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JOINT
Brief

No. 30

November 2023

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This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement N. 959143.

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Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine prompted the European Union to grant candidate country status to Ukraine. This major shift in the EU's approach was broadly seen by member states as a geopolitical imperative. Indeed, this time the geopolitical significance of enlargement is stronger than ever. A successful enlargement will be an essential part of Western efforts to make sure that Russia is not allowed to impose its sphere of influence and its vision of European security order on other countries.

The EU's post-Cold War enlargements between 1995 and 2013 had a strong geopolitical undercurrent, although it was rather hidden and may have seemed secondary at the time. For Finland, which joined in 1995, EU membership became possible after the end of the Cold War and was a way to firmly anchor the country to the West after decades of resisting efforts of the Soviet Union to be drawn to the Eastern bloc.¹ The Baltic states achieved membership in both the EU and NATO in 2004, being motivated by both security and economic considerations – they saw the closest possible integration to the West as a way to safeguard independence and reduce Russia's influence.² Thus, although security and geopolitics were not

¹ See Risto E.J. Penttilä, "Finland's Security in a Changing Europe. A Historical Perspective", in *Finnish Defence Studies*, No. 7 (1994), <https://urn.fi/URN:NBN:fi-fe201601223619>; Hannu Himanen, *Iloniemi – eminenssi* (biography of Jaakko Iloniemi, in Finnish), Helsinki, Docendo, 2022.

² Hiski Haukkala, Tobias Etzold and Kristi Raik, "The Northern European Member States", in Amelia Hadfield, Ian Manners and Richard G. Whitman (eds), *Foreign Policies of EU Member States*.

explicitly on the enlargement agenda at the time and may have gone unnoticed to many in Brussels and other Western European capitals, they were important for the new member states. From the EU's perspective, Eastern enlargement was above all an opportunity to support post-communist transition and extend democracy, stability and prosperity to former eastern bloc countries.

This time is different – the geopolitical significance of Ukraine's accession is underscored by the EU itself. On 24 February 2022, the EU experienced a geopolitical awakening, realising that Russia's aggression had become a major threat to European security at large and was going to shape the future of Europe for years to come.³ In subsequent months the Union mobilised all of its foreign policy tools, including imposing unprecedented sanctions on Russia and providing humanitarian, economic and even military assistance to Ukraine, to push back Russia's unlawful aggression and support Ukraine in its existential fight.

This came after years of the EU being in denial about the zero-sum nature of Russia's approach to Ukraine and other countries in the "shared neighbourhood" and the aspiration of Russia to impose its sphere of influence on its neighbours. Although the war in Ukraine started already in 2014, up to February 2022 the EU was trying to continue an increasingly untenable policy mix, including support to Ukraine's reforms and deepening relations with the EU (in the framework of the Association Agreement including deep and comprehensive free trade) and selective engagement with Russia. Furthermore, the EU stayed away from conflict resolution efforts, although it supported the so-called Normandy Framework consisting of France, Germany, Russia and Ukraine, where Kyiv was pushed to accept the controversial Minsk agreements.⁴

Continuity and Europeanisation, London/New York, Routledge, 2017, p. 23-37.

³ Kristi Raik et al., "Tackling the Constraints on EU Foreign Policy towards Ukraine: From Strategic Denial to Geopolitical Awakening", in *JOINT Research Papers*, No. 20 (April 2023), <https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=1623>.

⁴ Duncan Allan, "The Minsk Conundrum: Western Policy and Russia's War in Eastern Ukraine", in *Chatham House Research Papers*, May 2020, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/node/23605>.

The stakes are high

The EU's new geopolitical engagement in the Eastern neighbourhood is important for three major reasons.

First, EU membership is an important element of ensuring sustainable security for Ukraine. Even though full membership would realistically be achieved only after the end of active warfare and conclusion of some kind of armistice, it is beneficial to prepare for it already. Ukraine's prospect of membership has already stimulated the efforts and investments that the EU and its member states are making toward the reconstruction of Ukraine as well as the revitalisation of its economy.⁵ If Ukraine advances on the EU accession path, its recovery will be more sustainable, not least because its economy will be more attractive to EU investors. EU accession and even joining the EU's single market is known to have a positive impact on business environment and foreign investment.⁶ Thus, belonging to united Europe will facilitate economic development, which in turn will improve and sustain its social, political and military security. Also, a strong, economically developed, and sustainable Ukraine is vital for improving the shared security of Eastern Europe.

Second, Ukraine's accession has a major potential to strengthen the security and defence policy and geopolitical weight of the EU itself. The EU's support to Ukraine's war efforts is already prompting the Union to get more serious about defence and more specifically capability generation, for example through the initiative of joint procurement of ammunition.⁷ Looking beyond the war, the establishment of a just peace would in itself strengthen the geopolitical agency of both the EU and Ukraine. Considering the sheer size and geopolitically central location of Ukraine, the country's EU accession would enhance this shift. In addition, Ukrainian armed forces are acquiring unique first-hand battle experience, skills and capabilities in

⁵ The new Ukraine Facility proposed by the Commission foresees up to 50-billion-euro support to Ukraine's "recovery, reconstruction, and modernisation". See the European Commission website on EU solidarity with Ukraine: *Recovery and Reconstruction of Ukraine*, https://eu-solidarity-ukraine.ec.europa.eu/node/48_en.

⁶ Nauro Campos, Saul Estrin and Randolph Bruno, "Foreign Investment, European Integration, and the Single Market", in *VoxEU*, 17 July 2021, <https://cepr.org/node/356980>.

⁷ European Defence Agency, *EDA Brings Together 25 Countries for Common Procurement of Ammunition*, 20 March 2023, <https://eda.europa.eu/news-and-events/news/2023/03/20/eda-brings-together-18-countries-for-common-procurement-of-ammunition>.

their fight against a powerful and brutal invader that will further strengthen the “hard power” aspects of EU security and defence policy. At the same time, new borders are likely to bring new security challenges for the EU, including a volatile and possibly vindictive Russia, which underscores the need for a stronger military footprint for the Union.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, the outcome of the war is likely to determine the nature of the European security order for decades to come. Russia has blatantly broken the rules-based order with its brutal invasion of a neighbouring country. Moscow has also made clear (in the draft agreements with the United States and NATO that it presented in December 2021) that it aims at restoring a security order based on spheres of influence, with the fate of smaller countries being decided by larger powers.⁸ The EU is determined to defend the rules-based order and has engaged in pushing back Russia’s imperialist ambitions. Russia’s defeat and restoration of Ukraine’s territorial integrity will be essential preconditions for restoring the broken rules-based order in Europe and beyond. However, as long as Russia does not give up its imperialist ambitions, the European security order will have to be rebuilt not with, but against Russia.

The importance of conditionality

The new geopolitical necessity of enlargement requires the EU to develop a new, proactive approach to support Ukraine and other candidate countries in moving towards full membership. The prospect of membership needs to be credible and feasible – in contrast to the failure of enlargement policy towards the Western Balkans in past years. This does not mean fast track; Ukraine has to fulfil the conditions. Ukrainians are working hard to fulfil their share of necessary reforms and obligations.

It is important to stress that EU membership, as well as the reforms that it requires, are desired not just by the Ukrainian government but also by its civil society and

⁸ Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Treaty between the United States of America and the Russian Federation on Security Guarantees*, 17 December 2021, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790818/?lang=en; and *Agreement on Measures to Ensure the Security of the Russian Federation and Member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization*, 17 December 2021, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790803/?lang=en.

general population. Thus, Ukrainian civil society is in many instances acting as a watchdog for its government. The fulfilment of conditions for EU membership as well as the implementation of necessary reforms are seen by Ukrainians as not just formalities but much needed elements of their country's movement toward a rule-based, prosperous and secure state.



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