



**UDO**  
**NATION**



**EEYES**  
EASTERN EUROPE YOUTH  
EMPOWERMENT SPACE



# Think Tanks Essentials

Strategic Insights on Europe in a Changing Global Order  
Special Edition for Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe



## ABOUT US

**The International Charitable Foundation “UDONATION”** is a young and ambitious organization that brings Ukrainians around the world together to drive systemic change. We initiate cooperation between representatives of the Ukrainian diaspora and Ukrainian youth to strengthen their capacities, expand access to knowledge and resources, and implement projects aimed at protecting and supporting every Ukrainian.

We strive to create a unified intellectual space for Ukrainian youth in Ukraine and abroad. It is a platform for exchanging ideas, knowledge, and experience—where new initiatives emerge and a shared vision for the future of Ukraine is shaped.

“In unity there is strength.”

We believe that unity is the source of strength. Together, we are building a future in which every Ukrainian feels supported and has the opportunity to realize their full potential.

**This project is implemented within the youth initiative EEYES – Eastern Europe Youth Empowerment Space. We sincerely thank our team and experts who actively contribute to our initiatives, as well as all partners whose support made this project possible.**

**The publication is supported by the Committee on Ukraine’s Integration into the EU of the Youth Council under the Chairman of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine.**



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In a rapidly changing world, think tanks have become key players in shaping international debates and strategies. They not only generate ideas but also define the direction of political decision-making and influence public opinion.

The magazine “ThinkTanks Essentials” was created to summarize and analyze the most important expert research, demonstrating how it shapes our understanding of the global order.

This publication is valuable for anyone seeking to navigate the increasingly complex landscape of international politics. It allows readers to track key trends and explore the arguments of leading experts who influence the decisions of governments and international organizations. For researchers and students, it serves as a convenient source of analytical insights and up-to-date case studies; for diplomats and policy experts, it is a tool for understanding global processes and anticipating possible scenarios; and for a broader audience, it offers an opportunity to look beyond news headlines and grasp the deeper context behind them.

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# Foreword

The world we live in today is becoming increasingly difficult to explain in simple terms. Events that only yesterday might have seemed like local crises are now rapidly becoming part of a broader geopolitical landscape, shaping a new logic of the global order.

Security, the economy, technology and the information sphere mutually reinforce one another and no longer exist in isolation, as a crisis in one sector triggers consequences in others. Accordingly, each of the articles in this issue forms part of the broader picture of the systemic restructuring of the international order.

At the same time, the Middle East is, without exaggeration, one of the central themes in this month's analysis. Events surrounding Iran, in particular the US and Israeli strikes that began on 28 February, cannot be viewed as an isolated episode of regional escalation. They are a manifestation of much deeper processes – the transformation of the balance of power, competition between major powers, and the expansion of the conflict beyond traditional theatres of war.

As research shows, the war in Iran is in fact unfolding simultaneously across several dimensions – global, regional and potentially inter-state. It is affecting the security situation, as well as energy markets, political dynamics in the US and the internal consolidation of anti-Western actors.

This is precisely why it is important to move away from a simplistic view of such events as being 'distant' or 'indirectly linked' to Europe or Ukraine. Contemporary geopolitics is a network of interconnected processes, where any escalation has the potential to shift the balance of power at a global level. For Europe, this means, in particular, the risk of new energy vulnerabilities, increased dependence on external suppliers and, at the same time, the need to rethink its own strategic autonomy. For Ukraine, the war in the Middle East creates competition for resources, attention and the West's political priority, which directly influences the course of the war against Russia.

However, this issue is not limited to the Middle East alone. On the contrary, it offers a broader view of the transformations taking place across various dimensions of international relations.

A separate section of research is devoted to the evolution of European security. This covers both the rethinking of France's role in nuclear deterrence and the search for a new EU security architecture, as well as the need to forge a more autonomous strategic position for Europe amid the declining predictability of transatlantic relations. In parallel, the study examines issues of energy dependence, sanctions policy and the EU's internal constraints, which affect its ability to act as a coherent geopolitical actor.

The economic dimension is no less important. Research shows that industrial policy, financial instruments such as Eurobonds, and defence procurement reform are becoming strategic tools. This concerns Europe's ability to ensure its own competitiveness in a world where geo-economics increasingly determines political influence.

At the same time, some articles highlight the changing nature of threats. Information operations, the undermining of trust in democratic institutions and the manipulation of voter behaviour are becoming an integral part of modern conflicts and are shaping a new dimension of security that goes far beyond the traditional understanding of war.

The study "Algorithms and democracy. How social media shapes young Europeans' worldviews", which is the focus of this issue, demonstrates that the struggle for influence today is not only over territory or resources, but also over the attention, perceptions and political agency of citizens. Social media are also becoming active actors that shape the public sphere and influence democratic processes. Thus, on the one hand, we are witnessing classic competition between states and blocs; on the other, the transformation of the very nature of influence, which is increasingly shifting into the information environment.

Think tanks materials do not provide simple answers, and perhaps this is their greatest value. Instead, they offer tools for understanding how a new security architecture is taking shape, how economic dependencies are shifting, and how the nature of war and political influence is changing.

Today's reality demands a different kind of thinking – one that is systematic, critical and capable of seeing interconnections where we previously saw isolated events. And that is precisely why even seemingly regional conflicts must be viewed as part of a broader geopolitical game, in which the stakes are far higher than they appear at first glance.

Kateryna Nedashkivska  
Author and manager of "Think Tanks Essentials"

## OUR EXPERTS



**MARIA MEZENTSEVA-FEDORENKO**

*Member of Parliament of Ukraine, Deputy Chair of the Verkhovna Rada Committee on Ukraine's Integration into the EU, Chair of Ukraine's Permanent Delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE)*

Young people's interest in complex issues of international security is particularly valuable today, as it is the new generation that shapes approaches to addressing global challenges. The journal "Think Tank Essentials" demonstrates a high level of engagement among interns in analytical work and the articles featured are generally distinguished by their substance, structure and focus on current international developments.

All the articles and reviews submitted deserve a positive assessment, as they reflect a serious approach to researching complex topics and the ability to work with sources and data.

The content of this issue is notable not only for its broad thematic scope, but also for its clear focus on the most sensitive issues in contemporary international security — from the nuclear threat surrounding the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant and Europe's energy vulnerabilities to the transformation of EU defence policy and new power dynamics in the Middle East.

The combination of 'hard' security issues with a focus on algorithms and democracy appears particularly valuable, as it demonstrates a deep understanding that future conflicts are shaped not only on the battlefield but also in the sphere of influence over citizens' minds – which is highly relevant to discussions at the PACE level.

Special attention should be given to the paper that raises the concept of "security as a service." Particularly valuable is the endeavour to find practical application for this concept through Ukraine's wartime experience, namely the development of military technologies, combat expertise and existing examples of international cooperation. This allows Ukraine to be viewed not merely as a consumer of security, but as a provider of it, which represents an important shift in perspective.

In the context of its presentation at the PACE platform, this journal stands as a compelling example of how analytical work can contribute to shaping a shared European understanding of today's challenges and possible solutions. Presented from Ukraine's perspective, it also highlights the growing importance of the younger generation's voice in international discussions. These contributions demonstrate that young analysts are not only engaging with complex global issues, but are increasingly capable of influencing the discourse around security, democracy, and the future of Europe.

The publication therefore does more than inform! It helps frame an inclusive and forward-looking dialogue in which Ukraine is playing an active role in shaping the evolving European security architecture.

The present issue of the journal demonstrates a significant shift in the approach to analyzing international processes, moving from a fragmented description of events toward a systemic view of interrelated crises. As highlighted in the very preface, a key message is that contemporary geopolitics no longer consists of separate regional conflicts, but instead operates as an integrated and interdependent system in which security, economic, and informational dimensions are mutually reinforcing.

Particularly noteworthy is that the journal goes beyond merely stating facts and instead offers analytical frameworks for interpreting them. For instance, the concept of “nuclear piracy” in the article on the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant not only captures an unprecedented situation but also introduces a new category for international law and security studies. Likewise, the discussions on defense procurement reform and the EU’s strategic autonomy demonstrate that Europe’s key challenges lie not only in the realm of resources, but also in the institutional capacity to act swiftly and in a coordinated manner.

The focus theme on algorithms and democracy deserves special attention. It highlights that today’s struggle for influence is not just over territories or markets, but over the perception and behaviour of the citizens. This serves as an important signal for policymakers, as the information dimension is becoming just as significant as traditional security sectors.

Overall, the issue stands out for its high level of analysis and the successful integration of diverse thematic blocks, ranging from the Middle East to the internal transformations of the EU. At the same time, potential for further development lies in a clearer structuring of conclusions for various audiences, specifically for politicians and practitioners who require not only analysis but also concrete policy recommendations.

In the context of presentation at the PACE (Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe) platform, this magazine is a strong example of how analytical products can contribute to the formation of a shared European understanding of challenges and solutions. It does more than just inform, it sets the framework for a discussion on the future of security, democracy and Ukraine’s role in Europe’s new architecture.



**ANNA DOROSH**

*Head of Communications of the Government Office for  
Coordination of European and Euro-Atlantic Integration of  
the Secretariat of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine*

## **SECTION 1. OVERVIEW OF THINK TANKS ANALYSES**

## Four Years of Nuclear Piracy: Zaporizhzhia and the Weaponisation of Civilian Nuclear Infrastructure

*Ludovica Castelli, Ali Alkış, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), Italy*  
04.03.2026

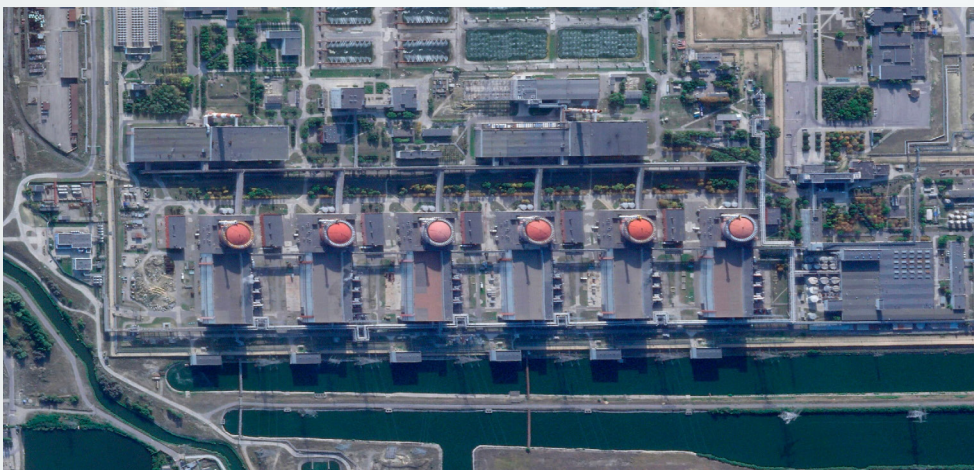
The study introduces a new concept – “nuclear piracy” – defined as the deliberate use of civilian nuclear infrastructure as an instrument of military and political coercion. The case of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant represents the first instance in history of the prolonged occupation of an operating nuclear facility in the context of an interstate war, as well as its integration into the logic of ongoing military operations



Unlike nuclear accidents such as Chernobyl or Fukushima, the primary risk in this case is neither technical nor natural in origin, it has been deliberately created by Russia. Military presence at the site, repeated disruptions to power supply, pressure on personnel, and recurring safety incidents have generated a constant state of risk. This risk is not incidental but actively maintained and leveraged as a tool of pressure on Ukraine and its partners. As a result, the nuclear facility has been transformed from critical infrastructure into a strategic asset – effectively a hostage of the war.

The study further demonstrates that existing international frameworks are not equipped to address such a scenario. International humanitarian law does not adequately account for the prolonged occupation of nuclear facilities, while the International Atomic Energy Agency lacks enforcement mechanisms and is therefore limited to ad hoc arrangements and diplomatic engagement. Consequently, the situation is characterised by three interrelated dynamics: the normalisation of radiological risk, the blockage of political and diplomatic resolution, and the emergence of a regulatory vacuum.

In this context, the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant should be understood not only as one of many violations committed by Russia, but also as a precedent that may shape future norms governing the protection and use of nuclear infrastructure in armed conflict.



**War in Ukraine; international security**

## Macron adds European flavour to French deterrence

*Marianne Paire, July Decarpentrie, International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS), Estonia*  
05.03.2026

The authors analyse France's new nuclear doctrine, presented by Emmanuel Macron, which provides for a careful "Europeanisation" of French nuclear deterrence whilst maintaining full national control. This represents an attempt to adapt France's capabilities to the changed security landscape, specifically the growing threats from Russia, the erosion of trust in US guarantees, and the intensifying debate on Europe's strategic autonomy.

A key innovation is the concept of forward deterrence – deterrence involving the deployment of nuclear assets beyond French territory. This includes the participation of European partners in military exercises, the possible temporary deployment of French nuclear assets on their territory, and the integration of their capabilities, particularly in the areas of air defence, early warning and long-range strikes, to support France's nuclear deterrent. At the same time, the ultimate decision on the use of nuclear weapons remains exclusively with the President of France, which underscores the unchanged nature of Paris's nuclear sovereignty.

The announcement of an expansion of the nuclear arsenal and the abandonment of the previous practice of transparency regarding its size also sent an important signal. This reflects expectations of a prolonged 'nuclear age', the signs of which are already visible. In a broader sense, the concept of forward deterrence is intended to build a European pillar of deterrence and lay the foundations for a new security architecture on the continent, in which Europe can act as a more autonomous strategic actor.



**[The EU's strategic autonomy](#)**

## Hormuz: a narrow strait, far-reaching shocks

(fr. Ormuz : petit détroit, grandes secousses)

*Sébastien Abis, Institut de relations internationales et stratégiques (IRIS),*

*Франція*

05.03.2026

The Strait of Hormuz is one of the key nodes of the global economy, and its destabilisation can trigger far-reaching consequences well beyond the Middle East. The point is that the military confrontation around Iran is also turning into a geo-economic conflict, in which infrastructure is becoming a tool of influence.

Despite the relatively small size of the Persian Gulf, the region concentrates a significant share of global energy reserves. Approximately one-third of global oil trade passes through the Strait of Hormuz, alongside substantial volumes of gas and refined petroleum products. This makes it a critical chokepoint for global energy and trade flows, particularly for Asian economies and, to a lesser extent, Europe.



The recent escalation is already disrupting maritime traffic. Shipping companies are suspending operations, insurance risks are rising, and vessels are accumulating while awaiting safe passage. In the event of a prolonged disruption, this could lead to higher energy prices, increased inflationary pressures, and a reconfiguration of global logistics, with longer and more costly routes, including diversions around Africa. An additional vulnerability lies in the region's dependence on food imports, which further amplifies the risks.

These events, therefore, serve as further confirmation that modern conflicts are increasingly spilling over beyond the military sphere. Control over strategic transport routes can have just as significant an impact on the global economy as military operations.

**Geopolitics; Middle East**

## Reforming European defence procurement to boost military

*Ethan Capstein, Javier Ospital, Guntram B. Wolff, Bruegel, an EU-level think tank*

05.03.2026

The study analyzes the structural problems of European defense procurement, and the authors conclude that the main constraint lies not in financing but in the organization of the system itself. Despite increasing military spending, most contracts in Europe are still concentrated in the hands of a few large contractors, which limits competition and inhibits the introduction of new technologies.

In this context, the war in Ukraine has been a key factor in rethinking approaches to defense innovation.



It has demonstrated that the modern battlefield is changing rapidly, and critical technologies, including unmanned systems, are often developed not by traditional defense corporations, but by small and agile companies. The speed factor is also important: Ukraine was able to significantly shorten the cycle of implementing new solutions and build a more decentralized procurement model.

Comparisons with the US, Israel and Ukraine show that effective procurement systems involve early involvement of startups, competition between developers and flexible contracting mechanisms. Currently, the European model remains slow and prone to excessive centralization.

The key conclusion is that without a deep procurement reform, Europe risks losing technological competitiveness in defense, even with sufficient resources.

**[The EU's strategic autonomy](#)**

## Iran Developments as Impetus for Beijing to Increase Coordination with Moscow

*Toomas Hanso, International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS), Estonia*  
06.03.2026

The conflict in the Middle East surrounding Iran is taking on broader geopolitical significance, and these developments may also directly affect the war in Ukraine. The author believes that strikes against Iran are creating a domino effect that is reshaping the balance within the China–Russia–North Korea triangle.

Beijing and Moscow have publicly condemned the attacks on Iran and called for de-escalation, demonstrating coordination of positions in international forums. At the same time, this political alignment has a practical dimension, particularly in the energy sector. In the event of disruptions to Middle Eastern energy supplies, China may further reorient toward Russian oil, potentially strengthening Moscow's economic position and partially offsetting the impact of sanctions.

The military dimension is no less significant. Iran is one of the key suppliers of drones, ammunition, and missile technologies to Russia. Its weakening creates a gap that could be filled by China through economic and technological support, and by North Korea by increasing military supplies. If such compensation occurs, Russia may be able to maintain or even strengthen its position on the battlefield. Overall, it is important to understand that developments in the Middle East could potentially either weaken Russia or, conversely, contribute to the consolidation of an anti-Western coalition around it.



**World order; Middle East**

# A Fundamental Threat to Democracy: When the Electorate's Agency Becomes a Target

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*Thiemo Feldmann, International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS), Estonia*

09.03.2026

Currently, the greatest threat to modern democracies lies not so much in the falsification of results as in the undermining of citizens' ability to participate in voting. The focus is shifting from the manipulation of procedures to the manipulation of voter behavior.

The author distinguishes three levels of threats: attacks on the election process itself, the undermining of public trust in them, and, most importantly, the influence on the will and capacity of citizens to vote. The first level includes cyberattacks or the sabotage of infrastructure. The second involves information campaigns that erode confidence in the integrity of elections. The third level is considered the most dangerous, implemented through two interconnected mechanisms and it serves as the central object of the author's analysis.

The first mechanism of influencing voter behavior consists of demotivating voters from participating in elections through narratives such as «all politicians are corrupt» or «voting changes nothing,» as observed during the 2024 European Parliament elections in Italy. At that time, specific hashtags such as #iononvoto («I am not voting») and #iorestoacasa («I am staying at home») appeared on the social network X.

The second mechanism occurs when the ability to vote is undermined through disinformation. For instance, false reports regarding security threats near polling stations can spread panic and reduce turnout. During the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, fake SMS messages and automated mass calls urging people to stay home were actively distributed.

These mechanisms reinforce one another, forming a closed loop of distrust: emotional demotivation increases vulnerability to manipulation. Consequently, turnout declines, radical forces are strengthened, and political systems become more fragmented.

The author emphasizes that such actions are part of broader hybrid strategies, specifically Russian information operations in Europe. The response must include both the technical protection of elections and proactive engagement with the information environment through the early detection of influence campaigns and the enhancement of media literacy.

**Democracy**

# Eurobonds for European strategic autonomy: a financial proposal with geostrategic foundations

*José Juan Ruiz, Elcano Royal Institute, Spain*  
11.03.2026

The increasingly debated strategic autonomy of the EU is impossible without financial autonomy. Therefore, the author proposes a radical rethinking of the role of finance in European security. At the center of the argument is the idea of creating a large-scale Eurobond market with a volume of approximately €5 trillion, which constitutes roughly 25% of the EU's GDP.

The author proceeds from the premise that in the modern international order, interdependence has been transformed into a tool of leverage through finance, energy, or supply chains. In this context, the EU recognizes its own vulnerability across several spheres simultaneously, particularly due to the growing unpredictability in transatlantic relations. The problem lies not only in the existence of these vulnerabilities but also in the fact that they are closely intertwined: a crisis in one area rapidly triggers problems in others. Consequently, even limited shocks can escalate into large-scale systemic crises for the majority of the Union's member states. This reinforces the need for strategic and financial autonomy, as dependence on external partners increasingly restricts the EU's ability to act independently.

At the same time, the varying «endurance thresholds» of member states and the current decision-making system lead to political paralysis. As the study shows, a way out is possible only through coalitions of states capable of reaching agreements via financial compensation.

It is precisely here, in the author's view, that Eurobonds play a key role: they are intended to create a European «safe asset,» provide resources for such compensations, and reduce dependence on the dollar-based financial system.



The EU's strategic autonomy; Economics, Finance

## Not One War but Three Wars in the Middle East

*Bernard Siman, Egmont Institute, Belgium*

12.03.2026

The central analytical idea of the study is the assertion that the war in Iran actually consists of three interconnected conflicts, each distinct in its logic. The first is the global war of the United States against Iran, which extends far beyond the Middle East. In this dimension, Washington acts as a global actor, seeking to destroy Iran's military capabilities and weaken its role in broader geopolitical and economic networks. Simultaneously, for Iran, this war is existential, which explains its strategy of rapid and large-scale escalation aimed at forcing the United States into a political settlement.



The second level is the regional war of Israel against Iran, which has significantly narrower yet more radical objectives. Israel seeks to destroy Iran's nuclear and missile potential and to definitively weaken the so-called «Axis of Resistance.» Both sides perceive each other as an existential enemy while simultaneously acting as revisionist actors attempting to alter the regional balance of power. This renders the conflict fundamentally more rigid and less manageable.

The third dimension is the potential direct war between Iran and the Gulf States, which is currently in a formative stage but possesses a high probability of escalation. Iran's massive missile strikes and threats to shipping in the Strait of Hormuz create the preconditions for a military response from the Gulf countries. Should this scenario materialize, the conflict would assume a full-scale regional character, involving proxy forces, the disruption of energy infrastructure, and the sharp destabilization of global markets, particularly through rising gas and oil prices.

The author examines three basic scenarios for the development of events. The most likely is the regime survival scenario: despite military weakening, the Islamic Republic maintains control, intensifies repression, and shifts into a mode of long-term confrontation. An alternative scenario envisions a change of power following the «Venezuelan» model, potentially with military involvement; however, this would almost inevitably be accompanied by internal conflict and the risk of civil war. The most destabilizing is considered the state collapse scenario, which would mean the fragmentation of Iran, large-scale chaos, the spread of terrorism, and powerful migration pressure on the region and Europe.

**World Order; Middle East**

# The War in Iran: Strategic Implications for Ukraine

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*Marcin Zaborowski, Tomáš Nagy, GLOBSEC, Slovakia*

*11.03.2026*

In this research, GLOBSEC analysts concentrated on the strategic implications of a joint US-Israel military campaign against Iran for Ukraine. They argue that the short and medium-term effects of the operation are mostly negative. A new conflict engenders a situation of multi-theatre competition, in which Ukraine is forced to compete for limited resources, attention, and the West's political priority.

The authors contend that the war in Iran distracts diplomatic and political attention from Ukraine, complicates the peace process, and simultaneously strengthens Russia's positions, which also obtains both operational and informational advantages. The factor of military resources is particularly critical: the US use of a significant number of precise weapons and air defense systems in the Middle East directly reduces their availability for Ukraine, fostering competition among several regions. Its impact is felt especially in the field of air defence, where limited stockpiles of interceptors and their high manufacturing cost lead to structural asymmetry, since cheap drones and rockets are capable of systematically draining expensive defence resources.

The energy dimension of the conflict also poses another great risk. The spike in oil prices and the possible reorientation of China and India on Russian energy sources generate additional revenue for funding Russia's war.

At the same time, the authors point out limited positive effects. The weakening of Iran potentially reduces its role as a Russian military-industrial partner, yet this effect is partly mitigated due to the localization of drone manufacturing in Russia. Simultaneously, Ukraine assumes a new role as an "experience exporter" in countering drones and layered air defence, which creates room for technology exchange and political capital.

Despite this, the authors conclude that the war in Iran yields a mostly negative balance in the short- and medium-term perspective, strengthening competition for resources, distracting the West's attention, and broadening Russia's opportunities.

**International Security, Middle East**

## German turns to the Indo-Pacific: From Strengthening Bilateral Partnerships to Balancing China in Asia and Deterring Russia in Europe

*Prannavan Surendran, International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS), Estonia*

12.03.2026

The author analyzes the growing significance of the Indo-Pacific region in the foreign policy of Germany and the EU, arguing that security and economic processes in Europe and Asia can no longer be viewed in isolation. Berlin's «pivot» to the Indo-Pacific is driven by the necessity to simultaneously reduce dependence on China, respond to the Russian threat, and adapt to shifts in transatlantic relations.

At the core of Germany's approach is the de-risking strategy, which involves diversifying economic ties by deepening partnerships with countries in the Indo-Pacific region, specifically Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, and ASEAN member states. This includes securing access to critical resources such as lithium, developing alternative supply chains, and concluding trade agreements that reduce reliance on the Chinese economy.



The balancing of China is implemented by limiting Beijing's economic leverage, particularly through the diversification of energy and trade flows. At the same time, the deterrence of Russia is primarily indirect: reducing Chinese economic support, specifically the purchase of Russian energy resources, is seen as key to weakening Moscow's financial stability and its ability to continue the war against Ukraine.\*

Overall, the author asserts that an active EU presence in the region is a necessary condition for both balancing China and limiting Russia's strategic capabilities.

### Economics; Geopolitics

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\*At the moment, we are only talking about Germany diversifying its economic partners; there is therefore no complete withdrawal from cooperation with China. Consequently, in the medium term, the impact on the Chinese economy will remain limited for the time being. Consequently, there are grounds for doubting that there will be any significant changes in China's economic support for Russia.  
– editor's note (here and below).

# Draining Fuel from the Russian War Machine: Oil, Gas, and Sanctions Outlook

*Veli-Pekka Tynkkynen, International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS), Estonia*

12.03.2026

The ability of Russia to wage war directly depends on oil and gas revenues, which remain a key pillar of its economy and military spending. In the author's opinion, despite large-scale sanctions, Western policies which restrict these revenues remain incomplete and not effective enough.

The energy sector provides about a third of Russia's budget revenues and over 60% of its exports, while military spending accounts for up to 40% of the budget. Sanctions, particularly the price cap\*, have cut revenues by around €100 billion, yet this effect is largely offset by high global prices and the ability of Russia to adapt by reorienting exports to China, India and other countries.

A key element of this adaptation is the use of a shadow fleet, which allows to circumvent sanctions restrictions and to maintain export flows. At the same time, this reorientation comes at a high price: significant oil discounts, rising of logistics costs, and increased dependence on China.

It is specifically emphasized that the sanctions regime is being undermined by internal political factors in the EU, particularly by the phenomenon of "fossil populism"\*, as well as by incomplete implementation of restrictions. Paradoxically, even after 2022 Europe continues to finance the Russian economy through energy imports.

The author proposes three scenarios. If the current restrictions are maintained, Russia will likely be able to further support its current income level and continue the war. Instead, the strengthening of sanctions, particularly through tighter control over their compliance and a reduction in the price ceiling, can significantly limit the Kremlin's financial resources and increase economic pressure. At the same time, the easing of sanctions or their partial erosion, on the contrary, will lead to an increase in Russia's energy revenues and a strengthening of its ability to finance the war.



## War in Ukraine; energy security; European security

\*Price cap – a sanctions mechanism that limits the maximum price at which Russian oil can be purchased. If Russian oil is sold above the price set by the G7 countries, tanker insurance, financing, and transportation through Western companies are prohibited.

\*Fossil populism – a political phenomenon where politicians or parties appeal to voters over cheap oil or gas.

## Europe Wanted to Quit Russian Energy, Iran's War Just Complicated That

*Pietro Rinaldi, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), Italy*  
13.03.2026

The author analyzes the consequences of the war around Iran for global energy markets and proves that it significantly complicates the EU's strategy to abandon Russian energy resources. The conflict has led to a sharp reduction in the supply of oil and liquefied natural gas due to disruption of key routes and attacks on energy infrastructure. This caused prices to rise, with oil reaching around \$100 per barrel and gas prices in Europe rising from around €30 to €50 per MWh.



In these conditions, Russia, despite the sanctions and the lack of direct participation in the conflict, according to the author, finds itself in an advantageous position. Rising prices and supply shortages are restoring demand for its energy carriers, allowing Moscow to partially regain economic and political influence. At the same time, Europe, which is increasingly dependent on the global LNG market (about 40% of imports), is losing its ability to isolate itself from external shocks and is becoming more vulnerable to price fluctuations.

Alternative suppliers, particularly the US and Norway, are unable to make up the shortfall quickly due to limited production capacity or refocusing supplies on more profitable markets. And this can create an opportunity for Russia to strengthen its position, in particular through the use of internal disagreements in the EU.

According to the author, the consequences of the war over Iran for Europe may include the restoration of dependence on Russian energy carriers, turning the regional crisis into a long-term geopolitical setback.

**Economics**

## «People’s Republic of Narva»: Is Estonia Russia’s next target?

(fr. La « République populaire de Narva » : l’Estonie dans le viseur de la Russie ?)

*Lukas Aubin, Institut de relations internationales et stratégiques (IRIS),  
France*

18.03.2026

A narrative about the “People’s Republic of Narva” began to appear in the Russian-language information space. Since March 2026, Telegram, VK and TikTok social networks have been distributing visual and ironic materials that reproduce the logic of separatist formations in Donbas, including maps, pseudo-state symbols and messages that call into question NATO’s readiness to defend the region.

Narva is seen as a potentially vulnerable space due to the combination of geographical location on the EU-NATO border with Russia and the specific demographic structure of the predominantly Russian-speaking population. Currently, Estonian security services assess the current phenomenon as a limited information operation: the audience remains small, there are no signs of organized mobilization or offline activity, and the content is mostly provocative.

Despite this, even such low-cost information campaigns can test the reaction of society and state institutions, increase internal polarization and reproduce broader narratives about “protection of Russian-speaking”. In the future, they can serve as an element of hybrid escalation scenarios, where information uncertainty precedes a political or security crisis.

“The Republic of Narva” is currently more of an example of cognitive warfare than a preparation for real separatism, but such narratives serve the function of testing the limits of NATO’s response and the resilience of Western societies.



**Baltic Sea region; hybrid threats**

## A Grand New European Security Strategy

*Sven Biscop, Egmont Institute, Belgium*  
19.03.2026

The need for a new European Security Strategy is becoming even more urgent as a response to fundamental changes in the international environment, in particular the reduction of the predictability of transatlantic relations and the strengthening of the competition of major powers. The starting point is the realization that the European Union can no longer define itself merely as an ally of the US, but must act as an independent centre of power in an increasingly multipolar world.

The author proposes to consider the European Security Strategy as covering the economic, political and military instruments of the EU. A key challenge is to build the EU's ability to act independently, combining cooperation with the possibility of deterrence and, if necessary, the use of force. This involves the development of an autonomous European defense component within NATO, in particular, the creation of full-fledged military capabilities for independent actions.

The strategy also emphasizes the role of the geoeconomy as an instrument of influence, the need to counter hybrid threats and strengthen the internal stability of the EU. In the global dimension, it is proposed to abandon the logic of spheres of influence in favor of building a network of partnerships as an alternative model of global interaction.

It is separately emphasized that Ukraine is part of the European security space, and the EU should not allow external forces to prevent its future membership. At the same time, the effectiveness of the new strategy will be determined not only by institutional decisions, but primarily by Europe's political will to act independently.



**European security; the EU's strategic autonomy**

## The Last Stronghold

*Martin Vladimirov, Tsvetomir Nikolov, Isaac Levi, Borbala Toth, Center for the study of democracy, Bulgaria*

19.03.2026

Despite significant progress since 2022, the European Union has not yet completed its energy decoupling from Russia, and Hungary remains the key factor hindering this process. It is Hungary that has become the last structural stronghold of Russian energy influence in Europe, maintaining deep dependence in the oil, gas and nuclear sectors.

The authors show that this dependence is not the result of technical limitations, but is systematically shaped by sanctions exemptions, long-term contracts, infrastructure links and politically connected business networks. In the oil sector, supplies via the Druzhba pipeline and access to cheaper Russian oil have not only maintained but also reinforced Hungary's dependence. In the gas sector, long-term contracts with Gazprom and the use of the TurkStream pipeline keep Hungary integrated into the Russian gas supply system, despite the availability of alternatives. The most long-term dependency comes from the construction of new nuclear reactors at the Paks II nuclear power plant in Hungary, with the involvement of Rosatom, which ties the country to Russian technology, fuel and funding for decades to come.

At the same time, the study emphasises that the problem extends beyond the borders of a single state. Existing exemptions, weak controls on the origin of energy sources, and the possibility of their re-export via third countries undermine the effectiveness of the EU's sanctions policy as a whole. What's important is that the economic cost of completely cutting out Russian gas is minimal, which debunks the main political arguments for keeping the dependency.

Therefore, closing the EU's energy gap with Russia depends not on resources or infrastructure, but on the political will to eliminate the internal loopholes that continue supporting Russia's war economy.



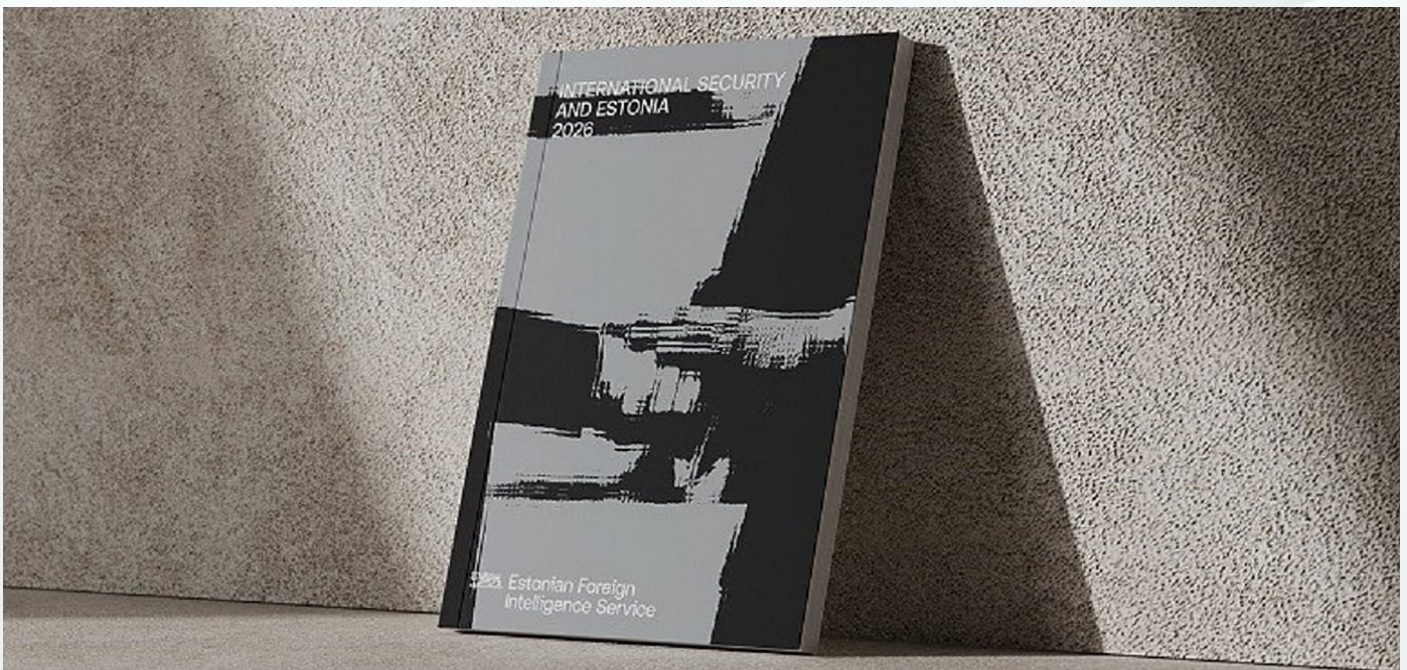
Energy security

## Signals from the North: What Nordic and Baltic Intelligence Assessments Reveal About Russia

*David Cattler, International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS), Estonia*  
20.03.2026

The author analyses the assessments of the intelligence services of the North European countries regarding Russia and argues that it is these states that provide the most accurate understanding of the current security environment. In contrast to the broader European discourse, which is often slow to react, these assessments demonstrate strong consensus among intelligence services, reflecting continuous monitoring of Russian behaviour.

A synthesis of these assessments helps to identify several key trends. Firstly, Russia is viewed as a state that has already entered a phase of long-term confrontation with the West, accompanied by the militarisation of its economy and political system. Secondly, the terms for restoring its military capabilities are being significantly shortened, which increases the risks to European security. Thirdly, hybrid pressure is becoming a permanent feature of the environment rather than an exception. At the same time, the importance of societal resilience as an element of defence strategy is growing.



Particular attention has been paid to the risk of a strategic miscalculation by Russia, driven by a distorted perception of the West. Russia may overestimate its own strength or underestimate NATO's response, which potentially increases the risk of new crises and an escalation of tensions between Russia and the West. Europe already has access to clear signals regarding the nature of the threat, but the key issue is whether there will be sufficient political will to act in accordance with these assessments.

[European security](#)

## The War in Iran Risks Deepening Divisions Among MAGA Supporters

*Marie-Cécile Naves, Institut de Relations Internationales et Stratégiques (IRIS), France*

24.03.2026

The U.S. war in Iran is not consolidating American society but, on the contrary, is deepening existing political and ideological divisions, according to the author. Unlike the period following the September 11 attacks, current U.S. foreign policy does not generate a «rally 'round the flag» effect of societal mobilization in support of the government; instead, it has become a source of internal tension.

The evidence of these divisions is seen both in the decline of public support for the war (less than a third of Americans support the administration's actions) and in the contradictions among Republicans. The resignation of officials, criticism from influential media figures, and rising tension within the MAGA movement indicate an erosion of its ideological integrity, particularly due to a departure from its traditional non-interventionist policy.



Despite this, the Republican Party remains largely oriented toward Trump's position, yet this is increasingly less bolstered by public support. The economic impact of the war serves as a critical factor, as rising energy prices and the overall increase in the cost of living amplify discontent, especially on the eve of elections.

The author also draws attention to the increasing tension in domestic politics related to the electoral process and the administration's reaction to its falling popularity. Consequently, the war in Iran emerges not merely as a foreign policy move but as a factor reinforcing the instability of the American political system.

**World Order; Middle East**

## War against Iran: The Birth of a Genuine Geopolitical EU?

*Nicole Dewandre, Egmont Institute, Belgium*

25.03.2026

At the meeting of the UN Security Council on February 28, European delegations focused on condemning Iran's actions, while not mentioning the circumstances that led to the escalation. The central thesis of analytics is that by avoiding recognition of the role of the United States and Israel in provoking conflict, European states undermine their own legitimacy and weaken their diplomatic weight. In addition, such a position, according to the author, not only distorts the picture of events, but also reduces the effectiveness of international institutions that depend on a common understanding of the facts. As a result, the diplomatic space is filled by other actors, including China and Russia, who appear more consistent in their assessments.

The inconsistency of the European position on the nuclear issue is separately emphasized. The war has in fact led to the cessation of IAEA inspections in Iran, that is, it has undermined those control mechanisms that the EU seeks to protect.

At the same time, the author points to the possibility of forming a more independent European position. In particular, Spain's refusal, led by Pedro Sánchez, to support the war and Kai Callas' statement that this conflict is not "Europe's war" demonstrate an alternative line of behavior. The author believes that such differences do not mean weakness, but, on the contrary, precisely because of the internal discussion, the EU can move away from automatic follow-up of allies and develop a more independent common position.



[The EU's strategic autonomy; Middle East](#)

# European Energy Autonomy: Is There Content Behind the Concept?

*Andrei V. Belyi, International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS), Estonia*  
25.03.2026

The author analyzes the paradox of European energy policy: in its pursuit of strategic autonomy, the EU has actually deepened its dependence on the US through a sharp increase in imports of liquefied natural gas. The war over Iran has only intensified this trend, causing disruptions in global supplies and increasing the importance of American exports for European energy security.

After abandoning Russian gas, Europe quickly switched to liquefied natural gas, primarily from the United States, which will provide about 60% of EU imports by 2025. At the same time, Europe's domestic resource base is shrinking: the closure of large fields, a decline in production in the North Sea, and the gradual abandonment of coal - all this limits the possibilities of energy self-sufficiency. The role of gas is also emphasized, as it determines the dynamics of electricity prices, affects industrial competitiveness and, ultimately, Europe's ability to maintain its own security policy. Expectations of a rapid replacement of fossil fuels with renewable sources turned out to be overly optimistic, as the instability of green generation maintains the need for gas as a basic resource.

Despite the new dependency, the risks associated with the US are assessed as lower compared to the Russian ones, given the commercial nature of the liquefied natural gas market and the growth of US export capacities. For now, in the author's opinion, Europe's possibilities to achieve strategic autonomy will be limited. Therefore, it is worth preserving this transatlantic trade connection, but at the same time taking a pragmatic view of energy realities and gradually developing alternative sources.



Energy security

## The EU's AI strategy: challenges and the way forward

Giorgos Verdi, Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy  
(ELIAMEP), Greece  
26.03.2026

Despite a strong scientific base and a highly skilled workforce, the EU lags significantly behind the US and China in key indicators of artificial intelligence development, particularly in terms of investment volumes, the number of cutting-edge models and the scale of the entrepreneurial ecosystem. In 2024, only three cutting-edge AI models were developed in the EU, compared to 40 in the US and 15 in China, whilst investment stood at \$14.9 billion compared to \$109 billion in the US.



The author emphasizes that Europe's primary challenge lies not in a lack of innovation, but in the inability to scale these innovations and transform them into market outcomes. Key barriers include the fragmentation of the single market, the underdevelopment of venture capital\*, and limited access to financing. At the same time, regulatory policy, specifically the AI Act, is not the main reason for lagging behind and may even foster trust in the technology.

Another key issue is the low level of AI adoption: only 18% of small and medium-sized enterprises in the EU use these technologies. This limits the potential productivity gains and economic benefits.

The author suggests focusing on completing the Digital Single Market, developing financial instruments, strengthening computing capacity, and supporting open-source solutions as a more accessible pathway to scaling. Overall, the future of the EU's position in global AI competition depends on its ability to overcome internal structural constraints.

### Artificial intelligence

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\*Venture capital is an investment in high-risk, innovative companies in exchange for a stake, enabling them to grow and scale up rapidly.

# Evolution of European Industrial Policy: Past, Present and Perspective

*Michael Peneder, Austrian Institute of Economic Research (WIFO), Австрія*  
30.03.2026

The EU industrial policy has evolved from an instrument of state intervention into a complex integrated model that combines market mechanisms and strategic regulation. According to the author, modern industrial policy must be based on developing the economy's capacity for adaptability, innovation, and structural transformation.



The author proposes a conceptual approach based on three intertwined functions: fostering innovation, accumulating productive resources (human capital, infrastructure), and shaping the regulatory and market environment. In the current context, this logic is institutionalized through instruments such as IPCEI\*, FDI\* screening, CBAM\*, as well as through strategic initiatives like the Competitiveness Compass.

The renewed focus on industrial policy is driven by combining the technological lag behind the US and China, geopolitical tensions, and challenges of the green and digital transformation. At the same time, its effectiveness is currently limited by three structural problems: first, fragmentation among the Member States; second, a lack of large-scale funding; finally, internal contradiction between the principles of free market and growing protectionism.

Hence, the EU's competitiveness depends on the ability of the economic model to evolve, preserving a balance between availability and strategic management of dependencies.

## Economics

\*Important Projects of Common European Interest is an EU mechanism that allows Member States to co-finance major strategic projects, particularly for the development of critical technologies, and to go beyond standard State aid rules.

\*Foreign Direct Investment screening is a mechanism designed to assess foreign investments for potential security risks and to monitor control over strategic sectors.

\*Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) is a border carbon adjustment tool. If imported goods are produced with high CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, the importer must pay an additional carbon tariff.

## Focus Topic

# Algorithms and democracy. How social media shapes young Europeans' worldviews

*Ilkka Räsänen, Kristo Lehtonen, Bálint Dercsényi, Laurence Fenn, Sujata Krishnan-Barman, Cindy Lee, SITRA, Finland*  
10 March 2026

Do citizens remain active agents in the political process if the information environment is governed by social media algorithms? This question is increasingly central to the state of contemporary democracies, and analysts at SITRA provide a compelling answer.

Social media platforms can no longer be regarded as neutral channels of communication. They have effectively become architects of the public sphere, determining through algorithmic curation what information users encounter, how political perceptions are shaped, and within what boundaries public discourse unfolds. This constitutes a new form of power – algorithmic control over attention, emotions, and ultimately, citizens' political positions.

One of the key strengths of the study lies in its methodology. The authors employ an experimental platform audit. A total of 24 researcher-created avatars, representing young users aged 18-24, interacted with Instagram, TikTok, and X across three European countries – Finland, France, and Romania. These avatars simulated varying levels of political engagement (low and high), as well as clearly defined left- and right-leaning political orientations. In total, 1,719 political posts were manually analysed, with the findings further supported by a representative survey of more than 3,000 respondents.

The study identifies a phenomenon that can be described as algorithmic unpredictability. Users' behavioural signals do not exert a stable or consistent influence on the content they receive. Feeds shift abruptly and without clear explanation, while attempts to “calibrate” one's information environment fail to produce predictable outcomes. This undermines one of the fundamental premises of democratic participation – citizen's agency. Rather than exercising control over the information they consume, users increasingly become objects of algorithmic selection.

The findings also challenge prevailing assumptions about the nature of information threats. Contrary to widespread belief, explicit disinformation constitutes only a small share of content – approximately 3%. Instead, the dominant category consists of opinions, interpretations, and emotionally charged narratives that are inherently difficult to verify, accounting for roughly two-thirds of all content. This distinction is critical. The core issue is not the dissemination of falsehoods per se, but the systemic shift of the information environment towards subjectivity and emotionality. Algorithms optimize not for accuracy, but for engagement, thereby privileging content that provokes strong emotional reactions – outrage, fear, or anger.

Empirical results further point to an ideological imbalance in the distribution of political content. On average, 58% of content exhibits a right-leaning orientation, compared to 26% for left-leaning perspectives and only 16% for centrist positions. Notably, this imbalance persists even when users actively engage with opposing viewpoints. This suggests that algorithms do not merely reflect, but actively shape the structure of political discourse, amplifying certain perspectives while marginalising others.

The psychological dimension is equally significant. Approximately half of young users report experiencing fear, irritation, or anxiety in response to political content on social media. This indicates that the digital environment increasingly operates according to an emotional rather than a rational logic. In such a system, political communication loses its character as an exchange of arguments and instead becomes a competition for attention.

A further complicating factor is the growing presence of AI-generated content, which already accounts for around 5% of political material. This includes deepfakes and automatically generated messages capable of scaling narratives at unprecedented speed. Such developments exacerbate existing challenges and make the information environment even more difficult to interpret and regulate.

Taken together, these dynamics contribute to what analysts describe as the erosion of the digital public sphere. Social media platforms no longer provide a shared space for deliberation; instead, they foster fragmented informational realities, polarised communities, and volatile, emotionally charged environments. As a result, a core pillar of democracy – the citizen's ability to form independent judgments based on information is undermined. Young people, as the primary users of social media, are particularly vulnerable.

Therefore, contemporary democracy faces a crisis of transparency and control over algorithmic systems. Political reality is increasingly shaped not through traditional instruments or public debate, but through mechanisms that remain opaque to society. Under such conditions, the central challenge extends beyond safeguarding freedom of expression to ensuring that citizens retain meaningful control over how that freedom is exercised in the digital environment.

**SECTION 2.**  
**INSIGHT LAB ANALYTICAL MATERIALS**

**EEYES Insight Lab** – a youth-oriented think tank of the International Charitable Foundation «UDoNation» / Eastern European Youth Empowerment Space (EEYES). The center conducts research in the fields of international and domestic politics, economics, and security, and engages financial expertise as needed. The priority of Insight Lab's activities is to ensure high quality standards for its analytical products.

Research within Insight Lab is implemented both on the team's initiative and at the request of partners; it may be intended for either public or restricted distribution. The current geographical focus covers Germany, Poland, and France, with the prospect of further expansion to the European region as a whole. At the same time, Insight Lab functions as a platform for professional dialogue, exchange of expertise, and development of modern research approaches.

An important area of the center's work is the internship program for young researchers. Insight Lab systematically invests in the development of a new generation of analysts, creating conditions for the acquisition of practical skills, professional growth, and the public presentation of their work results. The materials presented in this magazine were prepared by Insight Lab interns within the framework of the internship program under the supervision of the center's team.

# How is Russia's war against Ukraine affecting confidence in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and influencing other states' decisions regarding their nuclear options: whether to remain under the allies' 'nuclear umbrella', strengthen conventional deterrence, or consider developing their own nuclear capabilities?

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*Liza Oliinyk*

## Introduction

After the collapse of the USSR, Ukraine inherited the world's third-largest nuclear arsenal: according to various estimates, over 1,700 strategic warheads, around 2,800-4,200 tactical nuclear warheads, 176 intercontinental ballistic missiles and 30–40 strategic bombers. On 5 December 1994, Kyiv voluntarily relinquished this arsenal by acceding to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) as a non-nuclear state in exchange for 'security assurances' from the US, the UK and the Russian Federation, commonly known as the Budapest Memorandum. This move was seen as a triumph and one that signalled a high level of trust among the parties involved. In doing so Ukraine exchanged nuclear capabilities for political security assurances.

However, the Russian Federation systematically violated this agreement when it occupied the Autonomous Republic of Crimea in 2014 and later launched military operations in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. In 2022, when Russia began a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the occupation and regular shelling of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant fundamentally discredited such security arrangements and brought the world to the brink of a nuclear catastrophe. The Russian Federation's violation of the Budapest Memorandum has become one of the most striking examples of this failure for the international community. As a nuclear-armed state and a permanent member of the UN Security Council, Russia officially committed in 1994 to respect Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity in exchange for its voluntary renunciation of nuclear weapons. Serhiy Shutenko's statement during PrepCom III on 29 April 2025 explicitly emphasised: 'The violation by Russia of the Budapest Memorandum revealed the weakness of this document'.

The example of Ukraine opens a broader debate on the deepening crisis of confidence in the NPT. This raises the question of whether states are relying less on 'soft' political assurances and increasingly on 'hard' guarantees. This fundamentally reshapes the motivations of three groups of actors: (1) states under direct threat from an aggressor; (2) allies of nuclear-armed states who doubt the reliability of the 'nuclear umbrella'; (3) 'threshold' states with technical capabilities who are reassessing the benefits of nuclear status.

The paper examines the main factors behind the erosion of trust in the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, regional reactions to the Ukrainian precedent, and the transformation of states' nuclear decision-making since 2022.

## Elements of the war that most undermine confidence in the non-proliferation regime

Full-scale war has exposed a deep systemic crisis in the Non-Proliferation Treaty as an effective barrier against nuclear threat. Today, four interrelated factors can be identified that transform an aggressor's nuclear status into a tool for manipulation, underscoring the inability of 'soft' commitments to guarantee security.

The first element undermining the regime is Russia's overt nuclear coercion. The Russian Federation's 2024 revision of its nuclear doctrine, which expanded the scenarios for the use of nuclear weapons in response to conventional threats, transformed the arsenal into an active instrument of political pressure, according to the Arms Control Association. This undermines Article II (which prohibits non-nuclear states from receiving, manufacturing or otherwise acquiring nuclear weapons) and Article VI (the obligation to 'pursue in good faith negotiations on nuclear disarmament') of the NPT. This approach clearly demonstrates that nuclear status appears to confer impunity for aggression, effectively encouraging other countries to reconsider their renunciation of nuclear programmes.

The example of the Budapest Memorandum is a second factor that undermines trust. It remains the most famous example of such guarantees: the US, the UK and Russia (later joined by France and China) promised to respect Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. However, this was a striking example of the ineffectiveness of security assurances. Russia, as a nuclear-armed state and a guarantor, violated its promises to respect Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The deadlock during PrepCom III 2025 – specifically, the lack of consensus on any recommendations for RevCon 2026 – was a logical consequence of the erosion of the treaty's credibility. Without enforcement mechanisms, security assurances are no longer perceived by states as legally binding, but as declarative statements devoid of any real means of implementation. This undermines the foundation of the NPT: non-nuclear states see that international law lacks mechanisms to ensure compliance. This pushes the world towards seeking 'hard' alternatives – from the concept of nuclear sharing to the development of their own nuclear threshold status. This leads to a third factor: the weakness of enforcement mechanisms.

The occupation of the Zaporizhzhia NPP has set a precedent where Europe's largest nuclear power plant remains under the aggressor's control without any enforced de-occupation. IAEA reports (GOV/2025/66, GOV/2026/7, GOV/2026/25) document restricted access for the ISAMZ mission, making full verification of nuclear safety impossible. Resolution GC(69)/RES/14 calls for the withdrawal of troops but is being ignored due to the institutional paralysis within the UN Security Council, where the aggressor state abuses its veto power. This undermines confidence in the effectiveness of Article III of the NPT.

The response to nuclear risks at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (power line outages 12 times since 2022) is limited to statements and IAEA missions. Political differences and the veto are hindering swift action. This illustrates the fourth element – the slowness and limited nature of the collective response, which undermines Article IV of the NPT and reinforces the perception of the 'might makes right' principle.

These four elements act synergistically, creating a new reality in which regional responses are becoming more assertive. Europe is increasingly strengthening collective defence arrangements, East Asia is actively debating its own nuclear capabilities, and the Middle East is intensifying its policy of nuclear ambiguity.

Region	The main reaction	Impact on the NPT
Europe	The strengthening of 'hard' alliances and the nuclear umbrella	Growing confidence in collective guarantees, but doubts about the reliability of the US (the Trump factor)
East Asia	Growing support for a national programme or nuclear sharing	The risk of a shift from latent possibility to an active debate on withdrawing from the NPT, or towards the pursuit of a 'nuclear threshold' status
Middle East	Intensification of nuclear ambiguity and 'threshold' status	The undermining of Article II due to the linkage with Iran and the risk of a regional arms race

*Table 1. Regional reactions to the Ukrainian case after 2022–2026*

### Changing state motivations in nuclear decision-making

As confidence in 'soft' security guarantees begins to decline, countries are increasingly compelled to reassess their strategic calculations. Instead of relying on the NPT, states are increasingly opening discussions on intermediate or 'harder' options.

One such option is the development of a domestic nuclear programme – the most radical, yet least likely, option. The main constraint lies in the high political and technological barriers: sanctions, IAEA monitoring, and the breakdown of defence alliances. The most striking example is South Korea, where 76.2% of citizens support the idea of developing their own nuclear arsenal. The country's actions have moved from hypothetical debate to concrete policy discussions: the government has openly discussed the redeployment of US tactical weapons or the adoption of a nuclear sharing arrangement. At the same time, strong pressure from the US remains a restraining factor, as it opposes such a programme due to the risk of sanctions and the breakdown of the alliance.

Given the risks of unilateral moves, deeper integration with nuclear-armed allies is gaining momentum in Europe. The redistribution of nuclear roles within the alliance (deployment of forces, joint exercises and planning) allows for strengthened deterrence without formally violating the NPT. Combined with investment in conventional forces, air defence and hypersonic missiles, this helps establish a clear 'red line' for an aggressor. This is a rational option for states seeking to strengthen their defences while avoiding direct escalation at the international level.

A ‘threshold’ strategy involves the development of a full nuclear fuel cycle– uranium enrichment, reactors and the associated infrastructure – without proceeding to the actual production of nuclear weapons. This allows a state to achieve a rapid ‘breakout’ to nuclear-weapon status. Such a status is attractive to countries where allies’ guarantees are not perceived as sufficient.

The Ukrainian case has significantly lowered the threshold for perceiving nuclear risks. ‘Soft’ guarantees are insufficient, whilst alternative ‘hard’ guarantees appear unrealistic. This trend is likely to weaken the NPT regime and significantly increase the risk of both further nuclear proliferation and a broader shift by states towards a ‘threshold’ strategy, compared to the pre-2022 period.

### **What security guarantees are credible after 2022?**

Political memoranda, declarative commitments and negative assurances have largely lost all credibility on the international stage since 2022. States are increasingly compelled to consider new, pragmatic new, pragmatic defence mechanisms.

The full-scale invasion of 2022 has prompted NATO to adjust its approach: a military response to an attack on an ally is increasingly expected to be automatic. This is facilitated by the deployment of large combat forces on the eastern flank and a significant increase in defence budgets, enabling the Alliance to respond without delay. Eastern European states view NATO as their most reliable defence. However, following Trump’s return to the US presidency, the Alliance’s stability has been called into question regarding whether there is any likelihood at all that NATO will remain united and retain a credible and automatic collective defence mechanism. The invocation of Article 5 requires political consensus within the North Atlantic Council, and the subsequent contribution of each state is determined by its national constitutional procedures. Whether all countries would be prepared to go to war if it were far from their borders remains an open question.

Debates on the creation of sub-regional defence alliances for defence in specific regions are becoming increasingly relevant. Bilateral and air defence alliances, as well as regional defence blocs, are increasingly emerging as a response to geopolitical uncertainty surrounding the US’s role in European security, reinforcing the shift towards ‘strategic autonomy’. The Kensington Agreement between Britain and Germany, signed in 2025, has been ratified by the parliaments of both countries, meaning this commitment has become part of national legislation. It effectively functions as a ‘bilateral Article 5’, which is legally binding regardless of changing political circumstances.

Following the situation surrounding Greenland, Denmark initiated efforts to involve European allies to defend the Arctic. Discussions are currently underway on the creation of a separate Northern Defence Pact (Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain and Britain), which would enshrine the defence of Greenland in the national laws of European countries.

Debates on the European nuclear umbrella (within the framework of French doctrine) also have the potential to become one of the most compelling guarantees. In March 2026, French President Macron announced a strategic extension of French nuclear deterrence to allies. This includes potential participation in French nuclear exercises and consultations on shared European interests.

These guarantees appear more credible because they involve institutionalised joint decision-making and clear response mechanisms, unlike declarative memoranda.

## **The NPT: resilience and the path to restoring trust**

The Ukrainian precedent was not merely a breach - it exposed a fundamental systemic vulnerability in the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Confidence in the non-proliferation regime has been significantly eroded, and the international system is entering a new phase. The approach of RevCon 2026 makes the situation critical: if the conference fails to reach a consensus, it could lead to the most crisis since 2005.

Today, the risk of a regional arms race is intensifying. South Korea, by considering the pursuit of its own nuclear programme, may provoke North Korea into an uncontrolled expansion of its arsenal. Saudi Arabia, which is actively stockpiling uranium ore and seeking to develop a full nuclear fuel cycle, openly states: if Iran obtains a nuclear weapon, it will do the same. This chain reaction is unfolding against a backdrop of the normalisation of nuclear coercion and the undermining of Article VI, as there is no progress on disarmament and the New START treaty expired in February 2026 without a successor.

Restoring trust in the regime requires a comprehensive approach combining institutional and political instruments. Ukraine's experience demonstrates that political assurances are no barrier to aggression by a guarantor state. There is a need to rethink the architecture of security guarantees for states that have voluntarily renounced nuclear weapons, by developing legally binding mechanisms that would prevent a recurrence of such a systemic collapse and tools to circumvent the veto power of a violating state.

Realistic steps towards restoring trust must be based on a shift from general declarations to practical deterrence tools. Instead of waiting for a legally binding treaty, which is currently blocked, Ukraine, together with its partners, should initiate the creation of a 'Register of Guarantee Violations' under the UN Secretariat. Such a step would transform the treaty into an instrument of accountability, where every instance of nuclear blackmail would be recorded as a legal precedent, automatically triggering immediate international consequences and consultations.

In parallel with this, it is necessary to focus on the protection of nuclear facilities by establishing a special subsidiary body to develop safety protocols for nuclear power plants in areas of armed conflict. A key element should be the introduction of a 'digital moratorium' – an international commitment not to attack nuclear infrastructure control systems.

The economic aspect of restoring the regime centres on reforming the Nuclear Suppliers Group. Ukraine and its partners should advocate for updated rules, ensuring that any state violating the physical integrity of nuclear facilities—as Russia has done at the Zaporizhzhia NPP - automatically forfeits access to nuclear technology, equipment, and fuel exports. Such an approach would make the NPT an effective mechanism without the need to completely amend the text of the Treaty.

Equally important is the protection of the information space related to disarmament. The aggressor's manipulative narratives and disinformation concerning arms control pose a real threat to global security. This requires coordinated efforts to expose nuclear coercion as a tool of political pressure.

With the start of the new post-New START phase, supporting a new European security architecture, particularly the French umbrella, emerges as a realistic step. This allows for the creation of a security framework within the continent through joint planning and consultation mechanisms, without violating Articles I and II. These steps could begin to restore confidence in the NPT, as trust is restored not through declarations, but through practical mechanisms that demonstrate a readiness to enforce compliance.

## **Conclusion**

Russia's war against Ukraine has become the most serious test of the nuclear non-proliferation regime since 1968. Ukraine's voluntary renunciation of its nuclear arsenal in exchange for political security guarantees has been undermined by the aggression of a nuclear-armed state – a permanent member of the UN Security Council. This has weakened confidence in 'soft' guarantees, strengthened states' motivation to seek 'hard' alternatives, and set a precedent that leaves the NPT vulnerable to further erosion.

RevCon 2026 is the last chance to prevent the NPT's final transformation into a 'paper tiger' once and for all. However, the success of this conference can no longer be measured solely by empty declarations; a genuine restoration of trust is possible only through a shift toward a model of practical enforcement. This entails the creation of new alliances, the implementation of updated security standards, the introduction of a 'Register of Violations', the strengthening of economic isolation of violators within the Nuclear Suppliers Group, and the development of a new European deterrence architecture. Ukraine, as a country that has gone from renouncing weapons to confronting a nuclear aggressor, is uniquely positioned to spearhead the renewal of global security

The future of the non-proliferation regime depends on the international community's ability to replace a policy of 'concern' with a policy of sanctioned action. Without holding violators to account, the NPT risks becoming nothing more than a historical document in a world where the rule of force has definitively replaced the force of international law.

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*This article was written for the magazine "Think Tanks Essentials". Views expressed in the article are those of the author.*

## Comparative analysis of the conditions of Poland's accession to the EU and potential negotiating compromises regarding Ukraine's accession

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*Daria Vyshniak*

Ukraine and Poland, as neighbors, are historically closely connected, and this gives grounds and opportunities to analyze the integration processes of political, socio-economic life in these periods, as well as to consider how civil society was formed on Poland's way to the EU. In general, both countries have a similar state system, almost identical forms of government, and similar economies, culture, and social life in many ways.

Poland began European integration immediately after the overthrow of the communist regime in 1989. In December of the same year, the European Union signed the so-called European Agreement with Poland (then an analogue of the Association Agreement), which provided for preparations for joining the EU. Already in 1994, the country applied for membership. Preparations for integration with the European Community began in 1996 with the creation of the European Integration Committee, which was engaged in adapting Polish legislation to European standards. In 2003, at a nationwide referendum, 77.45% of voters agreed to Poland's accession to the EU. Poland became a member of the European Union on May 1, 2004, and joined the Schengen zone on December 21, 2007. The main prerequisite for Poland's accession to the EU was the country's economic crisis, which Poland sought to overcome through European integration. Before European integration, Poland was in a difficult economic situation, but already after accession it was able to survive the global financial crisis of 2008 relatively successfully. At the same time, geopolitical factors were no less important: the desire to finally consolidate political and economic independence from the influence of the Russian Federation, to integrate into the Western political and security space, as well as to strengthen national security, taking into account the geostrategic proximity to Russia and Belarus. Today, Poland is an example of a country where effective economic and socio-political reforms have led to economic growth and political stability.

Particularly sensitive to the changes associated with European integration was the agricultural sector, which employed about 17% of the population and accounted for 4% of Poland's GDP for 2004. This structure of the economy caused an increased dependence of a large part of the population on agriculture, which made it vulnerable to integration changes. As a result, as well as due to the political speculation of certain forces, a significant part of farmers perceived joining the EU as «disadvantageous».

Polish farmers had several reasons not to support European integration. First, there were fears about the mass purchase of agricultural land by foreigners due to their relatively low cost. Secondly, farmers doubted their ability to withstand competition on the European market, especially given that farmers in Western European countries, particularly Germany and France, were already receiving substantial subsidies. At the same time, fears about rising prices were spreading. Against the background of such sentiments and disinformation, farmers organized protests and blocked transport routes. Especially at these protests, the popularity of the political party «Self-Defense» increased.

In 2003, the Polish authorities decided to bring the situation under control and carried out a targeted awareness campaign throughout the year, in particular among farmers, stressing that it was they who could become one of the main beneficiaries of EU membership. At the same time, leading political forces acted in concert, promoting the idea of «returning to Europe» through media, regional forums and active public communication with citizens. An important role was played by the authority of the Church and the support of socially significant figures, which contributed to increasing the trust of the population. As a result, the emphasis on the economic benefits and security benefits of integration made it possible to significantly reduce the level of Euroscepticism and ensure support for accession in the 2003 referendum.

A key element of Poland's EU accession negotiations in 2003–2004 was agricultural quotas. They made it possible to limit the sharp increase in competition, while at the same time opening access to the EU market on preferential terms.

Initially, Poland and the EU worked on the basis of a bilateral agreement, within the framework of which tariff quotas were introduced for both parties and an import duty was established at the level of 0%. The introduction was advantageous for Poland, since the quotas allowed products to be imported and exported duty-free within the limits of the quantities laid down, making trade more profitable. But depending on the surplus or deficit of grain on the domestic market, exports and imports could be flexibly regulated depending on the situation on the domestic market. However, Polish grain did not meet European requirements, so it could not be sold. Consequently, it was necessary to improve production technologies using funds provided by the EU.

Similarly to agricultural quotas, the function of gradual adaptation was performed by transitional restrictions on the labor market. During the enlargement of the European Union in 2004, the issue of free movement of labour became one of the most sensitive for the «old» Member States. Despite the fact that freedom of movement for workers is a fundamental principle of the EU, states were allowed to temporarily limit the access of citizens of new member countries to their labor markets. Restrictions were only in force at the employment stage. Once they got a job, workers had the same rights as local citizens, including pay and social guarantees.

These restrictions were enshrined in the Acts of Accession and were implemented through the so-called transition period under the formula «2+3+2», which provided for the possibility of postponing full liberalization of the labor market to seven years. The first stage (2004–2006) allowed EU-15 states to apply national rules or bilateral agreements on access to the labor market for citizens of new member countries. The second (2006–2009) and third (2009–2011) stages involved a gradual reduction of these restrictions.

Even before joining the European Union, Poland began to form an institutional and administrative basis for the effective use of EU budgetary mechanisms. A key role in this has been played by preaccession aid programmes, in particular PHARE, which since the early 1990s has contributed not only to economic adjustment to EU standards but also to the strengthening of public administration. Subsequently, SAPARD and ISPA instruments were introduced, aimed at modernizing the agricultural sector and developing infrastructure. An important element was the creation of specialized institutions, in particular the Polish Agency for Regional Development (PARR), which ensured the practical implementation of these programs.

In parallel with the use of financial instruments, a deep institutional transformation was taking place. The 1999 reform, involving the creation of 16 voivodeships, laid the foundation for the decentralization of regional policy. At the same time, the State was gradually forming a centralized coordination mechanism, which culminated in the establishment of the Ministry of Regional Development in 2005. This made it possible to combine strategic management at the national level with the active participation of the regions in the implementation of development policy.

After joining the EU in 2004, Poland integrated these developments into the cohesion policy system, transferring the main responsibility for managing EU funds to state and regional authorities. This approach made it possible to ensure the effective development of significant financial resources and the implementation of large-scale infrastructure and economic projects.

Alongside this, an important element of financial support was the European Union Solidarity Fund (EUSF), set up to respond to major natural disasters and other emergencies. Even before accession, Poland received the first payments for recovery after the floods of 2001–2002, which became an example of the practical implementation of the principle of European solidarity. However, the role of this instrument remained supportive, and the priority for accession remained long-term funds with national co-financing.

An analysis of the negotiation process suggests that Poland has been forced to make a number of substantial concessions in sensitive areas. In particular, this concerned the acceptance of a reduced transitional period in respect of restrictions on the acquisition of agricultural land by foreigners, and the adoption of not fully advantageous conditions in the field of direct payments for farmers. The concessions in the field of environmental protection were particularly revealing, where Poland has committed itself to extensive infrastructure modernisation in line with EU standards, which requires considerable financial resources and time. That is, even within the framework of generally successful integration, Poland agreed to difficult and costly conditions, which can be considered as a kind of «price of accession» to the European Union.

Most of the Polish concessions of 2004 may be repeated for Ukraine, especially in the agricultural sector and the labor market, due to similar challenges. At the same time, these concessions will not be of a unilateral nature, but will be part of broader negotiating compromises aimed at ensuring the gradual adaptation of both Ukraine and the European Union to enlargement.

Ukraine's path began in March 2007 with negotiations between Ukraine and the European Union to conclude a new strengthened agreement that would replace the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement concluded in 1994. Another step on the way to achieving the ultimate goal of European integration – signing and ratification in 2014 of the Association Agreement between Ukraine and the EU. Although this Agreement did not provide for EU membership, the relations of the parties began to be developed in a qualitatively new format of political association and economic integration. Ukraine's unchanged course towards joining the EU is also declared in the Strategy of Ukraine's Foreign Policy Activities. Among the main priorities is Ukraine's full membership in the EU and NATO. The aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine in 2022 became an impetus for the activation of the European integration process. Russia has held back Ukraine's European integration processes for a long time, and now it has completely lost its chances of controlling it. On February 28, 2022, an application for Ukraine's membership in the EU was signed. On April 8, 2022, the head of the European Commission, Ursula von der Lein, handed over a questionnaire to the President of Ukraine to determine the state's readiness to start accession negotiations. Ukraine filled the first part already on April 17, the second – on May 9, 2022.

In addition to passing 5 main stages, Ukraine must also meet the Copenhagen and Madrid criteria, as well as the Charter of the European Union on Fundamental Rights.

That is, stable institutions must function throughout the territory of Ukraine, which will guarantee democracy and the rule of law, an effective market economy must also function, which will be able to cope with the competitive pressure and market forces of the European Union and will be able to assume the responsibilities of membership. After handing over the completed questionnaire, the European Commission published an opinion with a recommendation to the European Council to grant Ukraine the status of a candidate for EU membership, as well as 7 recommendations to be implemented by Ukraine for the next stage of the opening of accession negotiations. Already on June 23, 2022, the European Council decided to grant Ukraine the status of a candidate for EU membership. Ukraine began working on the implementation of the recommendations of the European Commission, which included the reform of the Constitutional Court of Ukraine, strengthening of anti-corruption measures, combating money laundering, and others.

Currently, Ukraine's European integration path is at the stage of gradual adaptation to the requirements of the European Union. After obtaining candidate status, Ukraine began the process of harmonizing national legislation to the EU acquis, and during the first Intergovernmental Conference in June 2024, accession negotiations were officially opened. At the same time, the implementation of certain elements of future commitments, particularly in the area of trade with the EU, is already being observed today.

Modern changes in the trade regime between Ukraine and the European Union indicate the formation of a model of future negotiation compromises. The return of quotas and duties after a period of full liberalization within the framework of autonomous trade measures demonstrates Ukraine's readiness to agree to restrictions on access to the EU market in sensitive sectors. The new quotas, which in a number of cases are well below actual export volumes, suggest the need to contain competitive pressures on EU Member State markets. Thus, even before the acquisition of membership, Ukraine is already faced with the need to adapt to conditions that may become part of its future obligations within the European Union. What is important, Ukraine is already implementing a model of adaptation similar to the Polish one in practice.

Poland's concessions in the field of the labor market, namely the introduction of transitional restrictions according to the «2+3+2» formula, made it possible to gradually adapt the economy and protect the national market. Ukraine, which already has candidate status, faces similar logic, although at an earlier stage. Currently, the labor market of Ukraine is characterized by several key obstacles to integration with the EU: demographic shortage of labor due to the war and the need to return citizens, inconsistency of EU labor legislation, which complicates the access of EU citizens to the Ukrainian labor market and Ukrainians – to the EU market, and the lack of joining EURES and social agreements with 19 EU countries, which limits the mobility and protection of workers.

Thus, progress in the field of free movement of labor for Ukraine depends on internal reforms and the implementation of European standards, which is the actual stage of concessions and preparation for future membership, just as it happened in Poland during integration.

Ukraine's accession to the EU also creates new challenges for the mechanisms of redistribution of funds within the Cohesion Policy. When Ukraine joins the EU, part of the money from funds that other countries currently receive, such as Romania, Hungary, and Greece, will be received by Ukraine.

The amount is a minimum of 4 billion euros annually. Although there is also a «capping» rule that limits losses for individual countries and delays Ukraine's access to some programs, Poland's historical experience shows that the total budget usually increases after expansion. It all depends on how successfully Ukraine will carry out reforms, agree on its plans with the EU and how negotiations on the next budget will take place.

Taking into account the experience of Poland and the current state of Ukraine's European integration, it is advisable to formulate a number of recommendations and forecasts regarding the further development of this process. First of all, Ukraine should pay special attention to the preparation for negotiating compromises in sensitive areas, in particular the agricultural sector and the labor market. Accelerating the adaptation of legislation to EU norms and the formation of effective institutions for the use of the Union's financial resources is also important. Communication with society in order to reduce social tension is no less significant.

At the same time, it can be predicted that the process of Ukraine's accession to the EU will be accompanied by the preservation of certain restrictions on trade, the introduction of transition periods in the field of free movement of labor, as well as tensions within the European Union due to the redistribution of financial resources. Thus, the European integration of Ukraine will be a gradual and complex process, which will require both internal reforms and readiness for compromises.

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*This article was written for the magazine "Think Tanks Essentials". Views expressed in the article are those of the author.*

# How does the transactional approach of the United States transform the European security architecture, and what is Ukraine's role within it?

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*Daniil Moskalenko*

## Introduction

At the 2026 Munich Security Conference, U.S. Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Elbridge Colby, responding to a question from Foreign Policy editor-in-chief Ravi Agrawal about whether the White House could guarantee that it would “pick up the phone” if a European NATO member invoked a call for assistance, effectively reaffirmed Washington’s commitment to NATO and Article 5. However, when asked the same question again—this time with the expectation of a clear “yes” or “no”—he responded evasively, shifting the focus to “readiness and outcomes” rather than what he called “cheap talk.” Colby also repeatedly emphasized that European allies must assume a larger share of the burden for the defense of the continent.

Such rhetoric, which has become characteristic of the new Trump administration, raises an important question for policymakers and analysts around the world: would the United States actually come to the aid of its European NATO allies in the event of a conflict on the continent? This strategic ambiguity is pushing Europe to reconsider its approach to defense and to fundamentally reassess the role of U.S. “guarantees” in the continent’s security.

How, then, does the White House’s changing view of transatlantic relations reshape Europe’s role in the security architecture of the continent? What is driving this shift, and what consequences might it have for Ukraine’s strategy in securing external support, deterring Russia, and obtaining long-term security guarantees?

## **Security guarantees and burden-sharing: can they be reconciled?**

Contrary to widespread belief, Article 5 of NATO does not require automatic military involvement by member states in the event of an attack on one of them. The principle of collective defense states that each party to the North Atlantic Treaty will “assist... by taking such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force.” In other words, each NATO member determines for itself the form and scope of assistance it provides, which makes it difficult to treat this mechanism as a strict security guarantee. In practice, it is political will—not formal obligation—that determines the level of a state’s involvement in a conflict.

Under such conditions, the United States retains broad discretion in interpreting the principle of collective defense, taking whatever measures the current administration considers appropriate and acting in line with its own understanding of national interests. The 2026 U.S. National Defense Strategy, currently being prepared by the Department of Defense, identifies homeland security, stability in the Western Hemisphere, and the containment of China as top priorities. Russia, by contrast, is framed as a “manageable threat” that should primarily be deterred by Europe itself.

According to the current administration, NATO member states have sufficient economic capacity to deal with the Russian threat without heavy U.S. involvement. The document repeatedly underscores the need for burden-sharing, arguing that the United States can no longer effectively protect its own interests while also sustaining transatlantic military power largely on its own.

The second Trump administration has made it clear that the United States is no longer prepared to fully underwrite Europe's security. Under these conditions, U.S. security guarantees appear increasingly conditional. The American nuclear umbrella and critical forms of assistance may still strengthen the defense capabilities of European allies. Yet direct U.S. involvement no longer seems automatic—especially in the case of limited or ambiguous hostile actions.

### **What defines the shift in the U.S. approach toward supporting Ukraine and Europe?**

At present, the United States views the containment of China as its principal foreign policy priority, treating Beijing as its only true peer competitor while relegating the European theater to secondary importance. The second Trump administration is pushing European allies toward greater strategic autonomy, which is increasingly becoming a condition for continued U.S. presence and support in maintaining regional security. At the 2025 NATO Summit in The Hague, member states committed to spending 5% of GDP on defense. Notably, the summit declaration consisted of only five points, suggesting that the adoption of this commitment was effectively its central purpose.

In February 2026, fundamental changes took place in NATO's command structure: the United States transferred two major command posts in Naples and Norfolk to Italy and the United Kingdom, respectively. These positions had been held by Americans for decades, and the move symbolically marks a gradual reduction of the U.S. role in Europe's defense. In effect, Washington is increasingly handing European security responsibilities over to Europeans themselves, while shifting its own focus to regions considered more vital to U.S. national interests.

The United States no longer provides direct aid to Ukraine on the scale seen before; instead, Europe has significantly increased its military, financial, and humanitarian support. Washington's role in sustaining Ukraine's defense capabilities is now increasingly tied to the PURL (Prioritized Ukraine Requirements List) initiative, under which NATO member states and partners provide financial contributions for the procurement of U.S.-made weapons needed for Ukraine's defense against Russian aggression. In this context, Washington has moved away from the role of donor and toward that of a pragmatic arms supplier.

At the same time, given the need to redirect resources toward China, Washington increasingly sees the Russian-Ukrainian war as a burden that unnecessarily drains U.S. capabilities and is working to end the conflict as quickly as possible.

Notably, Elbridge Colby himself made the decision in July 2025 to suspend certain weapons deliveries to Ukraine. Although he officially justified the move by citing concerns over the depletion of U.S. stockpiles, the decision can also be interpreted as a signal that the war in Europe is no longer a top priority for Washington. Colby is also the author of *The Strategy of Denial* (2021), in which he argues that U.S. foreign policy should prioritize China over Europe. It is therefore clear that Colby plays an active role in policymaking and that his strategic outlook resonates with the current administration.

At the same time, the United States is investing significant diplomatic effort in resolving—or at least freezing—the Russian-Ukrainian war. Acting as a mediator between Kyiv and Moscow, Washington participates in trilateral meetings and contributes to shaping the framework of a possible peace plan. The White House seeks to deprive China of Russia as a strategic asset in its confrontation with the West, while the ongoing war complicates such a goal.

At the same time, it would be wrong to conclude that the United States seeks to leave Europe entirely or force Ukraine into capitulation. Washington remains willing to supply Ukraine with critical weapons necessary for its survival, doing so quickly but in a controlled and limited manner. This is an attempt to redistribute the burden among European allies, not to abandon the region. In addition, the United States continues to provide Ukraine with intelligence support. Given Washington's long-term backing of Kyiv and Ukraine's association with the broader Western world and the U.S. sphere of influence, a complete Ukrainian defeat would deal a serious blow to U.S. credibility. At the same time, U.S. support is increasingly being used as leverage to pressure Ukraine into softening its position on the terms of ending the war. This approach was first demonstrated when the United States temporarily suspended intelligence sharing after the controversy in the Oval Office.

Ending the war—not securing victory for either Ukraine or Russia—has become the central U.S. foreign policy objective on this track.

**What new criteria for support are likely to emerge within the America First paradigm, and what should Ukraine do about it?**

Under the Biden administration, Ukraine could appeal to the defense of democracy and freedom when seeking military and economic support. Under the Trump administration, however, such arguments are no longer sufficient. Ukraine now needs to adopt a more pragmatic rhetoric centered on mutual benefit.

A clear example of how Ukraine can demonstrate its utility is its assistance to U.S. allies in countering Iranian drones, which forms part of broader cooperation between Kyiv and Washington in the field of unmanned technologies. Although Trump's rhetoric tends to downplay this contribution, the more pragmatic segment of the American establishment and business community is unlikely to ignore it. Ukraine's experience in modern asymmetric warfare is uniquely valuable. The country has effectively become a testing ground for advanced military technologies and weapons systems, which may appeal to states seeking combat-proven systems that offer the best possible balance between cost and effectiveness.

Beyond military technologies, the United States has already shown interest in Ukraine's natural resources and may also be interested in sectors such as agriculture, the creative economy, and energy. Ukraine can therefore tie financial and military support to investment agreements in these sectors. For example, the U.S.-Ukraine minerals deal provides that, in exchange for priority access to the purchase of extracted resources, the United States would invest in reconstruction, while any future U.S. military assistance would count as a U.S. partner contribution to a newly established Reconstruction Investment Fund. Although the agreement lacks strong institutional guarantees, it nonetheless serves as a practical example of interaction within the America First paradigm.

Ukraine must therefore monetize its advantages and translate them into concrete arrangements involving investment, joint production, or procurement of Ukrainian defense products. Ukrainian diplomats and lobbyists should actively shape the country's image, highlight these advantages, and encourage foreign partners to engage in mutually beneficial cooperation.

### **How does the shift in U.S. rhetoric reshape European security?**

The shift in U.S. rhetoric from a values-based paradigm to a more transactional approach is forcing European allies to rethink their role within the broader security system. They increasingly understand that their security is, above all, their own responsibility. As U.S. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth has stated, the United States can no longer act as the guarantor of Europe's security. Although such rhetoric creates uncertainty among European allies, it also compels them to invest more actively in their own defense capabilities and in Ukraine's defense industry.

Following the return of the Trump administration, the European Union launched the ReArm Europe/Readiness 2030 plan aimed at strengthening its military capacity. The initiative envisions mobilizing €650 billion in defense spending through a 1.5 percent increase in national defense budgets. It also includes the creation of the €150 billion Security Action for Europe (SAFE) credit instrument, which is intended to finance the procurement of military equipment and investment in air and missile defense systems, drones, and related capabilities.

This initiative marks a significant transition from Europe's longstanding reliance on U.S. military power toward autonomous rearmament. The scale of the planned spending reflects both the urgency and ambition of this shift. The introduction of a joint borrowing instrument such as SAFE demonstrates the willingness of EU member states to pool resources in order to ensure the continent's security, especially in the face of the Russian threat and growing pressure from Washington. According to recent reports, the EU may replace SAFE with a new defense lending mechanism to meet unexpectedly high demand from participating states. Europe is therefore seeking not only to deter Russia more effectively, but also to reduce Washington's leverage over European security policy.

The perceived "withdrawal" of the United States is also pushing European states to assume greater responsibility for sustaining Ukraine's defense capabilities. The overwhelming majority of direct military, financial, and humanitarian support now comes from European partners. According to statements by President Emmanuel Macron, France now provides around two-thirds of Ukraine's intelligence support, whereas this role had previously been performed primarily by the United States. Moreover, within the SAFE framework, Ukraine's defense industry has gained the opportunity to participate on equal terms with the defense industries of EU member states. Such integration into the European defense ecosystem promotes the exchange of expertise, attracts foreign investment into Ukrainian defense companies, and strengthens collective efforts against the Russian threat.

The sharp rhetoric of the current U.S. administration toward its European allies is thus acting as a catalyst for greater European mobilization in response to the continent's security challenges. The more Europe fears U.S. disengagement from European affairs, the more it invests in its own defense and in supporting Ukraine independently of Washington. As a result, support for Kyiv becomes more resilient to political fluctuations in the United States.

## Ukraine as a component of the European security architecture

As the United States gradually ceases to function as Europe's unquestioned security guarantor, Ukraine is emerging as the only viable alternative to a large-scale American conventional military presence on the continent. Its combat experience, large armed forces, and deep understanding of modern warfare allow it to fill critical gaps in Europe's defense capabilities. At the same time, in order to maintain its status as a "steel porcupine," Ukraine requires European capital, investment, and financial support. The European continent increasingly finds itself alone in confronting Russian ambitions and hybrid threats. This mutual dependence should become the foundation of European-Ukrainian cooperation.

First, Ukraine should emphasize the need to institutionalize cooperation in a way that does not depend on domestic political fluctuations in European states. A strategic dimension of cooperation is essential for the sustainable development of European defense capabilities. This means concluding security agreements that include long-term budgetary commitments, clearly define the areas and depth of cooperation, and provide a framework for sustained partnership. Notable examples include the Declaration on a One Hundred Year Partnership between Ukraine and the United Kingdom and the Agreement on Security Cooperation and Long-Term Support between Ukraine and Germany. Importantly, these arrangements specify concrete sums and volumes of assistance rather than remaining purely declarative documents.

Ideally, however, such arrangements should be ratified by national parliaments, which would give them full legal force and increase their binding character. Although the existing frameworks with the United Kingdom and Germany represent an important breakthrough, their main weakness lies in the fact that the commitments remain political rather than legal. In the event of domestic political change or financial strain, little beyond reputational costs would prevent governments from stepping away from these commitments.

Second, Ukraine must encourage foreign companies to cooperate with Ukrainian defense enterprises. The German and Danish models of support should serve as the basis of European-Ukrainian military cooperation. Under the German model, the state invests in its own defense-industrial base and in joint production, and the resulting output is supplied to Ukraine. The Danish model, by contrast, involves direct government financing of weapons production at Ukrainian defense enterprises. Investment in Ukrainian defense companies, joint production initiatives, and the possible relocation of production to European countries—while maintaining the ability to send the resulting products to the Armed Forces of Ukraine—would all contribute to strengthening Ukraine's defense capacity.

Although such initiatives are driven largely by private capital and business interests, Ukrainian diplomats and government officials can still play an important role in shaping a positive image of Ukraine's defense-industrial sector. This can be done through engagement with foreign business representatives, intergovernmental consultations, and lobbying on behalf of Ukrainian defense interests abroad.

In this context, joint projects between European and Ukrainian companies, as well as joint EU procurement of weapons for Ukraine, are of central importance. The SAFE initiative creates a mechanism for the gradual integration of the Ukrainian and European defense industries, opening space for the exchange of technologies and expertise. At the same time, joint purchases of U.S. weapons under the PURL framework have become a critically important response to the reduction of direct U.S. military assistance, given the current irreplaceability of certain American weapons systems.

## Conclusion

As U.S. strategic priorities shift and American hegemony weakens, the United States no longer presents itself as the unquestioned guarantor of European security or as the principal defender of democracy. This, in turn, limits the scope of its strategic support for Ukraine in the war against Russia. Although the Trump administration's transactional approach came as a shock to European allies, it has also forced the European Union to take its own security more seriously and begin mobilizing resources accordingly.

In a Europe with reduced U.S. involvement, Ukraine will become a key actor without which a modern security architecture on the continent is impossible. Although the transition to this new security model will be difficult, it is also unavoidable. The combination of Ukrainian military capabilities and European financial resources is becoming the foundation of deterrence against Russian aggression, with the United States contributing only critical resources and its nuclear umbrella.

This article was written for the magazine "Think Tanks Essentials". Views expressed in the article are those of the author.

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## Can Ukraine institutionalize the “security as a service” model in a way that converts its own capabilities into long-term political commitments from partners after the war?

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*Anna-Mariia Marchenko*

The term «security as a service» in the sense of «exchange» of technologies, security guarantees or strategic partnership has not yet been used, but now there are many factors that indicate that Ukraine has every chance of being the first state that can introduce such a model. At present, I propose to identify such a model precisely in the sense of partnership, guarantees, as well as the exchange of military experience and innovations between states and long-term partnership.

Historically, states have entered into agreements similar to the “security as a service” model, where one of them offered, for example, its military technology or other services in exchange for security guarantees. However, it is important to understand the geopolitical context when concluding such agreements.

An example is the signing of the Budapest Memorandum in 1991, under which Ukraine transferred nuclear weapons in exchange for security guarantees from the signatory states, financial assistance, and partial debt relief. However, this should not be classified as a full-fledged exchange, but rather as a disarmament of Ukraine, as a result of which the state became weaker, and other signatory states were able to obtain military technology (nuclear weapons) in exchange for security guarantees (which were ultimately violated), so this agreement cannot be a full-fledged example of the “security as a service” model.

Also, one can mention the placement of US military bases in African countries and other states after World War II, where the United States extended its influence (including military), and also guaranteed security in the respective territories where they were located. However, this example also cannot be attributed to the “security as a service” model proposed above, since such arrangements were most beneficial to the US, and it was a politically and militarily unequal exchange.

I propose to present the current position of Ukraine in the political geographical situation. Starting from 2022, when the state was shaken by full-scale inclusion, security issues and issues of providing the Armed Forces with means more effective than means came to the fore, and the need to develop new technologies with which the Ukrainian Armed Forces could outnumber a slightly larger enemy in terms of personnel and weapons became increasingly urgent.

The issue was painful, since Ukraine was one of the first countries that had to defend the Black Sea territory practically without its own fleet, as well as the sky from the Geran-2 drones, the technology for the production of which Iran had transferred to Russia. Given the lack of state financial support and the problem of financing the army, Ukraine was negotiating with the European Union, the IMF and the United States to provide loan obligations to resolve these issues.

Since February 24 2022, Ukraine has received over \$170-185 billion in total international assistance, a significant part of which was concessional loans to finance the budget deficit, including social spending, which allowed all domestic tax revenues to be directed to the army. Direct loans from the EU, IMF, and World Bank amount to tens of billions of dollars, with a large share of the assistance being grants.

Over the past 4 years, Ukraine has been able to develop its own technologies to combat threats at sea and in the air. These include FPV drones, interceptor drones, and Magura naval drones, which have repeatedly demonstrated their effectiveness on the battlefield. The use of artificial intelligence in military developments has been increasing, and recently, Ukrainian specialists have developed exoskeletons for more comfortable stay of soldiers and performance of tasks near the combat zone.

Undoubtedly, without financial assistance from partners, it would not be easy for Ukraine to introduce new technologies and develop means to effectively combat the aggressor. On the other hand, it is precisely these developments that Ukraine can consider its own assets, which other states do not have, and with the help of which Ukraine can begin to implement the “security as a service” model.

As of January 2026, Ukraine is recognized as the 20th most combat-ready army in the world, and Ukrainian military personnel show some of the best results in NATO exercises.

An illustrative situation has developed with military operations in the Middle East: in connection with the military operation of the US and Israel against Iran, a huge problem has arisen in shooting down Iranian «shaheeds», which are completely irrelevant to neutralize with expensive missiles.

In this regard, Ukrainian experts have arrived in partner countries to exchange combat experience in shooting down these devices, and Middle Eastern countries are also considering the possibility of purchasing Ukrainian interceptor drones. This is already an indicator and recognition of the expertise and combat experience of the Ukrainian military in the conditions of modern warfare.

In the context of an unstable security situation in the world, the exchange of military experience is an outstanding driver of the development of partner states, capable of creating long-term strategic relations between states, increasing their defense capabilities.

Yes, Ukraine is already demonstrating openness to such cooperation by sending military experts to the Middle Eastern states, but I suggest considering the option of developing such partnerships in the long term.

NATO member states are states with which Ukraine regularly conducts military exercises, and the military of the partner states have already had the opportunity to see Ukrainian technologies in action. Representatives of the partner states could, for example, visit relevant military bases on the territory of Ukraine through study visits and learn from the experience of using the technologies.

It should not be forgotten that Ukraine is confidently moving towards EU accession. The state has already implemented a lot of the EU acquis into its own legislation, and full membership will open up avenues for new cooperation, particularly in the security sector.

This issue is particularly relevant from the perspective of the European Union’s strategic autonomy policy. The complex geopolitical situation and the global crisis in general require member states to implement measures to make independent decisions and defend their interests in geopolitics, defense, and economics. The development of one’s own military potential, the ability to conduct crisis management operations, and the creation of a European defense-industrial complex are now on the key agenda. Thus, many EU member states are already allocating additional budgets for the development of their armies and the production of ammunition. Given the intermittent presence of «unknown drones» over the countries of the Union, this area of strategic automation is becoming more relevant than ever.

Ukraine, as a candidate country for membership in the European Union, already has successful cooperation with the Union and a fairly positive dynamic in the development of political relations with it. In this regard, the introduction of the “security as a service” model together with the European Union can be more than successful. It is important to understand that when concluding any such agreements, not only the political context must be taken into account, but also the guarantees of providing such services and the guarantee of receiving something in return. Yes, this model can be implemented by concluding international agreements on strategic partnership in the security sector, within the framework of which Ukraine could provide access to its military technologies, conduct training for the military of member states. They, in turn, for example, repay certain credit obligations of Ukraine that have accumulated during the period of hostilities, as well as contribute to fair political punishment of the aggressor - the Russian Federation (non-removal of sanctions, political isolation, etc.).

Of course, implementing such a model will not be easy, and will depend in particular on the political mood in the world, as well as the state of the Ukrainian economy and armed forces in the post-war period. However, the development of a strategic partnership in this direction will contribute to equal exchange with partners and multilateral development.

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*This article was written for Think Tanks Essentials magazine. The views expressed in the article are those of the author.*

# Strategic, Economic, and Electoral Assessment of the Consequences of Ukraine's Accession to the EU for Poland

*Mykyta Haliaskarov*

Amid common security threats in the region, bilateral relations between Ukraine and Poland are acquiring strategic importance. The full-scale aggression of Russia has become both an opportunity for partnership and a challenge that has raised new questions between the neighbors. Despite this, official Warsaw remains one of the main lobbyists for Ukraine's integration into united Europe. The success of both countries will depend on the ability of their governments to find a compromise and respond to the risks that may arise on Ukraine's path to the integration bloc.

## **Economic impact**

The European Union has remained one of the pillars of financial assistance to Ukraine since the beginning of the full-scale aggression of the Russian Federation in 2022. The Ukrainian economy has faced severe obstacles in many areas: trade, infrastructure restoration, migration issues, and more. According to World Bank estimates, the post-war reconstruction of the country will cost \$588 billion—an unaffordable amount for the government, representing almost three times its GDP before the full-scale Russian invasion (as of 2021). The EU's role in rebuilding Ukraine will remain core: the European Commission is already working on the Union's budget for 2028–2034, which considers the creation of a separate fund to support Ukraine with up to €100 billion in capital. At the same time, back in May 2022, the Commission demonstrated a firm stance on assisting both during the conflict and after its conclusion.

Ukraine's accession to the EU will mean its inclusion in financing programs and the budget formation procedure. The lag in many economic indicators and the challenges of post-war reconstruction are obstacles for the EU, as this is a matter not only of economic but also of security. In the future, Ukraine will replace Poland as the largest recipient of European funds, but the scale and nature of funding changes may take various forms. Since joining in 2004, Poland has received over €175 billion allocated through the Cohesion Fund programs aimed at reducing the gap between rich and poor regions, as well as the Common Agricultural Policy, which provides financial support to farmers and rural development. Despite the country's economic successes, regional and national economic indicators have not yet reached the European average, and funding will continue.

The focus on restoring Ukraine will be the most important, but it will not lead to massive changes in the EU budget, as it might seem at first glance. Under the regulations of the current EU budget (2021–2027), there is a «capping» system—a limit on the maximum amounts of receipts from the Cohesion Fund linked to the size of the country's GDP. It is unlikely that member states will fundamentally change these regulations when considering subsequent budgets, as this poses a risk of greater conflict between national governments and Brussels. A massive outflow of money to Ukraine at the expense of Poland will not occur because Ukraine, according to capping requirements, will be able to take a maximum of 4th place among the program's recipients. At the same time, the scale of Ukraine's economic recovery will require additional investments, and an alternative option will be the creation of separate emergency funds. Although Poland may face a partial reduction in regional funding, it will gain the opportunity to more actively develop its business in Ukraine by involving construction and transport companies.

An additional momentum to bilateral relations will be provided by the cessation of customs and phytosanitary checks for freight transport at the border. To achieve this, Ukraine must adapt its goods to European standards, which is a pivotal condition for integration into the single market and the acceleration of transit procedures. Meeting these requirements and deepening Ukraine's integration into the NCTS declaration system will lead both to an increase in transit through Poland (which will have a positive effect on the Polish economy) and to the expansion of Polish exports to the east. The blockade of Ukraine's maritime export routes by the Russian Navy has already made Poland indispensable in the logistical support of its eastern neighbor's exports. With the full stabilization of the situation in the Black Sea, the transit of some Ukrainian goods through Poland may decrease, but the implementation of infrastructure projects will integrate Ukraine into the European transport network, creating preconditions for the formation of new logistical chains. Rail transport holds particular potential: by building main lines with a 1435 mm European standard gauge from Ukraine to Poland, the logistics spending on certain commodity items will decrease. For Poland, there is a prospect of developing transport toward Asia and the Middle East via the Black Sea: the modernization of the Gdańsk-Odesa highway will open up new opportunities for this. This direction is important, as evidenced by the EU's plans to present a new infrastructure project this year for the development of logistics between the Baltic and the Black Sea, in which Ukraine will also participate.

Ukraine's accession will open up new labor resources for Poland: amid the financial gap between Ukrainians and Poles, the migration trend may persist even after the war ends. Finalizing the accession process will facilitate the movement and employment of Ukrainian citizens, which will help close a certain staff shortage currently existing in Poland. According to official forecasts from the Polish government, even under the most favorable conditions, the country's population will decline, stimulating competition for Ukrainian workers. They have already become vital to the Polish economy and contributed to its rapid growth, so Warsaw will be interested in maintaining this trend. A similar situation occurred with Poles: after 2004, the number of Polish labor migrants in EU countries increased significantly (although there is now a trend towards their return). However, there is a possibility that Poland, along with some other states, will demand a transitional period for opening the labor market to Ukrainians in certain sectors to protect its own specialists.

### **Sectoral impact**

The agricultural sector remains the cornerstone of Polish-Ukrainian relations, from both a trade and financial perspective. This tension is caused by both differences in production volumes and structural differences between the two markets. Poland ranks 5th in terms of European support for farmers and has 14 million hectares of agricultural land in use. By comparison, the area of Ukrainian agricultural land is 41 million hectares, which would make it the largest agricultural country in the EU. Despite existing regulatory restrictions (a regressive scale and capping of support for a single enterprise), Ukraine would still become the largest recipient of EU agricultural support. This could significantly increase the overall agricultural expenditures of the European Union, which will likely lead to the introduction of a transitional period, as happened with some Central and Eastern European countries. At the same time, the EU's financial burden will decrease somewhat due to the transformation of certain European regions into «phasing-out» areas—those facing a gradual reduction in funding from the Cohesion Fund. Ukraine's accession will cause a decrease in the European average GDP per capita, to which regional support is tied.

The trade side of this issue is a real «apple of discord» in bilateral relations, which resulted in the blocking of border checkpoints by Polish farmers after trade liberalization.

Competition in agricultural products is determined by the following features: Poland has a vast number of small farms that are heavily dependent on subsidies and have limited efficiency, affecting their profitability. Ukrainian agricultural enterprises are much larger and more productive, although the yield per hectare is sometimes somewhat lower. Additionally, a significant factor currently influencing the lower prices of Ukrainian grain is the partial implementation of sanitary and production standards, making the products cheaper. Ukraine's negotiation process with the EU will depend on its full adaptation to these standards. Taking it into account, Poland and other countries will prioritize agriculture during accession negotiations, promoting strict transitional periods. On the other hand, the stable export of Ukrainian agricultural products is a matter of global food security: the development of infrastructure to Baltic ports will guarantee that this export is not interrupted even in the event of renewed escalation in the Black Sea.

Amid the increase in EU defense spending and the formation of a new security strategy, the development of the military-industrial complex is promising. According to Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski, some Ukrainian military enterprises have already been localized in Poland. The elimination of customs checks and the harmonization of export licenses will make it possible to scale this activity. In the context of hybrid threats from the Russian Federation and Belarus, Ukraine's practical experience in the use and countering of drones is invaluable for Poland as the main outpost of NATO's eastern flank. EU defense programs open up broad opportunities in this direction, in particular, the SAFE loan program. Poland has already announced plans to allocate part of its received European funds to support Ukraine and build joint defense enterprises.

### **Electoral impact**

The start of the full-scale war in Ukraine and the massive influx of refugees to Poland brought Ukraine to the forefront of the information field. Neither the 2023 parliamentary elections nor the 2025 presidential race went without mentioning Ukraine. Most Polish parties (including the largest ones—»Law and Justice« and «Civic Platform») share a general position on supporting Ukraine in its war against the aggressor and its Euro-Atlantic integration. At the same time, electoral strategy is strongly influenced by demographic and ideological factors, which adjust party politics. A greater openness regarding EU accession is demonstrated by supporters of the liberal «Civic Platform» led by Prime Minister Donald Tusk. The party less frequently links integration to harsh ultimatums, although in the fight for the rural electorate, it was also forced to emphasize the protection of Polish farmers (during the 2023 parliamentary elections). A significantly tougher position is taken by the conservative «Law and Justice» (PiS), which actively mobilizes voters around the topic of protecting farmers and historical memory. It was PiS that introduced the first embargoes on Ukrainian grain under the Morawiecki government. With Karol Nawrocki's victory in the presidential elections, narratives about «protection against unfair competition» only intensified. A separate painful trigger remains the issue of the Volhynia tragedy. Conservative politicians have already directly linked the resolution of this historical issue to consenting to Ukraine's accession to the EU, demanding exhumations and steps toward reconciliation. This aspect should not be ignored: a significant part of Polish society considers concessions in matters of historical memory an absolute prerequisite for Ukraine's European integration.

The changes caused by EU enlargement will continue to stimulate conservative parties to apply elements of pressure (e.g., threats to veto individual negotiation chapters) for the sake of protectionism. For liberal parties, given their electoral base, such radical measures are less characteristic—their tactics will rather be aimed at resolving problematic issues and subsidies directly in the corridors of Brussels.

## Security Impact

The largest military confrontation in Europe since World War II has forced the EU to radically revise its approach to defense. The result has been the implementation of tools to strengthen national armies and unify procurement. Today, Ukraine possesses the most combat-ready army in Europe with unique combat experience. Its accession to the EU will open new prospects in strengthening the Polish «Eastern Shield» and NATO's eastern flank overall—even before formally acquiring membership in the Alliance. The effectiveness of this process will depend on reducing bureaucracy and implementing «military Schengen» mechanisms. The level of partnership will be determined by how deeply Ukraine is integrated into defense initiatives, such as the EDIP industrial program and PESCO permanent structured cooperation projects. Ukraine's full involvement in the EU's defense policy will become the foundation for a strong Ukrainian-Polish military partnership. Poland, remaining Kyiv's key lobbyist on the path to NATO, will perform the function of the main communicator between the Alliance and Ukraine, allowing it to amplify its geopolitical influence in the region.

## Conclusions

Overcoming obstacles and achieving an institutional compromise that finalizes Ukraine's accession to the EU will inevitably redraw the political map of Eastern Europe. Warsaw and Kyiv will build a new tandem that will become the engine of economic and defense development for the entire region. Despite fierce competition in certain sectors, Poland will strategically benefit from the eastward expansion of the European Union. The competitiveness of its agricultural sector will depend on the chosen model of adaptation: the consolidation of small farms, the gradual phase-out of subsidies for inefficient production, or other methods of developing this sector. Although these processes will be accompanied by upheavals among voters, they will provide the necessary momentum for the modernization of agriculture. The Polish experience with the social adaptation of Ukrainians will help Warsaw compete more effectively for new labor resources with the economies of Western Europe. Ultimately, Ukraine's accession will encourage Poland to establish itself as a regional leader, turning it into a crucial economic and military hub on a European scale. Thanks to its geographical and institutional position, Poland has all the prerequisites to become the main transit artery for European capital aimed at the reconstruction of Ukraine.

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This article was written for the magazine “Think Tanks Essentials”. Views expressed in the article are those of the author.

# How should Ukraine approach its diplomacy with the EU and the US in order to lessen their escalation fears whilst securing more decisive military, financial and political support?

*Oleksandr Chikal*

Support from partner countries plays a vital role in Ukraine's defence during a full-scale invasion. However, we often see situations where such support is delayed, curtailed or even made impossible due to the domestic situation in the countries providing it.

For example, in 2023, against the backdrop of Ukraine's counter-offensive, Russia resorted to nuclear blackmail, resulting in a decline of Western aid, which made a contribution to the failure of the counter-offensive. In 2024, the desire of US citizens to force the warring parties to make peace contributed to delays and arms restrictions on Ukraine, which only emboldened the aggressor and led to a new escalation. The Trump administration's suspension of intelligence support to Ukraine in 2025 led to Ukrainian territorial losses in the Kursk region and an intensification of Russian attacks. Fears of escalation, doubts about Ukraine's reliability, the ability of countries to provide assistance, the reaction of voters – various factors contribute to the inability to provide assistance. Fear of escalation is a systemic political constraint on democracies. Overcoming this barrier requires an analysis of the specific reasons for aid restraint in key partner countries (the US, France, Germany and the UK).

## **Attitudes towards military and economic support**

US citizens largely approve of aid to Ukraine: 63% are in favour of financial support and 24% are against, whilst 66% are in favour of military aid and 20% are against. However, 27% of those in favour wish to keep it at the current level. The Trump administration criticised the grant-based nature of the aid. This has led the US to shift towards a model of pragmatism in its support, notably through arms sales.

German society is fairly divided: 49% of Germans support financial aid to Ukraine, whilst 46% are against it. As for military aid, 55% are in favour, and 39% are against. However, 28% of those in favour believe it should remain at the current level. Another poll indicates that aid to Ukraine has dropped to the bottom of the proposed list of priorities for the German public, with European unity, national security and countering authoritarian countries (such as Russia or China) currently taking the top spots.

The UK is more inclined to offer support: 69% of Britons are in favour of financial support for Ukraine, whilst 22% are against. 73% of those surveyed are in favour of military aid, whilst 18% are against. At the same time, on average, 35% believe that the level of aid is sufficient, and 20% believe it is excessive.

The French are mostly in favour of supporting Ukraine (51% support financial aid, 63% support sanctions against Russia and 57% support military aid). At the same time, 37% want to reduce financial support and 30% want to reduce military aid. In other words, support exists, but public sentiment is leaning towards reducing aid. Another survey of public sentiment in Europe shows that around a third of French people (34%) hold nationalist or Eurosceptic views. This means that a significant proportion of the population is more concerned about domestic issues and is turning away from foreign policy challenges.

Overall, there is a trend in Germany and France towards a decline in support, which is linked to other issues, particularly domestic ones. At the same time, the British are more inclined to provide assistance, though a significant proportion still wish to preserve the current level of support. In the US, the public is in favour of helping Ukraine, yet the government does not support such aid on a free basis.

Among the main reasons cited by opponents of aid among the partners are the high cost of support, the prioritisation of domestic issues, the prolonged nature of the conflict, and a sense of detachment from the conflict. Only 3% of Americans, 7% of Germans, 5% of French people and 3.5% of Britons, relative to the total population, fear the risk of provoking Russia. Thus, the escalation of the conflict is not a significant fear among voters.

Instead, a significant proportion of residents in key partner countries expect a Third World War (ranging from 38% to 46%) or a Russian attack on Europe (45–62%) within the next 5–10 years. This suggests that Europeans' past fear of escalation has turned into a present expectation of an actual attack: they are already aware of the high likelihood of involvement in a conflict, so they are trying to prepare. Accordingly, between 50% and 60% of voters in France, Germany and the UK are in favour of increasing military spending. In the US, this figure is around 37%.

Also, there has recently been an increase in cases when partners claim that they have already handed over everything they had, that their military supplies are exhausted, and that there is therefore nothing left to help with. This trend is also likely to intensify as the US war in Iran continues.

Partners' concerns regarding Ukraine's wastefulness and the loss of expensive equipment are not currently a priority, are not widespread, and do not feature in surveys as relevant issues. Fear of nuclear escalation is also not among the main reasons for refusing to provide aid to Ukraine. Over the past year, discussions regarding Europe's own nuclear deterrent have intensified, and Russia's constant nuclear blackmail is no longer perceived as acutely as it was at the start of the war.

### **Political support from partner countries**

Among Ukraine's key political objectives we should highlight the establishment of a fair peace and rapid integration into the EU.

A December 2025 poll reveals a trend: Europeans are fatigued by the burden of war and support certain concessions by Ukraine to bring the war to a swifter end. Despite this, between 50% and 72% (depending on the specific country) believe that Russia will violate a peace agreement within 10 years of its signing. Consequently, they oppose any concessions by Ukraine that would justify the aggressor, allow it to recover, or give it an advantage in a future war. On average, the least acceptable points are amnesty for both sides of the conflict, limitation of the Armed Forces of Ukraine to 600,000 troops, Russian control over the occupied territories, Russia's return to the G7, restrictions on NATO membership for Ukraine, and Ukraine's withdrawal from Donbas region. Restrictions on the Ukrainian Armed Forces to 800,000 (down from the current 880,000), a prohibition on NATO permanently stationing troops in Ukraine, and a prohibition on Ukraine returning territories by military means are viewed more calmly.

US voters are almost evenly split on whether Ukraine should make concessions. However, the Trump administration has decided to side with those who advocate for Ukraine to make concessions.

Furthermore, the US National Security Strategy, published in early 2026, states that it is the EU countries that should be responsible for resolving the conflict and providing security guarantees to Ukraine.

As for Ukraine's European integration, 52% of EU citizens support Ukraine's integration once the necessary conditions have been met, whilst 41% are against it. In at least 10 countries (including Hungary, Austria, Bulgaria and Germany), support falls short of 50%. This could block the European integration process at the stages of the Union-wide vote on the admission of a new member, as well as the ratification of the accession treaty and referendums in individual member states — the final stages of integration, which require absolute consensus among all states regarding the admission of a new member. The same survey highlights the main fears of the populations of EU member states regarding enlargement. These include uncontrolled migration (40%), corruption and organised crime (39%), financial costs of new members (37%), economic inequality (33%), security vulnerabilities (30%), and unfair competition (21%). And around 40% of citizens consider reforms in candidate countries and stricter accession requirements to be a necessary condition for EU enlargement, so that candidates truly meet the specified standards. In other words, rapid integration is unlikely, as it requires reforms in both Ukraine and the EU, as well as an explanation of the benefits of Ukraine's integration.

### **Risks and opportunities to bear in mind**

Military and financial support in partner countries continues to be a major concern for the public, whilst the proportion of those who advocate keeping it at the current level or reducing it is growing. At the same time, the percentage of the population concerned about issues other, than Ukraine, is rising. This indicates both an acknowledgement of the importance of supporting Ukraine and a certain degree of fatigue and a shift in priorities. Partners are concerned about the financial burden of aid to Ukraine on their own countries, face problems related to depleted weapons stocks and/or low production volumes, yet are not afraid of an escalation with Russia and expect a potential war with it.

Therefore, Ukraine should propose forms of cooperation that would be mutually beneficial. Ukraine should initiate forms of pragmatic partnership with Europe. In exchange for support, we can offer to integrate our expertise into the European defence system: from troop training and logistics deployment to the establishment of modern defence factories. The main goal is to strengthen Europe's defence capabilities whilst minimising its financial costs.

In the context of the peace process, a significant proportion of people expect Ukraine to make concessions. However, given the fear of renewed Russian aggression, European partner countries are opposed to concessions that would weaken Ukraine militarily or reduce the pressure on Russia. Ukraine can leverage its similar stance with Europe to forge a common position and develop a more predictable vision for a settlement. In contrast, the US administration is more inclined to demand concessions from Ukraine; hence, given its pragmatic nature, Ukraine must demonstrate the fallacy of such an approach and the risks posed by a peace deal that benefits Russia.

When it comes to European integration, EU citizens are fairly divided on Ukraine's integration: around 50% are in favour and around 40% are against it. The EU population has fears associated with the further enlargement of the Union. Enlargement clearly requires reforms in Ukraine prior to integration, an improvement in the perception of Ukraine in member states, as well as EU reforms.

## Recommendations

In the military and financial spheres, Ukraine should offer solutions that reduce the cost of aid or help establish mutually beneficial cooperation. These include:

**Investment in Ukrainian manufacturing.** According to statements by Ukrainian officials, the majority of the equipment used on the front line is manufactured in Ukraine. Given the lower labour costs, and consequently lower production costs, partners' investment in Ukrainian industry makes it possible to increase the amount of aid provided without requiring significant financial contributions.

**Establishing branches of Western defence manufacturers in Ukraine** (following the example of Rheinmetall and BAE Systems). This model enables Western equipment to be repaired and adapted more quickly to meet the needs on the front line. It also helps Ukraine to avoid losing equipment prematurely and to exchange expertise, providing companies with feedback on the shortcomings of particular pieces of equipment.

**Joint production.** This model involves establishing Ukrainian production facilities in a partner country. Such production enables the supply of new weapons to Ukraine whilst also laying the groundwork for the manufacture of new and relevant types of weapons in the partner country. This, in turn, contributes to the industrialisation and militarisation of the partners, thereby fulfilling their needs.

**Long-term contracts** enable Ukraine to conclude agreements with foreign companies in partner countries regarding long-term cooperation. This makes it possible to mobilise more funding for production, generate greater and more predictable demand, develop partners' industries (which is a desirable objective in Germany, for example) and address supply shortages. Such long-term agreements at the national level may include Ukraine's assistance to partners in preparation for a potential war, aid in case of a Russian attack, or the exchange of expertise, which shifts the perception of aid from a burden to a security investment.

To boost political support for the peace process, Ukraine should maintain its partners' existing support and actively promote its own vision of peace, explaining why concessions to Russia pose a threat.

In this context, the 'Coalition of the Determined' looks very promising. An initiative brings together EU and NATO countries keen to provide maximum support to Ukraine and to coordinate Europe's policy towards the new US administration. Member states are helping Ukraine meet its needs on the front line, have provided guarantees of peace, and are communicating to President Trump the European position and the risks of decisions they find unacceptable. Furthermore, some coalition countries have spoken out in favour of having their own seat at the negotiating table, as well as direct contact with Russia to conclude peace. In other words, the 'Coalition of the Resolute' is already supporting Ukraine both on the front line (which is important, given that Trump's peace mediation has currently lost momentum and the main events are now unfolding on the battlefield) and at the negotiating table. Furthermore, it has the potential to initiate a different, more effective peace process.

Another method of fostering strong support for peace is strategic communications – a set of communication measures designed to achieve specific information objectives. To increase support among citizens of Western countries, Ukraine must explain why peace on Russia's terms poses a threat to Europe and the US. The key messages could be:

- the argument that the aggressor's impunity allows it to recover quickly and start a new war. Given Russia's hybrid war in Europe and intelligence reports regarding a potential Russian attack on Europe, it is vital for partners to prevent this from happening. Furthermore, supporting the aggressor would send a signal to the rest of the world that violating international law is acceptable and would encourage new wars;
- the argument that a just peace for Ukraine, as the most defence-capable country in Europe, serves as a deterrent to Russia and gives Europe more time to prepare for a potential Russian attack and rise defence expenditures;
- the argument that Russia has repeatedly breached agreements, so a peace deal favourable to them would be poorly received by the markets, which in turn would make investments in Ukraine unprofitable.

The new messages are tailored to the sentiments of Western partners: they explain the importance of supporting Ukraine in light of the threats and benefits that are currently of concern in the West. In terms of increasing support for European integration, and in light of the EU's concerns and challenges, Ukraine should:

- implement reforms as the foundation of the Euro-integration process;
- resolve any existing or potential conflicts with countries opposing integration (in particular Hungary and Slovakia, which are blocking accession);
- engage in dialogue with the EU regarding the reform of the Union and/or discuss the terms of integration, taking into account citizens' concerns;
- improve Ukraine's image in Europe in order to minimise the number of countries where support for Ukraine's integration falls below 50% (which would mean a halt to integration at the stage of national referendums).

Consequently, the key factor behind the decline in support today is not fear of Russia, but domestic fatigue, shifting priorities and a shortage of resources. Given the current situation, Ukraine should position itself as a security partner and more actively promote forms of military assistance that reduce the financial burden on its partners. To achieve a more adequate peace, Ukraine should build a common position with the European countries of the 'Coalition of the Determined', which will allow it to balance the pressure for concessions more effectively and argue for the unacceptability of certain concessions or peace terms.

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*This article was written for the magazine "Think Tanks Essentials". Views expressed in the article are those of the author.*

## From “rule-taker” to “rule-shaper”: role of Ukraine in shaping approaches to accountability for aggression

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*Tetiana Shevchenko*

In the contemporary international system, rules are formally universal, yet their application often depends on political context and power. Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine has become one of the clearest illustrations of this contradiction, bringing renewed attention to the issue of accountability for aggression and exposing an existing structural problem. The prohibition of aggression remains a foundational norm of international law, but its enforcement in practice is shaped by political constraints. The International Criminal Court cannot exercise jurisdiction over the crime of aggression in this case, as Russia is not a party to the Rome Statute and referral through the UN Security Council is blocked by veto power. This reveals a core limitation: existing accountability mechanisms fail in cases involving politically influential states.

This is not an exception but a recurring pattern. Historically, enforcement of the prohibition of aggression has depended on political conditions. The Nuremberg Tribunal followed total military defeat, while tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda were enabled by consensus in the UN Security Council. In contrast, other uses of force, including Iraq (2003) and Georgia (2008), did not lead to comparable accountability mechanisms. The Ukrainian case does not break this pattern but makes the contradiction more visible: international law criminalises aggression but lacks effective tools to enforce this norm against powerful states.

In this context, describing Ukraine as a “rule-maker” is an oversimplification. Ukraine does not have the capacity to independently create binding international norms. However, it actively influences how these norms evolve and are implemented in practice. Its role is better understood as that of a norm entrepreneur – a state that promotes new approaches where gaps in the system exist. This occurs when three conditions align: a clearly defined legal gap, the availability of practical expertise, and support from a coalition of states willing to translate ideas into institutional arrangements.

The initiative to establish a Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression illustrates this dynamic. Developed within the Council of Europe framework, it seeks to address the jurisdictional gap left by the ICC through a coalition-based approach. Yet its limitations are evident. In the absence of custody over suspects, proceedings are likely to take place in absentia, reducing the practical effectiveness of justice and creating the risk that the tribunal serves a declaratory rather than an enforcement function.

This limitation is structural rather than incidental. Experience from previous tribunals shows that effectiveness depends not only on legal design but primarily on political conditions. The arrest of Ratko Mladić, for example, became possible only after sustained political and economic pressure, including conditionality linked to EU accession. No comparable leverage currently exists in relation to Russia. This suggests that a tribunal alone is unlikely to ensure meaningful accountability without complementary enforcement mechanisms.

Accordingly, the tribunal should be seen not as the central instrument, but as one component of a broader system. A more realistic approach lies in a network-based model of accountability, where prosecutions are pursued in parallel across multiple jurisdictions. This reduces reliance on a single institutional mechanism and increases the likelihood of partial but tangible enforcement.

Such a shift is already underway. The Joint Investigation Team (JIT), supported by Eurojust, together with the International Centre for the Prosecution of the Crime of Aggression (ICPA), has established a transnational system for evidence collection. According to Eurojust, this system already integrates over 10,000 pieces of evidence from 17 countries.

What matters here is not only scale, but method. Evidence is collected, standardised, and integrated in real time, reducing fragmentation and enabling its use across jurisdictions. As a result, accountability is no longer solely a function of courts, but increasingly depends on how systems of evidence collection and processing are organised. In this domain, Ukraine's influence is particularly significant. By providing field-based information, identifying patterns of violations, and shaping investigative priorities, it contributes to the procedural architecture of accountability. Its influence lies less in formal rule-making than in shaping how rules operate in practice.

A similar dynamic can be observed in the area of reparations. The Register of Damage for Ukraine, established within the Council of Europe, has already received over 110,000 claims, representing an unprecedented effort to document harm during an ongoing conflict. However, the question of enforcement remains unresolved. The other central challenge concerns Russian sovereign assets. According to estimates by the European Commission and G7 partners, approximately €300 billion have been immobilised, largely within EU jurisdictions. At the same time, the European Central Bank and other institutions have warned that full confiscation could pose risks to financial stability and undermine the principle of sovereign immunity. As a result, policy has shifted toward more limited measures, such as the use of profits generated by these assets rather than the assets themselves. This creates a gap between available resources and actionable compensation mechanisms. Damage is documented and resources exist, but a direct legal mechanism linking the two is still absent. Without such a link, the system risks remaining procedural rather than effective.

These challenges are further compounded by broader legal and political constraints in the EU and the United States. Due process requirements impose high evidentiary standards that cannot be bypassed even in wartime. Court practice has already demonstrated a willingness to annul sanctions where such standards are not met. At the same time, sovereign immunity limits the prosecution of high-level officials, while political considerations constrain more far-reaching measures.

Another key issue is the fragility of institutionalisation. Many accountability mechanisms rely on temporary funding and political support. Without long-term anchoring within EU and Council of Europe frameworks, they risk remaining ad hoc initiatives. In this context, securing stable funding is not a technical matter, but a systemic requirement.

Finally, the question of legitimacy remains critical. The strong international response to the war in Ukraine contrasts with less consistent approaches to other conflicts, reinforcing perceptions of selectivity. At the same time, such inconsistency is not limited to Western states. A number of countries across Africa, Asia, and Latin America criticise Western double standards while simultaneously maintaining political or economic ties with Russia or avoiding clear condemnation of its actions. This contributes to a fragmented international legal environment in which appeals to universal principles have limited traction. Under such conditions, advancing new norms requires not only normative arguments but also coalition-building and pragmatic engagement.

Overall, Ukraine's influence is both real and constrained. It can shape the architecture of accountability mechanisms, particularly where it provides practical expertise and information. However, it cannot alone overcome structural constraints related to enforcement, political will, or global legitimacy.

The key question, therefore, is not whether Ukraine becomes a "rule-maker", but whether the mechanisms being developed will function in practice. Despite significant progress, including network-based accountability models, real-time evidence systems, and emerging reparations frameworks without effective enforcement tools these initiatives risk reproducing a familiar problem: the existence of norms without their implementation.

In this sense, Ukraine's role is not to transform the international legal order, but to expose its limits and push its adaptation. Whether this leads to more consistent and effective accountability, or to a more complex form of selective enforcement, remains an open question.

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*This article was written for the magazine "Think Tanks Essentials". Views expressed in the article are those of the author.*

# Transformation of the Polish Political Elites' Attitude Toward European Integration (2003–2025)

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*Olha Brehei*

## Introduction

The process of Poland's integration into the European Union has become perhaps the most striking example of a country's successful integration into international supranational associations. Since the European Union is one of the most significant unions in the modern world, the issue of Polish European integration in the 1990s became particularly acute and became Poland's primary foreign policy focus. It was the accession to the EU that became the culmination of a long process of political, economic, and social reforms, accompanied by a broad consensus among political elites. However, in the following two decades, this consensus underwent significant transformations. Why is the idea of Euroscepticism now becoming increasingly popular among the Polish political elites?

## Retrospective: From Consensus to Split (2003–2015)

The period from 2003 to 2015 in Polish politics can be characterized as a dramatic transition from Europhilia to Euroscepticism. While in the early 2000s, belonging to the European Union was perceived as an alternative-free path, within a decade, the European issue turned into the main line of the domestic political front. The 2003 referendum recorded a unique alliance of the liberal elites of the Civic Platform party (Platforma Obywatelska, PO) and the conservative elites of the Law and Justice party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS) around membership in the European Union. In this way, Polish political discourse was defined by the metaphor of «returning to the European family.» For the political elites of that time, the EU was not just an economic block, but a symbol of the final break with the Soviet sphere of influence. The 2003 PiS program did not yet contain radical Euroscepticism. On the contrary, the Kaczyński brothers emphasized that Poland should be a «strong state in a strong Europe,» understanding that outside Western structures, Poland would remain in the «gray zone» of Russian influence.

However, the first rifts appeared even then. The discourse surrounding the Treaty of Nice gave rise to Jan Rokita's slogan «Nicea albo śmierć» (Nice or death), which became the first manifesto for defending Poland's weight in the EU voting system. The demands to preserve a voting distribution system favorable to Poland proved that Polish pragmatism emerged even before membership itself. The Catholic Church, under the leadership of John Paul II, played the role of a «moral guarantor,» promoting the thesis that Poland should bring Christian values to a secular Europe—a concept that would later become the foundation of PiS ideology.

## The first PiS government and the presidency of Lech Kaczyński (2005–2010)

The victory of PiS in 2005 marked the end of the era of unconditional Euro-optimism. Political discourse began to shift from adaptation to EU norms to a struggle for agency. A key moment was 2007 and the debates surrounding the Lisbon Treaty. Then-Prime Minister Jarosław Kaczyński built a rhetoric of «protecting Polish interests» against the dominance of major powers, introducing the concept of «conditionality» of sovereignty into the discourse.

Although Lech Kaczyński signed the ratification act, his numerous reservations laid the groundwork for future conflicts with Brussels. This transformation of discourse moved the discussion about the EU from the level of geopolitical choice to the level of ideological debate: while for the Civic Platform, adaptation to European norms was synonymous with progress, for Law and Justice, it became an act of losing sovereignty.

Donald Tusk's return to power in 2007 brought Poland back into the «mainstream» of European politics. The discourse of the liberal party Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska, PO) was based on the thesis: «A strong Poland at the heart of the European Union (EU).» At that time, Tusk and Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski built a strategy of cooperation with Germany, which allowed Poland to become a key player during the development of the Eastern Partnership and in overcoming the consequences of the 2008 financial crisis.

At the same time, PiS radicalized its rhetoric, utilizing internal factors and crises within the EU itself. An important role in this was played by both domestic political factors and changes within the European Union; in particular, the eurozone crisis provided conservative elites with sufficient arguments to promote Euroscepticism. Law and Justice argued that the common currency project was a tool for the economic dominance of the strong over the weak. Thus, the attitude toward the EU transformed from a geopolitical dimension into a dimension of economic protectionism and the protection of «national capital.» In PiS discourse, the EU increasingly appeared as a structure imposing rules that did not always correspond to Poland's national interests. The opposition PiS, following the 2010 Smolensk disaster, further radicalized its discourse, accusing the Tusk government of «subservience» to Berlin.

### **The Era of «Good Change» (2015–2023)**

In 2015–2023, Euroscepticism became Poland's official state doctrine. The Law and Justice party's (PiS) rise to power radically changed the nature of Warsaw's interaction with Brussels, transforming Poland from a loyal partner into the main ideological opponent of European federalism. An analysis of party programs, particularly the strategic document «Program PiS 2014: Zdrowie, Praca, Rodzina» and its subsequent iterations in 2019 and 2023, demonstrates a clear evolution of the concept of «sovereignty.» While in 2015 it was interpreted as the right to protect national interests within the framework of existing treaties, in the «Bezpieczna Przyszłość Polaków» (2023) program, it finally transformed into a concept of «absolute agency,» where Polish law and the Constitution hold unconditional priority over the rulings of the CJEU.

The 2015 migration crisis became a key trigger for the formation of «security-based» Euroscepticism. It was then that the image of Europe as a weak entity, incapable of protecting its own borders, appeared in the rhetoric of Polish elites. The refusal of the refugee relocation quota system was Warsaw's first act of open defiance, presented to the electorate as the defense of Catholic identity. At this point, according to data from CBOS (Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej) – Public Opinion Research Center in Poland – reports (Komunikat z badań nr 164/2015), a shift occurred in public consciousness: while support for EU membership remained high, the number of citizens opposing the transfer of new powers to Brussels rose sharply.

The conflict over the rule of law became the central point of confrontation. The pretext for Brussels' intervention was the PiS judicial reform, specifically the change in the appointment procedure for judges of the Constitutional Tribunal and the creation of the Disciplinary Chamber of the Supreme Court.

According to the European Commission, this undermined the independence of the judicial branch; therefore, for the first time in history, the European Commission decided to activate Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union, which provides for sanctions against a member state in the event of a breach of the rule of law. The suspension of voting rights is the most radical consequence of this article.

Attempts by the European Commission to invoke Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union were interpreted by Polish elites as «legal imperialism.» The rhetoric of B. Szydło and M. Morawiecki evolved from defending judicial reform to accusing Brussels of violating Warsaw's democratic mandate. In his speech before MEPs in October 2021, Morawiecki emphasized that the EU is not a superpower but merely a union of sovereign states, effectively legitimizing the course toward legal autonomy.

Poland's economic strengthening transformed its role from a recipient to a protectionist defending its energy sector from the EU's «Green Deal.» The shift to a rhetoric of «economic egoism» allowed the Law and Justice party to convince voters that European environmental standards were tools for restraining Polish competitiveness. This era demonstrated that the Polish transformation was not merely an electoral maneuver, but a profound reformatting of relations where sovereignty became the primary instrument of political survival.

### **Strategic Analysis: Ideology or Electoral Calculation?**

The transformation of the course is a synthesis of the leader's ideological conviction and strategic mobilization of the electorate. According to data from CBOS (Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej), support for Poland's membership in the EU remains phenomenally high. Even during periods of sharp conflict between Warsaw and Brussels, the support level did not fall below 77–85%. Such public consensus creates a certain barrier that forces even the most radical politicians to avoid direct calls for Polesxit. The electoral success of PiS was based not on a desire to leave the EU, but on the idea of «agency»: obtaining financial preferences while maintaining full sovereignty in matters of ideology and justice.

For Jarosław Kaczyński's party, Euroscepticism is simultaneously an ideological and strategic tool. Rhetoric about the «dictate of Berlin» allowed for the mobilization of the conservative electorate in rural regions. Analysis of the programs shows that PiS uses the tactic of «normative pragmatism.» In the 2023 program, the emphasis shifted from «cooperation» to «resistance» to changes in EU treaties, which was presented as defending the democratic choice of Poles from external interference.

The Civic Coalition under the leadership of Donald Tusk also went through a path of adaptation. While in 2007–2015 their discourse was almost idealistic, in the 2023 campaign and at the beginning of 2024–2025, it became more grounded. Tusk began using arguments of security and economic benefit, emphasizing that «a strong Poland in the EU means security on the border with the RF.» This was a response to PiS accusations of «surrendering interests.» The 2023 elections and the 2025 presidential race confirmed that the Polish voter punishes excessive radicalization. The change of power was the result of a strategic demand from society to end the confrontation.

## New Realism and Geopolitical Leadership (2023–2025)

The October 2023 elections and the rise to power of Donald Tusk's «Civic Coalition» changed the vector, but did not return it to the state of 2003. Modern «armed Euro-optimism» is defined by Poland's quest for regional security leadership against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine. External factors also play an important role in the transformation of the discourse. The 2015 migration crisis, Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, and Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine after 2022 are changing the context in which EU debates take place. In the Polish case, these events strengthen the importance of the security dimension of integration, but at the same time fuel arguments in favor of maintaining maximum autonomy in decision-making. This creates a paradoxical situation where the EU is simultaneously perceived as both a necessary and a potentially restrictive actor.

In 2023–2025, the discourse of Polish political elites regarding the EU is taking on signs of stable polarization. European integration is transforming into one of the key markers of political identity. For some political forces, it symbolizes modernization, openness, and cooperation; for others, it represents a threat to sovereignty and cultural identity. At the same time, both sides are forced to take into account the steady support for EU membership among the population, which limits the radicalization of positions.

### Personal Factor: The Evolution of Jarosław Kaczyński

Understanding the transformation of Poland's course regarding the EU is impossible without an analysis of the ideological evolution of Jarosław Kaczyński. Despite not always holding official state positions, Kaczyński has remained for decades the undisputed leader of the Law and Justice party and the country's most influential politician, whose authority within the conservative camp is of an almost sacred nature. It is he who acts as the chief architect of Polish political strategy, and his personal convictions are directly translated into state policy.

The vertical structure of the Law and Justice (PiS) party has transformed J. Kaczyński's personal vision into an inviolable state doctrine. Analyzing Kaczyński's path from the early 2000s to 2025, one can trace his evolution from a restrained pragmatist to a radical ideologue. While in 2003 he supported joining the EU, viewing it as a security anchor against Russia, his views subsequently shifted toward hard sovereignty. According to analytical reports from the Centre for Eastern Studies, Kaczyński began to perceive Germany and France not as partners in integration, but as «hegemons» using Brussels' institutions to realize their own national interests at Poland's expense.

This transformation directly affected the party hierarchy and led to the displacement of moderate cadres by radical loyalists. In an official speech at a party congress in Lublin (2019), Kaczyński explicitly stated that «Polishness is an integral part of our identity, which we will not allow to be dissolved in European multiculturalism.» This vision became the official party line, as confirmed by the «Polski Ład» program (2021), where the emphasis shifted from «cooperation» to the «defense of agency.»

In answering whether this change is an ideological transformation or a strategic adaptation, one must acknowledge a synthesis of both factors. On one hand, it is a deep ideological transformation of Kaczyński himself, whose worldview is based on the 19th-century concept of the «traditional state,» which comes into conflict with the postmodern EU project.

On the other hand, it is a sophisticated strategic adaptation to the electorate. CBOS sociological studies show that conservative voters in the provinces felt threatened by rapid socio-cultural changes. Kaczyński masterfully used anti-Brussels rhetoric for internal mobilization, allowing for the effective consolidation of the electorate. Thus, Kaczyński's personal evolution became the engine of a national pivot: he did not merely react to the moods of the masses but actively shaped them.

### Conclusions

Thus, the transformation of the Polish political elites' attitude toward European integration in the period of 2003–2025 reflects a complex path from a romantic «return to Europe» to a hard pragmatism based on the unconditional priority of national agency. The main outcome of this process has been the final destruction of the nationwide pro-European consensus that prevailed during the 2003 referendum and the transformation of relations with Brussels into a key line of domestic political division. Modern Polish Euroscepticism, embodied by the ideology of the Law and Justice party, turned out to be not a call to leave the EU, but a specific form of ideological mobilization where Brussels is portrayed as a threat to national identity and traditional values. A special role in this dynamic was played by the personal evolution of Jarosław Kaczyński, whose ideological transition from restrained Eurorealism to radical confrontation with European institutions became the official state doctrine during the «Good Change» period.

Tusk's return in 2025 did not revive the idealism of the 2000s; the country remained in a phase of pragmatic «armed Euro-optimism.» Poland's current elites, regardless of party affiliation, demonstrate much greater agency and readiness to enter into conflicts with Brussels over issues of security, migration, and energy. In this way, the transformation of the Polish political elites' attitude concluded with a transition to a model where the European Union is no longer perceived as a civilizational goal, but as a platform for realizing national interests and regional leadership in the face of new geopolitical threats.

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