

SUSTAIN AND PROSPER: HOW EUROPEANS CAN SUPPORT UKRAINE

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SUMMARY

- The EU has already provided unprecedented support to Ukraine as it fights its existential war against Russia. But this war will not end any time soon.
- The EU and member states urgently need to ramp up and accelerate their military assistance for the long war and make stronger commitments to Ukraine's long-term security.
- This will require them to develop their military-industrial capabilities. In addition, they should develop bilateral security arrangements with Ukraine and work towards bringing the country into NATO once the war is over.
- Ukraine's EU accession, however, will ultimately be more transformative for the country. The EU therefore needs to ensure it is truly fit for enlargement to up to 36 states and take concrete steps towards making Ukraine a member state.
- The EU should view this support for Ukraine as an opportunity to enhance its military production facilities, raise its geopolitical profile, secure its neighbourhood, and stabilise the contour and modus operandi of a larger European Union.

On 17 September 2023, NATO's secretary-general Jens Stoltenberg warned that Russia's war on Ukraine would not end any time soon. "We all want a quick peace," he said, but if "the Ukrainians stop fighting, their country will no longer exist".

In September 2022, two of the authors of this paper, alongside their ECFR colleagues Piotr Buras and Jeremy Shapiro, took stock of this emerging long-war scenario, proposing a European plan to support Ukraine. This plan included military assistance, security guarantees, and economic support that included access to the European Union's single market.

Fast forward a year, and much has changed. Ukraine is facing a second winter of energy terror, but its second counteroffensive is also making steady progress. Ukraine's Western allies (eventually) agreed to supply military equipment in the form of tanks and fighter jets, as well as the necessary training to use them. The EU and its member states have provided economic support to the tune of €76 billion, surpassing that of the United States. And Ukraine is edging closer to the opening of accession talks to become an EU member state itself. Some cracks, however, are beginning to appear in Western support – with, for instance, some US Republicans becoming more active in their efforts to prevent the Biden administration sending new assistance to Ukraine.

Yet, even if Russia ended its illegal invasion tomorrow, Ukraine would still need years of support to deal with the fallout. The war has taken a vast toll on the country. Thousands of lives have been lost, both among civilians and the military. Almost one-fifth of Ukraine's pre-February 2022 population has been forced to flee the country and Ukraine's five million internally displaced people experience hardships of their own, for example, through disruptions to schooling and loss of livelihoods. The Ukrainian economist, Timofiy Mylovanov, estimates that Ukraine's workforce could become a third smaller than it was before the full-scale invasion by the time the war ends.

This only heightens the need for European leadership on support for Ukraine and an updated European plan to provide it. At an unprecedented meeting of EU foreign ministers in Kyiv on 2 October, the bloc's foreign policy chief, Josep Borrell, reiterated the EU's commitment to supporting Ukraine for the long war and to the country's European future. It was the first time such a meeting had taken place in an EU candidate country, let alone a war zone. This policy brief sets out how the EU and its member states can transform this commitment into new action to support Ukraine over the coming months and years. The brief focuses on those two key areas: security and military assistance and Ukraine's EU accession, drawing on interviews with senior Ukrainian government officials and members of parliament, as well as experts, journalists, and representatives of civil society.

Security is immediate and existential for Ukraine. The EU therefore urgently needs to step up and accelerate its military assistance. This will require the EU and its member states to develop their own defence-industrial capabilities. But the EU should also prioritise long-term commitments to Ukraine's security. This would include working towards bringing the country into NATO, since only a secure Ukraine can ensure the lasting reforms necessary for EU accession; and the EU, because EU membership will further consolidate Ukraine's long-term security.

Beyond that, the EU accession process will be transformative for Ukraine's democracy and economy, but also for the EU itself. This process is not developing in a vacuum, and decision-makers need to take into account the impact of previous waves of enlargement, as well as of years of discussions with Western Balkans countries. The EU is already sending the right signals about its commitment to achieve enlargement. It could make these signals more tangible by opening accession talks with Ukraine and by developing a clear plan for how accession can happen. However, the EU needs to take the required time to implement its conditionalities and to prepare itself to admit such a large and consequential country.

Without this urgent commitment to Ukraine's security and long-term commitment to its European future, the EU risks alienating the very Ukrainians that it seeks to support. This could ultimately change their vision of EU membership: instead of the idealistic, values-based aspiration that was at the core of the Euromaidan protests and that still inspires Ukrainians' fight for freedom, the country could end up taking a much more transactional approach to the bloc. Avoiding this scenario is clearly in the European interest.

What is more, if European policymakers take the right steps to support Ukraine in the coming months and years, they can enhance the EU's military production capacities and build a more coherent approach to European defence. This would also help increase the bloc's geopolitical

profile and allow it to contribute to securing and stabilising its neighbourhood. Finally, the EU's preparations for Ukraine's accession are an opportunity to rethink some of the bloc's institutions and policies more broadly. Supporting Ukraine's security and offering it a clear path towards EU membership are thus opportunities for the EU to shape a safer, more prosperous, and better functioning union.

The road that we propose in this paper is not an easy one. But the EU has a historic opportunity to take it; it should rise to the occasion.

Security and military assistance

Since Russia's all-out invasion, the EU and its member states have responded quickly to support Ukraine, deploying existing instruments in new and innovative ways. This has comprised military assistance as well as other support that makes a significant contribution to the war effort.

The EU's financial support, for example, has been vital in keeping the Ukrainian state running. Since the beginning of the war the EU, its financial institutions, and member states have contributed €76 billion, of which €20 billion has been used for military support. At the beginning of the war, the bloc provided this support on an ad hoc basis; the EU has now streamlined it into a package of macro-financial assistance amounting to €18 billion for 2023 – €1.5 billion each month. The EU is currently planning financial support for Ukraine of €50 billion for 2024-2027. Beyond guaranteeing essential state functions, this support is vital to ensure the macro-financial stability of the country. It also helps to dismantle the Russian leadership's belief that it can bankrupt Ukraine.

Certain other EU interventions are more difficult to quantify, but have nevertheless played an important role in supporting Ukraine. For example, the EU rapidly implemented its Temporary Protection Directive, allowing Ukrainian refugees to enter the EU without a visa and without formally requesting asylum. Moreover, the EU has also introduced 11 packages of sanctions against Russia (also targeting Belarus and Iran). These measures have disrupted Russia's economy and its ability to produce goods, including for the military. Between them, the EU and G7 countries have frozen more than €300 billion of Russian assets and imposed bans on imports and exports amounting to approximately €135 billion. They continue to work on finding ways to close the loopholes that have emerged in financial, energy, and technological sanctions.

The EU's and member states' military support has also been considerable, surprising many of the Ukrainians we spoke to for this brief.[1] In addition to bilateral support from member

states, the first days of the invasion saw the EU make use of the European Peace Facility (EPF) to finance the acquisition of equipment and weapons. So far, the EPF alone has committed €5.6 billion in military support, supplemented by the individual contributions of EU member states. It also set up a training mission for the Ukrainian military and has earmarked another €500m to ramp up the production capacity of ammunition and accelerate its delivery.

These were all extraordinary steps for the EU. But Ukrainians we spoke to in Kyiv, while grateful for this support, underlined that it materialised too slowly to make a real difference on the battlefield; it also often came at the expense of huge diplomatic efforts to convince partners to supply what Ukraine needs.^[2] For instance, the plan to finance the necessary amount of ammunition did not take shape until more than a year and a half into the war. This provides a clear example of the issues with timing that the EU has faced when trying to step up its support for Ukraine.

In the first year of the war, individual member states had tried to find ways to increase their production of artillery ammunition to supply to Ukraine. But producers struggled to secure the necessary credit to fund this increase and lacked assurances that their investments would be worthwhile in the longer term. Supplies therefore remained far short of the numbers Ukrainian forces need: Ukraine's annual artillery shell consumption is at least 1.8m rounds per year; the EU's production capability has increased from roughly 300,000 shells a year in 2022 to roughly 650,000 shells in 2023.

In March 2023, the European Commission rolled out a plan to procure one million shells within a year. But, because of divergences about the way the money should be spent, it took until summer for the first contracts to be concluded between manufacturers and the European Defence Agency: France, for instance, wanted the money to go towards only new ammunition produced within the EU; while Germany wanted to include off-the-shelf purchases from third countries. Only in July 2023 did the commission earmark the extra €500m. Even now the disagreements are settled, it will take six to nine months to produce the entire shots (the shell, fuse, and the propellant charge), depending on the availability of subcomponents and raw materials.

To ramp up its military support for Ukraine in the immediate and medium term, the EU and its member states will need to find ways to overcome difficulties such as these. And, to overcome Russia's aggression, Ukraine will need much more than just large amounts of ammunition. The EU should use this opportunity to develop its own defence-industrial capabilities.

How to ramp up military support for Ukraine

The media debate on military support for Ukraine often revolves around supposed “game changers”, but Ukrainian military experts and defence officials talk more about the “sustainability” and “scalability” of their war effort. [3] On the one hand, for Ukraine’s defence to be sustainable, the EU and member states need to find ways to provide more ammunition, spare parts, and repair and maintenance for the Western systems Ukraine is already using, as well as to replace ageing Soviet legacy systems Ukraine cannot sustain. The lack of ammunition for artillery systems discussed above is a critical bottleneck in this regard. Scalability, on the other hand, refers to support for Ukraine that allows it to increase the size of its armed forces: put simply, Ukraine needs more weapons of the type it is already using and the appropriate training for its newly formed brigades.

Despite the slow start, European companies will play a key role in ammunition production for Ukraine. German defence enterprises Rheinmetall, Diehl, and MBDA Germany have already signed contracts with their US counterparts to produce much-needed Patriot air defence missiles and 227mm rockets for Ukraine’s ground launched multiple rocket system. The progress of this project is of critical importance for Ukraine’s war efforts but ultimately also for European defence capabilities.

The EU should do more to facilitate this kind of response by the European defence industry. One of the main industrial constraints so far has been the exclusion of defence firms from all EU financial assistance and instruments created after the 2008 financial crisis and then the covid-19 pandemic. This contributes to their difficulties in accessing credit and insurance, which becomes even more challenging for industry in the absence of long-term contracts with national governments. The European Commission should therefore start by conducting an in-depth overhaul of its financial regulations to improve access to credit and insurance.

To sustain the Ukrainian armed forces in a long war of attrition, European policymakers, armed forces, and defence industries will also have to find ways to ensure a steady flow of vehicles (including tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, armoured transport, armoured short-range air defence, and self-propelled artillery). This will be no mean feat, especially as stored cold-war legacy equipment is much shorter in supply in the West than in Russia. The Russian military was able to quickly pull thousands of tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, and artillery systems out of storage. Western states, meanwhile, held an intensive political debate on whether or not to touch their limited reserves of spare vehicles.

European armies will only be able to increase their vehicle support if they embark on large-

scale modernisation programmes to free up supplies to send to the battlefields. For now, few EU member states have put in orders for new land vehicles: Germany, for example, has ordered 18 Leopard 2 tanks and 12 Panzerhaubitze 2000s to replace vehicles delivered to Ukraine. But these are not sufficient to allow defence companies to scale up production. Those countries that have expressed an interest in larger orders demand a local share of production, which again delays the process as well as eventual deliveries.

The European Commission should therefore elaborate a pan-European vehicle plan for Ukraine, analogous to that for ammunition. This would incentivise member states to put in larger orders and producers to make the necessary investments. These vehicles would then either be handed over to Ukraine or to an EU member state, if that country agreed immediately to supply equivalent systems to Kyiv.

Moreover, the more Western equipment Ukraine uses, the more companies will pay attention to the need for repair and maintenance. For example, Ukraine will become one of the world's largest operators of Leopard 1 tanks. German companies Rheinmetall and FFG therefore plan to open joint ventures in Ukraine predominately to repair and maintain these vehicles; other European companies have also expressed an interest in opening franchises in Ukraine. This kind of initiative benefits both Ukraine's war effort and the military-industrial sector: Ukraine needs its equipment maintained; defence enterprises want to see what kind of damage Russian weapons do, or what challenges certain Russian systems pose, because that assists their research and development efforts for the next generation of vehicles or systems. This further justifies new joint procurement schemes and the increased integration of Ukrainian and EU military-industrial capacities.

Currently, Ukrainian forces are encountering new battlefield realities that hinder manoeuvre-warfare and tilt the war towards a battle of attrition. To maintain a credible deterrence for the future, the armed forces of EU member states need to understand and learn to cope with these factors, both in a technical sense (for example, by developing new mine-clearing, drone-defence, and electronic warfare techniques) and in the tactical-operational sense (by refining their doctrines on armoured manoeuvre warfare). This will require cooperation with Ukrainian forces in training and military-to-military liaison on new tactics and doctrine, as well as with the defence-industrial sector to try and test new systems. The EU should therefore encourage joint ventures with Ukrainian companies, thereby also significantly enhancing its own strategic sovereignty – including in areas that are currently underdeveloped, such as drones and software development. To obtain sufficient and predictable funding, the EU should link these ventures to discussions on its new multiannual budget (2028-2034).

How to support Ukraine's long-term security

Immediate and medium-term military assistance is crucial. But it will gain more credibility if the EU and member states anchor it in longer-term commitments, including bilateral security arrangements, NATO membership, and ultimately EU accession.

On the margins of the July 2023 NATO summit in Vilnius, Lithuania, the G7 countries adopted a “joint declaration of support for Ukraine”, which provides a framework for long-term bilateral security arrangements in line with the “Kyiv security compact” that Ukrainian leaders proposed in September 2022. The commitments in this joint declaration formalise assistance for the long war of the type discussed above, including modern weapons deliveries, joint training and military exercises, and support for Ukraine's military-industrial sector. The declaration also establishes a consultation mechanism in case of future aggression by Russia to decide on ways to support Ukraine's right to self-defence. At the time of writing, 25 countries had subscribed to the declaration. Through these arrangements, Ukraine's Western partners can demonstrate that they are seriously committed to supporting Ukraine's security over the long term.

For Kyiv, however, bilateral arrangements may be an unsatisfactory solution, as they would drain Western resources and keep Ukraine in ‘intensive care’ for years, without any chance of a real economic recovery. Ukraine's Western allies must also have learned from Russia's invasion that countries left in ‘grey zones’ can be attacked. NATO membership could therefore be the most efficient way to deter Russia in the long term. That way, savings on Ukraine's defence – which would become part of NATO's collective defence – could go towards Ukraine's reconstruction.

Before the Vilnius summit, the Ukrainian government had hoped for a clear commitment to get Ukraine on the track towards such NATO accession – via a political invitation to the alliance without joining until the war had ended.^[4] But the Vilnius summit ended with the same declaration that NATO members had first made in Bucharest 15 years earlier and have repeated every year since then: “Ukraine's future is in NATO”. Given the change in Ukraine's circumstances since Bucharest, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's frustrated reaction was understandable.

However, NATO members also acknowledged in Vilnius that Ukraine's progress in terms of interoperability and political integration with the alliance would make a membership action plan irrelevant. In effect, NATO allies recognised that Ukraine would be ready for membership once the war was over, without expressly extending the invitation Ukraine had

hoped for.

Even so, the Ukrainian commentator, Alyona Getmanchuk, and others have suggested that the Vilnius declaration indicates that NATO has not learned from what has happened in the 15 years since Bucharest. In their view, “Ukraine’s future is in NATO” created ambiguity and thus “invited” Russia to escalate: by promising that Ukraine would become a member of NATO, but not actually inviting Ukraine to join, NATO members gave Russia enough time and reason to trigger a conflict and try to prevent Ukraine from ultimately joining the alliance.

But some members of NATO, and especially the US, took a very different lesson from the 15 years since Bucharest: do not promise what you may not be able to deliver. This difference in views between Kyiv and Washington (and among NATO members, as some – such as Poland, the Baltic states and, more recently, France – favour a political invitation for Ukraine) is leading to less cohesion between NATO states, on the one hand, and NATO and Ukraine, on the other.

This weakens the unity of the NATO alliance at a time when that unity is more vital than ever. It also prevents the alliance from making clear decisions, which risks feeding the Ukrainian frustrations that were evident following the Vilnius summit. This in turn could contribute to altering Ukraine’s vision of its Western partners and accelerating the shift to a deeply transactional vision of its relationship with them, or even to a growing resentment in the Ukrainian public about the lack of support. [5] Europe could thus lose Ukraine even before the war is over.

The context of the campaign for the 2024 US presidential election will not make things easier for the Biden administration, which is unlikely to shift its position at the Washington summit, due to take place a few days before the Republican party convention. The US administration will likely instead try to focus on the commemorative dimension of this summit, marking NATO’s 75th anniversary, rather than on such a divisive issue as Ukraine’s path to membership. But, if in 2024 NATO did manage to extend an invitation for Ukraine to join once the war is over, it would send a powerful signal both to Ukraine and – perhaps more importantly – to Russia. Ultimately though, it will be Ukraine’s EU accession that has the most profound and transformative impact on the country’s future.

Ukraine’s European future

Ukraine’s EU accession will, of course, be another crucial element of its long-term security. But EU membership will also transform the country in other ways. Since Ukraine was granted EU candidate status in June 2022, its government has implemented more democratic reforms

and those of a better quality than before. Indeed, Ukraine's ability to implement reforms despite the war has been striking, and the war itself has increased the commitment of Ukraine's government and policymakers to the reform agenda – because they want to capitalise on all the chances they have to win the trust of their own people and their Western partners.

To maintain this level of commitment from the Ukrainian leadership, the EU will need to reciprocate and provide clear signals of its own commitment to integrating Ukraine. As Western Balkans leaders know from bitter experience, the EU suffers from an expectation-credibility gap on enlargement. And, before 24 February 2022, EU enlargement – despite ongoing negotiations with, for instance, Montenegro and Serbia – was almost “clinically dead”. The EU and member states will need to learn lessons from past enlargements over the next few months and years. Only then will they be able to offer Ukraine – and other candidate countries – a credible path to membership that serves both their interests and those of a larger EU.

How to make the EU fit for enlargement

To pave the way for Ukraine's accession, the EU first needs to actually prepare itself to become a union of up to 36 states. To do so, it needs to learn from both the successful enlargements of the past and the failures of its recent enlargement policy.

The first lesson has to do with the economic and demographic impact of accession on current and future member states. The way the EU and existing member states dealt with this in relation to the 2004-2007 enlargements is particularly instructive. EU membership and the structural funds that came with it allowed new member states such as Poland to catch up with other European countries in terms of infrastructure. But membership also made them less competitive and had a huge impact on demographics, with thousands of young, active people emigrating to the United Kingdom and other EU member states. The EU set up transition periods and safeguard clauses to mitigate the impact of enlargement on member states, but these frustrated the candidate countries. On agriculture, for example, transition phases were up to ten years. So, it is entirely possible for the EU and existing member states to welcome the integration of new members, yet all the while set reasonable conditions to safeguard their own interests.

To ensure the credibility of Ukraine's accession process, the EU will need to adapt its sectoral policies and earmark sufficient resources to address Ukraine's huge needs in terms of regional development and agricultural policy, without depriving current member states of the benefit of these policies. The EU should make clear that long transition periods in these areas

will be necessary to ensure the country's integration can happen sooner rather than later. It needs to define the duration of the transition periods in close coordination with relevant member states and Ukraine. Member states will find these discussions difficult, but addressing these issues soon would send a signal to Ukraine that they are seriously committed to ultimately integrating the country into the EU.

Secondly, the EU and member states will need to define the other challenges they face to integrate Ukraine (and other candidate countries) and address these challenges pragmatically. These include institutional issues such as the increased use of qualified voting in the European Council, the number of commissioners, and the appropriate number of members of the European Parliament.

On these issues, internal discussions among member states have barely started, and the danger is that the vision of enlargement will quickly become bogged down in technicalities. Indeed, some countries, such as Germany, France, and Portugal have already indicated that they would like to see progress on enlargement linked to prior reform of EU institutions. A renaissance of this debate is legitimate, but it is bound to weaken enthusiasm for membership among the candidate countries. After all, countries such as Montenegro are already impatient, after having closed very few chapters in years of negotiations. Some analysts have recently tried to break the present binary thinking of membership, under which countries are either full members or outside the club, by proposing models of so-called staged or multi-speed integration. This is also likely to meet resistance from candidate countries. Senior Ukrainian officials, for example, have stated that Ukraine would not accept any form of “second-class membership”. [6]

The EU again needs to learn from the past to overcome issues such as these. In June 1997, in preparation for the “big bang” enlargement of 2004, the European Commission presented a broad strategic plan, “Agenda 2000”, that covered everything from assessment of the various candidate countries to the EU's own institutional and policy reforms. After difficult negotiations, members agreed to the plan in June 1999, thereby clearing the way for enlargement. This kept frustrations among candidate countries and existing member states as under control as possible.

The EU and member states should agree on a similar strategic plan for the current enlargement, which could be called “Agenda 2030”. To enable new member states to join before 2034, the EU will have to make room for the countries in its budget, which runs from 2028-2034. In practice, this implies that Agenda 2030 should be part of the 2024 election campaign to the European Parliament, presented by the new European Commission next year, and agreed upon at the latest during the Polish or Danish presidencies in 2025. EU

leaders therefore need to agree to develop such a strategic plan at the European Council meeting in December 2023. Simultaneously, the EU should inform the public in member states and explain the benefits of enlargement to increase the societal acceptance of this policy.

How to support Ukraine's EU accession

Ukraine will require continued support as it undertakes the reforms necessary for EU accession. When it granted candidate status to Ukraine, the EU put forward seven recommendations, which had to do with de-oligarchisation, the fight against corruption and money laundering, judicial reform and the reform of the constitutional court, and changes in legislation regarding national minorities and the media.

These are painful reforms for Ukraine, especially as it fights an existential war, and it is unclear whether the government will manage to fully complete them by the end of 2023. Even so, progress on the recommendations is still a litmus test for how serious Kyiv is about complying with the EU acquis and playing by the EU rules. In June 2023, an assessment by the European Commission found that Ukraine had made progress in implementing all the recommendations, albeit to different degrees: it has already fulfilled the recommendations on the judiciary and the media; the recommendation on the constitutional court is showing “good progress”; and those that relate to anticorruption, money laundering, national minorities, and de-oligarchisation have demonstrated “some progress”. A coalition of Ukrainian civil society organisations has developed an alternative report, “candidate check”, whose findings on Ukraine's progress are widely in line with the EU's evaluation. (It is even more critical than the EU in certain areas such as the reform of the constitutional court.)

If the Ukrainian government manages to complete the implementation of the remaining recommendations by the end of the year, the European Council will greenlight the opening of accession talks at its December 2023 meeting. The EU would gain more, however, if it decided to open accession talks with Kyiv anyway in December – even if there is still room for improvement. This is because both the EU and Ukrainian civil society will have much greater leverage over the reform process once the negotiations kick off. Moreover, not opening negotiations after Kyiv's remarkable efforts to implement reforms while fighting a war could alienate Ukraine.

As in past waves of enlargement, a strong commitment from and mentoring by one or several member states could make this process more concrete and palatable. Lobbying by member states for specific candidate countries has always been part of enlargement. In 2004, Nordic member states lobbied for their Baltic neighbours, France for Romania, and Germany and

Austria for Poland and Hungary. Similarly, some member states, like Austria, Greece, and the Czech Republic, have started lobbying for Western Balkans candidate countries; while others, such as the Baltic states, push for a “fast track” accession for Ukraine. Conversely, some EU member states may block or delay the accession process because of bilateral issues with a candidate country, as happened with Bulgaria and North Macedonia. This is an all too plausible scenario between Ukraine and, for instance, Hungary.

It will be crucial for the EU to avoid a situation such as that, whereby one EU member state uses its bilateral agenda to delay the accession process, or uses the accession process to move its bilateral agenda forward. Beyond that, concrete steps, such as establishing a “partnership for enlargement” with Ukraine and defining a clear timeline and agenda for accession, can contribute to reinforcing the EU’s credibility and provide a strong incentive for Ukraine to move forward with the necessary reforms. The EU should therefore also commit itself to setting a target date for Ukraine’s accession at the council meeting in December.

That target date should nevertheless be realistic. The Ukrainian government wants a fast-track process and refuses to entertain the idea of a staged accession or a differentiated integration, sometimes disregarding the situation in the EU and the process itself. But, given the complexity of the process and lack of readiness in the EU, it is difficult to imagine a fast-track accession under the current conditions. Even if it were possible, it is unclear to what extent such a process would be beneficial for either the EU or Ukraine.

Again, previous enlargements hold valuable lessons in this regard. In the past, waves of enlargement often proceeded on the mere promise of progress on reforms. As the experiences of countries such as Romania or Bulgaria demonstrate, this reduced the EU’s leverage to actually demand the implementation of the relevant policies following accession, and thus the credibility of the conditions themselves. Moreover, Hungary’s and Poland’s backsliding on the rule of law after their EU accession shows that fulfilling the EU’s requirements by the time of accession is no guarantee of a sustained commitment to the rule of law, and can ultimately threaten the functioning of the union as a whole. So, if candidate countries rush reforms dedicated to progress on corruption and rule of law, it may end up being a disservice both to the countries in question and the EU.

This means that the EU needs to ensure that Ukraine has the necessary time to implement proper and well-defined conditionalities. The process is a unique opportunity to secure reforms that will prepare Ukraine to enter the EU in the best possible way. Its accession should not come with a ‘wartime discount’ that would ultimately weaken Ukraine. The EU should define its conditionalities in a clear and unequivocal way and accompany their achievement with the appropriate rewards. A merit-based approach should go both ways:

Ukraine should not advance without deserving it, but the EU also should not turn a blind eye to Ukraine's achievements and merits.

Representatives of Ukrainian civil society organisations are also adamant that strict implementation of the EU's conditionalities is necessary. [7] This would permit the EU and Ukrainian civil society to use the leverage of the membership perspective to its full potential and secure real and lasting reforms, especially in fundamental matters such as the rule of law, the reform of the judiciary, and the fight against corruption and money laundering.

Moreover, the EU should encourage Ukraine's leaders to pursue structural reforms of the country's economy. The Ukrainian government should integrate these reforms into the recovery and reconstruction process, helping to ensure the Ukrainian economy is fit to face competition in the EU single market. This would also help Ukraine not only to preserve attractive conditions for its workforce to stay in the country and for foreign investors to come, but also to increase the number of jobs available – including in territories currently illegally occupied by Russia. In those territories, it will be crucial to provide economic opportunities to the local population to prevent feelings of alienation among people there that may make their reintegration more difficult.

Recommendations

Security and military assistance

Ramp up immediate and medium-term military assistance

- The EU needs to accelerate and sustain its security and military support for Ukraine for the long war. EU institutions should facilitate the response by the European defence industry.
- One of the industry's main constraints so far has been difficulties in accessing credit and insurance. The European Commission should therefore conduct an in-depth overhaul of its financial regulations to improve access.
- The EU and member states should also elaborate a pan-European vehicle plan to generate the quantities of various armoured fighting vehicles and other weapons systems required to sustain Ukraine. Ordering vehicles in bulk would incentivise producers to make the necessary investments.
- They should also establish new joint procurement schemes and integrate Ukrainian military-industrial capacities in EU defence industries. Moreover, they should encourage joint ventures with Ukrainian companies, for example, for repairs and maintenance.
- To obtain sufficient and predictable funding, the EU should link such a scheme to the important discussion about its new budget (2028-2034).

Commit to Ukraine's long-term security

- The EU and member states need to anchor that support for the long war in long-term commitments to Ukraine's security.
- They can do so in two ways: by committing to long-term bilateral security arrangements and aiming to define a common vision of Ukraine's path towards NATO membership ahead of the 2024 summit in Washington DC.

Ukraine's European future

Make the EU fit for enlargement

- The EU also needs to commit to Ukraine's future within the bloc, which will consolidate its long-term security, as well as transforming the country's democracy and economy. But first, the EU will need to ensure it is fit for enlargement and prepared to become a union of up to 36 states.
- Ukraine's accession will require the EU to adapt its sectoral policies and make sure that sufficient resources are included in the budget to address the country's needs in terms of regional development or agricultural policy, without depriving current member states of the benefit of these policies.
- The EU should make clear that long transition periods in these areas will be necessary to ensure that Ukraine's integration can happen sooner rather than later. It needs to define the duration of transition periods in close coordination with relevant member states and Ukraine.
- Just as with the big-bang enlargement of 2004, the EU and member states should agree upon a strategic plan in preparation, which could be called "Agenda 2030".
- In practice, this implies that Agenda 2030 should be part of the election campaign to the European Parliament in 2024, presented by the new European Commission, and agreed upon at the latest during the Polish or Danish presidencies in 2025.
- EU institutions and member states should agree upon the need to develop Agenda 2030 at the December 2023 European Council meeting.
- The EU should also conduct an information campaign with the public in member states to increase societal acceptance of enlargement.

Support Ukraine's accession process

- Also in December 2023, the EU should commit itself to a target date for Ukraine's accession.
- The EU then needs to ensure the credibility of the accession process. This could involve a strong commitment from and mentoring by one or several member states to make the process more concrete and palatable.
- The EU needs to find ways to avoid a situation in which one member state uses its bilateral agenda to delay the accession process, or uses the accession process to move its bilateral agenda forward.
- The EU should take concrete steps towards Ukraine's accession, such as by establishing a "partnership for enlargement" with Ukraine or defining a clear timeline and agenda, to reinforce the credibility of its perspective. This would provide a strong incentive for Ukraine to move forward with the necessary reforms.
- EU institutions should avoid rushing the accession process and take the necessary time to implement proper and well-defined conditionalities for Ukraine.
- The process is a unique opportunity for the EU to push for reforms that will prepare Ukraine to enter the single market in the best possible way; it should not come with a 'wartime discount' that would ultimately weaken Ukraine.
- This should include structural reforms of the country's economy. The Ukrainian government needs to integrate these reforms into the recovery and reconstruction process.
- The EU should define the necessary conditionalities in a clear and unequivocal way, with the appropriate rewards. A merit-based approach should go both ways: Ukraine should not advance without deserving it – but neither should the EU turn a blind eye to Ukraine's merits.

Conclusion

Over the past year, the EU and member states have responded well to Russia's aggression and provided extensive support to Ukraine. However, frustrations are growing in Kyiv, and Europeans need to respond to this by ramping up both their immediate and long-term assistance to the country. If they do not, these frustrations could give way to resentment and to a more transactional and utilitarian vision of Ukraine's relationships with its Western partners.

For the foreseeable future, security will remain the absolute priority of Ukraine and will take precedence over all other issues. But Ukraine's security, recovery, and future prosperity will also receive a boost from its EU accession. The EU should be strict about Ukraine's implementation of the necessary steps towards EU membership, but opening negotiations this year will give the EU leverage to push for reforms, monitor their implementation closely, and accompany Ukraine on its path towards membership – thereby demonstrating the EU's and member states' commitment to enlargement.

Without security assistance and a clear commitment to enlargement, the EU may be left with a theoretical choice between not integrating Ukraine – at the cost of its own unity and of leaving a dangerous geopolitical vacuum at its borders – or integrating a strong Ukraine that resents the timorous and overdue support provided by its partners when its existence was at stake. The EU's ability to play a bigger geopolitical role would also be undermined by its inability to agree on Ukraine, as would its ability to prevent third actors challenging its role in the eastern neighbourhood and playing on the internal divisions that would necessarily emerge.

Indeed, failing to support Ukraine's security in the short term and to offer it a European future could, ultimately, destroy the EU. Ironically, what started in 2013 with association agreements that the EU naively believed would be the vehicles of an enhanced cooperation benefitting Ukraine and ultimately Russia, turned out to be the catalyst for fundamental changes of the EU itself, pushing it to turn into a geopolitical actor it had never sought to become. Now the cost of not making this shift would be huge for the EU.

Taking bolder steps requires a change of narrative: far from being a liability, or even something the EU owes to Ukraine, as it is too often perceived, supporting Ukraine's security and offering it a clear path towards EU membership are great opportunities for the EU. That is, they are opportunities for the EU to enhance its military production capacities; increase its geopolitical profile and play a real role in securing and stabilising its environment; and rethink its institutions and policies to make the EU more functional and able to integrate all

the countries of a definite geographical space, thus stabilising the contour and modus operandi of a larger European Union.

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[1] Authors’ interviews with senior Ukrainian government officials, held off the record, Kyiv, July 2023.

[2] Authors’ interviews with Ukrainian government officials, representatives of civil society, and military experts, held off the record, Kyiv, July 2023.

[3] Authors’ interview with Ukrainian military experts and defence officials, held off the record, Kyiv, July 2023.

[4] Authors’ interviews with Ukrainian government officials, held off the record, Kyiv, July 2023.

[5] Authors’ interview with a Ukrainian political analyst, held off the record, Kyiv, July 2023.

[6] Authors’ interviews with senior Ukrainian officials, held off the record, Kyiv, July 2023.

[7] Authors’ interviews with representatives of Ukrainian civil society organisations, held off the record, Kyiv, July 2023.

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