

The European Union Is Better Off With Ukraine As a Member



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Ukraine has been knocking on the EU door for years, but it was the full-scale invasion by Russia in February that triggered the submission of a formal EU application.

Strengthening sovereignty, overcoming well-known systemic weaknesses, anchoring the country in the Western community of values, and access to modernizing tools – all these aspects featured in the internal debate and motivated progressive alignment with the EU. Ten long years after Ukrainians stood up for their European future in the winter of 2013, the perspective of EU membership has finally become a reality; sadly, it comes with a high cost that millions of Ukrainians have to pay daily by suffering through Russian atrocities.

Since the full-scale invasion by Russia, it has become clear that the only option for Kyiv is full integration within Western institutions. The recent decision of the European Commission to recommend the opening of membership negotiations paved the way to make this a reality^[1]. The future of the country represents a common objective, and investments in Ukraine's defense and existence must not be lost. It may, and must become an opportunity for both, the West and Ukraine. And the whole world will profit from making Ukraine a prosperous country.

Public support for a secure Ukraine inside the EU

By attacking Ukraine, the Kremlin demonstrated how they severely miscalculated and undervalued Ukrainian resilience.

Since 2014, Ukraine has undergone a deep mental transformation, besides administrative and regulatory changes. After the Revolution of Dignity, public support for joining the EU and NATO has steadily grown; in fact, from 2015-2021, approval for EU integration was always held by the majority, wavering between 56% and 65%^[2]. Since February 2022 however, this figure has exceeded 90%.^[3]

The Ukrainian support for Western integration is clear, and irrespective of any broad Slavic familiarity, Kyiv will never be willing to be a province of Russia.

Russian atrocities will be remembered for generations

The murdering and torturing of countless civilians, questioning the very existence of the nation, of the language, of their unique customs, beliefs, and culture while de-

stroying monuments and robbing museums – all of these horrendous acts have revealed Russia as a brutal state lacking any moral base.

The blood spilled and cruelties committed will be remembered for generations and constitute a deep emotional ditch.

The first episode of the war ended with Crimea and parts of the industrial basin of Donbas being cut off from the rest of Ukraine. The Kremlin calculated that Ukraine would never be able to recover from such a loss of critical industrial assets and deposits of coal, iron ore, gas, and oil, as well as ports and income generated from tourism. Unfortunately, this reasoning was buttressed by the inaction of international partners, which strengthened Russia's belief that it may crack Ukraine completely.

Contrary to the Kremlin's calculus, the underestimated Ukraine began to gradually recover, thanks mainly to the openness of the EU market. Despite many constraints, the economy diversified and created new sources of growth.

Next month, leaders of the European Union will consider the possibility of opening accession talks with Ukraine and Moldova. Never were they confronted with analogous choices under similar dramatic circumstances. Moreover, it is difficult to conceive of a European decision that has had such direct historical or geopolitical consequences.

Today, the war's end and the damage's scope are still uncertain. International political and military support directs Ukraine to recover its sovereignty and integrity within the internationally recognized borders.

The big question ahead is how to transform the energy of the military effort into the power to rebuild the new future. The experiences of Japan, Germany, or South Korea may serve to illustrate different, albeit successful, post-war reconstruction, although not all past comparisons apply^[4].

Obviously, Kyiv must demonstrate progress in addressing seven specific requirements set by the European Council in June 2022, but one overarching spect is painfully clear for the Ukrainians, the key to their future in Europe lies not in their hands but with EU leaders.

Since EU leaders are accountable to their domestic populations and are guided by the interests of their countries and the Union, they must clearly present arguments on the benefits of accepting Ukraine as a future member to win not only the battle for justice but also the debate over European identity and values.

Ukraine's biggest asset, a talented, hardworking populace

Ukrainians belong to the group of well-educated nations – 58% of those aged 30-34 have completed tertiary education against the 40% average for the EU.^[5] The OECD argues that the 44% of Ukrainians who have obtained vocational and education training – mostly in industry, agriculture, and construction – constitutes an important asset given the need for reconstruction.^[6] This high level of education and skills also largely explains the smooth integration of Ukrainian refugees into their host countries.

Out of eighteen million Ukrainians who left the country since Russia invaded, over ten returned. The majority of around six million who remain abroad declared willingness to return, but the figure may differ should the war last for an extended period.^[7]

The prospect of EU membership could trigger the returns of refugees and additionally mobilize the Ukrainian diaspora, estimated in 2019 at eleven to thirteen million. During the war, the diaspora has offered valuable assistance to the homeland by raising the public's and politicians' awareness while buttressing support for Ukraine and collecting considerable funds for humanitarian assistance and military forces.^[8]

Besides the benefit to Ukraine and host nations from abroad, the high level of education has expedited the recovery of several crucial segments of the economy. Ukraine has even exported energy to neighboring countries for several months into the war. Reconstruction of roads and rail infrastructure, critical for supplying military forces and exporting Ukrainian products, has been carried out promptly and to a high standard.

The war has notably highlighted the role of women in Ukrainian society. Many left the country with children for the sake of security, but those who stayed have taken on additional and new responsibilities, including enrolling in the armed forces. Over forty thousand women have joined the military ranks, with approximately seven thousand serving at the front line.^[9] Others have replaced mobilized men in different sectors of public life and the economy.

While their achievements are laudable, we must be reminded of the countless women and girls who have endured extreme suffering. An Orthodox priest recently told me that Russian soldiers are raping children as young as 4 and women as old as 86. Recovery from these atrocities will demand a huge amount of effort by state structures and civil society.

Yet, women's high professional and societal activity represents a valuable factor for the post-war reconstruction and responsibility for the country. The process will not be easy in a traditionally paternalistic society, but war may serve as a game-changer in this respect.^[10] Women who have lost their family members in the war have become vigilant watchdogs of post-war political and administrative life. Currently, around 20% of deputies of the Verkhovna Rada are women, almost twice as compared with the previous setting. In local elections in 2020, women won 38% of seats, which indicates further empowerment of women^[11].

Since the Revolution of Dignity, civil society has become very well-structured and vibrant, and the war has not dampened their efforts but reinforced their commitment and capabilities. Various NGOs have evolved into an effective network that can reliably scrutinize the administration's and partners' performance in implementing several tasks.



The Ukrainian society is usually resilient to everyday hardship but intolerant of abuse of power, corruption, and mismanagement - values shared by all European democracies.

Streamlining and participating in the post-conflict reconstruction

Rebuilding Ukraine represents a huge challenge for Europe, but it is also an opportunity. In principle, the post-war periods are marked by rapid economic growth, provided there are no military aftershocks, and people may concentrate on reconstructing their homes and lives. The objective of EU membership works as an important factor in stabilizing internal peace.

From the immediate and short-term perspective, the country will need a great amount of construction and building materials manufactured in Ukraine and supplied by European and other partners. This increased demand for goods will boost several sectors of Europe's stagnating industry.

The reconstruction of Ukraine will be supported and funded by several sources. At the G7 meeting in Japan last May, the group made assistance to Ukraine's post-war recovery a common goal, thus ensuring access to the most advanced models and technologies.^[12]

Before the war, remittances from Ukrainians living abroad amounted to almost 7% of the GDP and constituted the cheapest investment capital.^[13] Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion, the flow of remittances decreased as much of the available funds financed the purchase of war material abroad and humanitarian needs.

Public funding provided by the EU and other partners aims, among others, at ensuring private investor's engagement in Ukraine and offering the most affordable access to capital. At a time when several developed economies are experiencing a slowdown, investments in Ukraine could trigger new activities and foster a path to economic growth.

Booster to re-industrialization of Europe /natural resources

The already flourishing industrial sector positions Ukraine to become one of Europe's biggest industrial powerhouses after the war. Large deposits of oil, gas, coal, iron ore, and several critically important elements such as uranium, titanium ore, bauxite, and mercury ore favor the development of heavy industry.

A significant change in the industrial structure resulted in the last few years from depriving Ukraine of access to oil and gas fields in Crimea and coal and iron of Donbas after Russia's aggression started in 2014. Additionally, free trade with the EU favored advances in other branches of the economy with high added value, like the IT sector, which accounts for over 4.5% of GDP.^[14]

The war impacted the digital transformation twofold. It accelerated the use of digital technologies for the military sector and management of public services but absorbed manpower and investments from other sectors of the economy, without mentioning the destruction of infrastructure.^[15] Yet, the post-war recovery represents an opportunity to make Ukraine among the leaders of digital transformation.

Around 300,000 IT professionals have been mobilized to apply modern technologies to counter Russia's dominance in conventional arms.^[16] While defense technologies will stay a priority during the war, the IT sector will have the opportunity to steer the economy in the post-war period. Innovative ways to attract investors and facilitate the creation of firms via dedicated IT platforms have already yielded the expansion of the sector and a significant increase in its share in tax and export revenues.

Ukraine embraced digital transformation years ago. Electronic platforms for public procurement ProZorro helped to tackle part of the corruption in public spending. The Diia.City platform has enabled access to administrative services for citizens, assistance for business-targeted vocational training and assistance in accounting and accessing documents.^[17]

The IT sector proved its efficacy once it ensured the smooth continuation of education during the pandemic. Millions of pupils and students uninterruptedly followed classes, with masterclasses instructed by the most qualified and select teachers. Today, only one-third of students can attend school in person; others displaced within Ukraine or from abroad continue online education with the Ukrainian system.^[18]

Generation of energy for Europe and the region

Easy access to raw materials facilitated traditional energy generation, with little attention to climate and environment. High energy-intensive heavy industry, including the military sector inherited from the Soviet era, demanded the construction of nuclear power plants that accounted for over 54 percent of total output, followed by conventional coal and gas thermal power plants, hydro, and renewables.^[19]

Despite the war, Ukraine ensures an uninterrupted transit of Russian gas to Europe. This role is decreasing as Europe progressively lowers its historic dependence on Russian gas, and Ukraine stopped buying gas from Russia in 2015^[20]. However, after regaining control over Crimea and the Black Sea shore, Ukraine may potentially become an important producer and exporter of gas in its own right while supplying large quantities of gas from the Caspian region or the Middle East to Europe thanks to its robust network of pipelines. Importantly, the gas storage in Western Ukraine, with a volume equal to one-third of the existing capacities of the EU, enhances the energy security of Europe.



Due to its natural resources and well-developed gas transmission infrastructure, Ukraine is well-placed to develop hydrogen capacities and participate in ensuring the carbon neutrality of Europe. Alignment with the EU regulatory framework in this field will facilitate investment and upscaling of already existing technologies.^[21]

Breadbasket of Europe and the World

Until 2022, Ukraine, together with Russia, contributed 30% of globally traded wheat, 20% of maize, and 70% of sunflower oil. It was also an important producer and exporter of fertilizers.

Russia's aggression caused additional aggravation of the food supply chain to the most needy regions of the world; over 340 million people around the world are threatened by acute hunger, according to the World Food Program.^[22] Returning Ukraine as a global supplier of crucial commodities lies in the interest of the Global South and of the EU as the main collective provider of humanitarian and development assistance.^[23]

With its fertile black soil, good climate, and favorable water system, Ukraine was traditionally considered a breadbasket of Europe. Over 71% of the surface of this second-largest European country is agricultural land, and 56% is arable^[24].

In 2021, Ukraine harvested 86 million tons of grain, without counting potential crops from occupied territories in Donbas and Crimea. It ranked the first exporter worldwide of sunflower and its byproducts while being among the top ten producers of corn, wheat, barley, and rapeseed, accounting for over 10% of global turnover.^[25]

Since the beginning of the invasion in February 2022, Russia has targeted agricultural facilities, storage, infrastructure, and export routes to destroy Ukraine's capacity

as an important world player and deprive it of export income.^[26] As mentioned above, disrupting cereals supply from Ukraine means aggravating the global food chain with a risk of hunger in vulnerable countries and regions.^[27]

For its potential, Ukrainian agriculture might be a challenge for several EU partners: recent disputes around the sustainability of Grain Solidarity Lanes confirmed this assessment. Yet, in a long-term perspective, Ukraine contributes to the food security of Europe, to the stabilization of prices, and to the prevention of inflation. In addition, the abundance of fertile agrarian land offers an ideal place for organic production, so much looked after by consumers.^[28]

Although agriculture profits from around 24,000 square kilometers of surface waters that allow effective irrigation, some regions periodically suffer from water scarcity.

Russia destroyed over five million hectares of forest and contaminated thousands of square kilometers with mines and explosives. Advanced detecting and de-mining technologies – including drones and remote sensing of the surface – will be needed to clean the land for future exploitation^[29].

Greening of economy

To gain full membership in the EU, Ukraine will commit to following the European Green Deal, and therefore all investments in post-war recovery should serve to meet this objective.

The damage inflicted by Russia may be turned into an opportunity for a green transition as – for example – the potential of energy generation from biomass remains still untapped.^[30]

Moreover, Ukraine's black soil has the potential to absorb large quantities of greenhouse gases.^[31] Energy generation from wind, sun, biomasses, and renewables may result in a rapid reduction of carbon footprint, thus making Ukraine a vital partner in achieving carbon neutrality in Europe.

To achieve that objective, important investments are needed to reduce energy and heat losses in the energy network and the housing sector. The EU Commission intends to use the Ukraine Facility to reconstruct Ukrainian cities to become more sustainable and environmentally friendly in line with the concept of New European Bauhaus^[32].

Until recently, buildings were responsible for over 40% of final energy consumption, and in the residential sector, 54% of energy was used for heating or cooling. The shelling of Ukrainian cities by Russia inflicted huge damage in the sector of multistore apartment buildings. The use of modern construction materials, insulation, and circular use of energy is key to increasing energy efficiency and aligning with the Zero-Emission Building standards set as a target by the EU for new constructions^[33].

The reconstruction of Ukraine can become a testing ground for many ideas, such as low-carbon cement that, in turn, may make Ukraine an important provider of new materials for other countries.

Effective Eastern Shield of Europe

Russia will remain Europe's biggest security challenge for the foreseeable future. Ukraine's determination to join the Western-led European integration challenged the Kremlin's imperial ambition further after other countries of the former Soviet Bloc decided to join NATO and the EU.

What all previous leaders of Russia or the Soviet Union were anxious about, Vladimir Putin has provoked – Russia is the most prominent threat facing Europe and the West, and any hesitancy towards this understanding has finally ended.

The shockwave of Ukraine's bravery trembles the West. It has served as a wake-up call after years of shortages and a calculated stand of ignoring the basic fact that there is no sustainable welfare without the values of freedom and democracy.

Finland and Sweden have abandoned their neutrality to join NATO, while Armenia and Moldova are seeking security cooperation with the Alliance.^[34] Security and defense will feature the top priorities in the EU for upcoming years. Military spending will probably rise sharply throughout the biggest EU economies after years of underinvestment.^[35] The EU budget and regulations aim at enforcing closer cooperation and integration of related industries.

By resisting aggression, Ukraine has become the major security provider for Europe. War, so tragic for people, has made Ukraine the biggest testing ground of military equipment and combat strategy worldwide. Ukraine's

forced adaptation to sophisticated military equipment, the development of its military industry, and the considerable experience they have gained with remotely piloted air, land, and sea drones will allow them to guide Europe and NATO into the 21st-century security reality.^[36]

Driver of regional transformation and international rules

Accepting Ukraine into the EU may trigger chain reactions in several other countries. Moldova followed Kyiv in applying for EU membership, and since then, Chişinău has undertaken immense efforts to meet EU requirements.

Ukraine's and Moldova's move to the EU changes the context for solving the Transnistrian problem – one of several separatist conflicts that serve Russia's malign purpose to continue influencing the post-Soviet space. The effective alignment of Kyiv and Chişinău with the EU *acquis* confronts Transnistria with a new reality of all routes for trade and supply leading through territories compliant with EU regulations.

Russia's shrinking capacity to exert its troublesome influence opens a chance for consolidating pro-European tendencies in Serbia and other Western Balkan states. The expected decision to start accession talks with Bosnia-Herzegovina, as recommended by the European Commission, may boost the reconciliation process thirty years after the devastating wars. The region should finally exit from the gray zone of Europe and embark on the modernization and development path.

More openness on the EU side and perhaps new accession methodology are required to make the process credible. The costs of inaction exceed the possible expenditures of enabling accession to the willing countries.

Belarus attracted international attention in 2020 with massive peaceful democratic demonstrations. Alyaksandr Lukashenka feared being removed from power – a potential repetition of the Ukraine scenario after the Maidan Revolution – so with support from Russia, Lukashenka eventually crushed the protests. Now, Ukraine's successful resistance to Russia risks provoking unexpected developments in the neighboring country as well.

Changes in Russia are also not excluded. A century ago, revolutions from inside suddenly reversed the Tsarist Empire, and a similar scenario may be repeated in the future. The regime seems stable, though the unsuccessful and prolonged invasion unveiled weaknesses and vulnerabilities of the authoritarian system.

New regulations in international law to prevent wars and to make culprits accountable for committing atrocities and crimes followed all military conflicts of the past century. Unfortunately, they have proved inefficient in preventing aggression, but new regulations are under consideration.^[37] The indictment issued against the Russian President and Children's Ombudsman confirmed the resolve of inter-

national justice to withdraw the feeling of impunity even from top political actors. Additional legal arguments have been laid down by R. Badinter in a recently published “Vladimir Poutine. L'accusation”^[38].

Facilitating the adaptation of the EU to new realities

The future of EU unity depends fundamentally on reaction to Russia's aggressive action. Showing determination to defend and promote values of freedom, human dignity, and democracy as enshrined in Treaties^[39], the Union justifies its relevance and credibility. The collective response given so far has made the Union a stronger world player.

With uncertainty about the future leadership of the US, more is expected from the European Union in protecting peace, democracy, and stability. Accepting new members has proved in the past to reinvigorate the European project.^[40]

Calculations made after the 2004 enlargement displayed benefits for the so-called “old members” from funds dedicated to the Visegrad countries, Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, and Hungary^[41]. These EU economies made the whole EU market more competitive and a stronger global player.

A similar – if not magnified - effect will follow the accession of Ukraine, given the reconstruction needs and other applicants. The European Commission puts enlargement as a priority for the future mandate,^[42] and Charles Michel,

President of the Council, has ambitiously set 2030 as the target date for the completion of the process.^[43]

The costs of Ukraine's reconstruction remain difficult to estimate. The Kiel Institute for The World Economy calculated that donors committed from February 2022 to July 2023 almost 250 billion euros to Ukraine in military, humanitarian, and reconstruction assistance as well as direct budgetary support (only part of the pledges was disbursed).^[44]

As big as the sum stands, it is modest compared with previous post-war reconstruction costs. The Marshall Plan often serves as a reference. At the launch of the Plan in 1948, the GDP of the US exceeded only 3.5 times the combined GDP of recipient countries: France, Germany, and Italy. Today, the combined EU GDP is at least 85 times larger than that of Ukraine.^[45] Europe should consider reconstruction and future integration of Ukraine and other applicants, provided they are committed to fulfilling membership obligations, as strengthening its own potential, resilience to future shocks, and an asset in the global competition.

These unprecedented circumstances demand courage and foresight, while shortsighted responses jeopardize both past achievements and future ambitions. Ukrainians have been demonstrating the force of the European dream, and it is the EU which is now called on to make that dream a reality.



Endnotes

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