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CEPS EXPLAINER

ONE YEAR OF WAR IN UKRAINE

Understanding what has happened and what needs to happen next

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SUMMARY

It has been just over one year since Russia began its brutal war of aggression against Ukraine. In that year, the EU has stepped up and provided copious amounts of support to Ukraine – economic and military, as well as providing a safe haven for millions of Ukrainians who have fled the fighting.

As the conflict has now entered its second year, this CEPS Explainer dives deep to analyse what has defined the first year and then expands on what the EU needs to concretely do in the second if Ukraine is to have any hope of triumphing over the invaders. This will require vision, courage and boldness from European leaders. The alternative if they fail? A rules-based international order replaced by a ruthless multipolar world defined by competing spheres of influence.

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A little over a year ago, barely two weeks before that fateful day, Thursday 24 February, when Vladimir Putin unleashed Russian forces on Ukraine, I concluded that the war was all but inevitable. I did not get there through careful assessment of the evolving situation on the ground and I certainly did not have any better military-strategic insights than other observers.

Instead, it happened at the opera. We saw a beautiful performance of Mussorgsky's Khovanshchina at the Bastille in Paris. But what struck me was not the music but the libretto: based on the 1682 Moscow uprising of the Streltsy, Mussorgsky builds a story around the opposition to the pernicious influence of westernising reforms and the efforts to bring Little Russia – Ukraine – back into Mother Russia's fold.

If one of the great Russian romantics felt this was a carrying theme for his opera I could see how Putin could build on it again a century and a half later to make the case for his perverted post-imperialist dream. Fear and suspicion of the West has been a constant in Russian discourse, and Ukraine has always held a special – albeit often ambivalent – place in that narrative.

So, Putin's rambling 2021 article 'On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians' fell on fertile soil. But paradoxically that same narrative also presented, or rather generated, a threat – if Ukraine really is an integral part of the historical Motherland then ordinary Russians might begin to wonder why they cannot enjoy the same rights, freedoms and relative prosperity as their southern brethren. That would constitute a fundamental threat to the regime.

A land grab in the east, a settlement in Donbas or the acceptance of the Crimea annexation was never going to be enough; modern-day Ukraine had to be destroyed and its inhabitants 'saved' from the corrupting influence of the West. A nation thus strengthened and emboldened could pursue its path to renewed dominance over lost territories, by consolidating its sphere of influence or even extending its borders further.

This is where the West – and the Rest – got it wrong. Limited aggression over disputed bits of land is commonplace, or at least not uncommon. Often fed by historical and/or ethnic grievances it can nevertheless usually be reined in and stalled, occasionally even resolved, through mediation and a bit of give and take where, admittedly, the giving is usually done less eagerly than the taking.

Not here. Putin's attack on Ukraine is almost unique in the post-Second World War period in that it aims to erase another country from the map and incorporate its territory and people into his own state (and, yes, he does indeed treat Russia as his own).

It may be that the spectacular incompetence of the Russian military and the defenders' ingenuity and extraordinary bravery have now saved Ukraine and changed the equation back into a more traditional, though very difficult, land-for-security trade-off. This is, however, by no means certain. There are no credible statements or other indications from Moscow on more limited war aims.

AS THINGS STAND, A CEASEFIRE WOULD LIKELY RESULT IN ANOTHER FROZEN CONFLICT, QUALIFIED BY THE AGGRESSOR AS A (PARTIAL) SUCCESS, FOLLOWED BY A NEW, GRADUAL BUILD-UP AHEAD OF A FURTHER, FUTURE 'SUCCESS'. IN OTHER WORDS, 2014 ALL OVER AGAIN. OR 2008. POST-IMPERIAL DREAMS DIE HARD.

The recent Chinese 'peace plan' got a lukewarm reception in Moscow, just as it did in Ukraine and the West. As things stand, a ceasefire would likely result in another frozen conflict, qualified by the aggressor as a (partial) success, followed by a new, gradual build-up ahead of a further, future 'success'. In other words, 2014 all over again. Or 2008. Post-imperial dreams die hard.

AN UNEVEN INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE

The initial reaction among Ukraine's neighbours and partners, and across much of the rest of the world was disbelief and consternation. Could this really be happening in the 21st century?

Once they realised it could, the mobilisation of support from Western partners has been impressive but slow. Putin's military blackmail, including nuclear, seemed to work. The delivery of Polish Mig fighters was an early victim - no blame on the Poles here - and one that would have made a big difference in that early stage of the conflict.

Almost every step since has been preceded by prolonged public handwringing, as most recently illustrated by the debate over Leopard battle tanks. Chancellor Scholz is right when he criticises allies of being slow to deliver but given his own excruciating display of indecision he is not well placed to comment.

The support has not just been military, however crucial that obviously is in the face of the overwhelming onslaught Ukraine faces. There was a rapid and generous European response offering temporary protection to millions of Ukrainians who fled the country and humanitarian assistance to many more who remained behind.

The significant macroeconomic support has also been instrumental in allowing Ukraine's state machinery and public services to continue to operate. Gradually, the succession of sanctions packages is having an impact on the Russian economy and production capacities, though not as quickly or effectively as they would have done in the absence of foot-dragging, opt-outs and exceptions obtained by Hungary (in particular) as well as Greece, Cyprus and others.

Less well appreciated, or downright misunderstood and misinterpreted, are the efforts to mitigate the effect of the conflict on the global economy. Of course, the sanctions put in place against Russian actors – public, private and individual – have had a wider impact, but not as negative as often claimed. Indeed, the Western energy embargo has opened up opportunities for massive savings in countries buying oil at heavily discounted prices, with China, India and Turkey being foremost among them.

The surge in food prices was caused largely by Russia closing off Ukrainian exports and holding back their own. It was only mitigated by the shipping deal negotiated by the UN and Turkey, and the so-called solidarity lanes opened up for Ukrainian grain exports through the EU. Russia's renewed threat not to extend the deal is provoking shivers across global grain markets. EU assistance programmes to the rest of the world have remained largely unaffected despite the pressure to mobilise resources for Ukraine; a beneficial effect of the oft-criticised rigidity of EU long-term financial programming.

For too long there was – and still is – the hope that a path could be found back to a negotiated settlement. Rightly so, but it must be a path *back* to a settlement, not the freezing of the current situation on the ground. Almost all wars end at the negotiating table, but the talks are not there to consolidate or legitimise the aggressor's position, and they must respect fundamental principles of international law.

The Chinese 12-point position paper puts welcome emphasis on these principles, notably including respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, though it remains vague on most other points except its own strong economic and trade interests reflected in the penultimate points of the document. The Ukrainian president is right to give the paper a cautious welcome – all serious efforts to promote an end to the war are to be encouraged – but equally right to emphasise the obvious preconditions on respect for Ukraine's sovereignty within its internationally recognised borders.

TO SAY, AS FOR EXAMPLE INDIA, SOUTH AFRICA AND BRAZIL HAVE DONE, THAT YOU ARE 'ON THE SIDE OF PEACE' IS AN OPPORTUNIST COP-OUT AND DE FACTO OFFERS COMFORT TO THE AGGRESSOR. AND COMPARISONS WITH THE WARS IN AFGHANISTAN, IRAQ AND LIBYA ARE ENTIRELY OUT OF PLACE – HOWEVER MISDIRECTED AND MORALLY OR LEGALLY DUBIOUS OR OUTRIGHT ILLEGAL, NONE OF THESE WARS AIMED TO ANNIHILATE THOSE COUNTRIES AND APPROPRIATE THEIR LAND, PEOPLE OR RESOURCES.

To say, as for example India, South Africa and Brazil have done, that you are 'on the side of peace' is an opportunist cop-out and *de facto* offers comfort to the aggressor. And comparisons with the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya are entirely out of place – however misdirected and morally or legally dubious or outright illegal, none of these wars aimed to annihilate those countries and appropriate their land, people or resources. And why are those who were – and still are – ready to criticise these invasions not willing to

speak out now against the brazen Russian attacks on Ukraine in 2014 and 2022, or on Georgia in 2008?

On 23 February, the UN General Assembly adopted another resolution, its third since the start of the invasion, reiterating the same fundamental principles, condemning Russia's aggression and calling on it to withdraw immediately and unconditionally. The voting pattern was almost the same as for the two previous resolutions, with very broad support, a significant group of abstaining fence-sitters and a very small group of predictable Russia supporters opposing the text.

Despite the abstention of several large players like India, South Africa and Brazil, as well as China, this represents an important manifestation of support for the UN – and Ukraine. Significantly, the resolution also emphasises accountability and the importance of independently investigating crimes committed during the conflict. This lends support to the investigation initiated by the International Criminal Court (ICC), as well as to a possible International Centre for the Prosecution of the Crime of Aggression in Ukraine (ICPA), both supported by the EU. It is to be hoped that President Biden and the US State Department will hold the line against the Pentagon's objections to sharing intelligence with the ICC and continue to support its work on Ukraine.

LESS APPLAUSE, MORE ARMS, MORE FUNDING...

As the first grim anniversary of the war has passed, the Ukrainians have shown extraordinary courage and resilience in the face of relentless Russian pressure. But the cost is high, inhumanely so for the people, almost unimaginably so for the infrastructure of a modern society. The country continues to bleed and requires daily urgent assistance. But plans must also be developed, and funded, for the long-term rehabilitation which will be needed once hostilities come to an end.

Military assistance must and no doubt will continue. Otherwise, Ukrainian forces will bleed dry, quite literally. The past year has taught us how much speed is of the essence.

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The EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, was right in Munich when he said Ukraine needs less applause and more arms. And Ukraine's partners can afford it – impressive as it is, the past year's support is still only about a third of what the US and EU Member States shelled out in the 1991 Gulf War. More countries need to cough up more goods, and quickly. Equally important is resilience and persistence, namely a steady supply – especially of ammunition – as this is as decisive as the delivery of new equipment.

Most of the military assistance remains national, coordinated by NATO, but – to the surprise of many – the EU has also come to play an increasingly important part.

The off-budget European Peace Facility, initially proposed to contribute to African and international peacekeeping and reluctantly agreed by Member States in 2021, has proven invaluable for mobilising rapid financing for equipment and training. So successful, in fact, that it will soon be depleted if not replenished. That will also be essential for continuing to meet expectations and obligations regarding cooperation on peacekeeping in Africa and elsewhere.

Beyond the immediate budget issues, this also raises questions about the EU's role in military procurement. Security policy development in recent years, including the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARDS) have been helpful.

But in a situation where the EU finances the development of defence equipment on budget and arms deliveries off budget, and where defence ministers have agreed in principle to the joint procurement of ammunition, one can legitimately ask if the defence exception to the internal market rules is still relevant. It has already been softened by the 2009 Defence Procurement Directive and also contested in a series of court cases, but there is a strong case for applying fully internal market rules on procurement and state aids to the defence sector. This would probably be the most effective way to rationalise and – over time – harmonise European defence capabilities and overcome the costly and unnecessary duplication of equipment between allies.

Planning for the longer-term reconstruction and rehabilitation of Ukraine is already well under way. A coordination mechanism is being set up, not dissimilar to the G24 structure established in 1989 to support countries emancipated from the former Soviet bloc. Funding will be key here, too, and cannot reasonably be accommodated by the EU within its current multiannual financial framework.

The confiscation and transfer of Russian assets – sovereign ones as well as those held dubiously by oligarchs – may provide part of the answer if the legal hurdles can be overcome. This should not come as a surprise to Russia. After all, Moscow exacted heavy reparations from Germany, Finland and others after the Second World War.

Nevertheless, it seems obvious that more resources will be needed, to cover the desperate needs in Ukraine as well as the EU's necessary continued engagement with other countries and regions across the world. If this is about defending fundamental values and the principles of the UN-centred world order, as it is, then they must be supported and defended in all parts of the world. It may be that such support will become

at least in part more transactional than EU assistance has been in the past, for better and for worse. But even for it to be transactional it must be there in the first place.

The forthcoming mid-term review of the EU's multiannual budget will thus be an important litmus test of Member States' real commitment to shoulder these responsibilities. The European Commission has already flagged that it considers that 'the unforeseen needs created by war in Europe are well beyond the means available in the current … framework' and that it will come with an ambitious proposal in the course of the first half of 2023. Let us hope it does, and that Member States have the necessary courage and vision to support it. A ritualistic mid-term review like in the past, with a bit of redistribution within an unchanged overall frame, would reveal a lack of ambition that would severely damage the Union's credibility in the eyes of its partners and would provide comfort to its detractors.

… BUT ALSO SUPPORT THROUGH ENLARGEMENT, INSTITUTIONS AND REFORM

The longer-term support to Ukraine will be undertaken in the context of its newly acquired status, together with Moldova, as a candidate country for EU accession. This creates a demanding framework for political, administrative and economic reform to which, encouragingly, Ukrainian authorities are already beginning to respond to. It also impacts the ongoing enlargement process with the countries of the Western Balkans, many of which are exasperated and disillusioned by the snail's pace at which they have advanced.

Paradoxically, in the short term Ukraine might actually need accession less than other candidates – with measures taken before and during the war, it already enjoys free movement for its citizens and almost full market access for its goods. Nevertheless, the political effect of candidate status, and of a sense of inexorable movement towards membership, at whatever pace, remains decisive.

This new landscape also affects how the EU itself views the prospect and effects of enlargement. Few, if any, of the current Member States believe it will be possible to bring in all candidates, including a large and relatively poor Ukraine, with a weak administration still plagued by corruption, without reviewing the structures – and funding mechanisms – within the Union.

The European Political Community (EPC), President Macron's pet project, launched in Prague last October might find a role here as a halfway house, though based on past experience, no one has wanted to stay very long – if at all – in similar halfway constructions. The EPC could also serve to pick up the pieces from the EU's so-called Eastern Partnership – with two of its six members now candidate countries, Belarus firmly

in the Russian fold and the three Caucasian states in various states of disarray and at loggerheads with each other it is high time to put that policy framework to sleep.

THE EPC COULD ALSO SERVE TO PICK UP THE PIECES FROM THE EU'S SO-CALLED EASTERN PARTNERSHIP – WITH TWO OF ITS SIX MEMBERS NOW CANDIDATE COUNTRIES, BELARUS FIRMLY IN THE RUSSIAN FOLD AND THE THREE CAUCASIAN STATES IN VARIOUS STATES OF DISARRAY AND AT LOGGERHEADS WITH EACH OTHER IT IS HIGH TIME TO PUT THAT POLICY FRAMEWORK TO SLEEP.

One element which has come into focus, again, even in the current circle of members, is the extent of decision making by qualified majority voting (QMV). The mutual confidence and respect on which the EU process is based has already come under strain on various past occasions and with increasing frequency, but the misuse of the national veto, often to obtain advantage on unrelated files (in particular by Hungary) has brought this close to breaking point. A significant number of Member States previously sceptical to extending QMV further are now openly in favour. Thus it is probably no longer a question of whether but when and with what safeguards QMV will be introduced in some sensitive policy areas like sanctions implementation and, possibly, some elements on taxation. Steps in this direction are even more necessary in light of the Union's future enlargement.

The first experience of implementing the EU's Temporary Protection Directive will hopefully allow the Union to draw some lessons and, possibly, find some answers to the vexed broader issue of managing the flows of irregular migrants. The temporary protection scheme has worked well but not uniformly across Member States. The rights offered under the directive have not been interpreted the same way in all countries, leading to imbalances, bottlenecks and abuse (not least by callous 'hosts' of the displaced). A lessons learnt exercise aiming at further harmonisation based on best practices should be rapidly undertaken.

The generous welcome under the temporary protection scheme stands in harsh contrast to the continued dysfunctional handling of irregular migrants from other countries. Soon to be eight years after the great surge of migrants in 2015 and the EU has still not made significant progress on a common system of managing migrants and asylum-seekers, mostly due to the usual suspects stubbornly wielding their veto. Although the absolute numbers of irregular arrivals are small (in 2021 they represented one tenth of all immigration and 0.05 % of the EU's total population), visibility is high and successfully exploited by populist parties across the continent.

Considering these failures, EU leaders regularly engage in internal blame games and exhortations to the Commission and EEAS to do more externally to address the root causes of migration – more easily said than done – and to increase the rate of return of irregulars with no reason to stay. Both require substantial cooperation budgets. The latter has also encouraged ever more transactional relationships: 'more for more' but also

increasingly 'less for less' with those countries that show a callous disregard for the fate of their own citizens. The most recent European Council conclusions on the subject, drearily familiar to similar texts over the past seven years, encourage the Commission to go further down this path, drawing on trade and other policies as well as the cooperation instruments.

Other internal EU policies have fared better. The war exposed the structural weaknesses of EU energy markets and pricing mechanisms as well as the gaping exposure of individual Member States to monopolist supplies, particularly from Russia. Market integration has continued apace, dependence on Russian hydrocarbons has been reduced drastically, common purchasing programmes developed and the RePowerEU plan has mobilised – well, redirected – significant funds in support of European businesses and consumers.

Crucially, the energy supply crisis did not throw the Green Deal agenda off track, despite some initial suggestions that it should be reviewed.

CONCLUSIONS

One year on, Ukraine still stands and is holding out remarkably well. It has received a lot of support – material and financial – from its friends, more than anyone expected at the outset or indeed at several later stages of the conflict. But this is first and foremost the result of the bravery, perseverance and gritty resilience of the Ukrainians themselves, their armed forces and civilians across the country. Sadly, they will need a lot more of it as the Russian onslaught looks likely to be stepped up in the weeks and months to come.

So, if Ukraine is to remain standing, its friends, near and far, must continue to stand with it. This will require vision and courage in our political leaders to explain to domestic constituencies why continued support, with significant economic consequences, is a necessary investment in the safety and security of all of Europe. It will require the boldness to pursue an ambitious European agenda to mobilise substantial additional resources, to strengthen further policy coordination, to improve and speed up decision-making processes, and to review and adjust the regional integration agenda to offer credible, renewed perspectives to candidate countries as well as the wider circle of neighbours.

Finally, to overcome the widely held misperception that this is an Old World fight between Russia and the West requires the resources necessary to demonstrate our continued commitment to global and regional development agendas alongside a degree of principled humility in reaching out to mobilise more vocal global support for the fundamental UN principles of sovereign equality, territorial integrity and inviolability of borders.

This war, waged by a permanent member of the Security Council, is an attack on those very principles which underpin the established rules-bound international order. That order may not be to everyone's liking. But it is hard to believe that those who question it would prefer a multipolar world of competing spheres of influence over the checks and balances, however weak, of the messy multilateral system as we know it.

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