EUROPEAN COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS
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POLICY BRIEF

PREVENTING THE NEXT WAR: A EUROPEAN PLAN FOR UKRAINE

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June 2025

SUMMARY

- Whether or not there is a ceasefire in Ukraine this year, Europeans, together with the Ukrainians, should begin—now—to draw up a "beyond the horizon" plan for Ukraine in readiness for a ceasefire or a peace deal.
- Even if fighting stops, there is no doubt Russia will continue to undermine Ukraine, with knock-on impacts throughout Europe. The risk of a future Russian-Ukrainian war will remain substantial for years, possibly decades.
- Protecting Ukraine's security and enhancing its defence, European integration and domestic stability are in the interests of both Europeans and Ukrainians. Europe is safer with a sovereign and prosperous Ukraine than if the country is controlled or endlessly destabilised by Russia.
- The EU and European states must plan ahead to assure Ukraine's internal security, and help its democracy to flourish, Ukrainians to return home and the economy to bounce back.
- Without such a plan, Ukraine will endlessly preoccupy Europe's politics and economics. But with such a plan, Europeans can help transform it into an anchor of stability.

A tale of two scenarios

It is 2030. Ukrainians' valiant resistance failed to expel Russia fully from their territory. Instead, they have carved out the next-best outcome: the front line is mostly stable, despite the absence of NATO membership (as was the case for West Germany) or any final peace agreement (as is still the case for South Korea). But this situation allows the rest of the country to rebuild, recover and prosper.

In the teeth of severe adversity, Ukraine has consolidated into a stable, modernising state whose prosperity and security is underpinned by a robust web of European guarantees and the presence of reassurance troops on its territory. These European forces have warded off continued aggression and protected critical infrastructure, including Ukraine's nuclear power plants. Years of increased EU defence spending and modernisation have made Europe a powerful security actor, with Ukraine's defence industry helping scale up shared European capacity. This mutually beneficial cooperation has also revitalised Ukraine's own economy; veterans returning from the front and refugees from abroad now have jobs and opportunities. International businesses flock to the country, confident Kyiv's defences will safeguard their investments.

Special wartime procedures enabled the EU and Ukraine to break through the leisurely pace of peacetime rules and complete five electricity interconnectors and build five major bridges and highways in just three years—a process that would normally take nearly a decade. This has created the most seamless trade relationship yet between Ukraine and the EU. Ukraine's growing and increasingly zero-emission electricity exports, supported by the new interconnectors and protected nuclear plants, have also helped stabilise European electricity prices and made energy more affordable across the continent. While a final peace agreement with Russia remains out of reach, the front line remains stable. Even in the shadow of a conflict yet to formally end, defence protections, rapid innovation and deep European partnership have transformed Ukraine's future.

Yet, an alternative, bleaker, scenario could also lie ahead. Just as a "South Korea"-style armistice without a peace deal might not be the worst outcome for Europe and Ukraine itself, Russia will surely strive to achieve its own next-best outcome—turning Ukraine into a vast morass of instability, ruled half by Moscow, half by chaos.

Five years from now, Russia has managed to achieve a victory of sorts in Ukraine. It initially failed to gain control of the whole country but has since wrecked its security, governance, politics and economy. The two sides signed a periodically ignored ceasefire, but Moscow has dramatically intensified its war in the hybrid domain, while accumulating troops and weapons for the next large-scale assault.

After the 2026 ceasefire, Western assistance proved insufficient to stabilise Ukraine and rescue its economy; investors stayed away out of fear of renewed fighting. With Ukrainians disappointed by Europeans' ineffectual response, embittered by the indeterminate conclusion of the horrible conflict, the post-war elections became a divisive feast of recriminations. Moscow's assets in Ukraine peppered the campaigns with Russian propaganda. National unity—so painfully forged in wartime—dissipated once the smoke cleared. Internal security became harder to preserve as criminal groups smuggled weapons or engaged in human trafficking. The country lurched into default in the absence of external financial support; millions were left jobless. More refugees made for Europe while Ukrainians living abroad chose to stay away. Russia poured all possible resources into undermining the country, exploiting domestic divisions and weakening Ukraine's state institutions.

The EU's efforts to stabilise its neighbour failed because Europeans welcomed a ceasefire without putting in place a proper, prepared and coordinated plan to help their neighbour. The temporary cessation in fighting also quickly led to a cessation in substantial aid, as European voters and political parties moved on to the next crisis. All the potential strengths and advantages offered by a friendly and stable Ukraine went to waste in the absence of a "beyond the horizon" plan. Europeans were not ready for how quickly that horizon drew near. Now EU member states face constant full-spectrum threats right along the bloc's borders, continued westward migration and the legacy of billions of euros sunk into what became a weak, unstable state.

As things stand today, Ukraine is much closer to the "next best" scenario than the depressing alternative. Since Russia began its full-scale invasion of their country, the Ukrainians have achieved many extraordinary things. They have ruined Moscow's plans to control the entire country, preserved their sovereignty and governance and galvanised global support for Ukraine's cause. They have moved rapidly on from relying on depleted Soviet-era military stocks and Western arms donations to become nearly self-sufficient in areas of defence production such as drones and artillery. Ukraine's state institutions have risen to the challenge—and wherever they fell short, millions of ordinary Ukrainians stepped in to sustain the armed forces and each other. None of this was a given for a country which some (and not just in Russia) considered "artificial" just a few years ago. Their successes are a source of pride—but they are also the key to unlocking the more positive future scenario when the fighting eventually ends.

Still, Russia's sheer military heft has put Ukraine's innovation and defiance under real strain. Since the failed Ukrainian counteroffensive of 2023, the conflict has turned into a grinding war of attrition. Media reports rightly highlight Ukraine's ability to stall the invaders and the great costs Russia is paying for its slow progress. But the fact remains that Moscow's troops have been making incremental gains almost on a daily basis and its summer offensive is now

in full swing, compounded by intensified pummelling of Ukraine's cities. "If the frontline is stabilised, how come we are losing territory each day?", said one senior military official in Kyiv in May 2025.[1]

Donald Trump's return as president opened a new diplomatic phase, in which the US demands a ceasefire, Ukraine concurs and Russia pretends to consider it. Still, officials in the US and Ukraine remain hopeful for a temporary cessation of hostilities towards the end of this year or next.[2] And at some point, the Kremlin might well prefer to pocket its territorial gains and extract political concessions from Kyiv and Washington rather than stay bogged down in Ukraine. Doubtless, Russia would only agree a settlement either if it is stopped on the battlefield or if it concludes the benefits of a deal outweigh the drawbacks. This fact alone should alert Europeans to the vital need to plan—now—for the "day after" in Ukraine.

This paper goes beyond the ups and downs of day-to-day negotiations and battlefield fighting to counsel Europeans to look to the horizon: what lies just out of sight, and how can they shape the landscape that lies there? It examines how Europe can protect its interests in the medium to long term when a durable ceasefire (or even a peace deal) emerges, showing how to deny Moscow the possibility of launching another war on its neighbour a few years down the road.

The choice between the two scenarios—a next-best outcome or a zone of instability?—also lies in Europeans' hands. Here's how to make that first future a reality.

The war ends, the struggle continues

The end of the war will not mean the end of Russian attempts to sabotage Ukraine. For decades, Russia has portrayed its neighbour as a failed state, which it hoped the rest of Europe would leave outside the club rather than integrate. It has engaged in strategic corruption, used economic and energy blackmail and deployed cyber and hybrid attacks to weaken and control the Ukrainian state. There is no reason to expect such attempts will cease once the fighting stops; quite the opposite.

The all-too-imaginable picture of a Ukraine subverted by Russia should alarm Europeans right across the continent, from Poland to Portugal. For now, a hobbled Ukraine is neither a given nor the likeliest outcome. Since the start of Russia's full-scale aggression, Ukrainian society and Ukraine's state structures have proved resilient and effective. All the tools are in reach to paint a sunnier picture. But it will require the right combination of policies, politics and resource from Kyiv and its Europeans partners to foresee and resolve the challenges the country will face once the war is over.

So far, Europeans' response has—besides humanitarian aid—comprised essentially two main elements: guns and funds. In terms of the first, the volume of arms supplied by Europe exceeds that sent by the United States. Europeans have also started to discuss sending a reassurance mission. But with the American military commitment now deeply uncertain, Europeans will need to ramp up arms support yet further. In terms of funds, the most important part of Europeans' support is the macro financial assistance the EU provides to keep Ukraine's economy afloat. In the longer term, more EU funds could go to Ukraine via pre-accession instruments, given that it is now a candidate to join the bloc.

However, neither of these two EU responses are underpinned by a proper strategy which takes into account what kind of Ukraine there will actually be once the fighting stops. European troops and military instructors alone cannot help with the country's reconstruction. Nor is EU accession a silver bullet: membership will take years to materialise and faces political headwinds in some member states. Alongside guns and funds, therefore, Ukraine's European partners should, together with Kyiv, draw up a "beyond the horizon" plan. They must back this up with diligent preparation, substantial resource and political clout. This plan should comprise three broad parts: security, European integration and domestic stabilisation for Ukraine.

Security for Ukraine

The security of Ukraine is inextricably linked to the security of the rest of Europe: "assistance" given by Europeans to the country is also assistance in support of their own situation. While the war might seem distant to some in Europe, the ramifications have been felt everywhere, from steep inflation to financial outlays for Ukraine to the arrival of millions of refugees. Without long-term security, a post-war Ukraine that is weak and vulnerable will attract endless Russian aggression or destabilisation attempts; a secure, strong and capable Ukraine would be a real asset for Europeans' security.

The Ukrainian armed forces are numerous and experienced, and they possess a unique set of

advanced combat skills. Such a robust Ukrainian army, if not disarmed after a ceasefire, is a valuable asset for European security as a whole. Continued assistance to Ukraine is not about supporting an open-ended conflict to wear out Russian forces, but to acknowledge Kyiv's future role in European security.

To hold off the Russian threat, Europeans' strategic approach to security and Ukraine should comprise three elements. These apply whatever the latest twists and turns on the battlefield or at the negotiation table. To deliver robust security support for Ukraine, Europeans must: help Ukrainians defend themselves by providing continued military assistance and partnerships; integrate Ukraine into Europe's security institutions, with or without full membership; and deploy a limited but credible European reassurance force.

Help Ukrainians defend themselves

The initial element is a credible Ukrainian army capable of deterring further Russian aggression and the resumption of fighting. This 900,000-strong force is now battle-hardened and possesses unique combat experience, including in the use of disruptive technologies. Indeed, without the presence of the Ukrainian army, the rest of Europe would be forced to assemble more large-formation (and extremely expensive) land forces to defend themselves. While staffing and equipping the Ukrainian army should remain a task for Kyiv, Europeans can help assure its strength and capabilities for the longer term. In the event of a ceasefire or peace deal, European leaders must resist the temptation to relax and allocate resource and attention away from Ukraine. Instead, they need to sustain this aid whatever the details of any agreement with Russia.

In particular, Europeans should, first, **provide Ukraine with more of the ammunition and capabilities that can help it counter any Russian offensives.** This includes maintaining the flow of 155mm ammunition and air defence capabilities. But it also includes delivering the spare parts and support equipment that enable the Ukrainian armed forces to use donated platforms, including artillery, tanks and other armoured vehicles as well as fighter aircraft and air defence systems.

Second, Europeans must **further** support the growing ability of Ukrainian industry **to produce much of what the country needs**, **ranging from air and sea drones to ammunition and combat platforms.** This can take multiple forms. For example, the Ukrainian government lacks the funding to produce much more equipment domestically; to address this, dedicated EU financing could fill this shortfall, and it would be a cost-effective way to equip the Ukrainian armed forces. In this spirit, recent decisions by European companies appear promising, such as moves by Rheinmetall, Saab and KNDS to develop joint ventures in

Ukraine. The Danish and Swedish governments have also led by example to back such partnerships financially. European industry needs to further develop this type of activity; here, the EU financial toolbox should sponsor and facilitate these partnerships. A number of European defence companies have understood this and are developing long-term business partnerships. They would be inclined to go even further down this road if the risks associated with such investment were mitigated.[3] Defence officials in Kyiv increasingly view Ukraine's de facto integration and cooperation with European defence industry as essential to their country's security.[4]

Finally, **Europeans need to find a way to mitigate the consequences of new cuts in US military assistance to Ukraine**. They should start by looking at military systems where dependency on US assistance is the heaviest, such as air and missile defence, intelligence and targeting, and secure communication systems. Europe is not always able to replace these like for like, as some assistance or systems are only delivered by the US, such as Starlink and long-range ATACMS rockets. But European decision-makers can consider how to avert the damage from a US move to further reduce assistance. This problem could come up quite quickly, as the package agreed under the Biden administration will dry out in 2025 and no replacement appears to be in development. The future of US intelligence support and equipment deliveries under more commercial arrangements—in which Ukraine would pay for the support perhaps with European financial assistance—also remains an option, but is very dependent on decisions made high up in the American administration that are yet to be fully guaranteed in the long term. Europe thus needs to examine how exactly it could step in if the US withdrew. In some instances, such as space imagery or satellite communications, the European solution might not be as efficient as the American equivalent or would have to rely on commercial services as for space imagery, but policymakers may still be able to devise other options. For some critical equipment, such as air and missile defence, the solution might be a mix of answers ranging from procuring more from European systems to buying directly from the US to building American systems under licence in Europe. In the last two cases, Europeans would need a guarantee that deliveries are authorised for delivery to Ukraine.

Integrate Ukraine into European security institutions

As Ukrainian membership of NATO requires a consensus among all allies, this prospect appears to be off the table for the moment. NATO states such as Hungary have expressed their opposition and the Trump administration has mooted the end of Ukraine's bid to join the alliance as part of a "peace settlement" with Russia. Joining the EU remains a distinct possibility. But Ukraine will not benefit from the EU's article 42.7 mutual assistance provision before joining the bloc However, these constraints ought not to deter Europeans from seeking other ways to further deepen ties between Ukraine and European security institutions.

NATO

Regarding NATO, Europeans should **promote the extensive use of the newly established NATO Ukraine Council (NUC) framework.** The NUC grants Ukraine access to numerous NATO activities by virtue of being essentially the alliance's closest partner. This access includes participation in high-level political meetings (summits and ministerial meetings). To make the most of the opportunity the NUC offers, rather than focusing primarily on future membership. (The NUC began life as a "waiting room" for Ukraine.) The NUC should work to further improve: the interoperability of the Ukrainian armed forces with NATO forces; the implementation of NATO standards; and increased access to NATO operational awareness and active participation in NATO committees and exercises. A familiar model may be that of Finland and Sweden before they applied to join the alliance in 2022. In the years prior, Sweden and Finland drew closer to the alliance by participating ever more regularly in political and military consultations and exercises. As close partners, they did not benefit from the Article 5 mutual defence clause but were increasingly engaged in activities associated with collective defence.

The EU

Over the years, the EU has developed a security and defence relationship with Ukraine, including before the full-scale invasion of February 2022. Ukraine signed an administrative arrangement with the European Defence Agency (EDA) in 2015. Since 2022 its armed forces have benefited from EU training through the EU Military Assistance Mission in support of Ukraine (EUMAM); the largest training mission of the EU to date has trained 76,700 Ukrainian soldiers. The country has received massive financial and military assistance from the EU and member states. The European Commission and the EDA also support the development of defence industrial ties that gradually embed Ukraine in the European defence and technological industrial base.

Enlargement talks now need to cover**—upfront—the further deepening of these defence, technological and security ties, through the development of a unique and broad security partnership.** It would make sense to use the model of the EU-UK security pact to develop a tailored bilateral defence and security partnership.

The EU can also directly benefit from the lessons learned during the conflict and leverage Ukrainian industrial and military know-how to agree technological priorities. The massive use (by both Ukraine and Russia) of unmanned systems and the role of electronic warfare are

two immediate domains for such an effort (bearing in mind that any war between Russia and other European countries would inevitably differ from the current conflict). Furthermore, as noted, the EU needs to **foster joint ventures and long-term public and private partnerships to make the Ukraine of tomorrow a full part of the European defence and technological industrial base.** As one recent ECFR brief argues, this would be a mutually beneficial partnership matching Ukraine's innovations and battle-tested technologies with Europeans' rearmament needs.

Deploy a European reassurance force

A European security presence based in or very close to Ukraine is the final essential security component of the shared "beyond the horizon" plan.

The European debate about future security support for Ukraine has rightly moved on from the misleading term of "peacekeepers" or the questionable concept of a small military "tripwire" force (whose real function would only be to force the Europeans to intervene in the conflict).

Interest is now coalescing around the idea of assembling a solid "reassurance" force. The role of the reassurance force would be to significantly raise the costs and risks for Russia of restarting the war. In practice, and according to current open-source military analysis, this brief could be met by combining a well-equipped land presence with armour and air defences of 15,000-20,000 European soldiers operating next to a Ukrainian army capable of defending the country on its own. Such a force would not even need to be deployed near the frontline and could also be partially based outside Ukraine, provided it is able to reinforce European and Ukrainian forces in theatre at short notice. In this context, a US or NATO backstop mechanism—whose purpose would be to signal that an attack on this reassurance force could have consequences that do not need to be specified—would enhance the force's credibility and deterrent effect. It would also unlock the participation of a number of European countries while respecting America's stated intent not to deploy troops in Ukraine.

A reassurance force would represent a very significant commitment on the part of European states. It would require mobilising and enabling rotating forces, along with an ability to support and reinforce the forward-deployed troops. However, it is feasible. An accompanying air operation providing cover to the force and defending Ukrainian air space would in practice be an air policing mission capable of enforcing a no-fly zone over the portion of the territory controlled by Kyiv after the ceasefire. This air component would also play a potent deterrent role. Naval assets could contribute to the operation from the Black Sea, within the constraints of the Montreux convention. The rules of engagement should be clear and allow the use of force should Russia test it.

The deployment of such a force faces stubborn political resistance. Washington remains reluctant to provide a backstop through NATO directly and fears being dragged into a conflict. Moscow has yet to concede a Western military presence in post-ceasefire Ukraine. Meanwhile, many Europeans remain hesitant to go it alone without some American involvement. Nevertheless, a reassurance force would play a powerful role in making a success of Europe's and Ukraine's "beyond the horizon" plan and indeed guaranteeing Ukraine's—and the rest of Europe's—safety and security for the years after. The three recommended approaches to enhancing European security support for peace in Ukraine are tightly intertwined: a reassurance force operating in the absence of a robust Ukrainian army would be a soft target; investing in a closer security relationship and providing assistance to a semi-failed state would fail to pay dividends. However, the success of European security support will also inescapably rely on Ukraine's deeper integration on a broader number of fronts than security—the second part of the "beyond the horizon plan"—and drawing up the plan for supporting Ukraine internally—the third part.

EU integration and Ukraine

Since applying for EU membership in February 2022, Ukraine has made significant strides: it was granted candidate status in June 2022 and accession negotiations officially began in June 2024. However, the process is fraught with challenges. Hungary has repeatedly blocked or slowed procedural steps. Several other EU states insist that substantial internal reforms—especially to decision-making and budget frameworks—must precede any major enlargement. The sentiment among key officials across the bloc is that EU institutions and budgets can absorb a new round of enlargement to a few small countries, possibly Albania, Montenegro and Moldova.[5] However, some political EU leaders, as well as parliamentarians, trade unionists and farmers, want a deeper overhaul of the EU's decision-making procedures, budgets and policies before enlarging beyond this handful. Countries such as Poland are particularly concerned about the impact on the common agricultural policy because of the vast size of Ukraine's agricultural sector.

But EU integration is not a one-off event that happens on the day of accession and then ceases. There are multiple ways to integrate prior to joining, and integration continues long afterwards—many EU members remain outside the euro zone, and it took 18 years after their accession for Romania and Bulgaria to gain admittance to the Schengen area.

There are potentially two ways to look at Ukraine's membership journey. The first is the formal accession process, where the EU and Ukraine have little choice but to follow the

standard procedural and legal route: opening and closing negotiation clusters and chapters, implementing the *acquis communautaire* and negotiating transition periods for the post-accession phase, and more. But integration into the EU is not just a legal and procedural process. It is also a physical one. Irrespective of the speed of formal accession, the EU and Ukraine can work together to frontload and accelerate as many "real world" integration measures as possible. These would involve accelerating practical connections in security and defence, infrastructure, energy and trade. This will hasten Ukraine's material integration with the rest of Europe, which in turn will help drive internal Ukrainian reforms and prevent renewed conflict.

There are several concrete forms of integration to develop.

Economy

The first is economic. The harm the war has done to Ukraine's economy is enormous, estimated at some €170bn in terms of damage to infrastructure alone. Supporting Ukraine's economic vitality is fundamental to its ability not only to conduct the war but also then to rebuild itself, become independent of external help and remain a democracy. A dynamic Ukrainian economy is strongly in the EU's interests too. To support it, the EU could **accelerate Ukraine's integration into the single market by establishing a single market in industrial products, deepening market integration in services and providing greater access to public procurement opportunities between the EU and Ukraine.** Fuller integration into the single market for agriculture is politically awkward for many EU states and is probably beyond the bloc's current political, economic and budgetary capabilities. But even on agricultural products there is space for greater ambition. Certainly, Ukrainian exports of cereals, sugar and poultry pose problems for some EU member states. But other products are less sensitive, such as fruit, corn and flour. The EU should **look closely at greater market opening for some, less sensitive, Ukrainian agricultural products.**

Infrastructure

A much faster infrastructural boost for Ukraine will also support its economy and society, and Ukraine's neighbours to its west would also benefit from such investment. Such a boost could only be achieved if all donors to Ukraine's reconstruction look for faster ways to help and implement project. The EU—as well as the European Investment Bank, the European for Reconstruction and Development, the Council of Europe Development Bank, the World Bank, and as government from across the EU, Britain, Canada, Japan, Norway and other partners—do not just need seamless coordination, but also much faster ways to turn projects and plans into physical realities.

Varied forms of integration with the EU can assist this. For example, since the start of the war the diversion of trade overland away from the Black Sea has placed pressure on struggling infrastructure in Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Moldova. Fast-tracking the construction of better highway, rail and river port infrastructure within and between these countries and Ukraine would help the Ukrainian economy and smooth its integration with neighbouring economies.

The same is true for electricity interconnection. Despite massive Russian bombing of Ukraine's energy infrastructure, not a single new electricity interconnector with Ukraine (or Moldova) has yet been completed. Some projects are under development, but they have proceeded far too slowly. The European Commission has plans to integrate Ukraine and Moldova into the single energy market, but such a measure would benefit from greater physical infrastructure as well. Policymakers should ensure physical integration between Ukraine and the EU takes place regardless of the pace of Ukraine's procedural integration. This should include roads, bridges, access routes to border crossing points, airports, river ports on the Danube, and upgrades linking the Baltic, Black and Mediterranean seas.

Besides interconnectors, a comprehensive real-world integration process must also prioritise the rapid recovery of Ukraine's electricity generation sector. Restoring and expanding power infrastructure is essential not only for enabling greater energy trade flows with the EU in the future; the key international donors should prioritise it. Key areas should include accelerating the green transition with large-scale investments and substantial EU support, particularly for the development of storage batteries, which would both strengthen Ukraine's resilience against Russian attacks on its electricity sector and advance broader climate goals. Additionally, rebuilding and developing critical hydropower plants at Kakhovka and Cherkasy should be fast-tracked by donors to restore lost capacity and stabilise the grid. Looking ahead, robust military protection (by a European reassurance force) is also vital for the nuclear power plants that remain under Ukraine's control.

Security and defence

Security and defence integration is also of shared, urgent interest. Much cooperation in this field has been taking place bilaterally between the militaries of EU member states and the Ukrainian armed forces. But the EU can **speed up the integration of Ukraine into key EU security and defence policy initiatives—from the EDA, to permanent structured cooperation (PESCO) projects to EU instruments such as the EU hybrid and cyber response teams.**

Allowing Ukraine to join military mobility projects (such as progressing relevant dual- use infrastructure projects) is another way to strengthen Europe's security.

Ukraine's domestic resilience

Even when the guns fall silent, Ukraine's struggle will be far from over. The country's security, economic, demographic and social challenges are stupendous. Whatever the nature of the ceasefire or peace agreement, Russia will try to exploit problems facing Ukraine by sowing instability and confusion. Ukrainians face years—if not decades—of relentless hybrid warfare from Russia, on a scale likely many times greater than similar efforts directed towards states such as Romania and others. Ukraine's democracy will be tested by internal pressures and aggressive external operations, bribery of politicians, cover acquisition of media assets, influence campaigns in the digital realm to influence public discourse and vote-buying schemes. The EU will play a crucial role in supporting Ukraine in navigating this fraught environment, not least by continuing to work with Kyiv to bolster resilience and safeguard democratic institutions.

To help keep Ukraine on course, Europeans should prioritise the country's urgent domestic needs. The EU does not need to completely overhaul its programming and support for Ukraine; far from it. However, it should fast-track its intervention in areas where the risk is greatest of destabilisation and spillover into the rest of Europe.

The EU and other European countries, together with Ukraine, should therefore begin—now—to work on plan to support Ukraine's domestic resilience, capturing first-order priorities for:

- maintaining internal security;
- supporting a flourishing democracy;
- helping Ukrainians return home and settle;
- and rescuing the economy.

If the EU fails to start work on this straight away—making sure it is ready to swing into action as soon as ceasefire of sorts is achieved—Russia will be quick to take advantage and ensure Ukraine's internal situation slips out of Kyiv's control.

Maintaining internal security

In the aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion, Ukraine reported a fall in some criminal offences such as people smuggling from Asia and the Middle East; some gangs and criminal groups simply left the country. However, fighting, mobilisation and economic difficulties have all created other opportunities for illicit businesses or activities which endanger public security. It has also created more options for potential meddling by the Kremlin, both during the war and once it ends. There have already been reports of Russia's security and intelligence services offering bribes to effectively commission arson attacks on military hardware and the vehicles of people working for Ukraine's territorial military recruitment centres. For the moment, Kyiv has more or less risen to these challenges. But when the battlefield fighting subsides, Europeans and Ukrainians will need to work closely together to deny the Kremlin the chance to undermine the country from within by exploiting its internal security problems.

Small arms

The possession of small arms is a looming challenge. A large but unknown number of small arms were distributed by state authorities to the population in the early days of the war. Under martial law, civilian possession of firearms has been temporarily legalised. Once the fighting ends and martial law is lifted, the law is clear that these will need to be accounted for and handed back to the state within 10 days to avert a proliferation of arms smuggling or rise in lethal criminal violence. Importantly, for now, Ukraine has been effective at keeping control of access to small arms and firearms—according to the most recent Small Arms Survey , such access has actually become harder since the full-scale invasion. Still, when some regions furthest from the frontlines have tried to collect these weapons in, they have been largely unsuccessful. In one survey, around 45% of men across age groups said they either already own (7%) a firearm or would like to own one. Ensuring that small arms and firearms are recovered and handed over to the authorities will be crucial for maintaining the future internal security of Ukraine and preventing spillover into neighbouring states through smuggling. But giving up one's weapon is not only about enforcing the law—it is also about a person's feeling of personal security. The longer the shadow of a resurgent war with Russia, the more likely it is that people in possession of weapons will want to hold on to their arms. **The presence of a European reassurance force on the ground, as well as European investment in Ukraine's defence capabilities, would go a long way towards shortening this shadow**.

Veterans

Similarly important will be the integration of Ukraine's growing population of veterans. Since Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the fighting in Donbas in 2014, this group has grown to approximately 1.2 million people. Ukraine's Ministry for Veteran Affairs estimates 5-6 million individuals will come under its purview once the fighting stops. (This figure also includes family members.) Kyiv began to systematically address the issue only in 2024 when it adopted new strategic policies on veterans along with an operational plan for 2025-2027 to help service personnel in their transition to civilian life. However, these nascent policies are hard to deliver in wartime, or even in the situation of an unstable ceasefire with the continued threat of remobilisation for veterans and in the context of limited public resources.

For now, many projects are delivered on a voluntary basis by civil society and veterans' groups. In the event of a ceasefire, a whole-of-government approach will be needed instead, as in other post-conflict situations. The EU, the International Organization for Migration, the United Nations Development Programme and other agencies and donors have supported demobilisation and veterans' reintegration in a variety of post-conflict environments across the world. These were generally much smaller in scale—and further away from the EU's own borders. In other words, Ukraine, **the EU and other partners do not need to invent a whole new toolkit to support veterans' integration, but they will need to find substantially more funds (and ensure appropriate oversight) for its delivery.** Mobilising financial instruments will be crucial. This is where creative ways of using Russia's frozen assets, as described below, could prove especially powerful.

Reintegrating the millions of war veterans and their families into the country's social and economic fabric will be vital not just for the future posture of Ukraine's armed forces and its standby units, but also for economic recovery, especially in light of existing and increasingly acute labour shortages.

Mastering internal security challenge will greatly matter for Ukraine's politics too. After Russia began its war in Ukraine in 2014, numerous former combatants became increasingly vocal in the country's politics. This trend will only grow—considerably so—after the war ends. Surveys consistently show Ukraine's armed forces enjoy the highest trust among all Ukraine's institutions, and a large number of respondents (78%) would welcome the formation of a political party led by war veterans. This only further underlines the importance of building a solid bridge to civilian life for Ukraine's servicemen and servicewomen. It will be a factor in determining whether Ukraine's post-war politics becomes fuelled by grievances about the past or hope and determination for a better future.

The EU and Ukraine's domestic security

To address Ukraine's domestic security challenges, the EU and member states should work through the European Union Assistance Mission, which is a Common Security and Defence Policy initiative already present on the ground in Ukraine. The mission currently comprises around 430 people and has been present in Ukraine since 2014 working on security sector reform and, more recently, supporting the investigation of war crimes and stabilisation policing in the liberated areas. They should be ready to boost the mission's resources and potentially adjust its mandate if needed so its personnel can also work on other domestic challenges as they arise. Currently, it can already cover the task of assisting the Ukrainian authorities to recover small arms and firearms once a durable ceasefire is established, as well as to advise and support on the reintegration of returnees and foster societal cohesion and stabilisation in areas closer to the frontline. It can also support the future reintegration of "blue" war veterans—that is, members of law enforcement agencies who were mobilised into the army.

The mission already advises the Ukrainian government on enlargement and civilian security sector reform. To carry out most of these tasks on the scale needed once a ceasefire comes into force, the mission would need additional resources from the EU and member states. One way to achieve this is to make greater use of individual member states' capacity to support specific tasks of the mission—for example, the Dutch government has a dedicated funding stream to support its work on the stabilisation of Ukraine's liberated territories. Other member states could draw inspiration from this and focus, for example, on limiting the circulation of small arms or stabilising and building up the capacities of law enforcement bodies in liberated areas.

The EU also already has a Military Assistance Mission for Ukraine (EUMAM Ukraine), which provides training support to Ukraine's armed forces. It is currently operating from EU soil and is the other main tool potentially available to address security stabilisation. Once the hostilities end,the EU should **relocate EUMAM Ukraine to Ukraine itself**. This would help expand mutually beneficial cooperation with the Ukrainian military and support the continued transformation of Ukraine's armed forces, adoption of Western standards and creation of a strong reserve army. In addition, EU member states could **consider deploying their own specialised teams to Ukraine to support humanitarian de-mining and soil decontamination**, giving priority to areas with civilian infrastructure or arable land.

Supporting a flourishing democracy

In the three decades after its independence, Ukraine experienced two pro-democracy revolutions, one which was a response to a rigged election in 2004. Moscow's first military aggression against Ukraine followed immediately after pro-democracy protests swept away autocratic President Viktor Yanukovych's regime in 2014. So, for many Ukrainians, self-defence against Russian aggression is as much about protecting their country's right to exist as it is about protecting their democracy. Ensuring Russia fails on the battlefield is, understandably, an all-consuming preoccupation. But for Ukraine's prosperous and stable future, safeguarding democracy at home is just as vital.

Elections

Under martial law, parliamentary and presidential elections have been postponed and some other rights remain restricted. Once the fighting ends, holding new elections in line with democratic standards will be as important as ensuring the election campaign avoids recriminatory clashes that only benefit (admittedly rather small) extremist domestic forces or Russia itself as it promotes political friendly constituencies within Ukraine. Making sure the millions of Ukrainian refugees are able to vote will be an administrative and logistical challenge, but also a political one. The halting of USAID programming for Ukraine has impacted on this area: these funds were among major sources of support for relevant state and non-state institutions and organisations involved in elections organisation, monitoring and observation.

The matter of elections requires more donor attention than it has yet received, as well as financial support. Ukraine's constitution prohibits a parliamentary election taking place while under martial law. However, in theory, a presidential election might be held if the law on the martial law itself is changed (that is, there is no need to change the constitution). This legal situation has fuelled endless speculation in Kyiv about the possibility of a presidential election held even before the war is over. Such a vote would entail enormous challenges as outlined above—and is still unlikely to take place as long as the war continues. Regardless, when the time comes all relevant state institutions and civil society groups will need to have sufficient capacity to ensure the integrity of the vote. The monitoring of elections by credible civil society organisations will be as important as supporting the Central Election Commission's work, in order to ensure the result is widely accepted by the population as well as by Ukraine's international partners. The EU and member states should therefore work to **strengthen the integrity and credibility of Ukraine's future elections.** They can do this by ensuring independent election observation organisations and watchdogs will be available and capable and the Central Election Commission has sufficient capacity to organise and monitor the vote.

Media

Ukraine's media is important for sustaining what is still a vibrant political debate, but it has been skewed by the full-scale invasion. Shortly after February 2022, Kyiv launched a pooled news service "TV marathon" run by the country's main broadcasters. The service has attracted criticism, including from the EU, for its lack of impartiality and sidelining of opposition voices. The EU has long supported Ukraine's public broadcasting, not just financially, but also politically, by conditioning some of its financial assistance on steps to reinforce the public broadcaster's independence. Yet, for now, the service has limited audience reach and lags behind its commercial competitors. The EU has also supported the development of the national media regulator (the National Council of Ukraine on Television and Radio Broadcasting), which still lacks the resources and capacity to fully exercise its powers. The EU should **maintain its financial and political support directly to the public broadcaster and the regulator to ensure Ukraine's public broadcasting service is strong, non-partisan and trusted and that it commands a nationwide audience.**

Independent media in Ukraine have also been struggling: in the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion, advertising revenue dried up and donors such as USAID stepped in. Yet the cuts to most of USAID's media funding have caused an acute shortage of resources for many independent outlets, including in places close to the frontline. Europeans, including the European Commission, have tried to increase some of their support for the affected media organisations, but they cannot fill the entire gap. The EU and other donors need to **make sure the independent media sector is properly funded to prevent the media landscape becoming recaptured by vested interests and oligarch groups**, as was the case for most of Ukraine's history since independence.

Helping Ukrainians return home and settle

Russia's full-scale invasion created the fastest and largest displacement of people in Europe since the second world war. Ukraine was already battling a demographic crisis prior to Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014. Since then, the country's population has declined by 10 million people and now stands at around 37.9 million people. On Kyiv-controlled territory, the number may be well below 30 million. This includes direct casualties from the war, but also the 6.9 million other Ukrainians who left. Some have returned already —but many may only consider coming back once they see a viable future for their country. Moreover, Russia's recent and intensified targeting of Ukraine's cities could prompt even more people to leave their homes.

Once the ceasefire ends, the Ukrainian authorities will face two principal tasks when it comes to people's mobility: first, ensuring the end of martial law (and therefore restrictions on the movement of men of mobilisation age) does not spark another exodus abroad; and avoiding the risk of even more people leaving if the country faces instability or further impoverishment after the fighting ends.

The authorities in Kyiv are well aware of the challenge.[6] In the first year of the full-scale invasion, the government merged two government departments into a new Ministry for Communities, Territories and Infrastructure Development of Ukraine. One of its tasks is to support the reintegration of the country's 3.6 million internally displaced persons (IDPs). Last year, the government also established a new Ministry of National Unity and charged it with crafting policies to attract refugees to return home. Whether this meets with success or not depends not just on the policies themselves but—much more so—on the overall security and economic situation and access to housing and employment opportunities. **These areas—that is, domestic security and economic situation—should be targets for European intervention once the ceasefire is established. But preparing for such intervention, in conjunction with the Ukrainian government, should start well before the fighting stops.**

The EU and other donors already have assistance programmes aimed at refugees' and internally displaced persons' economic and social reintegration in a number of other post-conflict or conflict-ridden regions, especially in Africa. However, in Ukraine, the scale of the challenge—and its proximity to the EU's own borders—is incomparable to other locations EU-funded programmes have operated in. Unlike many other post-conflict environments, Ukraine has a functioning national government as well as regional and community-level governance. International partners including the EU and civil society should therefore **work closely with the Ukrainian authorities to design and deliver a common toolkit of interventions to address not just immediate relocation requirements but also the economic, social and psychological needs of the returnees.** This will entail the partners coordinating at the national level and scaling up what are currently often decentralised or isolated activities.

One of the key lessons from other post-conflict situations is to focus on a small number of pilot programmes which have proven successful elsewhere but adjust them to local conditions, and then scale them up nationally. Coordinating and working together would prevent fragmentation and ensure longer-term resource commitment. To this end, **the EU should start now to convene key international and local actors on a regular basis in order to come to a shared assessment of the scale of the challenge and potential solutions.** This

will almost certainly involve identifying how to advance Ukraine's economic recovery and provide sufficient opportunities and sources of livelihoods for those who return. The Ukraine Donor Platform is a multi-donor forum which brings key international partners and donors together with Ukraine's authorities to coordinate their support for the country's budgetary and financial needs. It too could address these issues.

Repowering the economy

Before 2022, Ukraine was undergoing a quiet transition from reliance on heavy industry towards becoming a 21st century economy. Entrepreneurial activity was booming across many sectors. The full-scale invasion has wrought huge damage to Ukraine's industrial potential, but it has also forced the country to adapt with an unprecedented speed and versatility. Thousands of new companies are working on digital or defence technologies, drone production, new logistics routes and more. This innovation drive arose out of necessity imposed by Russia's aggression—but it has already birthed a decentralised entrepreneurial web that Ukraine can rely on to underpin its future prosperity.

Dire straits

In the first year of Russia's full-scale invasion, Ukraine lost nearly one-third of its pre-February 2022 GDP and its industry experienced a steep decline in value. As a result of Moscow's relentless attacks on the country's energy grid and occupation of energy production sites, Ukraine now has only one-third of its pre-war power generation capacity. Russia has also targeted district heating and natural gas infrastructure, affecting millions of civilians and further stymying economic activity. Some of the damage has been fixed, but the repair bill keeps rising as Russia pounds civilian infrastructure.

Importantly, some of the vital US funding for protection of energy infrastructure is no longer available. Overall, the latest Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment suggests the total cost of reconstruction and recovery will come to €506bn over the next decade—2.8 times' the estimated nominal GDP of Ukraine for 2024. According to the same report, the financing gap in 2025 alone is over €9bn. Ukraine is nowhere close to being able to meet this on its own. Most of Ukraine's state budget is already financed by the West (excluding defence and army expenditure). Mobilising external support and, even more crucially, the private sector, will be critical for Ukraine's future economic recovery.

Russian assets and funding the "beyond the horizon" plan

The EU has already pledged €50bn for 2024-2027 under its Ukraine Facility to disburse mainly

loans, as well as grants, to advance Ukraine's reforms and transform the business environment. The facility also aims to address immediate security and economic needs, including energy grid restoration or expansion of access to economic opportunities. However, the facility alone will not be able to cover the remaining colossal financial, investment and reconstruction needs. Moreover, in contrast to past conflicts elsewhere in the world, this time, Europeans and the Ukrainians will be unable to draw on much financial help from the US, traditionally their closest ally on these issues.

Even if the EU scrabbles together a few billion extra euros, it will hardly be enough. And in an era of tight budgets and fiscal consolidation in many EU states, political leaders across Europe will find sending money to a non-EU member even harder to justify to their voters. Therefore, **Western decision-makers should look again at using Russia's foreign assets.** More than €280bn worth of these are currently effectively frozen abroad, most in the EU (€200bn).

EU countries have until now to make full use of these assets, preferring to draw down only their windfall profits. Their concerns stem mostly from potential legal issues and a wariness of weakening the position of the euro as a reserve currency. Some European governments, including in Belgium, where Euroclear holds most of the relevant assets in Europe, fear making full use of Russian assets could cause other non-EU countries to think twice before transferring or keeping their assets in the euro-zone. However, besides these debates about the potential impact on the euro of such a step, decision-makers should give greater weight to what this means for Europe's security and ability to defend it. The EU's hesitation also poses the following question to investors: should they keep their assets in an economic area which balks at properly defending itself, including by using all means at its disposal? Using the frozen assets would also be a powerful sign that the EU, indeed, has serious cards to play vis-à-vis Moscow.

Promisingly, more member states appear to be realising that Russia's assets will eventually have to help fund Ukraine's financial needs and its reconstruction, especially as these needs keep growing and US financial assistance beyond 2025 is now dubious. Policymakers should not defer until the end of the war the thinking about how to do this—and how to ensure funds are eventually used without being siphoned off through corruption or misuse. One way to move forward is for the EU to **consider transferring Russian assets into a joint, EU-Ukraine managed fund whose stated objective is to support Ukraine's stabilisation, reconstruction and recovery.** Individual member states could also become shareholders proportional to the contribution they make to the fund. Ukraine has recently created a fund with the US in the minerals deal (in that case, Ukraine's mineral wealth is the collateral rather than Russia's assets). The EU could take up this model. These resources would be dedicated solely to rebuilding Ukraine, including: underwriting the higher insurance costs for EU companies

taking part in reconstruction and recovery work; or issuing preferential loans for those seeking to invest.

Alternatively, EU member states could **consider using frozen Russian assets by creating a** EU-Ukraine liberty bond, as recently proposed by the Egmont Institute. This would be a special purpose vehicle in which Russia retains legal title to its assets—in effect, the EU would "borrow" the approximately €200bn worth of these assets for a period of 50 years to fund Ukraine's reconstruction. There are other possibilities beyond this for the EU and its member states. But the fundamental point is that exploring such options and taking a political decision to use Russian assets does not mean waiting until hostilities end—Ukraine's recovery and reconstruction needs are already dire. Such an injection of funds would ensure Ukraine's economy survives not just the hot phase of the war but also flourishes in its aftermath.

A message to Moscow

The turmoil already unleashed by the second Trump administration on the course of Russia's war in Ukraine has led many Western leaders to devote renewed political attention to their embattled neighbour. They are now seriously re-examining their defence and Ukraine policies. European decision-makers are well aware of the need to step up, and step in, on issues such as their own security, defence investment and reinforcing Ukraine's diplomatic, military and financial position.

However, what European leaders lack is a "beyond the horizon" plan to help secure and stabilise Ukraine once the fighting ends, boost Kyiv's ability to resist a likely continued hybrid war waged by Moscow and consolidate its European path. This policy brief has set out the pressing need to plan for all of this now and it has suggested how to do this. The shared plan between Europeans and Ukrainians should promote the security of Ukraine and the rest of Europe; map out Kyiv's future integration into the EU; and stabilise the country domestically. Without this plan, the effects of extra military and financial contributions from Europe will not only reach their limit, they will vanish altogether if Russia is able to exploit Ukraine's weaknesses after the war is over.

Peace in Europe demands the EU's longer-term engagement and investment. It should start in Ukraine: a strong and durable European commitment to Ukraine's prosperity and security will also serve as a deterrent to Russia. The Kremlin thinks it can wait for the West to tire or get distracted by other crises. But if the EU adopts this shared three-part plan together with Kyiv and—visibly, even noisily—makes a commitment for years to come, it will be a message to Moscow that the Russians will never be able to match Europe's resources and political will. If Europeans can demonstrate they have a solid plan in place for their neighbour, it could

hasten the day it is required—and dissuade Russia from relaunching large-scale attacks on Ukraine a few years down the road.

Recommendations

Help Ukrainians defend themselves

Europeans should:

- provide Ukraine with more of the ammunition and capabilities that can help it counter any Russian offensives.
- further support the growing ability of Ukrainian industry to produce much of what the country needs, ranging from air and sea drones to ammunition and combat platforms.
- find a way to mitigate the consequences of new cuts in US military assistance to Ukraine—starting by looking at military systems where dependency on US assistance is the heaviest, such as air and missile defence, intelligence and targeting, and secure communication systems.
- promote the extensive use of the newly established NATO Ukraine Council framework.
- ensure the enlargement processes covers—upfront—the further deepening of defence, technological and security ties, through the development of a unique and broad security partnership.
- foster joint ventures and long-term public and private partnerships to make the Ukraine of tomorrow a full part of the European defence and technological industrial base.
- deploy a European security presence based in or very close to Ukraine.

Integrate Ukraine into European institutions

Europeans should:

- accelerate Ukraine's integration into the single market by establishing a single market in industrial products, deepening market integration in services and providing greater access to public procurement opportunities between the EU and Ukraine.
- look closely at greater market opening for some, less sensitive, Ukrainian agricultural products, such as fruit, corn and flour.

- drastically accelerate the implementation of infrastructure projects—especially in transport, energy and border connectivity—to rapidly boost Ukraine's economy and support regional integration.
- fast-track physical integration with the rest of Europe and energy recovery, including green investments and critical power infrastructure as an immediate priority, regardless of Ukraine's procedural EU accession timeline.
- speed up the integration of Ukraine into key EU security and defence policy initiatives—from the EDA, to PESCO projects to EU instruments such as the EU hybrid and cyber response teams.

Support Ukraine's domestic resilience

Europeans should:

- use the presence of a European reassurance force on the ground, as well as European investment in Ukraine's defence capabilities, to help recover small arms.
- avoid inventing a whole new toolkit to support veterans' integration but find substantially more funds (and ensure appropriate oversight) in support of this.
- once fighting stops, relocate the EU Military Assistance Mission for Ukraine to Ukraine itself and consider deploying specialised European teams to Ukraine to support humanitarian de-mining and soil decontamination.
- work to strengthen the integrity and credibility of Ukraine's future elections by ensuring independent election observation organisations and watchdogs are available and capable and that the Central Election Commission has sufficient capacity to organise and monitor the vote.
- maintain EU financial and political support directly to the public broadcaster and the regulator to ensure Ukraine's public broadcasting service is strong, non-partisan and trusted and that it commands a nationwide audience.
- make sure the independent media sector is properly funded to prevent the media landscape becoming recaptured by vested interests and oligarch groups.
- target domestic security and economic policies to help Ukrainians abroad feel safe to

return home—and prepare such policies, in conjunction with the Ukrainian government, well before the fighting stops.

- work closely with the Ukrainian authorities to design and deliver a common toolkit of interventions to address not just immediate relocation requirements but also the economic, social and psychological needs of Ukrainian returnees.
- start now to convene key international and local actors on a regular basis in order to come to a shared assessment of the scale of the challenge (and potential solutions) regarding returning refugees and IDPs.
- look again at using Russia's foreign assets held in Europe, including considering transferring these assets into a joint, EU-Ukraine managed fund whose stated objective is to support Ukraine's stabilisation, reconstruction and recovery; or use frozen Russian assets to create a EU-Ukraine liberty bond.

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Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank all their interlocutors in Ukraine, EU and NATO member states and NATO, EU institutions and missions. These interviews and discussions have enriched our understanding, helped us gain deeper insights and tested and improved our arguments. We would like to especially acknowledge Adam Harrison's patient editing work and thank other ECFR colleagues including Jeremy Cliffe, Mark Leonard, Marie Dumoulin, Leonid Litra, Dmytro Kuleba and Jeremy Shapiro for engaging conversations and feedback on various parts of the text. While we have benefitted from their insights, the sole responsibility for the content of the brief lies with us as authors alone. Last but not least, we would like to recognise the work of the servicemen and servicewomen of the Armed Forces of

Ukraine—without their work and sacrifice, we would not be able to safely make the numerous trips to Ukraine and back.

[1] Authors' interviews in Ukraine and the US with high-ranking diplomats and officials, April-May 2025.

[2] Authors' interviews in Ukraine and the US with high-ranking diplomats and officials, April-May 2025.

[3] Authors' interviews in Brussels with defence industry representatives, May-June 2025.

[4] Authors' interview in Kyiv with a senior Ukrainian official, June 2025.

[5] Authors' interviews with EU and member state officials, Brussels and EU capitals, April-May 2025.

[6] Authors' interviews with Ukrainian and Western officials, Kyiv, April-June 2025.

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ISBN: 978-1-916682-93-1. Published by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), 4th Floor, Tennyson House, 159-165 Great Portland Street, London W1W 5PA, United Kingdom.