



Policy Paper on Demands for European Security and Defence Cooperation in Ukraine after Russia's Invasion

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Executive summary

Bridging the gap between EU capabilities and Ukraine's expectations: Ukrainians' demands for European security and defence cooperation in Ukraine after Russia's invasion

The European security outlook, and European support for Ukraine in particular, has changed dramatically. The EU is Ukraine's key ally, a fact that Ukrainians fully appreciate. The full-scale war has created momentum for previously impossible forms of assistance and cooperation. In the first days of the full-scale war, EU member states considered sending only helmets to Ukraine, whereas in 2025, the military support sent by EU member states to Ukraine is worth 60 billion euros, including advanced and lethal weapon systems, as well as supplies ranging from ammunition to missiles and fighter jets. The most recent plans for security guarantees for a post-ceasefire Ukraine, including air policing, maritime operations, and a reassurance force building capacities for Ukraine's land forces, demonstrate the cumulative change in the willingness of European states to respond to Ukraine's security needs.

Much of EU policymaking is based on its interactions and joint decision-making with the Ukrainian government, which has reached an unprecedented level since 2022. However, the evolution of the EU-Ukraine security and political partnership, particularly enlargement, and its eventual outcome will also depend on Ukrainian public perception. The aim of this paper is to collect and analyse information regarding Ukrainian public opinion on the EU, security, and defence, as well as how to facilitate the integration process, address the existing limitations, and improve the foundations of the EU-Ukraine relationship. This will be particularly relevant when the electoral process resumes. Evidence of public misunderstanding or frustration could lead to political backlash.

Our analysis is based on an opinion poll conducted by the Razumkov Centre, which gathers data on Ukrainians' demands and priorities regarding security and defence cooperation, as well as views on the role of the EU and other partners. The poll's main finding indicates a capability-expectations gap between Western actions and Ukrainian societal needs. The poll was commissioned to identify and analyse Ukrainians' demands and priorities in security and defence cooperation amid the tectonic shifts taking place in European defence and security policies in the region. Although the EU has declared its unwavering support for Ukraine for as long as it is needed, Ukrainian society finds the extent of European support to be unsatisfactory. Specifically, the public opinion poll conducted on behalf of the consortium finds that Ukrainians demand much more military assistance for their country. Weapon deliveries are prioritised over everything else, including security guarantees, reconstruction, reforms, and EU membership, which are possible only if statehood is preserved – something that is determined on the battlefield.

Security guarantees are the most essential form of security support. In this respect, EU membership is viewed as a security guarantee in itself, but Ukrainian society has many reservations about it. Ukrainians no longer consider the offer feasible during the war, which inevitably raises the risk of a potential public backlash due to insufficient support or unfulfilled promises in the longer term. The focus on arms supplies also indicates a turn towards self-reliance and strong support for Ukrainian agency, while trust in greater European engagement in providing Ukraine's security remains low.

Based on these findings, this paper recommends improving communication with Ukrainian society, particularly with opinion leaders and young people, as well as coordinating with Ukrainian authorities to avoid a cacophony of voices on core issues of mutual interest. Finding novel ways to better explain what the EU does and why will help minimise the capabilities-expectations gap.

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About InvigoratEU

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1 Introduction

Since 2022, Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine has been the greatest manifestation of geopolitical rivalry in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood. A direct assault on the letter and spirit of the European political and security order, Russia's aggression against Ukraine has forced the EU to seek new ways to defend itself. Declarations of the "birth of geopolitical Europe" and a commitment to stand "shoulder to shoulder with Ukraine", which appears to be "the front line of the defence of European values" (European Commission 2023), demonstrated the EU's awareness of the necessity to counteract the geostrategic reordering of the region through a variety of traditional and novel political, economic, and military instruments. This commitment has become a cornerstone of EU foreign and security policies. Through its united and steadfast support for Ukraine in the face of Russia's unprovoked and unjustified military aggression, the EU has mobilised and provided Ukraine with a comprehensive toolkit comprising political, financial, and military support. First, politically, the EU's main achievement was granting Ukraine EU candidate status in June 2022 and opening accession negotiations in December 2023. The EU also imposed a set of sanctions on Russia and Belarus in response to their aggression against Ukraine, and backed Ukraine's diplomatic efforts in the international arena, particularly its Peace Summit and Victory Plan initiatives.

Second, the EU became the main provider of financial and humanitarian assistance. Over €84.6 billion was allocated to bolster Ukraine's overall economic, social, and financial resilience. Specifically, the Ukraine Facility instrument allocates up to €50 billion for the recovery, reconstruction, and modernisation of Ukraine's economy. These efforts are linked to Ukraine's EU accession reform process. The EU has offered temporary protection to displaced people fleeing the war in Ukraine and has allocated significant humanitarian assistance to Ukraine and the member states. The EU has also offered key support to maintain energy resilience amid Russia's attacks on Ukraine's infrastructure and opened Solidarity Lanes to help Ukraine's struggling economy. Accordingly, the EU's capacity-building with Ukraine in security and defence is indicative of its awareness of the rising geopolitical challenges to the future of the European security order. The extent to which Europe and the EU can rise to this challenge remains an open and debated question.

Finally, the EU is Ukraine's main supporter in terms of military and security. Through the European Peace Facility and its member states, the EU has invested over 60 billion to bolster the capabilities and resilience of the Ukrainian armed forces and address Ukraine's pressing military and defence needs.

This policy paper aims to contribute to ongoing policy and scholarly debates related to the demands for robust security and defence capacity-building in Ukraine. To this end, the paper moves beyond the demands expressed by Ukraine's political leadership and focuses on public opinion within Ukrainian society. As new security and defence policies in Europe are still in flux and the EU's new eastern policy is still taking shape, with Ukraine playing a pivotal role in European security dynamics, it is important to gather data and provide analysis on Ukrainians' demands and priorities in security and defence cooperation, as well as their views on the capacity-building role of the EU and other partners. The commissioned poll is designed to fill gaps in the existing data and expand understanding of Ukrainian societal attitudes. The existing data largely examines societal perceptions and attitudes regarding Ukraine's cooperation

with the EU (see NEC, KIIS, and Gallup). In contrast, our data delves into Ukrainians' attitudes towards the substance of the cooperation, asking them to assess its elements and the EU's actions.

The main task is to highlight two dynamics: the EU's evolving security capabilities, and Ukrainians' expectations and attitudes towards European security assistance. Building on Christopher Hill's (1993) notion of the capability-expectations gap in relation to EU foreign policy and its global perceptions, we focus on the Ukrainian societal perspective, which has largely been overlooked in analyses of EU support. In this context, this paper seeks to address a gap in academic and policy analysis, with the aim of enhancing policymaking in Europe.

The analysis is based on an opinion poll conducted in Ukraine regarding demands for capacity-building, aimed at identifying the respective needs for action by the EU to provide territorial, political, and human security. The poll was conducted by the Razumkov Centre on behalf of the InvigoratEU project between 28 February and 6 March, 2025.

The paper is structured as follows. The first section establishes the context and traces the transformation of European security and defence cooperation with Ukraine. The second section presents Ukrainian views on EU support and the implications of a widening capabilities-expectations gap for Ukraine and Europe. This section also outlines key takeaways from Ukrainian public opinion regarding the broader political architecture around Ukraine (such as EU membership) and discusses the EU's ability to respond to Ukraine's security needs. Finally, the paper offers policy recommendations centred on communicating what the EU does and can do, as well as coordination between the EU and its Ukrainian counterparts.

The Role of Ukraine in European Security Dynamics

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 set in motion a series of changes in European security policies and arrangements that fundamentally reshaped the European Union's role in the Eastern Neighbourhood and the support available to Ukraine. These shifting security dynamics also propelled profound changes within the European Union, which constitute the key context for analysing Ukrainian security demands in this paper.

Scholars and policymakers have described 2022 as a "transformational moment" leading to the birth of a "geopolitical EU" (see Blockmans 2022). Developments in several EU policy fields, as well as broader strategic shifts, support this interpretation. The energy trade between Europe and Russia – which had continued to grow even after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, making Russia Europe's number one energy supplier – was replaced by unprecedented sanctions regimes against Russia and new EU energy policies aimed at decoupling Russia from the European energy market (Siddi 2022). In the past, the EU, led by its largest members Germany and France, had sought to address the conflict in Ukraine through diplomatic efforts in the Normandy format. After the 2022 escalation, however, dialogue was replaced by Russia's diplomatic isolation, economic and political sanctions, as well as stronger support for Ukraine, including lethal arms and weapons systems. The geopolitical context and European security dynamics evolved further in 2025. The full-scale war collapsed one pillar of the European security architecture – cooperation and dialogue with Russia – while the uncertainties

surrounding US foreign policy after Donald Trump's re-election shook another. The reliance of European states, and the EU, on the US to uphold the rules-based world order and to serve as the backbone of Europe's defence was replaced by a growing realisation that Europe had to be able to safeguard both its own security order and the rules-based world order without US support (e.g. Helwig & Jokela 2025; Saari & Karjalainen 2025).

However, rather than giving birth to a novel kind of "geopolitical EU", the developments following Russia's war of aggression in 2022 point instead to a shift in the EU's geopolitical reasoning and logic. Indeed, scholarly and policy studies demonstrate that geopolitical calculations have shaped security cooperation with Ukraine at both EU and member-state levels. From the early years of Ukraine's independence to Russia's full-scale invasion, consideration of Russia's red lines and the avoidance of provocation significantly limited security cooperation and military support for Ukraine's armed forces. This also contributed to the exclusion of Ukraine from both the EU and NATO (Karatnycky 2024; Sarotte 2021). The balancing act with Russia also shaped the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood Policy in that defence cooperation was excluded from the framework of the Eastern Partnership programme launched in 2009 (Gressel and Popescu 2020). Against this background, it is evident that Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 created momentum for profound change in Europe-Ukraine security and defence relations. Similarly, the emerging uncertainty in US foreign policy has put pressure on Europe and the EU to take even greater responsibility for supporting Ukraine and European security. How, then, have these shifts in the EU's geopolitical logic materialised in some of the key policy domains?

Firstly, the changes in European capitals' security policies – converging threat perceptions, updated principles of military engagement, and national investments in defence – resulted in a historic militarisation of the EU's security and defence policies and posture. Most notably, the EU, long referred to as a "civilian", "market" and "normative" power (cf. Hedetoft 2025, Smith 2005), took the unprecedented step in February 2022 of financing large-scale weapon deliveries to Ukraine through its newly established off-budget funding instrument, the European Peace Facility. In the months that followed, these initiatives reflected Ukraine's frontline needs: for instance, the ammunition shortage led to the adoption of the three-track ammunition initiative Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP) in the Council, aimed at facilitating the delivery of ammunition from existing stocks, through joint procurement, and through production in Europe (Council of the EU 7 July 2023). The EU also established the Military Assistance Mission to train and equip Ukrainian soldiers in training centres around Europe. While historic in the context of Europe-Ukraine relations and the EU's security and defence policies, the EU and its partners, including the US and the UK, were nonetheless criticised for supporting Ukraine too little and too slowly. For example, the ammunition deliveries agreed at the EU level were delayed to such an extent that the issue was widely reported as the "ammo failure" (e.g. Politico 16.11.2023; Dubovyk 2024).

Secondly, while the EU's shifting actorness in security and defence culminated in the situation in Ukraine, it also included other major developments. The Strategic Compass (2022) shifted the focus away from comprehensive security towards military capacity-building (Mustasilta 2023; Fiott 2021). In the years that followed, the EU adopted several strategies, initiatives and instruments to facilitate and fund its member states' attempts to revamp defence capabilities. Moreover, the changing approach to supporting partners goes beyond Ukraine: after the

taboo of lethal aid was broken, the EU financed lethal aid on a smaller scale to Niger, Somalia, Moldova, and Benin (Council of the EU n.d.; Genini 2025).

Thirdly, the changes in the European security environment and in the EU's geopolitical logic rebooted the EU's enlargement policy. In the decade leading up to 2022, EU member states had opposed enlargement for various reasons: France was generally against further expansion before internal reforms, while member states such as Greece and Bulgaria blocked the accession processes of individual candidate states in the Western Balkans because of bilateral disputes. Countries in the Eastern Neighbourhood were categorically excluded from the membership process due to enlargement fatigue, their lack of reforms, and the view that enlargement into Russia's self-declared sphere of interest would be considered provocative (Karjalainen 2023). Alternative policy frameworks such as the Eastern Partnership and the Association Agreements were established to advance integration without offering membership prospects. The 2022 pivot opened the membership perspective for Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, and provided fresh impetus for the membership processes in the Western Balkans.

The new enlargement drive is fuelled by geopolitical considerations: granting Ukraine the membership perspective was considered a necessary response to the war. It was intended to send a clear political message regarding the EU's commitment to Ukraine as a sovereign European state, while also highlighting the EU as a credible actor (see e.g. Anghel and Džankić 2023). While the European perspective was granted to the Western Balkan states after the Yugoslav wars, granting candidate country status to a country at war is a novel development in the history of European integration and reflects geopolitical and security considerations. The enlargement policy, however, remains focused on the goal of transforming accession countries to meet the EU's accession criteria, sometimes referred to as the goal of modernisation (Brandt et al. 2025). The enlargement method is recognised by scholars as the EU's most effective tool for encouraging democratic reforms, market integration, and transnational regulation in its neighbourhoods (Schimmelfenning & Scholtz 2008).

The materialisation of the membership bid in both neighbourhoods remains uncertain, however. Earlier hesitation towards EU enlargement is still observable in some key member states; new bilateral issues have emerged, notably between Ukraine and its neighbours; the applicant countries' progress in meeting the accession criteria varies (see EU Commission reports); and the war effectively holds Ukraine captive, preventing it from moving closer to EU membership. Moreover, the EU has not resolved the problem of how to enlarge in the context of an increasingly contested neighbourhood: while the war conditions prevent Ukraine from undertaking necessary reforms, Moldova and Georgia face unresolved territorial disputes as well as increasing Russian influencing campaigns and hybrid threats.

Finally, for Ukraine, the shifts in the EU's geopolitical logic and in its security and enlargement policies mark a shift from exclusion to inclusion in the European security architecture. Not only the EU membership bid but also NATO's declarative commitment to Ukraine's eventual membership denotes the shifting status of Ukraine in European security arrangements. Individual policy initiatives underline this shift: for instance, the Commission's White Paper (2025), which establishes a strategy and tools for developing European defence, devotes specific attention to cooperation with Ukraine. Ukraine is increasingly viewed as a security contributor in Europe: both its experienced armed forces as well as its defence industrial base are recognised as

important elements of the post-2022 security architecture. Ukraine's security is also increasingly recognised as connected to the rest of Europe's security, not least because the success or failure of its armed forces, as well as the endurance or collapse of societal resilience, are seen to set a precedent for an aggressive Russia's broader ambitions in Europe. A recent European Commission initiative, the ReArm Europe 2030 plan, within which the new €150 billion SAFE financing instrument has been launched, encourages the inclusion of Ukraine in joint military capability development and procurement projects alongside EU and EEA members, as well as close security partners.

In addition to changes within the EU, European states responded to the outbreak of the war by updating their threat assessments and security strategies, and by reassessing the need for security and defence cooperation. Western and Southern European states redirected their attention eastwards, while Germany and some Nordic states updated their principles of military engagement in conflicts. European states and their likeminded Western allies adopted a new strategic approach towards Russia, centred on isolation and deterrence. These changes were echoed – and augmented – by developments in key European security organisations. NATO accepted two new members, Finland and Sweden, and started to reinforce its defence capabilities on the Alliance's eastern flank as part of a longer-term shift of focus back to its core task of collective defence. New formats and layers of cooperation emerged to cope with the geopolitical rivalry and wartime security challenges. The European Political Community was established in 2022 to facilitate dialogue among likeminded European states, while the Coalition of the Willing, led by France and the UK, emerged in 2025 to coordinate urgent military support for Ukraine, overcome internal disputes, and involve extra-EU partners in the effort.

Altogether, Europe's efforts to support Ukraine through institutional mechanisms, including the CSDP, the European Peace Facility, and EUMAM, as well as bilateral mechanisms, have turned the EU into a primary security partner of Ukraine.

2 A Major Divide: Ukrainian Public Opinion on EU Support

This section discusses how Ukrainians assess European support and what they expect from the EU. It highlights key needs, especially weapons, and explains why a mismatch between Ukrainians' expectations and reality bad news is for both Ukraine and Europe. The main takeaway is simple: despite all the effort, European and EU support is perceived as insufficient.

As the previous section has shown, the EU has drastically changed its approach. Since 2022, assistance to Ukraine has increased significantly, enabling the country to continue its resistance. However, our public opinion poll indicates a gap between capabilities and expectations. In March 2025, only 7.8% of respondents expressed satisfaction with the EU and its member states' enhanced assistance. A further 18.4% believed that it was barely enough, 48.3% considered EU support for Ukraine insufficient, and 13.1% judged it to be extremely insufficient (Zenodo, Table 1).

The main concern of Ukrainians – and their principal demand – is the supply of weapons.

When asked, "What do you think could be the most significant contribution of the European Union to strengthening Ukraine's security" (see Table 1), 36.3% identified military aid as their

first-choice answer, followed by more financial assistance and security guarantees (both 21.3%).

Table 1: What do you think the EU's most significant contribution to strengthening Ukraine's security could be?

	Most important (%)	Second most important (%)	Third most important (%)
EU accession process	18.5	11.6	12.2
EU support for reforms in Ukraine	4.4	10.8	11.6
Economic and financial assistance from the EU	13.8	25.4	18.4
Military aid	36.3	21.3	12.0
EU sanctions against Russia and Belarus	2.3	9.3	15.5
Security guarantees for Ukraine from the EU	17.9	14.4	21.3
Other (please specify)	0.3	0.0	0.2
None of the above	2.1	0.7	0.8
It's difficult to say.	4.4	6.4	7.9

If asked to give only one answer, 46.9% listed arms supply (see Zenodo, Table 4). When asked which aspect the EU does not pay attention to, arms supply again topped the list (see Zenodo, Table 19). Even before the second Trump administration temporarily suspended its weapons deliveries, Ukrainian society clearly prioritised weapons over reforms, sanctions, and the accession process – the backbone of EU support for Ukraine.

Other prominent components of EU assistance, including territorial, political and human security, proved to be far less important. However, when asked what other (non-security) measures the EU could take to improve Ukraine's security (see Zenodo, Table 6), the majority still leaned towards security instruments and measures for restoring justice – namely, punishing Moscow for its crimes – over other measures. Protection of critical infrastructure, training of law enforcement agencies, and cybersecurity were closely followed by the restoration of justice inside the country (government accountability) and against the aggressor (investigation of war crimes). Human security and socio-economic support lagged far behind.

For Ukrainians, many of the findings confirm the obvious: the resources of the Ukrainian armed forces are stretched, and their capabilities to counter Russia's military advances are limited. In this respect, the dynamics at the frontline and changes in Russia's military strategy have not been matched by the scale of Western assistance. Russia's air strikes and Ukraine's limited air

defence, which is solely dependent on Western assistance, are obvious examples for Ukrainian citizens.

Towards Ukrainian Disillusionment with EU Support

Acknowledgement of Western support in Ukrainian society is well documented (Zelenskyy 2025). Yet there is a growing loss of belief that such support will meet Ukraine's needs, including the provision of military equipment and security guarantees. On the positive side, Ukrainian society shows considerable awareness of multiple political narratives and proposals. This not only explains why the "peacekeeper solution" – which envisioned deploying a European peacekeeping¹ contingent to Ukraine at some stage – topped the list of other solutions at 9.6% (at a time when European and Ukrainian leaders frequently discussed the issue), but also why other key public advocacy initiatives were recognised, such as "Close the Sky" (2.4%) – calling for the deployment of Western air forces to protect non-occupied territories of Ukraine – and proposals for the use of frozen Russian assets and security guarantees from 2022/2023. On the other hand, it also explains why few believed in Europe's peacekeeping missions and security guarantees. The most likely explanation is that they no longer considered them feasible.

Although the Ukrainian public has consistently expressed its overwhelming desire to receive Western security guarantees (see NEC 2024; KIIS 2024) – whether to protect the country during the invasion or to prevent renewed Russian aggression after a truce (KIIS 2024) – the likelihood of such guarantees being offered is seen as marginal. The mismatch is evident in public opinion on NATO. Whereas nearly 70% of Ukrainians supported NATO accession, only 29.3% believed that gradual accession to the Alliance is the best security guarantee available (NEC 2024). This is partly the result of a rapid decline in hopes of joining NATO, which dropped from 69% to 51% between 2023 and 2024 (Gallup 2024).

Peacekeeping operations led by the armed forces of EU member states or by the Coalition of the Willing enjoy broad support among Ukrainians (see Zenodo, Table 5). In March 2025, 82% of Ukrainians said they were ready to fight alongside Europe, even if the US withdrew (KIIS 2025a). At the same time, however, few highlighted the EU's role in this respect: only 15.3% considered EU security guarantees the most important form of support in security and defence, and just 5.7% believed in European troops (see Zenodo, Table 4).

The reason for this apparent contradiction may lie in a lack of confidence in the EU's ability to translate initiatives and narratives into action. Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion, there has been no shortage of audacious plans, motivational speeches, and statements of endless support. Ukrainian society was pledged full support "as long as it is needed" and "until victory". Security agreements with key partners were signed and widely publicised. The winter and spring of 2024–2025 were particularly prolific in terms of European diplomatic efforts, with the announcement of new initiatives such as sending peacekeepers or reassurance forces to Ukraine. None, however, proved to work as expected or as interpreted within Ukrainian society.

¹ It is necessary to note that discussions on peacekeeping operations in Ukraine partly depart from traditional definitions of UN mandated missions or EU/NATO crisis management operations. At times peacekeeping is associated with military presence in Ukraine and security guarantees under the term "security arrangements for Ukraine".

Miscommunication has clearly accumulated. Following the failures at the Vilnius and Washington Summits to secure an invitation to join NATO or receive temporary security guarantees – communicated domestically as almost a *fait accompli* – public support for NATO declined, and confidence in the West had dropped by 2024. Between September 2022 and February 2024, the proportion of respondents who believed in Western support and the West’s commitment to achieving an acceptable peace for Ukraine decreased from 73% to 49%. By February 2024, nearly equal numbers of respondents believed that the West would either continue to provide substantial support and seek peace on terms acceptable to Ukraine, or that Western support would wane and the West would require Ukraine to make concessions to Russia (KIIIS 2025b). Although hopes for a ceasefire and Trump’s return to office temporarily boosted the percentage of those who believed in the West’s support and its commitment to an acceptable peace for Ukraine to 62% by February–March 2025 (KIIIS 2025b), the failure to fulfil these expectations may have had a negative impact.

A similar tendency is observed to the attitudes to the US. The growing disappointment with the Biden administration in 2023–2024, and more importantly the shocking policy toward Ukraine under the Trump administration, collapsed Ukraine’s opinion of the US leadership. In 2025, 16% of Ukrainians approve of U.S. leadership, while 73% express disapproval, a record high. In 2022 66% approved of U.S. leadership (Vigers 2025).

“Is the EU ready for Ukraine?”

Europe remains the most trustworthy partner: 64% of Ukrainians considered it a reliable ally (KIIIS 2025b). Most Ukrainians primarily want the EU – rather than the US or any other country – to be at the negotiating table with Russia. In fact, 60.8% named the EU as the preferred mediator, far ahead of the US (34.5%) and China (12%) (see Zenodo, Table 18). Other studies also find that European leaders are the most popular politicians in the country.

There is no doubt that Ukrainians strongly favour a European future. Close to a majority believed that Ukraine would be a member of the EU within five to ten years (see Zenodo, Table 8). A similar percentage of respondents believed that the country would be ready to join the EU within the same period (Zenodo, Table 9). Notably, 20% believed that Ukraine would be ready within one to two years, as former Ukrainian Prime Minister Denis Shmyhal pledged.

The biggest obstacle to Ukraine’s EU membership is the ongoing war. If the war is set aside, however, the biggest obstacle is the EU itself, not Ukraine. EU bureaucracy (23.7%) and the positions of some member states (33.8%) were perceived as major roadblocks to membership. Neither a lack of political will on the part of Ukrainian authorities (8.3%) nor the lack of progress on necessary reforms (20.5%) were seen as equally significant, marking a drastic difference compared to some earlier findings (Table 2). Overall, 77.5% of respondents identified external factors as the main reason why Ukraine cannot join the EU. A total of 56% blamed the war, 21.5% regarded the EU as the main roadblock to membership, and only 12.5% pointed to Ukrainian domestic factors (see Zenodo, Table 10).

Table 2: What is the biggest obstacle to Ukraine's integration into the EU besides the war with Russia? One answer

1. EU bureaucracy	23.7%
2. The position of some EU member states	33.8%
3. Ukraine's lack of reform	20.5%
4. Lack of political will among Ukraine's leadership	8.3%
5. Other (please specify)	2.4%
6. It's difficult to say.	11.4%

Similarly, the main drivers of EU integration were seen as being in Ukraine, not in the EU. The European Commission (13.4%) and the EU member states (8.5%) ranked well behind the integration efforts of the Ukrainian government (23.2%) and the Ukrainian people (21.6%). This estimate is particularly telling in light of the mediocre assessment of the Ukrainian government's activities in the field of European integration. On a scale from 1 to 5, their efforts were rated at 2.9 (Zenodo, Table 13). Yet, when or if EU integration slows down or is suspended, for whatever reason, the blame is likely to be directed at Brussels, Budapest, or Warsaw, for example.

Overall, the growing scepticism over the prospects of the EU membership is clearly shown in the levels of hopes of the EU membership. Although the numbers are not as bad as concerning NATO membership or attitudes toward US administration, hopes for a European future within 10 years have dropped from 73% in 2022 and 2023 to 52% in 2025 (Vicars 2025).

Ukraine's Self-Perception as a Security Actor

There is a consensus that the war is existential, and that strong armed forces are the main guarantee of any stable and secure peace. Ukrainians want to be part of the West for security reasons, support any realistic initiative, and are ready to compromise in order to protect the country's statehood.

Yet, as Western support is widely perceived as fundamentally insufficient and persistently lagging, the sense of self-reliance is growing. Well-developed plans for future security arrangements – designed for the period after a ceasefire or the end of the war – hardly meet Ukrainian society's needs during the conflict. This shaken belief in the West fosters a stronger emphasis on self-reliance. Ukraine sees itself as an actor and a subject – rather than an object – of international politics. Both the wider population and some civil society actors call for greater focus on developing Ukraine's own capacities and strengthening its agency. A majority would accept EU membership even without sovereign control over the occupied territories. Ukrainian society strongly supports cooperation with Europe and envisions its role in the future security architecture. At the same time, it stresses the country's agency: a strong Ukrainian military is viewed as the main contribution to European security, and Europe needs Ukraine as much as Ukraine needs the EU.

Our poll shows that 73.9% believe that Ukraine's own powerful security system is the country's best contribution to strengthening European security (Zenodo, Table 7). Overall, European security is considered to benefit substantially from cooperation with Ukraine, including through joint military capability development projects (53.7%) and participation in European military missions (36.5%). In addition, 41.3% of Ukrainians believe that Ukraine can become an important component of pan-European security structures, including through the deployment of Ukrainian troops in joint tasks (Zenodo, Table 7).

This resonates with public debates in Ukraine on the country's current and future role as the "shield of Europe" and the de facto Eastern flank of NATO, preventing Russia's aggressive expansionism. As multiple commentators and Ukrainian officials underline, including President Zelenskyy and General Valeri Zaluzhnyi, Ukraine – with its largest European army and its military experience in containing Russia – is seen as the key to Europe's future and a core element of its security architecture. The fall of Ukraine, therefore, would imply the fall of Europe, reinforcing Ukrainians' self-perception as a key actor and their belief in their ability to rely on themselves. Hence, if Ukraine cannot join NATO, "NATO should be built in Ukraine [without NATO]" (Zelensky 2023), albeit with the financial assistance of Western partners.

No True Dilemma

Recent government scandals, unconstitutional decisions, and the prosecution of political opponents and civil society activists have raised concerns that reforms may not be among the government's priorities. At the press conference held during the Ukraine Reform Conference in Rome, President Zelenskyy (YouTube 2025) stated his position very clearly: "All our budget in war [...] I emphasise it to the government and all institutions: [...] in a condition when Ukraine must spend money on weapons, defence, shelter... security, we have to think about cutting institutions. What we can, we will get rid of. This is normal. [This will help] to manage processes faster, cut bureaucracy and save money."

Such an approach has sparked major debate in Ukraine among reform-minded groups about how to address the problem during wartime and specifically of communication with the West. One group supports Zelenskyy's approach, which prioritises the war above everything else and avoids raising the domestic challenges (Pekar 2025). Their view is that raising concerns over domestic processes may alarm Western partners and divert attention away from war support. They fear that criticism of the authorities would be exploited by Russian propaganda, by Ukraine's opponents in the West among both the far right and the far left, and would ultimately trigger a backlash in military aid, accelerating Ukraine's defeat.

The alternative view sees Western pressure as the main factor behind reform progress in the country and as a key safeguard against democratic backsliding (Pekar 2025). As a result, many in Ukrainian business and civil society now fully support open discussion of the government's actions, both publicly and with Western partners. In the absence of elections and political processes, and with the monopolisation of power by a single group within Ukraine, Western pressure and its conditionality are regarded as the only available mechanisms at hand to address these issues.

This growing cleavage within Ukraine's civil society and reform-minded bureaucracy is compounded by the fact that Western conditionality carries little weight under wartime conditions,

while Ukraine's opponents in the West need little pretext to suspend aid or adopt a "neutral" stance.

Reforms constitute a key part of the Western agenda. The EU accession process, the EU Facility, and IMF benchmarks all have institutional change provision embedded into them. Like Ukrainian civil society, the EU and its member states also seem to struggle to strike the right balance between adhering to reform conditionality and avoiding measures that could worsen wartime conditions.

The polling data indicates that the Ukrainian public does not perceive a strong contradiction between the two approaches. Clearly, as argued above, it does not prioritise reforms over military aid. Yet it does not necessarily see the two goals as incompatible. Societal support for reforms remains high: nearly 30% of respondents believed that Ukrainian authorities are not doing enough for European integration (see Zenodo, Table 11). Ukrainians also place high demands on Europe to help hold their government accountable. Supporting anti-corruption measures is considered the most important policy instrument apart from military assistance (see Zenodo, Table 6).

Reforms and similar measures are systematically included on the list of what the West should be doing. An NEC poll (2024, 8) shows that 63% of Ukrainians welcome pressure from the EU and the US to overcome domestic challenges. On top of this, over 90% consistently want Ukraine to be a fully functioning democracy and to strengthen democratic institutions. This can be taken at face value: Ukrainians see multiple problems with bad governance and inefficiency that also hamper the war effort. In this respect, reforms are seen as part of the solution to the military problems and as a way to increase the country's chances of survival by tapping into its domestic capabilities. This is why better government accountability is also regarded as a security need.

Furthermore, the large-scale protests across Ukraine opposing the law that curtailed the independence of Ukrainian anti-corruption agencies highlight the urgency of the issue. Large-scale grassroots protests across the country, in which young people were a dominant force, demonstrated that Ukrainian society is ready to defend its European future by all means. Such a reaction clearly came as a surprise to both the Ukrainian government and the EU and indicates a strong domestic demand for pro-reform actorness.

For the first time, in May 2025, opinion polls recorded that the percentage of those pessimistic about Ukraine's future exceeded the percentage of optimists (47% to 43%). A total of 47% believed that Ukraine would be destroyed as a country in ten years (KIIS 2015b). A third of the population believed that internal divisions are deepening and that Ukrainians are heading towards a split. Those who are currently pessimistic about the country's future are also sceptical about Ukraine's ability to maintain social cohesion, more so than about fluctuations in Western support.

3 Conclusions

Public opinion in Ukraine is united and clear on the key issues. Even though Ukrainians are concerned about the future, they remain united in their will to fight. They call on their partners for less talk and more action. While they increasingly understand geopolitical limitations and are ready to take a pragmatic stance, Ukrainian society believes that the current assistance format is inadequate. The war of attrition, ongoing for more than two years, requires new approaches.

The European Union's ability to meet Ukrainian needs has improved significantly, yet it remains insufficient in the eyes of Ukrainian society. For the first time in history, the EU and its member states are responding to Ukraine's calls for military assistance – but the scale and speed of these deliveries remain inadequate. The geopolitical logic that once excluded Ukraine from European security arrangements has shifted: both the EU and NATO are now open to Ukraine's future membership, and the EU's role as a security provider for Ukraine is expanding. At the same time, it remains unlikely that the EU will meet Ukrainian expectations regarding the pace of accession. Although candidate status was granted under crisis conditions, the accession process continues to be merit-based.

Yet Europe's ability to meet public expectations continues to lag behind. Ukrainians are well aware of the need for European support, but they do not share Europe's self-appraisal of its extraordinary efforts, which are deemed insufficient. The growing mismatch between expectations and reality on the ground fuels disappointment and strengthens the demand for self-reliance. The ability to withstand the war against all odds has elevated Ukrainian society's self-perception. Increasingly, Ukrainians view their country as a leader of the democratic world and a key actor in the European security architecture during and after the war.

This raises the question of what the EU should do. Can it provide what Ukrainian society demands and needs? To a certain degree, yes: Ukrainians no longer expect miracles from their Western partners, whether security guarantees or direct military involvement. They understand that no European army will come to their rescue. What they expect instead is a credible and institutionalised commitment to weapons deliveries and financial support. The ad hoc nature of possible measures is not necessarily seen as a solution. However, if the answer to this question is unclear, European partners and the EU should be open and frank not only with the authorities but also with the Ukrainian public. Ukrainians have proved that they can withstand difficult realities, and these should be communicated directly to avoid future disappointments.

In any case, Ukrainian society understands the existential nature of the war: the enemy seeks the destruction of the state and the nation. This consensus binds society together and sustains the war effort. Yet once the war ends – whatever the outcome – a different picture will emerge. The end of this consensus will pave the way for new – and some old – cleavages, glimpses of which already appear in this poll. If Europe's role continues to be regarded as insufficient and if EU membership remains deadlocked, post-war Ukrainian society may turn to “sovereign” nationalism, viewing Europe not only with scepticism but also in a negative light.

Recommendations: Do more, do better, do faster – Ukrainians believe the EU is not doing enough

Deepen institutionalisation of Europe-Ukraine defence support: In addition to enabling weapons and defence materiel support for Ukraine, the EU should upgrade Europe-Ukraine defence

cooperation to a new level, including within ReArm Europe 2030. Given Ukrainian knowhow in ongoing developments in warfare, as well as innovations related to technology and production, Ukraine's inclusion in European capability projects could be made mandatory in projects funded by EU programmes. Deeper integration of Ukraine's and Europe's defence industrial bases can also be seen as an element of the so-called phased enlargement process, which enables accession countries to participate in and integrate into different EU policy fields before full membership. Such integration could also strengthen the credibility of European attempts to provide security assurances to Ukraine. The recently agreed bilateral security agreements between Ukraine and EU member states provide a solid foundation for deeper collaboration.

Improve communication and coordination: Ukrainian society needs a clearer understanding of what the EU can and will do. The EU should communicate directly and openly with the Ukrainian public about its actions, and explain more transparently the how and the why, in order to prevent any further increase in unrealistic expectations. At the same time, there are often differences between EU and Ukrainian communications on EU-related issues within Ukraine, including the accession process and reforms. Better coordination of strategic messages and narratives, as well as joint dissemination through various channels would facilitate public perceptions of EU-Ukraine cooperation. The EU should also not hesitate to speak out in defence of its EU core interests, such as progress on accession-related reforms. Clear and public communication on any setbacks in the merit-based process is necessary both for the EU's credibility in Ukraine and for making genuine progress.

Focus on opinion leaders and young people in particular: Alongside strengthened official communication efforts by EU institutions and member states, the EU should aim to increase people-to-people contacts in security and defence. A key aspect entails involving opinion leaders and particularly young people, who can engage the Ukrainian public and reach new audiences through various channels, including social media. Building on the successful experiences of the Erasmus+ programme and the European Solidarity Corps under the Juncker Commission, the EU could fund and train a European-Ukraine Youth Solidarity Corps, willing to engage in dialogue with Ukrainian young people both on social media platforms and also in person at retreats in the EU (and, should security conditions permit, in safer regions in Ukraine). In this regard, the EU could also draw on member states' expertise in involving citizens in national defence efforts through a whole-of-society and comprehensive security approaches. Such activities would also support the EU's recent efforts to strengthen its preparedness to face various kinds of crises.

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Annex I: Public opinion survey on robust capacity-building demands in Ukraine

As part of the InvigoratEU analysis based on the “3R” approach (reform-respond-rebuild), a public opinion survey on robust capacity-building demands was conducted in Ukraine in early 2025. The aim of the survey was to provide in-depth knowledge on citizens’ respective demands and to fill gaps left by other polls. In doing so, the survey generated data and findings for the interrogating dimension of the InvigoratEU methodology and the AVIS Scheme (analysis-visioning-interrogating-strategizing). In other words, the purpose of the survey was to substantiate (and also establish) research findings through public opinion data.

The survey questions were designed to capture the views of Ukrainian citizens on territorial, internal, and human security demands. In addition, the survey was designed to gather data on citizens’ trust in, and the roles attributed to, different partners in terms of capacity-building for security.

The survey was conducted by the sociological service of the Razumkov Centre, based in Kyiv, Ukraine. Fieldwork was carried out from 28 February to 6 March 2025. The survey was conducted through face-to-face interviews in the following regions: Vinnytsia, Volyn, Dnipropetrovsk, Donetsk, Zhytomyr, Zakarpattia, Zaporizhia, Ivano-Frankivsk, Kyiv, Kirovohrad, Lviv, Mykolaiv, Odesa, Poltava, Rivne, Sumy, Ternopil, Kharkiv, Kherson, Khmelnytskyi, Cherkasy, Chernihiv, and Chernivtsi, as well as the city of Kyiv. In Zaporizhia, Donetsk, Mykolaiv, Kharkiv, and the Kherson regions, the survey was conducted only in those territories under the control of the Government of Ukraine and where no hostilities were taking place.

The survey was conducted using stratified multistage sampling, with random selection applied at the initial stages of sample formation and a quota method adopted at the final stage (respondents were selected according to gender and age quotas). The sample structure reflects the demographic composition of the adult population in the surveyed territories as of early 2022 (by age, gender, and type of settlement).

A total of 2,018 respondents aged 18 and over were surveyed. The theoretical sampling error does not exceed 2.3%. However, additional systematic sampling deviations may have arisen from the effects of Russia’s war of aggression, particularly the forced evacuation of millions of Ukrainian citizens. The survey data is available on Zenodo website.

About InvigoratEU

InvigoratEU is a Horizon Europe-funded project, coordinated by the EU-Chair at the University of Duisburg-Essen (UDE) together with the Institut für Europäische Politik (IEP) in Berlin. The project, with a duration of 3 years from January 2024 until December 2026, examines how the EU can structure its future relations with its Eastern neighbours and the countries of the Western Balkans. The consortium has received around three million euros for this endeavour.

How can the EU invigorate its enlargement and neighbourhood policy to enhance Europe's resilience?

Our first goal is to investigate how to reform the EU's enlargement strategy in a new geopolitical phase, HOW TO RESPOND to other actors' geopolitical ambitions in the Eastern Neighbourhood and Western Balkans, and HOW TO REBUILD the EU's foreign policy arsenal in view of a new era of military threats (triple "R" approach) combining the modernisation and geopolitical logics of EU enlargement, leading to new data – e.g. a public opinion survey in Ukraine, a set of scenarios, an external influence index (Russia, China, Turkey), and a social policy compliance and cohesion scoreboard.



Our second goal is to elaborate an evidence-based, forward-looking vision for the EU's political agenda and institutional frameworks for co-designing a multidimensional toolbox (i.e. two tailor-made toolkits), together with InvigoratEU's Expert Hub, Civil Society (CS) Network, Youth Labs, Workshops for Young Professionals and Policy Debates in a gaming set up, which will result in context-sensitive and actionable policy recommendations for European and national political stakeholders and (young) European citizens in particular.

Our third goal is to deploy a CDE (communication, dissemination and exploitation) strategy aiming at recommendations from Day 1 to maximize our scientific, policy and societal impact in invigorating the EU's enlargement and neighbourhood policies to enhance Europe's resilience. Ultimately, InvigoratEU is a deliberately large consortium respecting the diversity of Europe and political perspectives; 7 out of 18 are from Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, and the western Balkans (North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia), complemented by our Civil Society Network of 9 representatives from all Western Balkan countries, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

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