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- REFORMS AND RECOVERY
- CONTAINMENT THROUGH ENLARGEMENT

UKRAINE – EUROPEAN UNION

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CONTAINMENT THROUGH ENLARGEMENT: UKRAINE'S EU INTEGRATION AND THE FUTURE OF EUROPEAN SECURITY

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Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 highlighted the mistakes of post-Cold War Western policy towards Russia and other post-Soviet states, which contributed to an environment conducive to Russian aggression, and culminated in the largest armed conflict in Europe since World War II. This paper argues that the current geopolitical environment necessitates a return to a strategy of containment vis-à-vis Russia, with Ukraine's EU integration as one of its cornerstones. After considering the geostrategic reasons in favour of Ukraine's admission to the EU, the paper — drawing on battlefield dynamics analysis — examines how Ukraine's EU accession could proceed under wartime conditions.

Introduction

The large-scale escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian war on 24 February 2022 has led to a fundamental shift in the European Union's (EU) security perception. After decades of pursuing a "policy of compromise and accommodation towards Moscow" in the Eastern Neighbourhood, the EU, having realised the shortcomings of this approach, abandoned it and redefined its relationship with Russia by granting candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova shortly after Russia's full-scale invasion.¹

Enlargement — previously viewed as a technocratic process primarily driven by economic interests — is increasingly perceived as a geopolitical tool. This shift was reflected, most recently, in the conclusions of the European Council meeting of 18 December 2025, which define enlargement as a "geostrategic investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity".²

In this paper, I argue that the current geopolitical environment necessitates a return to a strategy of containment vis-à-vis Russia, with Ukraine's EU integration as one of its cornerstones.


- 1 S. Meister, *Russlands Krieg gegen die Ukraine: Neugestaltung der östlichen EU-Nachbarschaftspolitik* (Russia's War on Ukraine: Reshaping the EU's Eastern Neighborhood Policy), Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 18.01.2023, <https://www.boell.de/de/2023/01/18/russlands-krieg-gegen-die-ukraine-neugestaltung-der-oestlichen-eu-nachbarschaftspolitik>.
- 2 Conclusions — 18 December 2025, European Council, 18.12.2025, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/wqmkn04/en-20251218-european-council-conclusions.pdf>, p. 7.

The paper proceeds in five sections. The first discusses the mistakes of Western policy towards Russia and other post-Soviet states after the collapse of the Soviet Union that, I posit, contributed to an environment conducive to Russian aggression. The second section assesses the drivers behind Russia's aggressive behaviour towards Ukraine and other former Soviet states, while the third considers the geostrategic reasons supporting Ukraine's admission to the EU. The fourth section draws on battlefield dynamics analysis, and examines how Ukraine's EU accession could proceed under wartime conditions. The final section presents concluding remarks.

The Mistakes of Post-Cold War Policy

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the shortcomings in the policies of major Western powers vis-à-vis Russia have created an environment susceptible to Russian aggression. These states – motivated both by overly optimistic expectations regarding the prospects for a constructive, cooperative relationship with Russia and by concerns about the potential deterioration of Russian-Western relations that could lead to a new Cold War – failed to apply the same standards in assessing Russia's domestic and foreign policies as those applied to other post-Soviet states. The five Central Asian republics and Azerbaijan, for example, were held to more stringent standards regarding political reform than Russia, as autocratic tendencies in Russia's domestic politics, as well as its increasingly aggressive foreign policy, were often overlooked or excused.³ Meanwhile, Western policies towards other post-Soviet states were effectively subordinated to those towards Russia. As a result, "Russia was not

meaningfully encouraged or incentivised to find a place in the liberal international order and was insufficiently discouraged from pursuing regional aggression."⁴



Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the shortcomings in the policies of major Western powers vis-à-vis Russia have created an environment susceptible to Russian aggression

During the 1992 conflict in Moldova, in which Transnistria sought secession, Russia played a significant role in supporting separatist forces. In an attempt to exert economic pressure on Moldova, Russia cut off natural gas supplies to territories controlled by the legitimate Moldovan authorities during the conflict. The intervention of Russia's 14th Army on the side of the separatist forces under the pretext of 'self-defence' and 'the protection of civilians' helped shift the outcome of a key battle and, consequently, the course of the war, in favour of separatist forces.

Despite Moldova's appeals for more active diplomatic engagement, and Russia's role in the war, the United Nations and the United States – already preoccupied with developments in the former Yugoslavia – did not play an active role in conflict resolution. While the US, for example, expressed concern over the war and called on Russia to withdraw its troops from Moldova, it did not assume a more active role when Russia failed to comply, thereby allowing Russia to play a decisive part in the conflict-resolution

3 A. Vindman, *The Folly of Realism: How the West Deceived itself about Russia and Betrayed Ukraine*, Public Affairs: New York 2025, pp. 76-77.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 225.

process. The resulting ceasefire agreement ‘froze’ the conflict but failed to define the political future of the Transnistrian region.⁵ While the West had significant leverage over Russia at the time, given the latter’s need for Western support, it failed to utilise it. Western states, for instance, could have conditioned their support for Russia’s entry into international organisations or the provision of Western aid on Russia’s compliance with Western values in its domestic politics and international conduct, thereby potentially altering its behaviour.⁶

Although Western actors became involved in the conflict resolution process after the conflict had been ‘frozen’ (under the auspices of the OSCE since 1993, and the USA and the EU since 2005), Russia remained a central participant with a veto power over undesired initiatives.⁷ Arguably, the West’s response (or lack thereof) to the Transnistrian conflict “emboldened a later generation of Russian leaders to pursue wider strategic projects”, leading to the Russian attacks on Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014), and, ultimately, to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.⁸

Similar developments unfolded in Georgia, following its declaration of independence from the Soviet Union. Secessionist movements in Georgia’s South Ossetia and Abkhazia regions led to multiple wars in the early 1990s. Although “Russian intelligence and military officials – with varying degrees

of official knowledge and support – armed, advised, and at times even fought with these separatist movements”, the West nevertheless sanctioned Russia’s role as the main peacekeeping force on the ground in both regions, after ceasefire agreements had been reached.⁹ As Western states were reluctant to play a more active diplomatic role, exert pressure on Russia, or deploy their own peacekeeping forces in the post-Soviet sphere, both Moldova and Georgia remained in an asymmetric position vis-à-vis Russia, which Moscow was able to exploit. This Western policy, in turn, reinforced Russia’s beliefs about its right to play a prominent, if not exclusive, role in what it terms its ‘near abroad.’

Even though Russian peacekeeping forces in Georgia were not neutral, Western countries continued to renew their mandate annually, until the Russo-Georgian war in 2008, when these ‘peacekeeping’ forces effectively became invading forces. This war was arguably enabled by the West’s reluctance – despite Georgia’s appeals – to revise international peacekeeping formats and mandates, either by complementing or replacing Russian troops. As they sought to avoid ‘provoking’ Russia, the United States and other Western allies refused to supply modern weapons systems to Georgia prior to the war, and only provided training programmes that did not focus on territorial defence. Rather than preventing conflict, these decisions weakened Georgia’s defence

5 E. Baidaus, *An Unsettled Nation: Moldova in the Geopolitics of Russia, Romania and Ukraine*, ibidem-Verlag: Stuttgart 2023, pp. 256-261, 276-296.

6 A. Vindman, *The Folly of Realism: How the West Deceived itself about Russia and Betrayed Ukraine*, Public Affairs: New York 2025, pp. 76-77.

7 E. Baidaus, *An Unsettled Nation: Moldova in the Geopolitics of Russia, Romania and Ukraine*, ibidem-Verlag: Stuttgart 2023, pp. 297-303.

8 A. Clarkson, *Transnistria Was Ground Zero for Russia’s Neo-Imperial Ambitions*, *World Politics Review*, 24.01.2024, <https://bit.ly/4ocl5pG8>.

9 R. D. Asmus, *A Little War that Shook the World: Georgia, Russia and the Future of the West*, Palgrave Macmillan: New York 2010, p. 56.

capabilities, and arguably contributed to the outbreak of the war.¹⁰ Although Western states intended to respond to Russia's 2008 war against Georgia in a manner that would deter future aggression, they neither imposed economic sanctions on Russia nor condemned it outright, instead attributing blame to both sides for the outbreak of the war.

Even though the war damaged Russia's international reputation, it was soon followed by a Western policy of 'reset'. US efforts to 'reset' relations with Russia coincided with similar European initiatives, such as the EU-Russia Partnership for Modernisation, and Germany's so-called Meseberg process.¹¹ However, these initiatives ultimately failed, as they inadvertently strengthened Russia economically and militarily and further emboldened it, since Russia interpreted Western goodwill as a sign of weakness.¹²

These mistakes of post-Cold War Western policy vis-à-vis Russia and other post-Soviet states contributed to a growing sense of Russian impunity, and paved the way for Russia's 2014 attack on Ukraine. Additional enabling factors can be identified in post-Cold War Western policy towards Ukraine.

In 2004, the pro-Russian candidate Viktor Yanukovich was declared the victor following a fraudulent Ukrainian presidential election that was also marred by Russian interference, including an estimated \$300 million in contributions from Gazprom and other Russian sources to Yanukovich's campaign, as well as covert influence operations. This

development triggered what became known as the Orange Revolution — large-scale protests that successfully demanded the annulment and rerun of the fraud-marred second round of the election. The rerun was ultimately won by the pro-Western candidate Viktor Yushchenko.

This episode of Russian interference should have clearly demonstrated the nature and objectives of Russian foreign policy vis-à-vis Ukraine and the broader 'near abroad.' Had the appropriate conclusions been drawn, Western policy towards Russia and other former Soviet states could have been recalibrated, with the development of a strategy that might have broken with the prioritisation of relations with Russia, and the treatment of relations with other post-Soviet states as derivative of relations with Russia, and instead have centred on closer engagement with willing states on the post-Soviet periphery, with the aim of strengthening their sovereignty in the face of Russian ambitions. Such a strategy could have contributed to preventing subsequent instances of Russian aggression. However, while Ukraine received greater Western attention following the Orange Revolution, relations with Ukraine — as well as with other post-Soviet states — remained subordinate to relations with Russia.¹³

Even though the heads of state and governments of the NATO member states declared in the 2008 Summit Declaration in Bucharest that Ukraine and Georgia "will become members of NATO" one day, they refused to grant these countries

10 R. D. Asmus, *A Little War that Shook the World: Georgia, Russia and the Future of the West*, Palgrave Macmillan: New York 2010, pp. 64-66, 173.

11 N. Popescu, *Why attempts to reset relations with Russia fail*, European Council on Foreign Relations, 3.02.2021, <https://ecfr.eu/article/why-attempts-to-reset-relations-with-russia-always-fail/>.

12 E. Davlikanova, *The Road to Hell is Paved with Russian Resets*, Center for European Policy Analysis, 5.03.2025, <https://cepa.org/article/the-road-to-hell-is-paved-with-russian-resets/>.

13 A. Vindman, *The Folly of Realism: How the West Deceived itself about Russia and Betrayed Ukraine*, PublicAffairs: New York 2025, pp. 127-142.

Membership Action Plans (MAPs), mainly due to German objections driven by fears that doing so would alienate Russia and lead to a deterioration in Russian-Western relations.

Although Russia had opposed previous rounds of enlargement, it had backed down in the face of a unified alliance; granting MAPs to Ukraine and Georgia and thereby demonstrating NATO's unified commitment to these countries might have helped deter Russian aggression towards them. However, while member states made a political commitment to Ukraine and Georgia in Bucharest, and reaffirmed the possibility of their future accession to the alliance, this decision also revealed divisions within NATO, and may therefore have emboldened Russia rather than deterring it.¹⁴

In another example, had Western states established closer cooperation with Ukraine under the presidency of Viktor Yushchenko, and provided stronger financial and technical support for his reform efforts, the success of these reforms might have prevented his electoral defeat and the eventual election of Viktor Yanukovich as president in 2010.¹⁵ In that scenario, the significant deterioration in the capabilities of the Ukrainian armed forces during Yanukovich's presidency – occurring in the years preceding the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war in 2014 – might also have been avoided. While Ukraine's armed forces had already been

“enfeebled by decades of underinvestment and lack of reform” prior to Yanukovich's presidency, their size declined between 2010 and 2014 to approximately one-third of their 2010 level.¹⁶ As McFaul and Person argue, the asymmetric balance of power between Russia and Ukraine constituted a necessary condition for the outbreak of the war; as they conclude, a “more powerful Ukraine and a less powerful Russia would have made war less likely.”¹⁷

Although Viktor Yanukovich initially continued negotiations with the EU over an Association Agreement, which had begun under the presidency of Viktor Yushchenko, he ultimately withdrew from signing it under pressure from Russia. These developments triggered the outbreak of the Revolution of Dignity in late 2013, which in turn led to his ouster and flight to Russia in early 2014.

Even though Russia was expelled from the G8, and economic sanctions were imposed following the outbreak of the war, these measures were, to a large extent, symbolic, and had a limited impact on the Russian economy.¹⁸ While these sanctions contributed to halting the initial phase of the war, they may have been able to achieve this outcome only because they aggravated an already difficult economic situation. The Russian economy had already been slowing down prior to the outbreak of the war, and oil prices declined significantly in the second half of 2014.¹⁹ More importantly, the limited

14 R. D. Asmus, *A Little War that Shook the World: Georgia, Russia and the Future of the West*, Palgrave Macmillan: New York 2010, pp. 111-140.

15 A. Vindman, *Stop Tiptoeing Around Russia*, *Foreign Affairs*, 8.08.2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/stop-tiptoeing-around-russia>.

16 A. Vindman, *The Folly of Realism: How the West Deceived itself about Russia and Betrayed Ukraine*, PublicAffairs: New York 2025, p. 194.

17 M. McFaul, R. Person, *Why Putin Invaded Ukraine*, [in:] H. Brands (ed.), *War in Ukraine: Conflict, Strategy, and the Return of a Fractured World*, Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore 2024, p. 35.

18 P. A. G. van Bergeijk, *Sanctions against the Russian war on Ukraine could be made to work*, Centre for Economic Policy Research, 28.03.2022, <https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/sanctions-against-russian-war-ukraine-could-be-made-work>.

19 L. Freedman, *Ukraine and the Art of Strategy*, Oxford University Press: New York 2019, pp. 116-117.

scope of these sanctions contributed to Russia's sense of impunity, and paved the way for the substantial escalation of the war in 2022, by fostering an expectation that Western responses to a full-scale invasion would be, as Vladimir Gel'man puts it, as "weak and sluggish" as the West's reaction to the initial phase of the war in 2014-2015.²⁰

Although the EU increased its commitment to the countries of the Eastern Partnership, including Ukraine, following the outbreak of the war, it did not offer these countries the prospect of membership, thereby leaving them in a geopolitical grey zone as 'in-between lands' between Russia and the European Union.²¹ This half-hearted approach, in particular, constituted a significant contributing factor to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. As the American political scientist Hal Brands argues, the "crucial, collective failure of America and its allies" in deterring Russia's full-scale invasion "was their inability to make clear – or perhaps even to realise – how much Ukraine's survival mattered to them before a shocking invasion cast that survival into existential doubt."²²

Overall, the West's soft response to the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war in 2014 strengthened Russia's sense of impunity, and contributed to the belief that future acts of international aggression would not lead to more serious Western resistance and, thereby, to the emergence of a permissive environment for the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. But what drives Russia's aggressive behaviour towards Ukraine?

The Sources of Russian Conduct

The American political scientist John Mearsheimer posits that the primary driver of Russia's attack on Ukraine was the prospect of the further eastward enlargement of NATO to include Ukraine.²³ However, Ukraine was no closer to NATO membership in 2014 than it had been in 2008, when it was promised eventual membership at the Bucharest summit. Indeed, the Ukrainian parliament voted for the facilitation of the country's NATO membership nearly ten months after Russia's invasion of Crimea. Ukraine had still not come closer to NATO membership by the time of Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, either.²⁴

What ultimately seems to drive Russia's aggressive behaviour towards some of its neighbours is not the prospect of the 'expansion' of NATO to include them, but the spread of democracy. Russia has become increasingly hostile towards Georgia and Ukraine, as these states have undergone processes of democratisation following the Rose Revolution in 2003 in Georgia and, in Ukraine, initially following the Orange Revolution in 2004 and then again in the aftermath of the Revolution of Dignity in 2013. But why does Russia aim to contain and roll back the spread of democracy in the post-Soviet sphere, including through the use of military force?

In its international conduct, Russia seeks to restore its status as a great power, and promote a multipolar world order in which it exercises decisive influence over key global

20 V. Gel'man, *Russia's Gamble: The Domestic Origins of Russia's Attack on Ukraine*, Polity Press: Cambridge 2025, p. 137.

21 R. Youngs, *Europe's Eastern Crisis: The Geopolitics of Asymmetry*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2017, p. 215.

22 H. Brands, *The Ukraine War and Global Order*, [in:] H. Brands (ed.), *War in Ukraine: Conflict, Strategy, and the Return of a Fractured World*, Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore 2024, p. 5.

23 J. J. Mearsheimer, *Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault*, *Foreign Affairs*, 18.08.2014, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2014-08-18/why-ukraine-crisis-west-s-fault#>.

24 M. McFaul, R. Person, *Why Putin Invaded Ukraine*, [in:] H. Brands (ed.), *War in Ukraine: Conflict, Strategy, and the Return of a Fractured World*, Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore 2024, pp. 49-50.

events.²⁵ As part of these efforts, it seeks to establish an ‘exclusive sphere of influence’ across the post-Soviet space, within which it has the ability to interfere in the domestic politics of states and re-subjugate them without interference from other powers.²⁶ However, democratic breakthroughs in the post-Soviet sphere tend to lead to a process of moving away from Russia’s orbit and towards the West as democracy consolidates, leading Russia to increasingly lose its influence over these states.



Although the EU increased its commitment to the countries of the Eastern Partnership, including Ukraine, following the outbreak of the war, it did not offer these countries the prospect of membership, thereby leaving them in a geopolitical grey zone

Furthermore, successful examples of democratisation in post-Soviet states could demonstrate the possibility of freedom from Russian influence in the post-Soviet sphere and, by providing an example for the Russian people, even undermine the stability of the Putin regime.²⁷ As Victoria Nuland puts it, “Putin has always understood that a belt of increasingly democratic, prosperous states around Russia would pose a direct challenge

to his leadership model and risk infecting his own people with democratic aspirations.” Consequently, he “was never going to take a ‘live and let live’ approach to former Soviet lands and satellite states.”²⁸

Moreover, in the case of Ukraine, Putin likely not only uses the notion of the artificiality of the Ukrainian state and nation to justify the war, but has also personally internalised these beliefs. Furthermore, the regime’s reliance on Russia’s imperial traditions to justify the war and cultivate public support for it suggests the continued prevalence of imperialistic ideas among the Russian population.²⁹

However, allowing Russia to re-subjugate the states that it perceives to be in its sphere of influence would hardly result in stability. Even if the pleas of aspiring post-Soviet countries for Western alignment had been rejected, they would likely have continued to resist Russia’s efforts to draw them back into its sphere of influence, seeking whatever assistance they could obtain from the West, as these states have regarded Western alignment as “the key to independence, democracy, and affluence” and therefore more attractive than alignment with Russia.³⁰ Rejecting their European integration aspirations would merely render them more vulnerable to Russia’s malign interference — interference they would likely continue to resist.

25 N. Bugayova, F. W. Kagan, K. Stepanenko, Weakness is Lethal: Why Putin Invaded Ukraine and How the War Must End, Institute for the Study of War, 1.10.2023, <https://understandingwar.org/research/russia-ukraine/weakness-is-lethal-why-putin-invaded-ukraine-and-how-the-war-must-end/>.

26 R. Person, M. McFaul, What Putin Fears Most, *Journal of Democracy*, April 2022, 33(2), pp. 18-27, doi:10.1353/jod.2022.0015.

27 Ibid.

28 V. Nuland, Pinning down Putin, *Foreign Affairs*, 9.06.2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2020-06-09/pinning-down-putin>.

29 M. McFaul, R. Person, Why Putin Invaded Ukraine, [in:] H. Brands (ed.), *War in Ukraine: Conflict, Strategy, and the Return of a Fractured World*, Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore 2024, pp. 45-47, 50-51.


30 R. Kagan, The Price of Hegemony, *Foreign Affairs*, 6.04.2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-04-06/russia-ukraine-war-price-hegemony#>.

Returning to a system of spheres of influence in the international order would likely lead to a more dangerous and violent world. As great powers are often driven by “[i]deology and the quest for greatness”, rather than by insecurity, “[c]onceding a sphere of influence to a great-power challenger might not produce stability but simply give that challenger a better position from which to realize its ambitions.” Consequently, spheres of influence are rarely static; they tend to be constantly contested as “[r]ising states are continually tempted to renegotiate previous bargains once they have the power to do so.” Indeed, throughout history, settlements based on spheres of influence have often led to war, “from the Thirty Years’ Peace between Athens and Sparta to the Peace of Amiens between the United Kingdom and Napoleonic France.”³¹

The Importance of Ukraine

Having briefly reviewed the past mistakes of Western policy towards Russia, and the drivers of Russia’s aggressive foreign policy towards some of its neighbouring states, what might the outlines of a new, more effective approach to Russia look like? An important recognition in developing such an approach is that there is no long-term prospect for peace and security in Europe as long as the current Russian regime remains in power.³² Based on this, the best approach for the West at present seems to be a return to a strategy of containment, with Ukraine’s EU integration as one of its cornerstones.

Russia’s strategic objective in its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was to preclude the possibility of Ukraine’s integration into NATO or the EU and to bring it under Russian political control, by removing the democratically elected Ukrainian government and replacing it with a pro-Russian puppet regime. However, when the current phase of the war ends in some form or another, Russia may hold a chunk of Ukrainian territory, but the country is unlikely to be fully subjugated, and will likely become increasingly integrated into the European Union over time.³³ Indeed, the existence of a prosperous, democratic Ukraine, integrated into the EU and secure against future Russian aggression, would constitute a strategic defeat for Russia, even if some Ukrainian territories remain under temporary occupation.³⁴



Russia’s strategic objective in its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was to preclude the possibility of Ukraine’s integration into NATO or the EU and to bring it under Russian political control

Furthermore, by integrating the aspiring states of the post-Soviet sphere, the EU could cement the “consolidation of geopolitical pluralism within the former Soviet Union” and ensure the creation of “a felicitous environment for Russia to define itself purely as Russia.” In this regard, Ukraine’s

31 H. Brands, Don’t Let Great Powers Carve up the World, Foreign Affairs, 20.04.2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/responses/dont-let-great-powers-carve-world#>

32 J. Bolton, Putin Must Go: Now is the Time for Regime Change in Russia, 19FortyFive, 4.10.2022, <https://www.19fortyfive.com/2022/10/putin-must-go-now-is-the-time-for-regime-change-in-russia/>.

33 L. Freedman, Strategic Fanaticism: Vladimir Putin and Ukraine, [in:] H. Brands (ed.), War in Ukraine: Conflict, Strategy, and the Return of a Fractured World, Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore 2024, p. 57.


34 S. Besch, E. Ciaramella, Ukraine’s Accession Poses a Unique Conundrum for the EU, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 24.10.2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/10/ukraines-accession-poses-a-unique-conundrum-for-the-eu?lang=en>.

role is particularly important; as Zbigniew Brzezinski argues, “without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be an empire, but with Ukraine suborned and then subordinated, Russia automatically becomes an empire.”³⁵ Indeed, by integrating Ukraine, the EU could ensure “that Russia is not allowed to impose its sphere of influence and its vision of European security order” on the continent,³⁶ thereby contributing to the creation of a geopolitical environment conducive to a future post-Putin Russia’s eventual break with its imperial legacy.

It is, of course, unpredictable as to when and how Vladimir Putin’s rule will come to an end, and whether this will lead to Russia’s democratisation. Should Putin die in office, Russia will likely remain an autocracy. In the post-Cold War period, in 83 percent of cases in which leaders of personalised autocracies have died in office, the regime has endured. In those cases where the autocrat’s death did lead to regime collapse, the fallen system was replaced by another autocratic regime in every single case.³⁷

A coup removing Putin from power appears unlikely. The wealth and position of members of the Russian elite depend entirely on him, and Russia’s security services are controlled by his close and loyal allies. Popular protest thus appears to constitute the only pathway through which the fall of the Putin regime – or that of a post-Putin autocratic regime –

may be followed by democratisation.³⁸ However, the Prigozhin rebellion revealed that a “liberal, urban revolution” is less likely than “a highly militarised populist uprising driven [...] by Russian nationalists” in contemporary Russia.³⁹



Furthermore, by integrating the aspiring states of the post-Soviet sphere, the EU could cement the “consolidation of geopolitical pluralism within the former Soviet Union” and ensure the creation of “a felicitous environment for Russia to define itself purely as Russia.”

Ultimately, the chances of Russia’s post-Putin democratisation are slim. Overall, in the post-Cold War era, 92 percent of countries remained autocratic after the death in office or removal from power – whether by coup, civil war, or popular protests – of leaders in personalised regimes who had held power for at least 20 years.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, as Mark Galeotti highlights, the majority of the Russian elite “are pragmatic kleptocrats; they are happy to proclaim their devoted commitment to Mother Russia, but they want to be able to keep robbing her blind at the same time, and sending their money, and their families, and their mistresses to safety and comfort in the West.”⁴¹

35 Z. Brzezinski, The Premature Partnership, Foreign Affairs, 1.03.1994, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/1994-03-01/premature-partnership>

36 A. Osypchuk, K. Raik, The EU’s Geopolitical Enlargement – Ukraine’s Accession will Make the EU a Stronger Security Actor, JOINT Brief, November 2023, no. 30, <https://bit.ly/3Rjv76A>

37 A. Kendall-Taylor, E. Frantz, The Treacherous Path to a Better Russia, Foreign Affairs, 20.06.2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russian-federation/treacherous-path-better-russia>.

38 Ibid.

39 L. Fix, M. Kimmage, The Beginning of the End of Putin?, Foreign Affairs, 27.06.2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russian-federation/beginning-end-putin-prigozhin-rebellion>.

40 A. Kendall-Taylor, E. Frantz, The Treacherous Path to a Better Russia, Foreign Affairs, 20.06.2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russian-federation/treacherous-path-better-russia>.

41 M. Galeotti, We Need to Talk about Putin: How the West Gets him Wrong, Revised edition, Ebury Press: London 2025, p. 152.

In any case, a Ukraine firmly anchored in the West would underscore the futility of pursuing imperial ambitions, and could further incentivise a future, more pragmatic Russian leader to renounce such ambitions and seek some form of accommodation with the West. However, the EU has not previously admitted a state involved in an active armed conflict. Although approximately one-third of Cyprus's territory was under Turkish occupation at the time of its accession, active hostilities had not occurred in the country for three decades. The prospect of Ukraine's accession has thus introduced the unfamiliar possibility of integrating a state that is still engaged in an active war.

The Way Forward

This consideration is especially important as, notwithstanding the ongoing US-led negotiations, the war is unlikely to end soon. As Person points out, "bargaining models of war termination predict that peace negotiations are likely to fail", and, regardless of its eventual outcome, the war will be settled on the battlefield. The possibility of a negotiated settlement depends on the existence of a set of territorial and policy compromises acceptable to both sides. However, in light of the underlying reasons Russia gave for launching its invasion, the notion of a negotiated end to the war is hardly more than 'wishful thinking.'⁴² Under these

circumstances, Ukraine and its allies should plan to build a "viable, sovereign, and secure state under constant military pressure" as "an acceptable armistice may never formally arrive."⁴³

The demographic disparity between Russia and Ukraine would normally lead Ukraine to eventually lose a prolonged war of attrition against Russia, even with the timely provision of adequate Western military assistance.⁴⁴ However, due to the increasingly prominent role of UAVs on the battlefield, the area extending approximately 10-15 kilometres from the front line — often referred to as the 'kill zone' — has become a territory characterised by "drones, remote mines, precision artillery, and constant surveillance," in which it is "nearly impossible to manoeuvre without being detected and then immediately hit." In this environment, while the infiltration of small infantry units remains possible, exploiting such incursions has become virtually impossible.⁴⁵ As a result, the role of infantry in holding the front line has dramatically decreased. Indeed, Ukraine has "basically stripped the front line of soldiers in many places, and relied on the unmanned forces and very small units (a soldier or just a handful of soldiers)" to hold the line.⁴⁶

Under these conditions, it seems possible, by widening the 'kill zone', and denying Russia the ability to concentrate troops

42 R. Person, Why Ukraine Shouldn't Negotiate with Putin, *Journal of Democracy*, January 2025, 36(1), pp. 21-35, doi:10.1353/jod.2025.a947881.

43 A. Zagorodnyuk, Ukraine's New Theory of Victory Should be Strategic Neutralization, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 18.06.2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/06/ukraines-new-theory-of-victory-should-be-strategic-neutralization>.

44 D. Livermore, A Sobering Moment in the Ukraine War, Center for European Policy Analysis, 25.10.2024, <https://cepa.org/article/a-sobering-moment-in-the-ukraine-war/>.

45 A. Zagorodnyuk, The Only Security Guarantee Ukraine Can Trust, Foreign Affairs, 23.09.2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/only-security-guarantee-ukraine-can-trust#>.


46 P. P. O'Brien, The Fewer Soldiers on the Front Line the Better, Phillips's Newsletter [Substack], 23.12.2025, <https://phillipsobrien.substack.com/p/the-fewer-soldiers-on-the-front-line> access.

and equipment in its rear areas, to paralyse the capacity of Russian forces to generate momentum, and thereby render any future offensive operations strategically futile.⁴⁷ Over time, a situation characterised by “strengthened Ukrainian defences combined with the compounding costs of offensive operations for both sides could lead to a battlefield stalemate”, which, in turn, could eventually result in a freeze in the fighting “with only occasional flare-ups such as peppered the Donbas from 2014 to 2022,” along with the possible continuation of Russian air strikes.⁴⁸

Achieving this outcome requires continued, timely Western military assistance to Ukraine, prioritising air defence, unmanned systems, and long-range strike capabilities. As certain weapon systems necessary for the defence of Ukraine – such as the Patriot air defence system or ATACMS missiles – can only be procured from the United States, while others are not currently being produced in sufficient quantities in Europe, this will require continued cooperation between Ukraine, its European allies and the United States, to ensure Ukraine’s access to American equipment.⁴⁹

Some object to the fact that admitting Ukraine to the EU while it is still engaged in an active war would draw other EU member states into war with Russia. Article

42.7 of the Treaty of Lisbon establishes a mutual assistance obligation among EU member states. The provision stipulates that member states are required to assist a member state that has been attacked “by all the means in their power.” However, similarly to the mutual defence obligation under Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, this does not entail a binding requirement to deploy armed forces; rather, the nature of the assistance provided remains at the discretion of member state governments, and may range from diplomatic support to military intervention.⁵⁰



Some object to the fact that admitting Ukraine to the EU while it is still engaged in an active war would draw other EU member states into war with Russia

That said, security assistance to Ukraine may, over time, extend to the deployment of military forces by certain willing EU member states. These forces would not be deployed along the line of contact; rather, they could be stationed in strategically significant cities, ports, and power plants, to deter Russian attacks.⁵¹ Alternatively, European training

47 A. Zagorodnyuk, The Only Security Guarantee Ukraine Can Trust, Foreign Affairs, 23.09.2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/only-security-guarantee-ukraine-can-trust#>.

48 R. Person, Why Ukraine Shouldn't Negotiate with Putin, *Journal of Democracy*, January 2025, 36(1), pp. 21-35, doi:10.1353/jod.2025.a947881.

49 A. Rácz, Why Europeans Paying for US Weapons for Ukraine is a Unique Opportunity, German Council on Foreign Relations, 22.07.2025, <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/why-europeans-paying-us-weapons-ukraine-unique-opportunity>.

50 G. Weber, Mutual Defence in the European Union? The Imperative of Article 42.7 in Case the United States Abandons European Defence, Centre for Security, Diplomacy and Strategy, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, 18.12.2024, <https://csds.vub.be/publication/mutual-defence-in-the-european-union-the-imperative-of-article-42-7-in-case-the-united-states-abandons-european-defence>.

51 J. Liboreiro, Everything we know so far about the 'Coalition of the Willing' for Ukraine, *Euronews*, 2.04.2025, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/04/02/everything-we-know-so-far-about-the-coalition-of-the-willing-for-ukraine>.


missions could be deployed to Western Ukraine. The use of European fighter aircraft to patrol the airspace over Western Ukraine is another option under discussion.⁵² This could be achieved by deploying 120 European fighter aircraft operating from European air bases outside Ukraine.⁵³

Another source of objection concerns temporarily occupied territories. In this regard, the case of Cyprus offers a potential model. Under this arrangement, while the European Union recognises the territorial integrity of Cyprus, and considers the entire territory of the state part of the EU, the application of EU law is suspended in areas not under the effective control of the constitutional government. Josep Borrell, the EU's former High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, has cited Cyprus as a potential model for Moldova's accession, given the issue posed by Transnistria. As the war in Ukraine will likely evolve into a frozen conflict, or at least decrease significantly in intensity over time, there appears to be no reason why this model could not be applied in Ukraine's case as well.⁵⁴

Conclusions

While the European Union has departed from its earlier, half-hearted approach to supporting the European aspirations of Ukraine and other post-Soviet states following Russia's full-scale invasion, significant obstacles to Ukraine's EU

integration remain. Although some emphasise the need to "send a political message" – as an EU diplomat was quoted while discussing proposals to accelerate the integration of candidate countries – many member states remain sceptical and insist on following the EU's established accession process.⁵⁵



While the European Union has departed from its earlier, half-hearted approach to supporting the European aspirations of Ukraine and other post-Soviet states following Russia's full-scale invasion, significant obstacles to Ukraine's EU integration remain

However, Ukraine's accession to the European Union constitutes an important instrument for shaping the future of European security. Indeed, it appears indispensable to achieving a more stable and secure Europe over the long term. Leaving Ukraine in a geopolitical grey zone between the EU and Russia would merely render it more vulnerable to Russian aggression, thereby increasing the risk of further instability in the future. At the same time, as this paper has demonstrated, many of the security-related concerns frequently raised in objection to Ukraine's accession – such

52 L. Brown, UK could scrap plans to send thousands of troops to Ukraine, *The Times*, 24.04.2025, <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/defence/article/britain-abandon-plans-troops-ukraine-russia-mtjrm2wzh>.

53 SkyShield: a practical security guarantee for Ukraine, Price of Freedom, <https://proof.org.ua/projects/sky-shield/>, 2026.

54 J. Kaiser, How Cyprus could offer a blueprint for Moldova's path to EU membership, *The Parliament*, 27.03.2024, <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/news/article/could-moldovas-path-to-eu-membership-follow-the-cyriot-blueprint>.

55 Z. Sheftalovich, 5 steps to get Ukraine into the EU in 2027, *Politico*, 10.02.2026, <https://www.politico.eu/article/5-steps-ukraine-eu-membership-2027/>.

as the risk of drawing the European Union into the war or the issue of temporarily occupied territories – are largely unfounded or addressable.⁵⁶

In any case, irrespective of the timeline for Ukraine’s eventual EU membership, its European allies should prepare for a protracted period of hostilities. In the absence of a significant technological breakthrough altering the overall battlefield dynamics, or a collapse of political will on either side – developments for which there is currently no indication –

the continuation of the conflict remains the most plausible scenario for the foreseeable future.

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⁵⁶ Other concerns raised in objection to Ukraine’s integration are not security-related and therefore fall outside the scope of this paper. These include the virtual unsustainability of the EU’s Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and Cohesion Policy in their current form, in the event of Ukraine’s accession. For a detailed discussion of these concerns and potential ways to address them, see, for example, S. Lehne, A Reluctant Magnet: Navigating the EU’s Absorption Capacity, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 21.09.2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/09/a-reluctant-magnet-navigating-the-eus-absorption-capacity>.

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