

# The lingering war in Ukraine: Security implications in Europe

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*It has been nearly a year since Russia started a war against Ukraine in February 2022, leading to the devastation of the country, and has put an end to peace in Europe since World War II. With the rule-based order and security in Europe being endangered, Europe must rebuild its security architecture while at the same time facing a complex green and digital transformation, post-pandemic recovery, high-inflation, an energy crisis. The Central Eastern European region remains in the spotlight given its geopolitical location and economic ties to both Ukraine and Russia.*

The war has devastated Ukraine. Indiscriminate attacks are no longer limited to the eastern part of the country and pose a constant threat to civilians, while targeted attacks on the infrastructure, particularly on the energy infrastructure, leave large portions of the population without access to electricity, heat, or water. Meanwhile, Ukraine's economy is in survival mode, with a damaged agricultural land, destroyed production capacity and reduced labour supply. The country's economy is estimated to have contracted by [35 percent](#) in 2022; therefore, support from the international community has been crucial to Ukraine.

## Support to Ukraine

Substantial aid has been given to Ukraine both in terms of financial aid as well as military and civilian equipment. From January until mid-November 2022, the United States has provided around [47.8 billion euros](#) in bilateral financial, humanitarian, and military aid, while the European Union on an institutional (not member state level) has provided approximately [35 billion euros](#). Moreover an [18 billion euros](#) Macro-Financial Assistance package has been agreed by the EU for 2023. The EU has been supporting Ukraine since 2014, well before the currently ongoing war, in the form of grants and loans. Thus, since 2014 up until the advent of the war, the EU and European financial institutions allocated [over €17 billion](#) to Ukraine. Apart from the EU level support, individual member states have been providing financial aid, training and physical equipment to the country as well, with [Germany](#) being the largest donor in Europe. The already significant aid to Ukraine both financially and in material supplies from Europe and the United States has proven to be

crucial for the country’s survival, but more help is needed: according to the [World Bank](#) the country’s recovery and reconstruction needs mount to about 349 billion dollars. Reconstruction is difficult to begin as long as attacks are ongoing, and the security environment remains unstable, yet [many, including the UN Secretary General, argue](#) the process needs to start as soon as possible.

There is no direct involvement in the military operations either from the EU or the United States, but [Western advisers](#) have been providing military training and assistance to Ukraine in combination with military aid flowing into the country since 2014, thus contributing to strengthening the army’s skills and capabilities. Even though a potential Western involvement has been debated since the beginning of the war, first, there is no legal obligation to do so, second, such involvement could quickly lead to escalation. The fact remains, Ukraine is neither an EU (yet) nor a NATO member state, thus not party to the collective defence clauses. Other forms or agreements, have limited legal enforcement capacity, including the [Budapest Memorandum](#), according to which Ukraine gave up its nuclear capability in exchange for security assurances. Since these assurances are not equal to security guarantees, and since the memorandum does not have a clause on legally binding military assistance in case of need, there is no legal requirement for the signatory states to militarily intervene to defend Ukraine. Nevertheless, as mentioned above, the assistance and aid help the country to survive and defend itself.

While significant assistance has already been provided to Ukraine, [sanctions](#), including individual and economic sanctions, and visa measures, have been used to counter Russia both by the US and the EU with a medium- and long-term impact potential in mind to make the scope and scale of aggression more difficult to sustain. Sanctions, and in particular restrictions on energy, have been a source of disagreements and created divisions between EU members, with some CEE countries more reluctant to support restrictions on Russian oil and gas imports. As a result, Hungary, Bulgaria and Slovakia are exempt for [“permitting to refine and re-export Russian oil”](#) in the 9<sup>th</sup> round of sanctions, while both the oil embargo and the planned cap on gas price is likely to include further exemptions, or

loopholes. The debate is likely to continue, with the CEE countries in the spotlight given their dependence on Russian energy.

While energy is one of the major sources of division among the EU member states and puts the CEE countries in a difficult and vulnerable position, energy is not the only concern for the region. Simply the fact of being in the immediate neighbourhood of the war puts pressure on the countries both from an economic, social, and political point of view, while it increases security-related risks. Just to mention the unprecedented refugee flows, as Europe is now facing the largest refugee wave since World War II. [CEE countries](#) have been in the forefront of receiving Ukrainian refugees, with the highest number in Poland with 1.5 million refugees registered by November 2022, followed by 458 000 in the Czech Republic, around 100 000 in Slovakia and finally 31 000 in Hungary. Moreover, the countries were quick to react and provide shelter, while reactions on the EU level were also prompt. In March 2022, the [temporary protection directive](#) was activated with the aim to provide immediate and collective protection for displaced people across the EU. The [humanitarian crisis](#) is of great concern for the international community, with more than 6.5 million internally displaced people, and almost 8 million more are refugees in Europe, out of which nearly 2.1 million are in the CEE countries. Despite quick reactions and solidarity shown both at the European and CEE regional level, the longer the war continues, the more difficult it will likely be to provide the needed support to refugees, as the economic challenges are mounting in the respective countries. The COVID-19 pandemic has put significant strains on the countries, while post-pandemic recovery is being complicated by the ongoing energy crisis and high inflation not seen in decades. It is difficult to prioritise, but security risks cannot be ignored, and the security implications on Europe are already visible in the bloc, signalling that different more uncertain times are coming.

## The changing security landscape

The danger of the war spilling beyond the borders of Ukraine is not going away. Baltic countries have been warning of a potential conflict, and remain concerned given their geographic location, while continuing to boost their defence. Commitments on bolstering

defence capabilities is not limited to the Baltic countries, but is visible throughout the bloc, including in Germany with [“the commitment to set up a special fund of 100 billion euros and to invest heavily in the military”](#). Moreover, [Olaf Scholz](#) in his [“Zeitenwende”](#) speech on 27<sup>th</sup> February 2022 called attention to the Russian invasion as a turning point in European history, and announced his plans to break the country’s Ostpolitik, the traditional policy toward Russia. Moreover, Germany deciding on changing its approach to arms export and aiming to deliver weapons to a country at war should not be underestimated, since it breaks a decades-old approach and principle. Germany sent a strong signal on a much-needed update of its forces, as well as reiterated the commitment to the EU as a needed “framework for action” to provide security in Europe. The country, however, still faces criticism, along with other Western European states, not doing enough to help the Ukrainian army. However, breaking its decades-long policies is a strong signal and a major shift for Germany. While positioning the EU as a potential security actor in the future, concrete proposals are still needed considering the inherent challenges of the Common Foreign and Security Policy as well as Common Security and Defence Policy.

First and foremost, the EU was never a security actor, as security and defence have been primarily a NATO umbrella and member state level competencies. [Agreeing on security related issues](#) at EU-level has always been a challenge because of the unanimity voting procedure, thus allowing a single member state to block decisions. The required consensus makes it extremely difficult for all member states to reach a decision, not to mention act quickly. If the EU is to become a “framework for action” to provide security, this must change. The EU must transform to become a swifter and more flexible (re)actor. For this, majority voting procedures should be extended into at least some policy areas where unanimity is still the rule. This also means that embedded conflicts and divisions along some member states need to be resolved. At this point, however, it is unrealistic to expect such a major transition in voting procedures, but it is worth keeping this debate open for at least some policy areas, such as migration.

Brexit already had an impact on the European security landscape, as the bloc lost a country with a strong defence capability. Britain, however, remains committed and open to

cooperation with the European Union, but no longer is under obligation to abide by EU rules and procedures. Moreover, bilateral or multilateral formats such as the Joint Expeditionary Force, or working within the E3 format often creates [parallel cooperation structures](#). NATO also offers flexible cooperation platforms and has been seen as a security guarantor for its members; therefore, potential multiplications between the EU and NATO have always been discussed. The question remains, how would a stronger security European actorness complement NATO without duplications or conflicts? Nevertheless, for now, the commitment to increase defence investment in Europe has been seen positively. NATO's European umbrella needs to be stronger. Among others, [Poland](#) has committed to increase its defence budget from 2,2 to 3 percent in 2023. [Sweden's](#) defence budget, currently around 1,45 percent of the GDP in 2022, is the highest since 2005, and the country aims to reach the 2 percent by 2026, while also applying to join NATO along with Finland, breaking the traditional neutral stance, a major shift on the European security landscape.

As a result of the war, NATO has increased its [presence in its eastern flank](#), for example from 4 to 8 multinational battlegroups in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia. Moreover, additional ships, planes and troops already sent include fighter jets to support NATO air policing missions, bolstered naval forces in the Baltic and Mediterranean Seas, increased overall troop readiness and deployment of the highest-readiness element of the NATO Response Force to Romania. The question remains if these efforts together with the commitment to increase defence budgets, modernize national armies, and the intention to strengthen the EU's role in security, is enough to deter Russia and ensure security in Europe.

## Conclusions

Although long-term effects of the war are difficult to predict with the highest certainty, the fact remains that the longer the war continues, the more daunting its long-term impact is likely to be. The era of relative peace and stability in Europe has come to an end, and security should not be taken for granted anymore. Europe needs to rethink its security architecture both on an EU, NATO and member state level, while finding the right balance to ensure safety at home and in parallel providing much needed support to Ukraine. Adapting to the new environment will take vision, cooperation, commitment, and persistence.



## About EUROPEUM

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