

Ukraine's Challenge to Europe: The EU as an Ethical and Powerful Geopolitical Actor

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Ukraine is on the front line of the defense of everything we Europeans cherish: our liberty, our democracy, our freedom of thought and speech. Courageously, Ukraine is fighting for the ideals of Europe that we celebrate today.

—Ursula von der Leyen
President of the European Commission¹

No one knows better than Ukrainians that values must be defended, they must be fought for. For ten years, Ukrainians have been resisting Russia's aggression, defending not only Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity but also our shared European values. Since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion, Ukrainians have been defending the freedom of all of us.

—Katarína Mathernová
European Union Ambassador to Ukraine²

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*For comments, insights, and inspiration, we would like to thank Oxana Shevel, Rachel Epstein, Jelena Dzankic, Simonida Kacarska, Hilary Appel, Veronica Anghel, Grigore Pop-Eleches, Chad Bryant, Sophie Meunier, Kateryna Zarembo, Maria Avdeeva, Katarína Mathernová, Maryna Rabinovych, and reviewers and editors at *Ethics & International Affairs*. We would also like to thank participants of seminars and panels at Princeton University, the Kyiv School of Economics, Harvard University, Kyiv-Mohyla University and the American Political Science Association annual conference. We are grateful for the support of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Keck Center for International and Strategic Studies, and the Josef Korbel School of International Studies. This research was also supported by a grant from the National Council for Eurasian and East European Research (NCEEER) under authority of a Title VIII grant from the U.S. Department of State. NCEEER, the U.S. Government, and the Ukrainian government are not responsible for the contents of this essay.

Ethics & International Affairs, 38, no. 3 (2024), pp. 308–332.

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doi:10.1017/S0892679424000364

The European Union is navigating the greatest transformation of European security since the collapse of communism over three decades ago. It is also at a crossroads in how it defines itself. The challenge of helping Ukraine stave off brutal Russian aggression has raised urgent questions about the relationship among European integration, democratic values, and EU power. Is the EU an organization that caters to what is politically and economically expedient for member governments in the moment? Is it an organization that is easily manipulated and extorted by authoritarian members? Or is it an organization with an ethical North Star that fights for liberal democratic values and a rules-based regional order—and that helps put an end to Russia’s destruction of Ukraine? What are the consequences of these choices for the EU’s security and for its ambition to become a world power?

In the literature on European integration, the EU’s normative inclinations are often presented as being at odds with its geopolitical aspirations,³ as if power politics could only be practiced through the cynical coercion that is characteristic of authoritarian regimes.⁴ Broadly, it is assumed that the EU is suited to act as a civilian power, relying on trade instead of military power;⁵ a normative power, promoting a liberal order as “normal” in international relations;⁶ and an ethical power, proactively working to change the world according to its vision of the “global common good.”⁷ On the one hand, the slow-but-steady development of the EU’s military capabilities since the 1990s has often been criticized as diminishing its civilian and normative power and even destroying the essence of the EU itself.⁸ On the other hand, successive crises in the 2010s and a propensity for regime indifference in relations with some partners have pressured some inside the EU to adopt a more “pragmatic,” value-free approach to international relations. The EU Global Strategy of 2016, for example, was heralded as bringing a more pragmatic foreign policy, indicating that “the times of norms, values, and democracy-promotion are over.”⁹

The current war, however, has clearly demonstrated the importance of adhering to values in tandem with developing the EU’s military power. As Stelios Stavridis observed two decades ago about the shortcomings of the civilian and normative power paradigms:

Rather than emphasize the question of the promotion of democratic principles, the whole debate ignored the more problematic issue of how to promote these principles without ever having to use force. This is more than just a theoretical question because it assumes, though not explicitly, that democracies should not fight. Of course, history

and reason point in a different direction. What would have been a civilian response to Hitler's military take-over of Europe? It is clear that the question of how to use military power as part of a civilian power concept has not been studied sufficiently.¹⁰

Here, we challenge the “values vs. interests” dichotomy and argue instead that defending liberal democratic values is a key motor of the EU's existing and potential geopolitical power.¹¹ We pay special attention to EU enlargement as a tool for the EU to project power¹² through its liberal democratic values. Widely considered the EU's most effective foreign policy tool,¹³ enlargement has become the keystone of the EU's commitment to support Ukraine. As we explain below, if the conditions are right, the conditionality of the preaccession process can incentivize candidate states to implement far-reaching reforms that help build stronger liberal democratic institutions and improve human well-being across the continent. For candidates, membership offers greater security, stability, and prosperity; for the EU as a whole, enlargement offers a larger internal market and a greater geopolitical reach that boosts its economic and geopolitical power.

Ukraine's steadfast response to Russia's brutal war has propelled the EU to revive the EU's powerful enlargement process. Since the start of Russia's invasion in February 2022, the leaders of EU institutions have declared that Ukraine is fighting for European values, that Ukraine is all but in the EU already, and that the EU will stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes.¹⁴ In June 2022, Ukraine was recognized as an official candidate for EU membership and in June 2024, Ukraine was invited to open negotiations for full EU membership. These milestones marked a tremendous change of fortune for Ukraine's long, deeply held and hard-fought aspirations to join the EU. But this change has come at the price of a devastating, full-scale war with Russia. The Ukrainian government wants to hit the ground running, ready to adapt and implement the EU's *acquis communautaire* with record speed.¹⁵ Under martial law and under daily attack, the Ukrainian government is committing simultaneously to winning the war and qualifying for EU membership.

We argue in this essay that the EU has an opportunity to become a powerful geopolitical actor by anchoring European integration more firmly in liberal democratic values and embracing a values-based approach to foreign and defense policy, including the provision of military aid. The EU needs to reconceptualize European integration and, specifically, EU enlargement as inseparable from liberal democratic values. Liberal democracy is enshrined in EU treaties as a foundational value, but for the last decade or more it has been undermined by “pragmatic” dealmaking with

authoritarian regimes outside of the EU and attacked by authoritarian-minded political parties inside the EU. The latter was underscored by the strong showing of far-right parties in the European Parliament elections in June 2024. To face these challenges, mainstream parties in the EU need to cooperate closely and pull back from two ethical pitfalls in their internal and external initiatives: short-term expediency and regime indifference. Standing up consistently for democratic values will make the EU a more effective, prosperous organization while also strengthening it geopolitically on the world stage. In contrast, settling for short-term expediency and capitulating to a kind of *realpolitik* “regime indifference” at home and abroad will weaken the EU—as has been abundantly evident over the last decade.

The rest of this essay is divided into three parts. In the first part, we unpack how short-term expediency and regime indifference are weakening the EU and how the EU can chart a course away from these pitfalls. In the second part, we explain how a revived enlargement process can drive the EU to become a stronger and more ethical geopolitical power. In the third part, we explore how Russia’s brutal war and Ukraine’s determination to defend itself have spurred the EU to act—and why success in Ukraine is vital for an EU striving for greater geopolitical power on the world stage.¹⁶

ETHICAL PITFALLS THAT UNDERMINE THE EU’S GEOPOLITICAL POWER: EXPEDIENCY AND REGIME INDIFFERENCE

Since the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, it has often seemed that the heart and soul of the EU are at its periphery, where citizens of neighboring states are struggling to attain what longtime EU countries and citizens have taken for granted. It has also often seemed that crises are a key catalyst for deepening European integration. Few in Europe, however, expected that the heart and soul of the EU would be reformed and tested by a crisis such as we see today: a brutal European land war by a Russian regime that is openly threatening the EU and NATO. Given this collapse of Europe’s security order,¹⁷ EU leaders urgently need to chart a course for strengthening the EU as a defender of human rights and liberal democracy, internally and abroad. Whether EU pageantry will be matched with adequate military aid and political resolve depends in part on how EU leaders navigate the pitfalls that we turn to in this section.

While EU leaders responded to Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 with immediate, forceful declarations of solidarity and an

impressive surge of material help,¹⁸ the sense of shock, the situation on the ground, and the weakness of the tools with which the EU could help Ukraine all reflected the EU's damaging shift to more "regime-indifferent" foreign policies over the last fifteen years, such as those spelled out in the EU Global Strategy of 2016.¹⁹ This sidestepping of values in the name of "pragmatism" has delayed the institutional overhaul that can help EU foreign policy be more effective and consequential.²⁰ Regime indifference and expediency have also brought huge energy dependence on Russia and economic dependence on China that now limit the tools of EU governments and EU institutions in the midst of war. And a regime-indifferent approach has normalized the "territories in exchange for peace" appeasement debate,²¹ notwithstanding its obvious contradiction with a rules-based order, thus undermining it in Europe and beyond.

The first step is to turn the page on privileging expediency over democratic values and security, and on tolerating attempts to promote regime indifference within the EU. Choosing expediency undermines the EU's credibility at best—and puts EU citizens in mortal danger at worst, for example by enriching and emboldening Putin's Russia. Inside the EU, regime indifference sows deep, value-based divisions among EU member states and allows rogue players to hijack decision-making. Moreover, the double standard by which EU-candidate states are required to show that they have robust liberal democratic institutions, while member-state governments openly autocratize is deeply damaging to values adherence and undermines the credibility of the EU's conditionality: How can the EU insist on an independent judiciary, a free media, or a robust civil society if these conditions have been eliminated by authoritarian states that are members of the EU?

Deadly Expediency: Putting Profit and Power before Values

Over the last two decades, political and business leaders in many EU states have put power and profit ahead of security interests and democratic values in their dealings with the Putin regime.²² Ten years ago, EU member states all but brushed off Russia's invasion of eastern Ukraine and annexation of Crimea.²³ EU countries chose economic expediency and continued to pay Moscow increasingly more for oil and gas.²⁴ The conduct of the German government and the leaders of Germany's largest parties—the Social Democratic Party and the Christian Democratic Union (CDU)—was especially shocking. Even as Russia waged war in eastern Ukraine, Germany built gas pipelines that enriched and empowered

Russia while pumping corruption and Russian influence into the heart of Germany's largest political parties.²⁵ Out of step with its European partners, Germany chose to close down all of its nuclear power plants over the last two decades, giving Putin the opportunity to exploit the country's urgent need to import energy. As a result, Germany's political establishment refused to impose costs on the Kremlin.²⁶

The idea of (mutual) economic gain helped drive the commitment to political cooperation with Putin's Russia by EU leaders, all but bypassing other post-Soviet East European countries and pursuing a "Russia-first policy" in establishing economic and political cooperation, providing aid, and stimulating economic modernization, often limiting the ambitions of those "other" post-Soviet states. The French and German governments that led the process, together with other EU governments and representatives of EU institutions, refused to consider Ukraine a potential candidate for EU membership even after its unprecedented societal mobilization in 2013–2014 in pursuit of an EU association agreement and a membership perspective.²⁷ Instead, this approach supported reconciliation and dialogue with Russia as the *de facto* policy of the EU, even though the approach could be criticized as appeasement. Even after Russia's annexation of Crimea and the launch of the Donbas War in 2014, EU leaders sought to curb Russian aggression by asking Ukraine to accept limitations on its own sovereignty in tandem with deepening their own lucrative economic relations with Russia.²⁸ The "partnership for modernization" with Russia and calls for *wandel durch handel* ("change through trade") were justified with theories claiming that economic relations foster peace and boost bargaining power.²⁹

Whatever the theoretical arguments, some of which purported to have ethical undertones, the practical results were unequivocal: a stronger, more bellicose Russia, a weaker Ukraine, and a weaker EU.³⁰ Russia's invasion of Ukraine that began on February 24, 2022 revealed the harsh consequences of earlier European choices. Could the invasion of Ukraine have been avoided if European governments, especially the German government, had acted ethically in defending democratic values and regional security instead of succumbing to political expediency and the pressure to cash in on close economic relations with the Kremlin? We will never know, but it is certain that Ukraine and the West would at least be facing a less well-equipped and less economically resilient adversary if EU energy purchases from Russia had been kept in check in view of Europe's own security interests and human rights norms.

At the same time that EU member states sought economic benefits from commercial ties with the Kremlin, political parties sought to preserve their power inside the EU by turning a blind eye to the rise of authoritarian rule in Hungary.³¹ In particular, Germany's CDU and other members of the European People's Party (EPP) benefitted from having Hungary's governing Fidesz party, led by Viktor Orbán, in the EPP, so these actors shielded Orbán³² and the Fidesz government from scrutiny during their step-by-step destruction of liberal democracy in Hungary.³³ More than a decade later, Orbán's European partners began to take action, but it was too late. By then, Fidesz had consolidated authoritarian rule.³⁴ The power of Orbán is therefore a stark reflection of a dangerous drift toward relativizing liberal democratic values on the part of mainstream party leaders in Europe.

Resisting “Regime Indifference” in the EU’s Institutions

Fidesz governments have not been content simply to consolidate authoritarian rule in Hungary. Inside the EU, Orbán has sought to decouple European integration from the regime type of liberal democracy,³⁵ working toward an EU that has abandoned liberal democracy as a core value³⁶ and, instead, is institutionally indifferent to the regime types of its member states. In addition, Orbán has actively tried to export his brand of authoritarian rule to other EU member states and candidates to help him in the fight to strip the EU of its liberal democratic values and commitments. Since the 1950s, the quality of liberal democracy in EU member states has waxed and waned, perhaps reaching a nadir in Berlusconi's Italy, but these “experiments” were generally a domestic affair. In contrast, Orbán has tried to help bring to power as many ethnopopulist and authoritarian-minded governments as possible.³⁷ To this end, Orbán has sought to form powerful alliances with like-minded political parties³⁸ and style himself as the leader of Europe's ethnopopulist far right.³⁹ However, even though these parties have similar playbooks,⁴⁰ they disagree strongly about some policy issues, including aid for Ukraine.⁴¹ For now, they also disagree about who, if anyone, should be the pan-European leader of the far right. Nevertheless, in 2024, the challenge of ethnopopulist and culturally far-right parties to Europe's commitment to liberal democracy is growing.

Within the EU, the main reason that Orbán has substantial power is because key areas of EU decision-making—such as foreign and security policy and enlargement policy—require unanimity. This has allowed Orbán to weaponize

the threat of a Hungarian veto against his European partners. Orbán has used Hungary's veto to block EU policies as part of bargains he has made with the Kremlin and with other authoritarian governments.⁴² For example, since 2022, Hungary has consistently blocked EU aid to Ukraine as well as new sanctions against Russia.⁴³ More often, Orbán uses the threat of a Hungarian veto to force EU institutions to lift any sanctions they have placed on Hungary in response to the destruction of liberal democracy and the rule of law by successive Fidesz governments. Meanwhile, the presence of other ethnopopulist and far-right governments in the EU has prevented the use of Article 7 to suspend or expel Hungary from the EU. Such a move would require the unanimity of all EU governments except Hungary. Until it lost power in 2023, Poland's Law and Justice government stood ready to block such a move; in 2024, it is likely that Slovakia's and Italy's far-right governments would protect Hungary from Article 7.

Given the constellation of national governments and inflexible institutions in the EU, what is to be done about Hungary? There are no easy answers to this question. Russia's war against Ukraine—and Ukraine's brave response—have certainly put a spotlight on Orbán's destructive and unethical behavior. In July 2024, Orbán marked the start of Hungary's turn as president in the rotating system of the European Council by traveling to Moscow to visit Putin. This triggered a boycott of his presidency on the part of European Commission leaders and the EU High Representative.⁴⁴ Instead of moderating Orbán's extortion of his European partners and his assault on European values, Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine has caused Orbán to side more openly than ever with brutal authoritarian regimes, including Putin's Russia.⁴⁵ Calls to solve the EU's "Hungarian problem" have become more forceful. We also see the ramping up of efforts by other EU governments to isolate Orbán and reduce his influence.⁴⁶ Orbán may be bolstered by the strong showing of the far right in the June 2024 European Parliament elections. Then again, Orbán may overplay his hand. One ongoing showdown is over the membership negotiations with Ukraine: Orbán has threatened to single-handedly block Ukraine in order to please the Kremlin. Perhaps this will be a bridge too far, even for Slovakia and Italy, and EU leaders will use Article 7 to suspend Hungary, removing the Hungarian government's power to extort the EU.⁴⁷

Orbán's authoritarian rule in Hungary has already succeeded in weakening EU enlargement, the EU's most powerful foreign policy tool. How can the EU insist

on liberal democracy, rule of law, independent media, and strong civil society as conditions for membership when one of its existing members falls so far short? We turn now to the power of enlargement—and why it is worth reviving and deepening.

EU ENLARGEMENT AS A KEY BUILDING BLOCK OF THE EU'S GEOPOLITICAL POWER

The enlargement of the EU has been a great success as measured in human well-being, liberal democracy, economic prosperity, and international security—and these achievements are on display in vivid and compelling ways across Europe today.⁴⁸ Since the accession of Croatia in 2013, however, EU governments have let the remaining Western Balkan candidates languish in the accession process and, critically, have abandoned the merit-based approach for evaluating candidates.⁴⁹ Ukraine's drive toward EU membership stands to revive a meritocratic and dynamic enlargement process that would be a geopolitical and economic win for all sides.⁵⁰ By reviving enlargement, the EU can regain tools to promote liberal democratic states, prosperous economies, and inclusive societies while offering improved security, a more stable neighborhood, and the protection of EU rules for new members.

EU Membership as an Incentive for Liberal Democracy

What makes EU enlargement an effective democracy-promotion tool? In shaping domestic politics, the EU accession process empowers domestic elites who share the EU's democratic values at the expense of elites who target marginalized groups and attack democratic institutions to win and hold power. Under certain conditions, the prospect of EU membership and the conditionality of the EU accession process have tipped the balance of domestic power in favor of citizens, civil society groups, and political parties that embrace the normative as well as the material benefits of EU membership.⁵¹ Candidates for EU membership must meet tailor-made requirements in addition to adopting and implementing the *acquis communautaire*. These include the Copenhagen criteria, which stipulate the stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and the protection of ethnic-minority rights as a condition of membership.

In response to concerns about liberal democratic institutions in new member states and candidates, the EU has worked to make these commitments more concrete and the enforcement more rigorous, especially in the areas of rule of law,

democracy, and fundamental rights.⁵² During accession negotiations, the European Commission now puts the “fundamentals first,” prioritizing Chapter 23 (“Judiciary and Fundamental Rights”) and Chapter 24 (“Justice, Freedom and Security”) by opening them at the start of negotiations and keeping them open until the end. This means that a candidate’s performance in these areas is under constant review during the length of the negotiation process. Moreover, the Commission has put in place stricter conditionality with more specific and detailed intermediary benchmarks and greater monitoring to verify implementation. These include requirements that became known as the “Copenhagen-plus criteria,” which stipulate regional cooperation, the implementation of peace agreements, and cooperation with international institutions. However, these changes in accession requirements have led to a growing gap between the EU *acquis* that binds all member states and the special requirements that apply only to the candidates in the preaccession process.⁵³

In addition to well-specified requirements and strong monitoring and enforcement, the success of the accession process depends critically on the EU’s commitment to meritocracy in how it evaluates the performance of candidates in meeting EU requirements during the preaccession process. In recent years, we have seen the progress of candidates toward membership held hostage by the veto power of individual EU governments looking to score domestic political points, and by indifference on the part of the governments of Germany and France, which have looked the other way from these threats. This collapse of a meritocratic process has empowered autocrats and severely diminished the credibility, and therefore the power, of EU enlargement. In order to revive the enlargement process, the EU must return to a robustly meritocratic approach that has been destroyed by political expediency over the last two decades.⁵⁴

EU Membership as a Safeguard for Liberal Democracy

The image of the EU as a group of states united in their embrace of liberal democracy has, however, been deeply tarnished by democratic backsliding. Is the autocratization of Hungary a failure of EU enlargement? This is a difficult question to answer. The ability of Orbán to concentrate power so completely has been, in part, the result of a constellation of unique political and constitutional circumstances in Hungary.⁵⁵ In contrast, in twelve other postcommunist EU member states, liberal democracy has persevered—and incumbents who erode democracy are often

challenged by widespread mobilization and protest in the streets.⁵⁶ In Poland and the Czech Republic, for example, democratic institutions have withstood rule by authoritarian-minded elites, and these elites have recently been ousted by citizens and opposition parties dedicated to defending liberal democratic institutions.⁵⁷ To look at it another way, backsliding is not a postcommunist problem: two of the world's oldest and most celebrated liberal democracies—the United States and the United Kingdom—have recently experienced an assault on the norms and rules of liberal democracy that most closely resemble Orbán's "project" in Hungary.⁵⁸

Yet the EU could do more to incentivize candidates and member states to build and maintain robust liberal democratic institutions. EU enlargement works as a democracy-promotion program in part because the benefits of membership create incentives for ruling elites in candidate states to satisfy extensive requirements. Candidates must adopt tens of thousands of pages of rules and regulations (the *acquis communautaire*, discussed above) that EU member states have adopted since the founding of the EU—and then set up institutions to implement them. But most of these requirements are related to the EU's internal market. For decades, member-state governments have left the specifics of democracy to member states, limiting the reach of EU institutions and trusting one another to safeguard a reasonable local version of liberal democracy. In other words, EU member states have delegated decision-making and enforcement powers to EU institutions mainly in the economic realm. EU member states have agreed on relatively little "acquis" on how to structure liberal democratic institutions such as the judiciary and the civil service, and how they should guarantee liberal democratic tenets such as fair democratic representation, the rule of law, and an independent media.

As a result, in some key areas EU enlargement as a democracy-promotion project has come up short: EU member states had not agreed among themselves on standards of liberal democracy, preferring to forestall potential EU interference in their domestic politics. This worked when member states could assume (or at least pretend) that other EU member states were getting by with a reasonable, home-grown version of their own liberal democracies. As we explain above, the EU has attempted to compensate for this missing "democracy *acquis*" by creating additional requirements and benchmarks for candidate states to satisfy during the accession process. These apply, however, only to candidate states—and they are harder for the EU to enforce for practical and normative reasons because they are not part of the *acquis*.

For now, developing this missing democracy acquis is difficult given the need for unanimity. Then again, the erosion of democracy has put this issue at the top of the EU's agenda. Since EU integration is often deepened through crisis, it may be that the trifecta of rising far-right parties across Europe, authoritarian rule in Hungary, and military aggression by Russia will spur change. Most immediately, this would mean suspending Hungary both to eliminate its veto power and to send a strong message to candidates and member states alike that European integration is inseparable from liberal democratic institutions and values. It would also mean accelerating the work of developing a democracy acquis that embeds more deeply into EU law specific tenets of a robust liberal democracy, spelled out in greater detail, in areas such as the independence of the media, the freedom of civil society, and a level political playing field. Winning the war takes precedence but, to use an old turn of phrase, the EU accession process can put Ukraine and the EU on track to win the peace.

EU Membership as a Security Guarantee and a Tool of Geopolitical Power

Russia's war against Ukraine has put the security value of EU membership in sharp relief. As a policy choice, keeping Ukraine out of NATO and rejecting it as a credible future member of the EU is part of a chain of events that by 2024 has reduced many Ukrainian cities to rubble and caused unimaginable human suffering owing to Russia's war. For decades, even though their fears were often dismissed as alarmist and Russophobic,⁵⁹ states along Russia's border including the Baltic states and Poland have valued EU and NATO membership as a bulwark against an aggressive and revanchist Moscow.⁶⁰ Rather than asking yet again whether it was the nonexistent threat of Ukraine's NATO membership that triggered Putin's invasion, it is more relevant to reflect on a different set of questions: Would Putin have invaded Ukraine if it had been, like Finland and Sweden, in the EU but not in NATO? In response to Russian aggression on its borders, would Ukraine have been ushered into NATO with the same speed as Finland and Sweden? And if Poland and the Baltic states were not in the EU or NATO, would they have come under Russian attack by now as well?

What we do know is that Article 5 of NATO's North Atlantic Treaty and also Article 42(7) of the EU's Treaty on European Union include mutual assistance clauses—and that Russia has not yet attempted to test these clauses. The two organizations are clearly not equal in their defense capabilities and the scope of mutual assistance is always dependent on political will. However, both the EU and NATO

confer security assurances that can only be accessed through membership. For its part, NATO is also standing by. To mark the two-year anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Western leaders traveled to Ukraine's capital Kyiv to show their solidarity and support. Jens Stoltenberg, the former head of NATO, declared that "Ukraine will join NATO. It is not a question of if, but of when."⁶¹ While this is a dramatic expression of NATO solidarity, it leaves one to wonder how much more of Ukraine will be destroyed in the meantime.

Since the EU's security and defense policies are intergovernmental and evolving at a fast pace, the security commitments to Ukraine over the last three years have taken both bilateral and multilateral forms. As of September 2024, Ukraine had signed security agreements with at least sixteen individual EU member states⁶² and also with the EU.⁶³ Some analysts note that the proliferation of bilateral security agreements with Ukraine is problematic not only because they do not provide any iron-cast guarantees but also because their heterogeneity risks creating new divisions inside the EU, stymieing progress toward greater integration.⁶⁴ To lay solid foundations for strengthening the EU's security and defense capabilities, it is critical for the EU as a whole to take the initiative in deepening commitments to the security of Ukraine.

Importantly, the "Joint Security Commitments between the European Union and Ukraine," an agreement signed in June 2024, declares that it is motivated both by common values (defined as democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law) and by shared interests (peace, security, stability, and prosperity). Along with spelling out how the EU pledges to support Ukraine militarily, the agreement characterizes support for Ukraine's progress in the EU accession process as a security project: "The European Union underlines that enlargement is a geo-strategic investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity."⁶⁵ Indeed, the EU enlargement process offers a way for European governments and institutions to help Ukraine bolster its security while reconstructing its cities, supporting political reforms, and building a prosperous economy. All of these goals dovetail with the security interests of the EU and NATO governments themselves, meaning that both values and interests point toward the same outcome: EU membership for Ukraine.

The policies of the EU and Russia toward Eastern Europe cannot be represented as a kind of symmetrical fight for power and influence in the region, as the political values and strategies underlying them are incomparable. The driving force of EU enlargement since the collapse of communism in 1989–1991 has

been neighboring states knocking on the EU's door. The economic, political, and geopolitical incentives and rewards for neighboring states to join the EU are vast, including gaining a powerful seat at the EU table. EU enlargement is not driven by coercion or extortion—if anything, it is the EU that is the less willing partner. In the case of Ukraine, for decades prodemocratic forces have been asking—begging—the EU to recognize the state as a credible future EU member. While the first ten postcommunist candidates from Central Europe waited for three or four years after their revolutions of 1989 for this recognition, for Ukraine it has now been two decades since the Orange Revolution and one decade since the Revolution of Dignity, the largest civic mobilization in favor of European integration that Europe has ever seen.

For Ukrainians, EU membership symbolizes, even embodies, the long-term goals that they are fighting for.⁶⁶ Opinion polls show that Ukrainians are united in their resolve to defeat Russia and join the EU.⁶⁷ The enormous Euromaidan protests in Ukraine from 2013 to 2014 have a second name—the Revolution of Dignity—reflecting the twin motivations of people in the streets: opposition to the government's sudden decision not to sign the European Union-Ukraine Association Agreement and opposition to the corrupt, repressive, and authoritarian nature of that government. Citizens made a direct connection, reflected in opinion polls and in firsthand observations of the protests, that a European choice in Ukrainian foreign policy is directly related to the value-imbued choice of the more just, democratic, and inclusive country that must be built.⁶⁸

In response to the values and goals expressed in the Euromaidan and the Revolution of Dignity, Russia has been torturing and killing tens of thousands of people in Ukraine, kidnapping children, reducing cities to rubble, and attacking civilians relentlessly with missiles, bombs, and drones since 2014 and more severely since 2022. Against the will of the population, Russia is conquering Ukrainian territories with the goal of erasing Ukrainian identity by brutally forcing assimilation to Russian culture and values. Russia attempts to justify this by rejecting all Western liberal values and instrumentalizing its own set of profoundly illiberal “traditional” values as the basis of its rival “civilization”⁶⁹ that it seeks to impose on territories that it deems part of the “Russian world”—and beyond.⁷⁰ Scholars have argued persuasively that Putin is waging this war in order to forestall a liberal democratic Ukraine with a vibrant civil society, a prosperous economy, and an EU perspective.⁷¹ Instead, Putin wants to destroy and subjugate Ukraine as part of rebuilding a greater and even more autocratic Russia.⁷²

Given its role in empowering the Putin regime, the ethical imperative for the EU to help Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression is arguably greater than it was to help Central and East European states after the fall of the Iron Curtain. The United States, the UK, and France failed to stand up to the Nazis in the 1930s and the Soviets in the 1940s and thus set the stage for Stalin to gain control of Central and Eastern Europe.⁷³ EU countries, and especially Germany, have arguably facilitated and financed Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 in even more direct ways than the Western powers that helped set the stage for World War II and the imposition of Communist rule in the region.⁷⁴

UKRAINE'S DEFENSE OF EUROPE AND EUROPE'S ASSISTANCE TO UKRAINE

In the face of war, Ukrainians are showing great resilience and bravery. Since February 2022, it has become commonplace for European leaders to thank Ukraine for defending Europe against Russia and for fighting to protect shared European values. These have not been empty rhetorical statements. Ukraine is defending European security and European values in three ways. First, the Ukrainian people are fighting against a military threat from a brutal, revanchist Russian regime that has destroyed the post-Cold War security order, explicitly threatening all of Europe, most directly EU and NATO members near its borders. Second, the Ukrainian people's fight for the survival of an independent Ukraine and for the ability to decide their nation's geopolitical orientation and domestic political system contributes to safeguarding those same principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and freedom for the whole region. Third, Ukrainians at war see the EU as standing for human rights, political freedoms, and liberal democratic values.⁷⁵ A great majority of them, in all regions of the country, are fighting for a Western-oriented liberal democracy anchored in the EU and NATO.⁷⁶ Thus, they are standing up not just to Russian aggression but also to autocrats and would-be autocrats, including Hungary's Viktor Orbán, who are weakening the EU from within. All together, Ukraine's fight is challenging the EU to act more consistently with what it holds up as European values.

But as the winter of 2024 approaches, there is still a long road to travel and Europe's solidarity is more critical than ever. The Ukrainian military and Ukrainian civilians have been worn down by close to three years of Russia's ruthless attacks, struggling to survive despite shortages in air power, long-range

weapons, air defense, and personnel in a fight against a vicious, much larger, and better resourced enemy.⁷⁷ Russia has exploited restrictions on Western weapons and delays in U.S. and European aid to occupy and destroy new swathes of Ukrainian territory, terrorize Ukrainian cities with daily bombing, and damage severely, even catastrophically, Ukraine's electrical power generation capacity.⁷⁸ Between April and August 2024, Russia methodically destroyed power generation and transmission capacity through missile and drone attacks, risking that daily extended blackouts for households and businesses will grow into a humanitarian catastrophe by winter.

From the perspective of 2024, there are three areas where Ukraine's Western allies have so far fallen short in helping Ukraine fight off Russia's invasion. First, the scale of the aid to Ukraine by the EU and bilaterally by Western states has been relatively modest—whether as a share of national GDP or as a share of national defense budgets. In the end, assistance will be measured not by its size, but by whether it was enough for Ukraine to rout the Russian military from its territory. Second, the partners have limited the types and quantity of weapons they give to Ukraine. While eventually some weapons that have been withheld—from modern tanks to long-range missiles to fighter jets—have gotten handed over, the long delays and inexplicably shifting “red lines” have been deadly. For instance, the allies have provided only a fraction of the air defense systems that they have in storage, leaving Ukrainian civilians and civilian infrastructure across the whole country vulnerable and allowing Russia to blow up Ukraine's energy infrastructure.

Third, some partners, most importantly the United States and Germany, continue to withhold long-range weapons while stipulating that the weapons they do provide cannot be used to hit targets inside Russia. This means that while Russia strikes inside Ukraine at will, Ukraine has not been able to hit supply lines, aircraft, or military units preparing to attack Ukraine from across the border. As the casualties in Ukraine mount, some Ukrainians feel that they are little more than human shields protecting Europe's liberal democracies. In May 2024, President Zelenskyy argued publicly that while the allies do not want Ukraine to lose, some also do not want Ukraine to win, because they think Russia's defeat would be destabilizing. This situation highlights both the deep divisions among EU members in their policies toward Russia and the enormous security dependence on the United States on the part of the EU and European states—and these divisions and this dependence must both be mitigated in order for the EU to become a stronger geopolitical actor on the world stage.

Overall, we see a mixed result for the EU in the face of war. In those actions that show the promise and potential of the EU as a geopolitical actor, it is clear that defending values and promoting interests reinforce one another. In reviving enlargement as a foreign policy tool, the EU responded with lightning speed, offering what for decades was kept out of reach: recognition of Ukraine as an official candidate for EU membership and the near-term launch of EU accession negotiations. Deploying EU enlargement so rapidly in support of Ukraine was a strong response ethically and strategically. The EU has also imposed substantial sanctions on Russia and given indispensable financial and military aid to Ukraine, without which it could not continue to fight. EU citizens⁷⁹ and political parties⁸⁰ have largely supported aid to Ukraine, more durably than some expected. For their part, leaders of the EU institutions, including European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen, European Parliament president Roberta Metsola, European Council president Charles Michel, and EU high representative for foreign affairs Josep Borrell Fontelles, have been rhetorically exuberant in their support for Ukraine—and the pageantry of their frequent visits to Kyiv has helped amplify the EU’s commitment to Ukraine and to European values. While military aid has mostly been delivered to Ukraine on a bilateral basis, the level of coordination and solidarity among EU institutions, governments, and publics has been far reaching. Indeed, support for Ukraine may be the EU’s first “state-like” foreign policy goal; that is, the first publicly recognized EU foreign policy goal for which EU citizens have been asked, openly, to absorb personal costs.

Yet, even with all of this, Russia continues its brutal war of conquest in Ukraine. While concrete steps toward Ukraine’s EU membership are critical for boosting morale and laying the groundwork for Ukraine’s postwar recovery, these steps cannot compensate for shortfalls in the military aid that helps Ukraine liberate occupied Ukrainian territory. Ukraine also faces intense pressure from some quarters to engage in negotiations that sideline the principles of territorial integrity and sovereignty and reward the aggressor with further territorial aggrandizement. In our view, this will not work, even if whatever was left of the country was still promised EU membership. The only way to secure Ukraine’s sovereignty and to build the EU’s geopolitical power is through Russia’s military defeat on the battlefields of Ukraine. It would be deeply unethical and ineffective for EU governments to repeat, for example, the mistakes they made in Bosnia, where European preferences for negotiations helped delay U.S. military intervention and contributed to the deaths of thousands of Bosnian Muslims.⁸¹ A test of the EU’s potential as a

values-driven geopolitical power is to do more to hasten more direct Western military assistance to Ukraine, building consensus among EU members and pressuring the United States to provide more weapons and more aid.

CONCLUSION

A crisis of values in the face of war should drive EU governments to act. European integration has often been forged in crisis—and there is no question that Russia waging war and destroying Europe’s post-Cold War security order is a crisis, all the more so while liberal democracy is also under attack inside the EU. Will this crisis turn the EU into a more powerful geopolitical actor? To start, the EU needs a secure, democratic Ukraine as an EU candidate and, eventually, as an EU member. As part of reviving enlargement and amplifying its foreign policy, the EU needs to reaffirm that it is an organization of liberal democratic states, and that liberal democracy is at the core of how it understands its purpose and power on the international stage. The EU must stop letting expediency trump values and stop tolerating creeping regime indifference in its institutions. In tandem, EU leaders need to do more to sanction and exclude Orbán’s Hungary and develop tools to respond rapidly when democratic backsliding begins in other EU member states. With these building blocks in place, the EU will become a more powerful and ethical actor on the world stage, ready to consider further steps in developing its own military capabilities.

For its part, Ukraine will enter the EU dedicated to the European values of freedom and liberal democracy for which it has sacrificed so much. It will also make the EU more powerful by expanding the size and vitality of the internal market, by boosting the energy and agricultural sectors, and by bringing in unparalleled military expertise and innovation. While “negotiations” is a misnomer because any EU candidate has to accept all of the EU’s *acquis*, this does not mean that know-how will only flow one way.⁸² The experience of the Ukrainian military is in a class by itself. And Ukraine boasts, for example, strong state capacity and advanced digitalization of state services. Anyone who has traveled by train in Ukraine even during the war can observe that European and especially German railways may have a lot to learn from their Ukrainian counterparts.

Enlargement cannot win this war tactically, but strategically, it is invaluable, especially if EU members are focused on completing, not just sustaining, the enlargement process. At this turning point for European security, it appears

that many European leaders are coming to understand the urgency of helping Ukraine win the war. However, the power of far-right parties in Europe is rising, and some of these parties seek to undermine commitments to Ukraine and strengthen the hand of authoritarian and pro-Kremlin forces. If progress in the EU accession process becomes a policy that scholars study and EU leaders burnish to claim they are “doing enough,” while Ukraine sinks due to the ruthlessness of the Russian invasion, this will be a disaster not just for Ukraine but also for European security, European values, and the EU’s goal to become a world power. While theoretical debate and even fieldwork on Ukraine’s path to EU accession are appealing to many scholars of European integration like us, it is also critical to engage directly with the urgency of the war. The full force of the EU’s talents in the areas of reconstruction and integration cannot be effective until the war is over. Rebuilding Ukraine’s electrical capacity, for example, makes little sense if Russia is simply able to bomb it again. It is already fascinating for scholars to study the interaction of Ukraine’s twin projects of winning the war and joining the EU. But before practitioners and scholars can focus on reconstructing Ukraine and integrating it into Europe, adequate military aid has to be provided to Ukraine—and the war must be won.

NOTES

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- ⁴ For an overview of this framing in recent scholarship, see Carsten Nickel, “What Do We Talk about When We Talk about the ‘Return’ of Geopolitics?,” *International Affairs* 100, no. 1 (January 2024), pp. 221–39. For an example of this framing in critical geography, see Luiza Bialasiewicz, “What’s ‘Left’ for a ‘Geopolitical Europe’?,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 48, no. 4 (December 2023), pp. 826–31.
- ⁵ François Duchêne, “Europe’s Role in World Peace,” in Richard Mayne, ed., *Europe Tomorrow: Sixteen Europeans Look Ahead* (London: Fontana, 1972), pp. 32–47.
- ⁶ Ian Manners, “Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?,” *Journal of Common Market Studies* 40, no. 2 (June 2002), pp. 235–58.
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- ⁸ This trend was started by Richard G. Whitman, *From Civilian Power to Superpower? The International Identity of the European Union* (Basingstoke, U.K.: Macmillan, 1998); and Jan Zielonka, *Explaining Euro-Paralysis: Why Europe Is Unable to Act in International Politics* (Basingstoke, U.K.: Macmillan, 1998).
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- ¹⁰ Stelios Stavridis, “‘Militarising’ the EU: The Concept of Civilian Power Europe Revisited,” *International Spectator* 36, no. 4 (October–December 2001), pp. 43–50, at p. 45.

- ¹¹ “24 May | Salone dei 500—Palazzo Vecchio,” YouTube video, 3:03, from a panel presentation given by Nadiia Koval, “What Vision for the Future of Europe?” at the State of the Union conference in Florence, May 24, 2024, posted by EUI TV, June 26, 2024, www.youtube.com/watch?v=99UNRUo86VU.
- ¹² Milada Anna Vachudova, *Europe Undivided: Democracy, Leverage, & Integration after Communism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
- ¹³ The European Parliament, for example, describes the EU’s enlargement policy as “the single most effective EU instrument for securing peace, prosperity and fundamental values on the European continent.” Art. 1(b), “European Parliament Recommendation of 23 November 2022 to the Council, the Commission and the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy concerning the New EU Strategy for Enlargement,” 2022/2064/INI, November 23, 2022.
- ¹⁴ Among EU leaders, the president of the European Parliament, Roberta Metsola, for example, has declared that “Ukraine is Europe. Europe is Ukraine.” The president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, has declared that Ukraine is “fighting for the ideals of Europe.” Roberta Metsola, quoted in “Ukraine Is Europe,” the President: European Parliament, February 24, 2023, the-president.europarl.europa.eu/home/ep-newsroom/pageContent-area/actualites/ukraine-is-europe.html; and Ursula von der Leyen, quoted in “On Europe Day, President von der Leyen Travels to Kyiv,” European Commission, May 8, 2023, ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ac_23_2692. The commitment to support Ukraine for “as long as it takes” is officially stated on the European Commission website. See “Standing with Ukraine, Every Step of the Way, Solidarity, Resilience, and Commitment to Democratic Principles in the Face of Brutal Invasion,” European Commission, eu-solidarity-ukraine.ec.europa.eu/standing-ukraine-every-step-way_en.
- ¹⁵ In early 2024, the Ukrainian government reported the implementation of 88 percent of the *acquis* planned for the year 2023, despite the war, and of 77 percent of all the planned EU *acquis*. See Government Office for Coordination of European and Euro-Atlantic Integration of the Secretariat of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, *Report on Implementation of the Association Agreement between Ukraine and the European Union for 2023* (Government of Ukraine, Kyiv, 2024), eu-ua.kmu.gov.ua/wp-content/uploads/Report-on-implementation-of-the-Association-Agreement-between-Ukraine-and-the-European-Union-for-2023.pdf.
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- ¹⁹ The EU Global Strategy of 2016 could be interpreted as an attempt to “officially” move from an “ethical” to a “pragmatic” foreign and security policy, especially in relations with neighboring countries (calling for building internal “resilience” instead of enlargement) and authoritarian “partners” (applying “principled pragmatism” as an excuse for short-term gains from cooperation with problematic regimes). See Dijkstra, “Introduction,” p. 369. That strategy produced mixed results, in our view, precisely because it is impossible for the EU to reject a values-based approach, as this goes against the nature of the power resources of the EU. We can also interpret it as a minimalistic attempt to close the “capabilities-expectations gap” by lowering expectations. See Kristian L. Nielsen, “EU Soft Power and the Capability-Expectations Gap,” *Journal of Contemporary European Research* 9, no. 5 (November 2013), pp. 723–39; and Christopher Hill, “The Capability-Expectations Gap, or Conceptualizing Europe’s International Role,” *Journal of Common Market Studies* 31, no. 3 (September 1993), pp. 305–28.
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Abstract: In this essay, we bridge the gap between two understandings of the power of the European Union (EU): as a normative actor, guided by ethical principles and empowered by the internal market, and as a geopolitical actor, building its own military capabilities and ready to defend its interests through deterrence and defense. In view of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, we challenge the established "values vs. interests" dichotomy and argue that defending liberal democratic values is an essential foundation of the EU's existing and potential geopolitical power. We show how, over the last decade, opting for short-term expediency and capitulating to a kind of realpolitik "regime indifference" in dealings with authoritarian regimes at home and abroad have severely

weakened the EU and also diminished Ukraine's capacities to defend itself as it fights for these shared values on the battlefield. We argue that it is in the EU's strategic interest to strengthen its commitment to values-based foreign and defense policies, revive a meritocratic and credible enlargement process, and work with the United States to provide more effective military assistance to Ukraine in its fight for liberal democratic values and a rules-based European security order.

Keywords: European Union (EU), Ukraine, EU geopolitical power, EU foreign policy, EU enlargement, European security, Russia's war against Ukraine, liberal democratic values, democratic backsliding