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*Why Europe Does Not Withdraw from the Russia-Ukraine  
War*

**ABSTRACT:** This paper analyzes the geopolitical dimensions of the Russia-Ukraine war and the underlying reasons for Europe's sustained support for Ukraine, examining the primary international and regional perspectives. The study addresses the European Union's approach as a defense of the international order, state sovereignty, and common security, alongside the pivotal role of Germany in transforming its security policy post-2022. Concurrently, it presents the Russian narrative, which perceives the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as an existential threat to its geopolitical objectives and the "Russian World", as well as the Ukrainian perspective, which views the conflict as a battle for national survival and territorial integrity. Furthermore, the paper analyzes dissenting opinions within the EU, the skeptical stances of certain member states, and the potential impact of a

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United States “America First” foreign policy. The central argument posits that for Europe, this war represents a fundamental test of continental security, the credibility of NATO, and the defense of sovereignty as an established international norm. Ultimately, the conflict transcends a mere regional crisis, constituting an essential trial for European security architecture and long-term transatlantic unity.

**KEYWORDS:** Geopolitics; European security architecture; Russia-Ukraine War; NATO Enlargement; Rules-based International Order.

**SUMMARY:** 1. Introduction. – 2. Theoretical Framework. – 2.1 The Perspective of the European Union. – 2.2 The German Perspective. – 2.3 The Perspective of Skeptical EU Member States. – 2.4 The Russian Perspective. – 2.5 The Ukrainian Perspective. – 3. The US “America First” Perspective. – 4. Conclusions.

## 1. Introduction

On February 24, 2022, the Russian Federation launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, significantly escalating the conflict that had commenced in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea. This act was widely condemned by most Western states as a flagrant violation of the United Nations Charter<sup>1</sup>. The reaction of the European Union (EU) was immediate and multifaceted, encompassing economic sanctions, including

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations, *Charter of the United Nations*, San Francisco, 1945.

the freezing of Russian assets in Western financial institutions, as well as substantial financial aid and military support to Ukraine<sup>2</sup>.

Relying on the theoretical paradigms of structural realism, institutional liberalism, and the concept of a rules-based international order, this study elucidates the conflict through the diverse perspectives of the EU, Germany, Russia, Ukraine, the United States, and skeptical European nations.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

According to structural realism, states act primarily to guarantee their own security within an anarchic international system<sup>3</sup>. From this perspective, the European reaction can be interpreted as a strategic endeavor to maintain the balance of power on the continent<sup>4</sup>. Conversely, institutional liberalism emphasizes the critical role of international institutions and established norms in maintaining global stability and mitigating conflict<sup>5</sup>.

### 2.1. The Perspective of the European Union

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<sup>2</sup> European Commission, *European Council Conclusions on Ukraine*, Brussels, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> K.N. WALTZ, *Theory of International Politics*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1979.

<sup>4</sup> J.J. MEARSHEIMER, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> G.J. IKENBERRY, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2001; R.O. KEOHANE, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1984.

The EU views Russian aggression as a direct threat to the liberal international order and to the fundamental principle of the non-alteration of borders by force. Economic sanctions and comprehensive support for Ukraine are designed to degrade Russian military capacities and preserve European stability<sup>6</sup>. The European Union is fundamentally predicated upon the respect for state sovereignty and territorial integrity; therefore, it perceives the support for Ukraine as an essential defense of international rules.

The full-scale war commenced when Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022. Consequently, many Eastern European states, notably Poland and the Baltic nations, feel acutely threatened by Russian revisionist policy<sup>7</sup>. The prevailing perception is that if Ukraine were to fall, Russian coercive pressure upon these states would inevitably increase. For numerous European countries, this scenario is regarded as a direct and imminent threat to the security of the entire continent. The ability of a state to alter borders by force fundamentally endangers the stability established in the post-World War II order<sup>8</sup>. This conflict is not solely a territorial dispute; it is a profound challenge to European security architecture and international order. Europe is thus confronted with a stark choice between withdrawal and the active preservation of long-term stability.

## 2.2 The German Perspective

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<sup>6</sup> European Commission, *EU Sanctions against Russia*, Brussels, 2023.

<sup>7</sup> Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, *Russian Threats to NATO's Eastern Flank: Scenarios, Strategy, and Policy for European Security*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard Kennedy School, 2026.

<sup>8</sup> Reuters, *On NATO's Eastern Flank, US Policy Shift Stokes Security Fears*, 2025.

Germany views the war as a severe threat to the post-Cold War European security order. A Russian victory achieved through military force possesses the potential to destabilize the entire continent. The declaration of the *Zeitenwende* (historical turning point) by Chancellor Olaf Scholz in 2022 represented a paradigm shift in German security and foreign policy<sup>9</sup>. Germany subsequently increased its defense budget and systematically reduced its energy dependence on Russia, thereby altering its traditional paradigm of diplomatic engagement and economic interdependence with Moscow.

As Europe's largest economy, Germany plays an indispensable role in the collective European response. Prior to the war, Germany was highly dependent on Russian natural gas, primarily facilitated by the Nord Stream pipelines. Post-2022, Germany decisively severed this energy dependence, drastically reduced gas supplies from Russia, and accelerated investments in renewable energy infrastructure<sup>10</sup>.

Germany perceives the war as a critical threat to European security, yet it continuously attempts to balance robust support for Ukraine with the strategic imperative of avoiding direct military escalation. In response, NATO has strengthened its forward presence in Eastern Europe to guarantee strategic deterrence. From a realist perspective, support for Ukraine is essential to maintaining the balance of power in Europe. As Mearsheimer argues, great powers inherently seek regional dominance, a dynamic that would be significantly exacerbated if Russia were to establish control over Ukraine.

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<sup>9</sup> B. MAHLI, *Zeitenwende: Germany's Strategic Shift in Foreign and Security Policy*, Rabat, Policy Center for the New South, 2024.

<sup>10</sup> International Energy Agency, *Germany 2025 Energy Policy Review*, Paris, IEA, 2025.

### 2.3 The Perspective of Skeptical EU Member States

Within the EU, the stance on the conflict is not entirely uniform. Aligning with structural realism, which posits that states seek security and prioritize national interests in an anarchic system<sup>11</sup>, certain member states have exhibited skepticism towards unconditional support for Ukraine or have maintained more conciliatory rhetoric towards Russia.

Hungary, under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, presents the most prominent case of divergence. The war is frequently framed as a broader conflict between Russia and the West, rather than a direct threat to Hungary. The stated priority is the avoidance of escalation and the maintenance of domestic economic stability. Historically, Hungary has maintained a high degree of energy dependence on Russia<sup>12</sup>. Orbán frequently contends that the sanctions regime inflicts greater damage on the European economy than on the Russian one. Consequently, Hungary has periodically delayed or obstructed EU decisions regarding financial and military aid to Ukraine<sup>13</sup>.

Slovakia, particularly following the return to power of Prime Minister Robert Fico, has adopted a more skeptical posture. This includes stated opposition to further state-sponsored arms deliveries, an emphasis on the necessity for immediate peace negotiations, and critical rhetoric directed towards harsh economic sanctions<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> K.N. Waltz, op. cit.

<sup>12</sup> Freedom House, *Nations in Transit Report – Hungary (2023–2024)*, Washington D.C., Freedom House, 2024.

<sup>13</sup> European Council on Foreign Relations, *Keeping Friends Closer: Why the EU Should Address New Geoeconomic Realities and Get Its Neighbours Back in the Fold*, London, ECFR, 2023.

<sup>14</sup> Kyiv Post, *Fico Vowed 'Not a Single Bullet to Ukraine' – but Slovakia Is Selling More Arms Than Ever*, 13 January 2026.

Bulgaria has experienced significant internal political divisions regarding the conflict. While the official state policy has generally aligned with the EU consensus, certain political factions maintain a more pro-Russian stance, driven by historical, cultural, and energy-related factors<sup>15</sup>.

Austria maintains a constitutional status of military neutrality. Although it supports the EU sanctions regime, it exercises greater caution in military matters and deliberately avoids escalatory rhetoric<sup>16</sup>. For Austria, national economic interests remain a paramount priority, coupled with persistent concerns regarding the impact of sanctions on inflation, energy security, and industrial output. There is a pronounced fear of military escalation, particularly the potential for direct NATO involvement, leading to an emphasis on the necessity for diplomatic negotiations over continued militarization.

Despite these internal divergences, no EU member state has officially recognized the Russian annexation of Ukrainian territories. Even the more skeptical nations do not openly endorse the invasion; rather, they advocate for dialogue and negotiations while simultaneously criticizing the specific modalities and scale of the EU's collective response.

## 2.4 The Russian Perspective

According to President Vladimir Putin<sup>17</sup>, the eastward expansion of NATO constitutes an existential threat to Russian national security. From

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<sup>15</sup> Associated Press, *Bulgaria's Government Survives a No-Confidence Vote Brought by a Pro-Russia Political Party*, 3 April 2025.

<sup>16</sup> E. RUBINSON, *Holding the Line: Austrian Neutrality in the Shadow of the War in Ukraine*, in *Cooperation and Conflict*, 2025.

<sup>17</sup> V. Putin, *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*, Moscow, Kremlin, 2021.

this perspective, the conflict is framed as a broader confrontation with the “collective West.” The Kremlin asserts that NATO’s expansion following the end of the Cold War represents a direct and unacceptable threat<sup>18</sup>. Russia argues that Western leaders had previously provided assurances that NATO would not expand towards Russian borders, a premise that was subsequently contradicted by the accession of numerous Eastern European countries<sup>19</sup>.

Consequently, Ukraine’s potential integration into NATO is viewed by Moscow as an absolute “red line”. Nevertheless, most international legal and political analyses categorize the invasion as an unprovoked act of aggression<sup>20</sup>. For the Russian Federation, Ukraine is perceived not merely as a neighboring state, but as a vital historical and strategic zone. Putin has explicitly stated that Russians and Ukrainians are historically “one single people” and that Ukraine constitutes an integral part of the Russian historical and cultural space<sup>21</sup>. From this viewpoint, Ukraine’s geopolitical orientation towards the EU and NATO is interpreted as an artificial separation orchestrated by Western powers.

The events of 2014 serve as a critical prelude to the current conflict. Russia characterizes the ouster of the pro-Russian president in Kyiv during the Euromaidan protests as a Western-backed *coup d’état*. Following these events, Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula and provided military support to separatist factions in the Donbas region, utilizing the justification of protecting the ethnic Russian and Russian-speaking

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<sup>18</sup> Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *Can Russia and NATO Come to an Agreement?*, Washington D.C., Carnegie Endowment, 2021.

<sup>19</sup> M.E. SAROTTE, *Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of Post-Cold War Stalemate*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2021.

<sup>20</sup> L. FREEDMAN, *Ukraine and the Art of Strategy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019.

<sup>21</sup> V. Putin, *op. cit.*

populations<sup>22</sup>. The developments after the “Orange Revolution” and the Euromaidan protests solidified the narrative of an independent Ukraine pursuing a Western trajectory (NATO and EU integration). This dynamic compelled Russia to adopt a narrative wherein a primary objective of its military intervention is the protection of the Russian-speaking populace in eastern Ukraine, alleging systemic discrimination by the central government in Kyiv<sup>23</sup>.

In summary, the Russian perspective frames the war as a defensive necessity and a reactive measure against Western geopolitical expansion, whereas most Western nations condemn it as an illegal aggression against a sovereign state<sup>24</sup>. The Russian narrative elevates the conflict beyond a bilateral war with Ukraine, presenting it as a civilizational confrontation with the “united West” (comprising the USA, EU, and NATO). From this standpoint, Russia asserts it is defending its sovereignty against a unipolar world order dominated by the West, particularly the United States. Russia views this as an existential conflict determining its future influence and security. A Russian withdrawal would be perceived as a catastrophic strategic and political defeat for the Kremlin, severely undermining Putin’s domestic authority.

## 2.5 The Ukrainian Perspective

On February 24, 2022, Russia initiated a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, fundamentally violating state sovereignty and the core tenets of the United

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<sup>22</sup> BBC News, *Ukraine Crisis: Timeline*, 2014.

<sup>23</sup> Council on Foreign Relations, *Ukraine Conflict Explained*, New York, CFR, 2022.

<sup>24</sup> NATO, *Relations with Ukraine*, Brussels, NATO, 2022–2023.

Nations Charter<sup>25</sup>. Ukraine asserts that, as a sovereign and independent state, it possesses the inherent right to determine its own foreign policy, including integration into NATO and the EU. From this perspective, Russia holds no legitimate veto power over Ukraine's geopolitical orientation. The European Union responded to the invasion with comprehensive economic sanctions and substantial military assistance<sup>26</sup>.

Ukraine perceives the war as an existential battle for national survival and the defense of its sovereign territory. Ukrainian national identity and its definitive orientation towards European integration have been profoundly strengthened in the aftermath of the 2022 invasion. In direct contradiction to the Russian historical narrative, Ukrainians emphasize their distinct national language, culture, and historical trajectory. The war has unequivocally solidified the sense of Ukrainian identity and accelerated its definitive distancing from Russian influence.

From a liberal institutionalist perspective, the international order is fundamentally predicated upon established norms and institutions. Russian aggression represents a direct and profound challenge to these norms. The events of 2014 in Ukraine, characterized by pro-European protests and the subsequent flight of the pro-Russian president, are viewed domestically and by Western observers as a popular democratic revolution against systemic corruption and authoritarianism, rather than an unconstitutional "coup". Consequently, the annexation of Crimea and the instigation of the war in the Donbas are recognized as the initial phases of Russian aggression. The implementation of economic sanctions is intended to preserve and enforce the liberal international order<sup>27</sup>. Ukraine views the multifaceted aid provided by European nations and the United

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<sup>25</sup> United Nations, op. cit.

<sup>26</sup> European Commission, op. cit., 2022.

<sup>27</sup> European Commission, op. cit., 2023.

States as vital for its continued survival. President Volodymyr Zelensky has consistently framed the conflict as a defense not only of Ukraine's territorial integrity but also of the broader international rules-based order and democratic values within Europe. From the Ukrainian viewpoint, the 2022 invasion is an unprovoked, illegal aggression against a sovereign state, rendering the war a fundamental battle for its very existence.

Essentially, from the Ukrainian perspective, this is a war of national liberation and self-defense against a revanchist power seeking to forcibly return Ukraine to its sphere of influence. Ukraine's refusal to capitulate or withdraw is predicated on several critical factors: first, the acute apprehension that any territorial concessions would merely invite further Russian aggression; second, the conviction that the permanent loss of sovereign territory constitutes a profound historical injustice and a severe violation of international law; and third, the overwhelming support of the Ukrainian public for the continuation of armed resistance.

### **3. The US “America First” Perspective**

The “America First” political doctrine, heavily associated with Donald Trump, emphasizes that the internal interests of the United States must take absolute precedence. From this perspective, the US should not bear the disproportionate financial and military burden of supporting Ukraine<sup>28</sup>. Proponents of this view argue that Europe must assume significantly greater responsibility for its own continental security. Trump and aligned political figures have frequently criticized the extensive aid

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<sup>28</sup> Air & Space Forces Magazine, *Republican Division over Ukraine Aid in Defense Budget Debate*, 2025.

packages allocated to Ukraine, contending that the conflict imposes excessive costs on American taxpayers and demanding more rigorous oversight of military assistance funds<sup>29</sup>.

During his presidency, Trump consistently criticized NATO member states for failing to meet the alliance's target of allocating 2% of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to defense spending. He has articulated the position that allies who fail to meet their financial obligations should not expect automatic military protection, and that the US should cease functioning as an "unconditional guarantor" of European security.

Furthermore, Trump has historically maintained a less confrontational rhetorical posture towards Russia compared to the administration of Joe Biden. He has asserted that the war would not have occurred under his leadership<sup>30</sup> and has suggested that his administration could rapidly negotiate a peace settlement. Trump has indicated a strong preference for a swift resolution through diplomatic negotiations, implying that the conflict is being unnecessarily prolonged<sup>31</sup>. Critics of this approach argue that such a strategy would inevitably entail coercing Ukraine into accepting significant territorial concessions, whereas supporters maintain it is necessary to mitigate financial costs and reduce the risk of broader military escalation<sup>32</sup>.

In essence, the perspective associated with the "America First" doctrine is characterized by a prioritization of American national interests over expansive global commitments; profound skepticism towards long-term military and financial entanglements abroad; sustained pressure on

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<sup>29</sup> Reuters, *Trump and Republicans Question Ukraine Aid*, 2024.

<sup>30</sup> The Guardian, *Trump Claims Ukraine War Would Not Have Happened under His Watch*, 2025.

<sup>31</sup> Politico, *Trump Wants Peace in Ukraine*, 2025.

<sup>32</sup> AP News, *Trump Urges Ukraine to Negotiate Quickly*, 2025.

European nations to assume greater responsibility for their own defense; and a distinct preference for rapid diplomatic negotiations over a protracted strategy aimed at the long-term strategic weakening of Russia.

#### **4. Conclusions**

This analysis demonstrates that the Russia-Ukraine conflict encompasses multidimensional aspects that profoundly affect continental security, economic stability, political identity, and the global institutional order. Europe is currently facing historic, paradigm-defining choices that will dictate its security architecture for decades to come. The sustained support for Ukraine is not merely a reactive measure to an acute crisis; rather, it is an integral component of a comprehensive strategy designed to prevent broader regional destabilization and to maintain the internal political cohesion of the European Union.

A withdrawal of support would critically undermine the credibility of both the EU and NATO, establish a highly destabilizing precedent regarding the inviolability of borders, and fundamentally weaken the European security architecture. Consequently, robust support for Ukraine is perceived as a necessary strategic investment in the long-term stability of the continent. The Russia-Ukraine war represents a fundamental clash over the future of the European security architecture and the viability of the rules-based international order.

Europe does not withdraw because the maintenance of the balance of power, the defense of established international norms, and the preservation of regional stability constitute vital, non-negotiable strategic interests. Capitulation or withdrawal would severely degrade NATO's

deterrent credibility and create a global precedent that encourages further revanchist aggression. For these reasons, sustained European engagement must be understood as an essential, long-term investment in the security, stability, and normative foundation of the continent.

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