/VP\\_Web.pdf](https://www.sns.sk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/VP_Web.pdf).

21 KDH, *Manifesto* (see note 11).

22 Hnutie Slovensko/OLANO, *Manifesto* (see note 16).

18 "At the EU level we will support the transition to a qualified majority voting in select areas of foreign and defence policy, among other issues", PS, *Manifesto* (Bratislava, 2023), <https://progresivne.sk/programy/europska-a-zahranicna-politika-humanitarna-pomoc/>.



## A polarised country with a divided foreign policy

The Slovak case is quite complex, and the future positioning of Slovakia in the European security architecture depends largely on the outcome of the next elections, which will determine whether the current government coalition or the democratic opposition wins. According to recent opinion polls, both camps have almost equal support, though the latest polls show slightly more support for the parties of the so-called democratic opposition.<sup>23</sup>

If the same or a similar government remains in power in the years to come, Russia will be perceived as a partner for cooperation, even if the war with Ukraine continues. Russia will be presented as an important global actor, and therefore the need to establish a dialogue with Moscow will be emphasised. There will probably be a preference to re-establish “business as usual” with Russia as soon as possible, regardless of the cost. This would essentially mean returning to a certain kind of multilateralism, with international organisations such as the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe playing their respective roles. Additionally, the necessity to adequately reflect upon the increasing role of new global powers will be highlighted.

Considering the weakening position of Slovakia in both the EU and NATO, as well as its structural characteristics as a small country, it is unlikely to play an active role in creating a new order. This is despite the prime minister’s unilateral efforts to mediate between Russia and the EU. The Slovak government is not anticipated to thwart joint initiatives adopted at the EU or NATO levels, but rather to take on the role of agenda-follower, assuming that a diversity of views will continue to be accepted. Therefore, preserving the unanimity voting procedure is and will be emphasised. The government’s policy will certainly not be value-oriented, but rather based on transactionalism, or the “new pragmatism”. Relations with the US will be of strategic importance, thanks in part to the US position in the energy sector (e.g. develop-

ment of a new nuclear power plant) and defence sector (e.g. delivery of military equipment from the US). The country would aim to strengthen ties with other third parties, including China, but cooperation will mostly be limited to the economic realm.

If the future government of Slovakia is composed of the democratic opposition parties, a return to unequivocal support for Ukraine by all means is expected. Slovakia will view Ukraine as an integral part of the European security architecture, with established security guarantees. This includes developing strategic relations with NATO rather than pursuing membership. Russia will continue to be viewed as a security threat to Slovakia and Europe. Therefore, the need for adequate security guarantees for Ukraine and the entire EU that would deter Russia from its expansionist policies will be emphasised. The peace process between Ukraine and Russia will only be supported if it does not go against Ukraine’s interests. NATO, with a strong European pillar, will be considered the backbone of European security, and Slovakia will become interested in actively contributing to it. Nevertheless, this would not exclude supporting the parallel development of processes leading to the EU’s strategic autonomy. The US will continue to be perceived as a strategic partner and the most important contributor to European security. In this scenario, Slovakia intends to become an active follower, or, together with other like-minded countries, a shaper of processes leading to a new security architecture in Europe.

**An above-partisan consensus on Slovakia’s role in developing the future European security architecture will be difficult to achieve.**

Considering the differences between the current government and the opposition, it is unlikely that an above-partisan consensus will be reached on Slovakia’s role in developing the future Europe security architecture, regardless of the results of the next parliamentary elections. For now, EU and NATO membership can be considered common ground, but the understanding of Slovakia’s role varies from party to party. In the years to come, Slovakia will remain a politically polarised — or even fragmented — country with a divided foreign policy, which is not good for the cohesiveness of both the EU and NATO.

<sup>23</sup> See, for instance, Ako, *Prieskum volebných preferencií do NR SR – JÚL 2025* [Survey of Voting Preferences for the National Council of the Slovak Republic – July 2025] (Bratislava, 24 July 2025), [https://ako.sk/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/ag.AKO\\_VOLEBNE-PREF-JUL-2025-tlacova-sprava.pdf](https://ako.sk/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/ag.AKO_VOLEBNE-PREF-JUL-2025-tlacova-sprava.pdf); Focus Research, “Volebné preferencie politických strán – júl 2025” [Voting Preferences for Political Parties – July 2025] (Bratislava, September 2025), <https://www.focus-research.sk/>.

András Rácz

# Hungary: Towards the End of Its Russian Orientation?

The increasingly pronounced pro-Russian orientation of successive Orbán governments since 2010 is a result of ideological as well as pragmatic economic considerations, creating a considerable path dependency and limiting Viktor Orbán's room for manoeuvre. As a result, the Hungarian government envisions Russia becoming an integral part of a new European security system — though Budapest has never clarified the institutional details of how this would work in practice — while Ukraine remains outside of it as a buffer zone. However, the upcoming April 2026 parliamentary elections could change all of this. Should Orbán remain in power, his firmly Russia-friendly and anti-Ukrainian foreign policy will certainly continue, alongside the growing isolation of Hungary within the European Union (EU). In this case, Hungary will increasingly become an outlier in any emerging European security order by pushing for the inclusion of Moscow, continuing to represent Moscow's interests, and hampering Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration. However, should the opposition win, a fundamental change is likely to emerge in Hungary's foreign policy, and Budapest will begin realigning policy vis-à-vis Russia and Ukraine with that of the EU. Hence, this chapter examines the foreign policy approaches of the ruling party as well as the opposition force, TISZA (Respect and Freedom Party), describing two alternative visions in Hungary regarding Russia and Ukraine.

## A possible turning point in Hungary's authoritarian trajectory

Orbán has had successive terms as prime minister of Hungary since 2010, and during most of this period he has ruled with a constitutional supermajority. The transformation of Hungary's domestic political system into a consolidated autocracy in this interval is

well documented.<sup>1</sup> The gradual, increasingly authoritarian transformation of the Hungarian political system since 2010 in many regards has closely followed patterns seen earlier in Russia. Similar to Vladimir Putin, from 2010 onwards successive Orbán governments centralised much of the Hungarian media space, took over formally independent oversight bodies, and subdued most of the country's oligarchs.<sup>2</sup>

Russia was held up as a model shortly after Orbán's re-election in April 2014. In his speech delivered at Băile Tuşnad in the summer of 2014,<sup>3</sup> Orbán proclaimed his will to build an "illiberal democracy" and named Russia, China, Turkey, and a number of other countries as models of non-Western, non-liberal political systems, yet still successful states. Although the speech did not indicate a geopolitical re-orientation towards Moscow — as Orbán only endorsed Russia's non-liberal way of ruling — the message was still radically different from those of other member states of the EU and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In the 11 years that have passed since, Orbán has referred several times to Russia as a successful, stable, and desirable political model. This appreciation of Russia manifests also in the frequent personal meetings between Orbán and Putin.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Zsuzsanna Szelenyi, *Tainted Democracy: Viktor Orbán and the Subversion of Hungary* (London: Hurst, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Balint Magyar, *Post-Communist Mafia State: The Case of Hungary* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Government of Hungary, "Orbán Viktor: A Munkaalapú Állam Korszaka Következik" [Viktor Orbán: An Era of the Work-Based State Is to Come, in Hungarian] (Budapest: Prime Minister's Office, 28 July 2014), <https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/hu/a-miniszterelnok/beszedekek-publikaciok-interjuk/a-munkaalapu-allam-korszaka-kovetkezik>.

<sup>4</sup> Molnár Zoltán, "Orbán to Putin: We Do Not Feel Safe, We See the Images of War and Destruction", *Telex.hu*, 5 July 2024, <https://telex.hu/english/2024/07/05/orban-to-putin-hungary-is-the-only-country-in-europe-that-can-talk-to-everyone>.

Meanwhile, this authoritarian turn has created significant conflicts with the EU concerning the rule of law in Hungary. Successive Orbán governments — driven primarily by considerations about regime security — prioritised maintaining their authoritarian rule while factoring in confrontation with the EU. Orbán's personal grievances vis-à-vis several EU leaders — including the presidents of the Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker and Ursula von der Leyen — have played an integral part in this approach. Hence, relations with the EU have become increasingly tense, resulting in the suspension of most EU funds for Hungary in 2022. Combined with structural problems, the absence of EU funds has led to stagnation in the Hungarian economy for the last three years.<sup>5</sup>

The close ties between Orbán and Donald Trump — along with the right flank of the Republican Party — have not altered this economic trend, despite Trump's return to power in 2024. Orbán has long perceived Trump both as an ideological ally and a legitimising factor, as Trump has never criticised Hungary's domestic political system, unlike the confrontational Biden administration. However, ideological affinity has not resulted in any substantial economic benefits so far.

Hungary's next parliamentary elections are scheduled to take place in April 2026. Unlike in the previous four elections, there is a powerful challenger to Orbán, a newly established political party called TISZA, founded in 2024. The party is led by a former ruling party insider, Péter Magyar, who broke from Orbán and swiftly became his main rival, attracting support from large segments of society.

### **Magyar and TISZA perceive themselves as inherent parts of Europe and reject the Russia-orientation of Orbán.**

As of September 2025, all independent pollsters are showing that TISZA is leading in public opinion polls, but the election is still six months away. Based on what little is known about the foreign policy priorities of TISZA, their main objective is to regain access to EU funds. Consequently, it is safe to assume that if

they win the elections, they will enact a foreign policy that is fundamentally different from Orbán's. Besides the pragmatic considerations described above, ideological backgrounds also differ, as Magyar and TISZA present themselves as inherently European and reject the Russia-orientation of Orbán.

### **Difficulties in analysing Hungarian foreign and security policy**

The systemic lack of transparency about the decision-making mechanisms of the Hungarian government — including those affecting foreign policy — makes any data-based research extremely complicated. There is an absence of up-to-date strategic documents on foreign and security policy. The National Security Strategy was adopted in April 2020 and has not been updated since then, despite Russia's large-scale aggression against Ukraine, Hungary's neighbour, in February 2022. The National Military Strategy is similarly outdated, unchanged since 2021. The *Hungarian Foreign Policy Yearbook* — a comprehensive and renowned official annal that had been published since 1968 — ceased to exist following the 2010 issue.

Excessive and growing secrecy about governmental decision-making is another part of the problem. As a result, researchers have very few primary sources of information to study Hungarian foreign policy decision-making. The eminent foreign policy analyst Botond Feledy called Hungary's decision-making in this area an “unexplorable black box” already in 2018,<sup>6</sup> and this assessment is not any less valid today.

Somewhat paradoxically, a highly informative source is a book<sup>7</sup> published by the political director and chief strategist of the prime minister, Balázs Orbán (not related), about Hungary's foreign policy. Published originally in 2023, the volume describes Hungary's foreign policy approach as a “strategy of connectivity”, arguing that the current global trends towards a decoupling of East and West and the forma-

5 Gergely Csiki, “Megjött a kormány új GDP-prognózisa, 1%-ot vár az NGM 2025-re” [The New GDP Forecast of the Government Has Arrived: NGM Expects 1 per cent for 2025], *Portfolio.hu*, 29 July 2025, <https://www.portfolio.hu/gazdasag/20250729/megjott-a-kormany-uj-gdp-prognozisa-1-ot-var-az-ngm-2025-re-776825>.

6 Botond Feledy, “Feltárhatatlan Fekete Doboz? Egy hiperpragmatikus külpolitika kockázatai” [An Unexplorable Black Box? Risks of a Hyper-pragmatic Foreign Policy], in *Hegymenet: Társadalmi és politikai kihívások Magyarországon* [An Uphill Passage: Social and Political Challenges in Hungary], ed. András Jakab and László Urbán (Budapest 2017, Osiris), 111–29, <https://socialreflection.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/06.-FELEDY-BOTOND-Felt%C3%A1rhatatlan-fekete-doboz.pdf>.

7 Balázs Orbán, *Hussar Cut: The Hungarian Strategy for Connectivity* (Budapest: MCC Press, 2024).

tion of blocs are not beneficial for Hungary. So, instead of choosing sides, Budapest needs to maintain equally good, pragmatic, transactional relations with all sides. Though the text completely ignores the legal and normative foreign policy commitments stemming from Hungary's membership in the EU and NATO, and avoids reckoning with Russia's open hostility towards the West, the "connectivity" logic reflects some of Hungary's foreign policy decisions.

### Path dependency towards Russia: A long-lasting vulnerability

In addition to domestic political considerations, namely Orbán's willingness to rule in an illiberal way, one could argue that the 15 years of Hungary's pro-Russian foreign policies have created a strong path dependency. The long-term effects of this pro-Russian orientation are most visible in the energy sector. In 2021 approximately 62 per cent of Hungary's oil imports originated from Russia. However, as of September 2025, the rate reached 92 per cent.<sup>8</sup> So, while other countries of the Central-Eastern European region stepped up diversification efforts already after 2014 – but particularly following the invasion in 2022 – Budapest increased its share of Russian crude oil imports,<sup>9</sup> motivated by the profits to be acquired due to the price gap between Urals and Brent oils. In addition, through an intermediary company that was included in the oil import contract between Russia and Hungary, there have been hundreds of millions of euros siphoned off,<sup>10</sup> which likely constitutes another motive to maintain energy dependency.

This reliance is similarly strong in terms of nuclear energy, as it constitutes approximately 40 per cent of Hungary's electricity generation capacity. The country's only nuclear power plant is an ex-Soviet facility

in Paks. Hungary contracted Rosatom in 2014 to build two new nuclear reactor blocks for the Paks facility, to be financed from a €10 billion credit line from Russia. The contract was finalised already after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, but the Orbán government made no objections to it. This was in sharp contrast with Czechia, as Prague suspended cooperation with Rosatom after 2014 and completely ended it in 2022. Meanwhile, Hungary has continued to work with Rosatom, even though the price of the new reactor blocks has increased considerably. One likely motive is that there are oligarchs very close to Orbán among the main subcontractors of the construction project.<sup>11</sup>

The situation is somewhat similar with gas imports: Hungary signed a new 15-year gas import contract with Gazprom in the autumn of 2021. As of 2025, approximately 70 per cent of Hungary's gas is imported from Russia, mostly via the TurkStream pipeline, but from August 2025 onward Budapest also began buying Russian liquefied natural gas via Belgium, Poland, and Germany.<sup>12</sup>

Successive Orbán governments have long been lenient towards Russia's malign influence efforts, and this has not changed even following the full-scale invasion. Russian intelligence services had repeatedly hacked the IT systems of the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade even before 2022, but trade minister Péter Szijjártó did nothing to counter the threat.<sup>13</sup> He even accepted a high-ranking state decoration, the Order of Friendship, from his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov, in 2021. Hungary has been the only EU country to not have decisively

11 Gábor Kovács, "Végignéztük a paksi szerződéseket: Mészáros Lőrincnek a takarítás jutott" [We Went Through the Paks Contract: Companies of Lorinc Meszaros Got Cleaning Jobs], *hvg.hu*, 13 July 2024, [https://hvg.hu/360/20240713\\_paks-paksi-bovites-szerzodesek-meszaros-lorinc-balasy-gyulener](https://hvg.hu/360/20240713_paks-paksi-bovites-szerzodesek-meszaros-lorinc-balasy-gyulener).

12 "Betiltaná az EU, a magyar kormány mégis most vett először orosz LNG-t" [The EU Would Ban It, but Hungarian Government Bought Russian LNG for the First Time], *24.hu*, 27 August 2025, <https://24.hu/fn/gazdasag/2025/08/27/lng-foldgaz-gaz-orosz-magyar-energia-gazar-ttf-vlagyimir-putyin/>.

13 Panyi Szabolcs, "Putyin hekkerei is látják a magyar külügy titkait, az Orbán-kormány évek óta nem bírja elhárítani őket" [Putin's Hackers Also Have Access to Hungarian Foreign Affairs Secrets, and the Orbán Government Has Been Unable to Stop Them for Years], *Direkt36*, 29 March 2022, <https://www.direkt36.hu/putyin-hekkerei-is-latjak-a-magyar-kulugy-titkait-az-orban-kormany-evек-ota-nem-birja-elharitani-oket/>.

8 Péter Bucskey, "G7: Már Az Olaj 92 Százalékát Vesszük Oroszországtól, a Haszonból Putyin Köreinek Is Juthat" [We Are Already Buying 92 Per cent of the Oil from Russia, Part of the Profit May Go to Putin's Circles], *Telex.hu*, 9 January 2025, <https://telex.hu/g7/2025/09/01/orosz-olajimport-mol-normeston-profit-svajc-kozvetito>.

9 Gábor Kiss, "Miért Ragaszkodik a Magyar Kormány Az Orosz Olajimporthoz?" [Why Does the Hungarian Government Stick to Oil Import from Russia?], *Euronews.com*, 28 May 2025, <https://hu.euronews.com/2025/05/28/magyar-kormany-orosz-olajimport-mol>.

10 Bucskey, "G7: Már Az Olaj 92" (see note 8).

reduced the number of Russian embassy personnel since the 2022 invasion.

This close relationship is particularly visible in the field of media operations. Hungary's state media apparatus has often broadcast negative propaganda about Ukraine taken directly from Russian sources. Hungary's troubled history vis-à-vis Russia — which includes the crushing of the 1956 revolution — constitutes no limits to the adoption of Russian narratives. Cooperation in the media sector is so intensive that, in some cases, it is Russian state media that adopts anti-Ukrainian narratives from Hungary.<sup>14</sup>

The enduring reluctance to decrease dependence on Moscow leads to the question as to whether Budapest could have moved away from the firmly pro-Russian position, had the political will been there to do so. However, due to the lack of credible primary sources of information and the excessive secrecy described above, this question cannot be answered with any certainty.

### The United States as the main pillar of the European security order

Parallel to the conflicts with the EU in relation to the rule of law, Budapest has long been extremely sceptical about Europe's own ability to act as a meaningful security actor or to establish any form of strategic autonomy. These assumptions have become considerably stronger since the start of the full-scale war against Ukraine. The National Security Strategy and National Military Strategy mentioned above, both from the pre-2022 era, were much more optimistic about Europe's ability to provide for its own security.

**Orbán perceives that Europe's security can be guaranteed exclusively via very strong cooperation with the United States.**

Instead, Orbán perceives that Europe's security can be guaranteed exclusively via very strong cooperation with the US. This approach has become more prominent since the re-election of Trump, but it was already present in the Biden and Obama eras, though less explicitly. In line with this approach, Hungary favours a

strong NATO and is actively fulfilling all NATO obligations.

A particularity of successive Orbán governments is that, contrary to the conflictual EU relations, Hungary has always strived to be a reliable NATO ally, contributing to all important operations of the Alliance. In contrast to the consistent hampering of EU actions on Ukraine, Hungary has not blocked any NATO policies supporting Ukraine since the beginning of the full-scale invasion. Its military-to-military cooperation is excellent with other NATO allies, including also those that are actively supporting Ukraine.

There are, however, limits to this support. Hungary has consistently refused to provide Ukraine with any lethal military assistance and regularly condemns such actions as “only elongating the war and suffering”<sup>15</sup>. However, Hungary has made a few smaller-scale and less public moves to help Ukraine in some military-related areas: Budapest has trained Ukrainian combat medics<sup>16</sup> and treated wounded Ukrainian soldiers. There are also — officially never confirmed — rumours among diplomats serving in Budapest about Hungarian ammunition factories delivering shells to Ukraine via third countries.<sup>17</sup>

In line with Hungary's unwillingness to provide military assistance, Budapest did not join the “Coalition of the Willing” set up in early 2025 either, though Hungarian officials are present in the Ramstein format. Consistent with the “we need to stay out of the war” narrative, it is extremely unlikely that the Orbán government would contribute to such a force, should the European Coalition of the Willing deploy peacekeepers to Ukraine.

Prioritising the role of the US also applies to the war in Ukraine: Orbán has stated several times that the only way to end the war is through a US-Russia agreement — “only Trump is able to bring peace into

<sup>14</sup> Dorka Takacsy, “Hungarian Disinformation in Russia”, *Visegrad Insight*, 3 May 2023, <https://visegradinsight.eu/hungarian-disinformation-in-russia/>.

<sup>15</sup> This is a frequently used narrative by Hungarian officials. See, for example, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Péter Szijjártó, “Magyarország kész a közvetítésre Oroszország felé” [Hungary Is Ready to Mediate Towards Russia], Government of Hungary, 16 June 2024, <https://kormany.hu/hirek/magyarorszag-kesz-a-kozvetitesre-oroszorszag-fele>

<sup>16</sup> European Pravda, “Hungary Trains Ukrainian Medics — Defence Ministry of Hungary”, *Ukrainska Pravda* 25, 7 March 2023, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2023/03/7/7392376/>.

<sup>17</sup> Interviews with two EU ambassadors serving in Budapest, January and May 2025.



the war”<sup>18</sup> — and that Europe does not have much of a role to play in this.

## Russia as a key player of the post-war European security architecture

Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, the Orbán government has continued to assume that Russia will eventually win. Arguments include the differences in territorial size, population, and also military power. Orbán has stated repeatedly that a nuclear power, namely Russia, could never be defeated,<sup>19</sup> though history provides several examples in which nuclear powers have lost wars, such as the US in Vietnam and the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. In August 2025, Orbán even said that Ukraine has already lost the war and that its territory would be divided between Russia and the West.<sup>20</sup>

He has continually promoted the need to include Russia into the system of European security, albeit in different forms. In August and September 2025, he called upon the EU to sign a security agreement with Russia about Ukraine, instead of seeking security guarantees in Washington.<sup>21</sup> As mentioned above, the Hungarian government has also claimed that a direct US-Russia agreement is the only possible way to end the war.<sup>22</sup> Although exact details are never elaborated, the common element of these approaches is that

Budapest is indeed in favour of getting Russia institutionally included into the European security order in one form or another, but details have never been elaborated by any Hungarian official.

Regarding the end of the war, Hungary has continued to encourage ending the fighting as quickly as possible, prioritising the speed of any potential political settlement. De facto, this also means that Hungary would be content with Ukraine losing the occupied territories. Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Szijjártó has repeated several times the Russian narrative about the “new territorial realities”,<sup>23</sup> that is, the need to recognise Russia’s landgrabs.

The government has formally taken a strong humanitarian position and argued that the main priority is to end the killing. This has been fully in line with the domestic political narrative of “staying out of the war”. In order to gain a political advantage ahead of the elections, the government consistently frames itself as being “pro-peace” and the opposition as “pro-war”.

## Ukraine as a scapegoat and a buffer zone

Relations between Ukraine and Hungary have been tense since 2017, when Ukraine drafted a law to seriously constrain the rights of national minorities — including ethnic Hungarians living in the Zakarpattia region — to use their native languages in education institutions. This conflict over language use soured bilateral relations long before the breakout of the full-scale war. Though Kyiv modified the most problematic elements of the law in December 2023<sup>24</sup> — in line with the start of EU accession negotiations — this did not help much: Hungary continues to use the language issue as a de facto disingenuous argument against Ukraine.

The escalation in February 2022 came at a particularly sensitive moment for the Orbán government, as

18 Zoltán Kovács, “PM Orbán: Here Are the 5 Pillars of Our Strategy to Stay out of Wars to Come”, *About Hungary*, 26 July 2025, <https://abouthungary.hu/blog/pm-orban-here-are-the-5-pillars-of-our-strategy-to-stay-out-of-wars-to-come>.

19 Magyar Távirati Iroda [Hungarian Telegraphic Office] (MTI), “A Háborúnak Nincsenek És Nem Is Lesznek Nyertesei” [There Are and There Will Be No Winners in This War], *kormany.hu*, 5 May 2023, <https://kormany.hu/hirek/a-haboru-nincsenek-es-nem-lesznek-nyertesei>.

20 MTI, “Ezt a Háborút Oroszország Megnyerte, Az Ukránok Elvesztették” [This War Is Already Won by Russia and Lost by Ukraine], *kormany.hu*, 12 August 2025, <https://kormany.hu/hirek/ezt-a-haborut-oroszorszag-megnyerte-az-ukranok-elvesztettek>.

21 “Orbán Viktor közölte, hogy Ukrajna kapcsán mi az óriási veszély” [Viktor Orbán Named the Great Danger Regarding Ukraine], *Magyar Nemzet*, 9 November 2025, [https://magyarnemzet.hu/kulfold/2025/09/orban-viktor-kozolte-hogy-ukrajna-kapcsan#google\\_vignette](https://magyarnemzet.hu/kulfold/2025/09/orban-viktor-kozolte-hogy-ukrajna-kapcsan#google_vignette).

22 “Orbán Viktornak megint igaza lett” [Viktor Orbán Was Again Right], *Magyar Nemzet*, 16 August 2025, <https://magyarnemzet.hu/kulfold/2025/08/orban-viktor-amerika-orosz-alaszka>.

23 Réka Bíró, “Szijjártó Péter: Senki nem állt ki a tűzszünet mellett” [Péter Szijjártó: Nobody Stood up for the Ceasefire], *Magyar Nemzet*, 16 December 2024, <https://magyarnemzet.hu/kulfold/2024/12/szijjarto-peter-senki-nem-allt-ki-a-tuzszunet-mellett>.

24 Csilla Fedinec, *Ukrajna, nacionalizmus, kisebbségek. Etnopolitika és parlamenti képviselet Gorbacsov utolsó éveitől a második Trump-korszakig* [Ukraine, Nationalism and Minorities: Ethnopolitics and Parliamentary Representation from the Last Gorbachev Years to the Second Trump-Era] (Budapest: Gondolat Publishing House, 2025).



there were only some six weeks until the April 2022 parliamentary elections. Orbán focused the campaign on staying out of the war and accused the opposition of intending to drag Hungary into the conflict. This election strategy — supported by the extremely influential government-controlled media apparatus — turned out to be highly successful and earned Orbán a new constitutional supermajority.

Since then, the Orbán government has maintained an anti-Ukrainian stance, both in domestic and foreign policy. At home, Orbán blamed Ukraine for Hungary's high inflation rate by claiming that it was "war inflation" (*háborús infláció*). Ukraine was also scapegoated for the energy price hikes. Moreover, Orbán framed the long-standing political conflict with the EU over rule of law issues as being a result of Hungary's unwillingness to support Ukraine. While covering the election campaign, the government media apparatus claimed that Ukraine's accession into the EU would ruin Hungary's economy, thus legitimising Orbán's anti-Ukrainian stance.

### **Budapest's critical stance on Ukraine hampered the adoption of EU sanctions against Russia while also attempting to soften them.**

Budapest's critical stance on Ukraine hampered the adoption of EU sanctions against Russia while also attempting to soften them. According to Orbán, sanctions have inflicted more harm on the West than on Russia, so Europe "shot itself in the foot" with them.<sup>25</sup> In line with the "connectivity" logic, Budapest has long argued that economic — and particularly energy — cooperation with Russia needs to be restored.

In addition, Hungary continues to block the use of the European Peace Facility to provide Ukraine with military support. Budapest also opposes starting negotiations on the individual chapters of the EU accession process for Kyiv. Hungary's repeated vetoes on issues concerning Ukraine and Russia have raised serious questions in the EU.<sup>26</sup> In a sense, the decisions

being made in Budapest are keeping the EU ineffectual and weakening its ability to mediate.

Regarding the long-term prospects for conflict settlement, in line with his general anti-Ukrainian policy stance, Orbán believes that Ukraine cannot participate in European security structures and is resolutely against integrating the country into either the EU or NATO. He repeatedly argues that Ukraine — or, as he once said, the "territory named Ukraine"<sup>27</sup> — needs to remain a buffer zone between Russia and the West, even in the long run.

### **A possible reversal towards Russia and Ukraine with the opposition TISZA party**

While mapping out the Russia policies of TISZA, the absence of primary sources of information also applies to them. The organisation lacks a published electoral programme, thus the only source for mapping the party's foreign policy priorities is the speeches of Péter Magyar.

Contrary to the Orbán government's views on Russia, Magyar is demonstratively standing up for Hungary's reintegration into the West. In his speech delivered in Székesfehérvár in July 2025,<sup>28</sup> he named rebuilding relations with the EU and NATO as a priority of his foreign policy, together with his desire to reclaim Hungary's suspended EU funds. Meanwhile, Magyar often mocks Orbán's Russia-orientation by frequently calling ruling party officials *comrades*, referring to the communist-era lingo.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Cseke Balázs, "Orbán Viktor: A szankciókkal Európa lábán lőtte magát" [Viktor Orbán: With the Sanctions Europe Has Shot Herself in the Foot], *telex*, 26 September 2022, <https://telex.hu/belfold/2022/09/26/orban-viktor-5>.

<sup>26</sup> Nicholas Vinocur, "Denmark Pushes to Suspend Hungary's EU Voting Rights", *Politico*, 3 July 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/denmark-suspend-hungary-eu-voting-right/>.

<sup>27</sup> Balint Nagy, "A kormánynak Ukrajna már nem szuverén ország, nem állam, csak 'terület'" [For the Government Ukraine Is Not a Sovereign Country Anymore, Only "Territory"], *Telex.hu*, 6 March 2025, <https://telex.hu/belfold/2025/03/06/ukrajna-nevu-terulet-problema-maffiaallam-orban-viktor-szuverenitas>.

<sup>28</sup> Magyar Péter Hivatalos, dir., *Magyarország Helye Európában És a Világban – Székesfehérvár* [The Place of Hungary in Europe and in the World — Székesfehérvár], Video, 2025, 01:52:54, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NupfWBGc5Fg>.

<sup>29</sup> "Magyar Péter: Orbán elvtárs, önök csak egy piti, korrupt és hazug bűnszervezet" [Péter Magyar: Comrade Orbán, You Are Only a Pitiful, Corrupted and Lying Criminal Organisation], *hvg.hu*, 2 May 2025, [https://hvg.hu/élet/20250502\\_Magyar-Peter-Orban-elvtars-onok-csak-egy-piti-korrupt-es-hazug-bunszervezet](https://hvg.hu/élet/20250502_Magyar-Peter-Orban-elvtars-onok-csak-egy-piti-korrupt-es-hazug-bunszervezet).

**Magyar intends to decisively reduce Hungary's dependence on Russia and end the government's lenient approach to Moscow.**

Although the government's pro-Russian orientation is increasingly unpopular among Hungarians, and many of the elites are dissatisfied with the loss of access to EU funds, so far there have been no high-level defections from the Orbán camp to Magyar. Hence, even if there is dissent within the government regarding Russia, this has not yet publicly manifested. From what has been seen so far, Magyar intends to decisively reduce Hungary's dependence on Russia and end the government's lenient approach to Moscow.

Meanwhile, not much is known about TISZA's views on Ukraine and Kyiv's future role in European security. Magyar has deliberately avoided addressing this issue in order not to be labelled "pro-Ukrainian" by the government in the election campaign.<sup>30</sup> However, based on his will to prioritise the rebuilding of Hungary's relations with the West, it is highly unlikely that a future Magyar government would continue blocking Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration. However, in the absence of any electoral programme, this is only speculation using what little information is known about TISZA's foreign policy intentions.

Hungary's views on European security and its relations with Russia are both defined by the "strategy of connectivity" described above, that is, that Hungary needs to remain neutral and cooperate with all the main global players, including Russia. The fact that this neutrality, *de jure*, contradicts Hungary's membership in the EU and NATO apparently does not constitute a problem for foreign policy decision-makers in Budapest.

Regarding the future of the European security system, the Hungarian government believes that Moscow needs to be an integral part of it, especially regarding Ukraine, though this institutional framework has never been clarified. The Hungarian government has been consistent about Russia's security interests being taken into account: Orbán frequently argues that Ukraine needs to remain a buffer zone and shall never be a member of either the EU or NATO.

According to Budapest, sanctions against Moscow need to be lifted and trade relations between Russia

and the West need to be repaired, in particular with regard to energy imports. The latter issue, however, raises the question as to whether this firmly pro-Russian position of Hungary is also related to a path-dependency problem originating from the multitude of vulnerabilities created by 15 years of leniency towards Moscow.

Should the opposition TISZA party win the elections in spring 2026, they are highly likely to pursue a fundamentally different, pro-EU, and pro-NATO foreign policy. They would seek to decrease Hungary's dependence on Russia as much as possible and also stop blocking Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration. Indeed, this would be politically necessary for realising TISZA's top foreign policy priority — regaining access to the suspended EU funds. However, any foreign policy change depends on the election results, which no one can reliably predict.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with a foreign policy advisor of Péter Magyar, April 2025, Budapest.

Céline Marangé and Susan Stewart

# Conclusion: Russia Is out, Ukraine Is in — the Future of European Security

Russia's imperial and revisionist stances have severely undermined the post–Cold War European security order. Its implacable war on Ukraine and repeated hybrid attacks against European countries have had destabilising effects across the continent. The Kremlin is undermining the arrangements that form the cornerstone of the European security architecture. Growing doubts as to the reliability of the security commitment of the United States (US) to Europe, but also as to the capacity of Ukraine to sustain a long war of attrition, only aggravate these challenges.

Beyond Europe, the extent of international disorder is unprecedented since the hottest phases of the Cold War. A lasting shift in global power is accelerating the decline of Western influence worldwide and challenging the very existence of the rules-based international order. This political turmoil is taking place amid technological upheaval, which significantly increases the possibilities for targeting and manipulation. As a result, Russian subversion and disinformation activities, combined with artificial intelligence, may become a major threat to democracy.

In these demanding circumstances, it is helpful to map out points of convergence and areas of disagreement between European allies on the roles that Ukraine and Russia should play in the future European security architecture. Indeed, this constitutes a precondition for acting swiftly and decisively. We thus first assess how each actor covered in this study has changed its positions towards Russia and Ukraine since 2022 and what particular type of security architecture it envisions before outlining the likely evolution of the European security order.

## Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine: A driver of change

The point of departure of this research endeavour was the recognition of a fundamental incompatibility of

visions between Moscow and Kyiv. Three and a half years into the full-scale war, this divergence of views is more profound than ever: Russia is becoming ever more brutal on the battlefield and in the rear areas, while maintaining its maximalist objectives to force Kyiv to capitulate, whereas the Ukrainian military, political, and societal spheres continue to push back against Russia's advances, despite increasing difficulties and reductions in US support. The goal of this research has been to explore how various European actors approach this incompatibility and how it influences their visions of European security in the coming three to five years.

Faced with the return of a high-intensity war in Europe and the prospect that it could expand geographically, most European actors have reacted quite forcefully and consistently, on both the national and multilateral levels. Overall, the European Union (EU) and almost all member states have provided unprecedented support to Ukraine since 2022, making available “over \$162 billion in financial, military, humanitarian, and refugee assistance, of which 65% have been provided as grants or in-kind support and 35% in the form of highly concessional loans”.<sup>1</sup> Among the main European providers of military aid to Ukraine over the same period of time are Germany (€12.62 billion), the United Kingdom (UK: €10.36 billion), Denmark (€7.66 billion), and the Netherlands (€6.09 billion).<sup>2</sup> Six states spent more than 1 per cent of their gross domestic product (GDP) on bilateral aid to Ukraine: Estonia, Denmark, Lithuania, Latvia,

<sup>1</sup> Delegation of the European Union to the United States of America, “EU Assistance to Ukraine (in U.S. Dollars)” (Washington, D.C., 18 July 2025), [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/united-states-america/eu-assistance-ukraine-us-dollars\\_en?s=253](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/united-states-america/eu-assistance-ukraine-us-dollars_en?s=253).

<sup>2</sup> Statista, “Total Bilateral Aid Allocations to Ukraine between January 24, 2022 and February 28, 2025, by Donor and Type” (New York, NY, March 2025), <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1303432/total-bilateral-aid-to-ukraine/>.

Sweden, and Finland — the first two well above 2 per cent.<sup>3</sup>

We group the actors analysed according to the centrality of the Russian threat in their foreign policies. The main determinants of their positioning and strategies towards Moscow range from threat perceptions, economic interests, and geopolitical ambitions to political values (or, for some, ideological affinities).

For Finland and Sweden, the invasion brought an end to decades or even centuries of military non-alignment. Alarmed about their own security and the long-term stability of the Baltic Sea Region, they swiftly decided to apply to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Together with Norway and Denmark, they view Russia as a long-term threat, with implications in the Baltic Sea and the Arctic. Bolstering military and societal preparedness are at the heart of the Nordics' approaches, with considerable investments being made by Helsinki, Stockholm, Oslo, and Copenhagen.

For the UK and Poland — as well as for the Baltic States that are not covered in our study — the full-scale invasion of Ukraine only confirmed their pre-war assumptions about Russia's revanchism and aggressiveness. Both countries are fully committed to Ukraine's defence and sovereignty. Both consistently favour keeping the US engaged in European security while reinvigorating bilateral military partnerships, in particular with France, to strengthen Europe's defences.

For France, Germany, and Italy, the invasion came as a shock and forced their leaders to reverse the policy of engagement that had prevailed since the end of the Cold War. They broke with a long-standing ambivalence towards Russia and, in the cases of Italy and Germany, with a heavy dependency on Russian gas. However, the level and nature of their commitments to Ukraine vary: Berlin has contributed significant amounts of financial and military support, Paris is proactive in the military domain, while Rome remains pledged but cautious.

For Hungary, Slovakia, and Turkey, the willingness to engage with Moscow still predominates, with significant nuances. Although the current governments in Budapest and Bratislava align with Russian narratives and criticise both Ukraine and the EU's policies towards Russia, they have not yet vetoed the renewal

of sanctions. For its part, Ankara is unwilling to confront Russia, but remains committed to Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. While benefiting from sanctions circumvention, it has undeniably contributed to Ukraine's security.

It is not always possible to infer these actors' attitudes towards Ukraine from their positioning vis-à-vis Russia. For some, the relationship with Kyiv is clearly determined by the desire to contain Russia; for others, geopolitical calculations, economic competition, and historical grievances enter into play. Poland is an interesting case in point, since it perceives Russia as an existential threat and contributes significantly to Ukraine's and Europe's defences, yet it has a complicated relationship with Kyiv for historical and economic reasons.

### Preferred type of security architecture: Status quo plus

The vast majority of the actors analysed in this publication see Russia as a destructive actor and the European security architecture as directed towards deterring Moscow and defending Europe. Almost all of them desire to preserve major parts of the existing architecture by reinforcing NATO and the EU. They do not deny the increasing challenges to the security order, but intend to rely on these two pillars to address them. Since Donald Trump's inauguration in January 2025, the ensuing rhetoric and actions of his administration have served as a further catalyst to reshape and reinforce existing institutions. This affects NATO first and foremost, since the US has continuously played the largest role within that organisation and in terms of ensuring European security overall.

Efforts to improve the European security architecture in the coming years will therefore focus mainly on strengthening NATO and making the EU increasingly fit to function as a security and defence-related actor. The second von der Leyen Commission 2024–2029 introduced a Commissioner for Defence and Space, expanded the European Peace Facility (EPF), and developed the Readiness 2030 initiative, creating incentives for member states to advance in this area.<sup>4</sup>

3 Kiel Institute for the World Economy, "Ukraine Support Tracker", <https://www.ifw-kiel.de/topics/war-against-ukraine/ukraine-support-tracker/>.

4 See in particular European Commission, *White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030* (Brussels, March 2025), [https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/e6d5db69-e0ab-4bec-9dc0-3867b4373019\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/e6d5db69-e0ab-4bec-9dc0-3867b4373019_en). More particulars were provided in a roadmap that proposes inter alia four flagship

Originally aimed at enhancing the EU's ability to prevent conflicts and foster international security, the EPF was used to address Ukraine's pressing military needs. So far €11.1 billion (out of €17 billion) has been allocated to Ukraine, which has allowed it to buy fuel and equipment as well as ammunition and missiles for the Ukrainian army.<sup>5</sup>

As for the EU's Readiness 2030 plan, it aims to free up funding — on both the national and supranational levels — for massive amounts of defence spending by member states.<sup>6</sup> In addition, the initiative foresees a mechanism for common procurement (Security Action for Europe, or SAFE), backed by €150 billion in attractive long-term loans for member states. The plan has been greeted positively within the EU, although the need to alter the original title (ReArm Europe) at the request of Italy and Spain points to a certain reticence from some member states.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the plan “does not directly address the issues of fragmentation and limited interoperability of the European defence base”.<sup>8</sup>

This financial effort will be accompanied by attempts to keep the US as involved in protecting European security as possible.<sup>9</sup> During the NATO summit in The Hague in June 2025, the US reaffirmed its com-

mitment to NATO and European security. However, there remain doubts about the depth of this commitment and the form it will take, due to both the leniency of Trump towards Moscow and the inclination of many Republican politicians to refrain from opposing his decisions.<sup>10</sup> In fact, numerous US presidencies have declared their intentions to play a reduced role in European security.

Nonetheless, the most likely trajectory appears not to be a sudden US withdrawal from NATO and European security provision, but rather a gradual disinterest without a coherent plan for reductions. Therefore, exploring what a “European pillar” of NATO means in practice will be central in the coming years. After a strong focus on funds at the 2025 NATO summit — with a commitment to spending 5 per cent of GDP on defence by 2035 — there is now a shift to discussions on capabilities.

Despite the focus on preserving existing arrangements, there have been some attempts to create new institutions. In particular, the emergence of the European Political Community (EPC), launched by Paris in 2022, was a clear response to the need for informal communication on European security concerns within a broader circle of actors. This framework appears to be appreciated primarily by non-EU member states (such as the UK). Although the EPC, which includes Ukraine and Moldova and excludes Russia and Belarus, is perceived by some as a valuable opportunity for bilateral or small-group discussions in an informal setting, most actors do not see it as key to improving the European security order in the long run. It therefore seems likely to continue pursuing a low-profile existence.

In addition, minilateral formats are gaining in importance, from the Nordic-Baltic 8 (NB8) to the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) and Weimar Plus. Other *ad hoc* formats have been the Czech ammunition initiative and the “Coalition of the Willing” initiated by London and Paris. Created in the aftermath of the clash between Volodymyr Zelensky, Trump, and J. D. Vance in the Oval Office in February 2025, the latter is intended to strengthen support for Kyiv, lay out security guarantees in case of a ceasefire, and secure Ukraine's sovereignty in any peace deal. It remains to be seen whether these different formats will gain trac-

projects in the defence sphere. See European Commission, Joint Communication, *Preserving Peace – Defence Readiness Roadmap 2030* (Brussels, 16 October 2025), <https://tinyurl.com/4mt56may>.

5 European Council, “European Peace Facility”, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/european-peace-facility/>.

6 European Commission, *White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030* (see note 4).

7 Jorge Libeiro, “Brussels Rebrands ‘ReArm Europe’ Plan after Backlash from Leaders of Italy and Spain”, *Euronews* (online), 21 March 2025, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/03/21/brussels-confirms-rearm-europe-rebrand-after-backlash-from-italy-and-spain>; Spain did not agree to the 5 per cent of GDP defence spending target set at the NATO summit in The Hague, see Inti Landauro et al., “Spain Risks Derailing NATO Summit by Resisting 5% Defence Spending Goal”, *Reuters*, 19 June 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/spain-wants-opt-out-natos-5-defence-spending-target-2025-06-19/>.

8 Paul Dermine, “Funding Europe's Defence: A First Take on the Commission's ReArm Europe Plan”, *Verfassungsblog*, 5 March 2025, <https://verfassungsblog.de/rearm-europe-law/>.

9 See Łukasz Maślanka and Piotr Szymański, *The Resilience of the European Union and NATO in an Era of Multiple Crises* (Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies, February 2025), [https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/OSW\\_Commentary\\_646\\_0.pdf](https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/OSW_Commentary_646_0.pdf).

10 See Pia Fuhrhop, *Die Nato nach dem Gipfel in Den Haag. Weshalb die Zukunft der Allianz von europäischer Gestaltung abhängt*, SWP-Aktuell 33/2025 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, July 2025), doi: 10.18449/2025A33.



tion and how they will interact with NATO and the EU. However, they allow the difficult consensus requirements of larger organisations to be circumvented, thus providing faster, more flexible responses to certain military and political issues.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, not all existing institutions are emphasised as relevant for containing Russia's destructive behaviour. Specifically, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) was rarely mentioned in the analyses — and where it was, then usually to highlight its unsuitability for helping to reshape security in Europe, even if some actors, such as Germany, are still quite supportive. Although both Ukraine and Russia are participating states, a constructive dialogue with Moscow within the OSCE framework has not been possible. Serious financial difficulties and disagreements about the OSCE's leadership have led to its weakening, while Russia has consistently undermined the organisation due to its fundamental disapproval of the third (human) dimension. It is thus unlikely that the OSCE will play a significant role in defining the European security order in the medium term.

## Ukraine's progressive inclusion in the European security architecture

There is no unity yet on the precise role of Ukraine in the future European security architecture. It is nonetheless widely admitted that Ukraine is to be integrated into the European security order. The prevailing objective — and the underlying assumption here — is that Ukraine will be able to retain its full sovereignty at the end of the war, that is, it will not be compelled to accept an imposed arrangement that would limit its alliance options or military capabilities. It also appears probable that the integration of Ukraine into European security structures will deepen further by means of European support for Ukraine in both the NATO and EU frameworks (and in ad hoc formats). However, the exact modalities of this inclusion are still under discussion. The end goal

of Ukraine's advanced relationship with NATO is in dispute, and the question of Ukraine's relationship to the EU has also not been completely resolved.

As regards the EU, Ukraine was granted candidate country status in June 2022, and accession negotiations were formally announced in December 2023. However, Ukraine's entry into the EU depends on many future steps being taken by both sides. Although the European Commission is fully behind the process and recognises the significant progress that Kyiv has made, some acute political obstacles remain. Not only can the process be blocked at various points by any given EU member state, but concerns about rule of law issues, economic competition, and insufficiently addressed historical grievances have emerged (or re-emerged).

Since the EU accession process is lengthy, it is likely that the positions of various member states will change over time and that the question of EU enlargement to Ukraine will become more politicised. In several EU societies, majorities are against Ukraine joining the Union, according to opinion polls.<sup>12</sup> Kyiv's accession thus cannot be seen as a given. At the same time, if Ukraine manages to carry out the necessary reforms and meet the accession criteria, the EU will have difficulty retracting its commitment, unless it is in deep crisis. It could, however, prolong the process, leading to disillusionment in Ukraine.

It should be noted that Ukraine is already incorporated on similar terms as EU member states into the SAFE instrument for defence procurement, which highlights the EU's willingness to increasingly involve Kyiv in security and defence planning. Another indication of this is the creation of the EU-Ukraine Task Force on Defence Industrial Cooperation, which met for the first time in May 2025 and "aims to foster Ukraine's integration into the EU defence innovation ecosystem".<sup>13</sup> The pace of assistance to Ukraine,

<sup>11</sup> See e.g. Lisa Musiol, *A Way Forward for Europe's Coalitions of the Willing* (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 23 June 2025), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global-usrussia-europe-central-asia/way-forward-europes-coalitions-willing>; Neil Melvin, *Europe's Security Increasingly Lies Beyond NATO and the EU* (Berlin: Internationale Politik Quarterly, 14 August 2025), <https://ip-quarterly.com/en/europes-security-increasingly-lies-beyond-nato-and-eu>.

<sup>12</sup> Statista, "Public Opinion on the European Union's Decision to Grant Ukraine Candidate Status in Response to Russia's Invasion in 2024, by Member State" (New York, NY, February 2025), <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1404061/eu-support-for-ukraine-candidate-status/>; on Poland specifically, see "Opposition to Ukraine's EU and NATO Membership Now Outweighs Support in Poland", *Notes from Poland*, 25 June 2025, <https://notesfrompoland.com/2025/06/25/opposition-to-ukraines-eu-and-nato-membership-now-outweighs-support-in-poland/>.

<sup>13</sup> Directorate-General for Defence Industry and Space, European Commission, "First Meeting of the EU-Ukraine Task Force on Defence Industrial Cooperation", 14 May 2025, <https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/first-meeting-eu->

which has changed over time, depending on the actor involved, has had a significant effect on the trajectory of the war.<sup>14</sup> Thus, it is not only the *extent* to which European actors assist Ukraine and integrate Kyiv into security structures, but also the *tempo* at which they do this that can have a decisive impact.

As regards Ukraine's integration into NATO, it has progressed and is likely to continue. The Ukrainian army has consistently been trained since 2014 to meet NATO standards. Since 2022 a Comprehensive Assistance Package has been put in place "to help rebuild the Ukrainian security and defence sector and transition Ukraine towards full interoperability with NATO". This has been complemented by NATO Security Assistance and Training for Ukraine, established in 2024 to coordinate support for the Ukrainian military in these two areas. Even more tangibly, the alliance has also committed itself to a Pledge of Long-Term Security Assistance for Ukraine, which is intended to ensure sustainable levels of funding in the coming years.<sup>15</sup> Finally, the upgrading of the NATO-Ukraine Commission to the NATO-Ukraine Council in July 2023 further "demonstrates the strengthening of political ties and Ukraine's increasing integration with NATO".<sup>16</sup>

Despite these very significant developments, Ukraine's admission into NATO seems unlikely in the foreseeable future. This is not only due to US opposition to Ukraine as a NATO member — a rare point of convergence between the Biden and Trump administrations. Other member states, such as Germany, Hungary, and Slovakia, have expressed scepticism about this prospect for reasons ranging from risk

aversion to ideological affinity with Russia. However, the German position appears to be shifting under the current government of Friedrich Merz.<sup>17</sup> Even among those actors that officially support the idea of Ukraine joining NATO, such as France and the Nordics, the timeline for Ukraine's entry remains unclear and is linked to ending the war.

Finally, one point of divergence among the actors is the extent to which they link Ukrainian security to that of Europe as a whole. For the EU, the UK, Poland, the Nordics, France, and increasingly Germany, this connection is explicit, while for Italy and Turkey, it is more implicit or left unsaid. On the contrary, Hungary and Slovakia view Ukraine as a buffer state outside of European security structures. Those actors who clearly see a link are more active in finding ways to integrate Ukraine into existing defence and security frameworks. Those who draw a distinction between Ukrainian and European security are more inclined to perceive their support for Ukraine as being separate from their efforts to bolster security within the EU and/or NATO.

### Russia's long-term exclusion from the European security order

Something close to a consensus has emerged that Russia represents a serious and enduring threat to NATO, the EU, and their member states. Even those countries, such as Italy and Germany, that were in favour of (and engaged in) cooperation with Russia prior to 2022 have adopted a critical attitude, combined with efforts to decouple their economies from Russia. There are nonetheless differences in the longer-term assessments of Russia across the actors analysed.

Some actors, such as the UK, the Nordics, Poland, France, and more recently Germany, clearly express their evaluations of the Russian regime and its domestic and foreign policy goals. They doubt that Russia would be satisfied with controlling Ukraine and believe it will remain an aggressive force that is determined to undermine security and democracy in Europe. They generally contend that a post-Putin

ukraine-task-force-defence-industrial-cooperation-2025-05-14\_en.

**14** Michael Carpenter, "Ukraine Can Still Win", *Foreign Affairs*, 1 July 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/ukraine-can-still-win>.

**15** NATO, "Relations with Ukraine" (Brussels, 26 June 2025), [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_37750.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_37750.htm). For potential future measures, see Catherine Sendak and Ilya Timchenko, *Between Now and NATO: A Security Strategy for Ukraine* (Washington, D.C.: Center for European Policy Analysis, January 2025), <https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/between-now-and-nato-a-security-strategy-for-ukraine/>; Eric Ciaramella and Eric Green, *Ukraine, NATO, and War Termination* (New York, NY: Council on Foreign Relations, February 2025), <https://www.cfr.org/report/ukraine-nato-and-war-termination#chapter-title-0-4>.

**16** See NATO, "NATO-Ukraine Council" (Brussels, 7 March 2025), [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_217652.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_217652.htm).

**17** Serhiy Sydorenko and Ulyana Krychkovska, "Ukraine's Ambassador to Germany: Berlin Becoming More Open to Ukraine's NATO Membership", *Ukrainska Pravda*, 28 July 2025, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2025/07/28/7523748/>.

Russia may pursue the same kind of policy. A second group, comprised of countries such as Turkey and to a lesser extent Italy, has been more reticent to articulate its assumptions about Russia's objectives.

A third group, comprising Hungary and Slovakia, is favourable to Russia's positions because of energy dependency, authoritarian tendencies, and ideological proximity. These two Russia-friendly governments have the potential to act as spoilers. However, upcoming elections in 2026 in Hungary and in 2027 in Slovakia could alter the foreign policy courses of these two states, as their political challengers are likely to rebuild ties with the EU and Ukraine. Even if this does not occur, the situation is more ambiguous than it often appears. Bratislava is unlikely to block key decisions on Ukraine and Russia, while Budapest remains supportive of NATO, even if it is capable of postponing crucial decisions within the EU context. Finally, the Czech Republic could change course after the victory of Andrej Babiš's party in the parliamentary election in October 2025, jeopardising the Czech ammunition initiative.

In the medium term, however, the approach to European security will develop along an axis of confrontation with Russia, despite opposition by certain European actors (Hungary, Slovakia) and ambivalence on the part of others (Turkey, Italy). Most actors analysed view NATO as the main vehicle for deterring Russia and defending Europe. They foresee a phase in which the existing architecture will be strengthened — and European solidarity will be bolstered — in order to withstand the various kinetic and hybrid threats coming from Moscow, and to manage the uncertainty coming from Washington.

The war on Ukraine has led to a massive increase in defence spending in Europe. According to SIPRI methodology, Russia's military expenditure grew by 38 per cent to reach US\$149 billion dollars in 2024. Meanwhile, all NATO members increased their military spending. European NATO members spent US\$454 billion in total in 2024, which represented only 30 per cent of total spending across the Alliance.<sup>18</sup> In addition, much more attention has been paid to countering Russian hybrid attacks in the

cyber and information spheres and making the states and societies in Europe more resilient.

## Mitigating challenges and ensuring the preferred order

In sum, a critical mass of European actors is in favour of preserving NATO and the EU as the primary institutions of European security. A future European security architecture will likely rely on a NATO in which European allies are more involved in terms of both capabilities and command structure, and on an EU that plays a larger role in Europe's defence and deepens its cooperation with NATO. Assuming that Ukraine maintains its full sovereignty at the end of the war, it will gradually be further integrated into EU and NATO structures, presumably leading to membership in both at some relatively distant point. Russia, on the other hand, will remain an actor that needs to be contained and deterred for the foreseeable future. A tipping point has thus been reached, meaning that a sufficient majority of the key European actors studied now see Ukraine's future within the European security architecture and Russia's future outside of it.

Various military contingencies could prevent this architecture from consolidating, however. There are uncertainties as to whether the Ukrainian army and society can withstand a war of attrition of this magnitude. The conclusion of Russia's aggression in Ukraine in Moscow's favour would jeopardise Ukraine's integration into Western structures. It could also embolden the Kremlin to intensify its attacks on other European countries, using hybrid or even kinetic means, since its resources would have been partially freed up. Moscow has avoided direct confrontation with NATO so far. However, the prospect of an overt attack on a NATO member state should not be ruled out, given Russia's tremendous investment in arms production, its sustained effort to develop the Youth Army (*Yunarmiya*), and its growing insistence on Europe as the primary enemy. There is also uncertainty about the extent to which the US will reduce its security footprint in Europe, concerning both its activity within NATO and its support for Ukraine. A sudden and rapid withdrawal would increase vulnerabilities across Europe (including Ukraine) in the short term and require a faster European reaction.

Political contingencies could also impede the consolidation of this enhanced architecture. In the international arena, the emergence of an "authoritarian

<sup>18</sup> SIPRI, "Unprecedented Rise in Global Military Expenditure as European and Middle East Spending Surges", press release (Stockholm, 28 April 2025), <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2025/unprecedented-rise-global-military-expenditure-european-and-middle-east-spending-surges>.

alliance” between Russia, China, North Korea, and other countries would seriously threaten not only European security, but also democracy as currently practiced in Europe, especially if the US were to tacitly support this alliance. In the regional arena, Eurosceptic and populist parties may come to power in additional countries, possibly in some of the more influential EU member states. This trend would alter the current balance we have described, giving illiberal regimes a much greater role in decision-making. This, in turn, would shift existing preferences regarding not only the role of institutions, but also the question of Ukraine’s inclusion into and Russia’s exclusion from the European security order.

To increase the likelihood of implementing the current preferences regarding European security, several steps should be considered. First and most acutely, a Russian military victory needs to be avoided at all costs. This implies supporting Ukraine with all instruments available and simultaneously continuing to weaken the Russian war machine. Thus, it is key to build up European capabilities while reducing Russia’s military and industrial potential significantly, both directly and with Ukraine’s assistance.

Second, cohesion in European societies needs to be retained and improved. This means explaining why enormous amounts of resources are being allocated to defence (including hybrid threats) while also investing in social policy, especially in countries where support for Ukraine is less certain. Otherwise, extremist forces will gain additional traction by maintaining that defence spending is taking priority over citizens’ well-being. In fact, even moderate parties are already expressing concerns about increasing defence budgets at the expense of other areas, especially in countries such as France and Italy, where levels of public debt are dangerously high and budgets are therefore severely constrained.

Third, the time factor needs to be taken into account. The pace at which Europe is able to move forward along these various tracks will, in part, determine the extent to which the above-mentioned obstacles can be minimised, and indeed whether or not a worst-case scenario involving a concurrence of different obstacles can be avoided.

In sum, the consistent emphasis on NATO and the EU as two essential pillars of an upgraded European security architecture points to a primarily status quo-oriented approach, even if the EU has made significant advances in the realm of security and defence in recent years. This has the advantage of relying on

tried and trusted structures in a period of great uncertainty, as Russia pursues its escalatory strategy unrelentingly. However, the question for the coming years will be whether a revised NATO-EU framework will be sufficient to ensure European security in a rapidly evolving environment. The more the US decides to reduce its security footprint in Europe, the more acute this question will become. This is why flexible formats such as the “Coalition of the Willing” may gain relevance, as will the continuous integration of Ukraine into the EU and NATO. Given Ukraine’s experience with taking sweeping and innovative steps to defend itself, cooperation with Kyiv can help to prepare other European actors for dealing with future challenges.

# Appendix

## Abbreviations

ABM	anti-ballistic missile	SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
AfD	Alternative für Deutschland	SMER	Direction — Social Democracy (Smer — sociálna demokracia)
ASAP	Act in Support of Ammunition Production		
CAESAr	Camion équipé d'un système d'artillerie ("Truck equipped with an artillery system")	SWP	German Institute for International and Security Affairs (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik)
CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy	TEU	Treaty on the European Union
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States	TISZA	Respect and Freedom Party (Tisztelet és Szabadság Párt)
CSDP	Common Security and Defence Policy	UK	United Kingdom
DPR	Donetsk People's Republic	UN	United Nations
DTIB	defence technological and industrial base	US	United States
E3 / E5	European 3 (France, Germany, UK)/European 5 (France, Germany, UK, Italy, Spain)	USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
ECFR	European Council on Foreign Relations	ABM	anti-ballistic missile
ENP	European Neighbourhood Policy	AfD	Alternative für Deutschland
EPC	European Political Committee		
EPF	European Peace Facility		
EU	European Union		
EUMAM	European Union Military Assistance Mission in Support of Ukraine		
Forza Italia	Forward Italy		
FSB	Federal Security Service (Russia)		
G7	Group of Seven (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, United Kingdom, United States)		
G8	Group of Eight (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, United Kingdom, United States)		
GDP	gross domestic product		
HLAS	Voice — Social Democracy (Hlas — sociálna demokracia)		
ICBM	intercontinental ballistic missile		
Ifop	French Institute of Public Opinion (Institut français d'opinion publique)		
IRSEM	Institute for Strategic Research (l'Institut de recherche stratégique de l'Ecole militaire)		
JEF	Joint Expeditionary Force)		
KDH	Christian Democratic Movement (Kresťanskodemokratické hnutie)		
LNG	liquified natural gas		
LPR	Luhansk People's Republic		
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization		
NB8	Nordic-Baltic 8 (Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, and Sweden)		
NORDEFCO	Nordic Defence Cooperation		
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe		
PCA	Partnership and Cooperation Agreement		
PESCO	Permanent Structured Cooperation		
PS	Progressive Slovakia (Progresívne Slovensko)		
SAFE	Security Action for Europe		
SaS	Freedom and Solidarity (Sloboda a Solidarita)		



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