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### Why Europe Should Follow France's Lead on Ukraine

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Speaking in Prague in early March, Emmanuel Macron warned Europeans that now was not the time to be “cowardly.” This comment came just a week after a conference on Ukraine in Paris, during which the French president told a reporter that the prospect of sending Western troops to Ukraine should not be “excluded.” Europeans, he said, will “do everything that we must so that Russia does not win.” The remarks proved controversial and irritated several allies. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz pushed back, distancing himself from Macron’s pronouncements. Leaders in Greece, Spain, Sweden, and the United States also clarified that sending troops to Ukraine was not on the table. In a live interview on national TV ten days later, Macron doubled down, saying that “the security of Europe and France was at stake in Ukraine” and that “if the situation should deteriorate, we would be ready to make sure that Russia never wins that war.”

Macron's hawkish pro-Ukraine message arrives at a time when Kyiv's difficulties are piling up. Russian pressure on the battlefield is increasing. Ukraine's military is dangerously short on personnel and munitions, while Russian disinformation campaigns and cyberattacks are multiplying. Europeans are feeling war fatigue; a recent survey by the European Council on Foreign Relations found that only one in ten think that Ukraine will achieve a decisive military victory, while a plurality (37 percent) believe the war will end in a "compromise settlement." In the United States, Donald Trump, the Republican presidential nominee, has said that if he is reelected, he would tell Russia to do "whatever the hell they want" to NATO allies that don't increase defense spending to the NATO target of two percent of GDP.

Two years ago, when Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, France was the odd country out, still trying to engage Moscow in the hope of restraining Russian President Vladimir Putin. Now, France is one of the last bastions of unyielding support for Ukraine. Macron has welcomed Kyiv's bids to join the European Union and NATO, and France has agreed, along with the United Kingdom, to send long-range missiles to Ukraine. Last month, the French National Assembly and Senate approved a bilateral security cooperation agreement with Ukraine, committing France to support Ukraine militarily for the next ten years, or until it joins NATO. And now, the French president wants Putin to know that NATO's direct military involvement on the ground in Ukraine "should not be ruled out."

Despite the discomfort Macron's recent comments have produced, France's steadfast support for Ukraine may prove to be a game-changer. Macron is among the most experienced European leaders and one of the few who offer a geopolitical vision for Europe. French support for EU enlargement will accelerate the institutional and policy reforms needed to bring new members into the union. Ahead of the European parliamentary elections, the European Council on Foreign Relations poll showed that a plurality of French voters remain supportive of Ukraine's fight to regain all its territory: a welcome contrast to the pessimism in countries such as Greece, Hungary, and Italy, where majorities wish to see their leaders "push Ukraine toward negotiating" with Moscow.

France's newfound assertiveness springs from a change in its leadership's geopolitical perspective; Macron has grown comfortable with the idea of a bigger Europe playing a bigger role on the world stage. The French president's posture is also shaped by a sense of urgency over a rapidly deteriorating situation in Ukraine, which could prove to be an existential threat to Europe.

Macron understands that if the Kremlin is not deterred in Ukraine, others will fall victim to its imperialist designs. Other European governments should follow France's lead. They must signal to Moscow that they are prepared to do whatever it takes to check Russian aggression on the continent. To that end, they must clear a path for Ukraine to join the EU.

## **PIVOT POINT**

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Four days into Russia's invasion of his country, President Volodymyr Zelensky signed an official request for Ukraine to join the European Union. At the time, the move was viewed as symbolic, unlikely to become reality any time soon. Charles Michel, the president of the European Council, poured cold water on the request, noting that "there are different opinions and sensibilities" on enlargement among current members. For France, EU accession felt secondary to the stakes of the war. On that day, the former French president, François Hollande, spoke for many when he remarked that "the urgency is not to get Ukraine into the European Union, but to get Russia out of Ukraine."

But by the summer of 2022, as Ukrainian forces successfully pushed back against the Russian army, the idea of a strong, independent, war-ready Ukraine en route to EU membership began to seem more plausible. By then, France's conciliatory approach toward Putin had become untenable. Macron's attempts to play mediator between Moscow and Kyiv came to naught. When evidence emerged in early April that Russian forces had massacred hundreds of civilians in Bucha, many European leaders viewed the prospect of continuing discussions with Putin's regime as positively immoral. ("One should not negotiate with criminals," Mateusz Morawiecki, the Polish prime minister, said at the time. "Would you negotiate with Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot?") As most of Europe coalesced around a firm position against the aggressor, France felt pressured to adjust its posture. In the spring and summer of 2022, as Zelensky and the Ukrainians became modern-day European folk heroes, French diplomacy began to move in a new direction.

In May 2022, Macron proposed creating a European Political Community, a 44-nation forum aimed at reinforcing political coordination on the continent. The intergovernmental forum allowed Europeans to stand united in the face of Russian aggression. But the new organization was not meant as a replacement for full membership in the EU. Its first meeting, in Prague in October 2022, saw a unanimous declaration of support for Ukraine but resulted in no practical commitments to the country's sovereignty and security. European nations on

Russia's periphery needed a stronger embrace in a time of war. Ukrainians' brave resistance to Putin's invasion had given considerable moral weight to Kyiv's demand for EU membership.

The French Foreign Ministry pushed for the government to embrace enlargement. French diplomats were finally convinced that France's efforts toward rapprochement with Russia had been unproductive and that it was time to recalibrate. Ukraine's integration would come at a high price and require substantial preparation. France wanted to get ahead of the curve in the hope of shaping the outcome. In May of last year, Macron formally endorsed EU enlargement. "The question for us is not whether we should enlarge," he said in a speech at a European security conference in Bratislava, Slovakia, "but how we should do it." Macron clarified Paris's position: the EU should enlarge "as fast as possible," and France would help make it happen.

## **BIGGER WOULD BE BETTER**

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The costs of integrating Ukraine, along with seven other applicant countries, into the European Union will be significant. The size of Ukraine alone is an issue. Its agricultural sector threatens the common agricultural policy that has underpinned European farming for the past 60 years. Unless the policy is overhauled, the Ukrainian agricultural industry would absorb most of the EU's agriculture subsidies and slow the continent's transition to sustainable farming. The same thing would happen with European cohesion funds, which are meant to support EU members with lower national incomes and would thus be diverted to poorer new members.

Competition from Ukrainian grain exporters has already led to protests by farmers in Poland. Across the board, Europeans have grown nervous about integrating as many as eight new countries, especially one as large, poor, and war-torn as Ukraine. But Ukraine will cost the EU a lot whether it is a member state or not. According to the Ukraine Support Tracker of the Kiel Institute, Europeans have already committed more than \$100 billion in military, humanitarian, and financial support to Ukraine. Many billions more are needed. The World Bank, the United Nations, and the European Commission have estimated that the total cost of reconstruction over the next decade will be on the order of nearly \$500 billion. The EU cannot afford chaos on its border, and several countries, including France, have already signed bilateral agreements with Ukraine for long-term support. As European countries engage in security guarantees and reconstruction, they might as well spend that money as part of the enlargement process.

After the war, Ukraine's military will also be among the best armed and most experienced on the continent. Ukrainian nationalist sentiment is at an all-time high, and the country's leaders have cast their countrymen's courageous fight against Russian imperialism as a longing to join Europe. Under such circumstances, integrating Ukraine into the bloc would go a long way toward securing regional stability.

## **REFORM BEFORE ENLARGEMENT**

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European institutions are ill equipped to absorb the shock of a significant enlargement. In 2019, France vetoed EU accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia, on the grounds that the EU accession mechanism needed to be reformed. Specifically, France proposed stricter conditions for candidates regarding rule of law and economic policy. In March 2023, the French and German ministers for Europe launched a study group that provided recommendations on seat allocations in the European Parliament, voting procedures, and other internal policies that would need to change to accommodate Ukrainian and other candidate countries' membership. Negotiating these changes at the EU level will take years, as budgets and policies will have to be adapted. The system of direct payments under the common agricultural policy may have to be abandoned, for example. Faced with this reality, France has promoted the idea of a "gradual integration," which would mean that candidate countries could be eligible for benefits along the way, as they complete reforms, and not just at the end of the accession process; the benefits could also be withdrawn if a candidate does not stay on track.

France also sees an opportunity to bring about a more flexible union, one in which countries can take joint action in some areas while maintaining independence in others. Differentiated levels of cooperation could mitigate tensions with skeptics of greater integration, such as Hungary, without jeopardizing the ambitions of the core. As Alexandre Adam, a former Europe adviser to Macron, has argued, enlargement presents a "clarifying moment" that could spur members to recognize "the existence of different aspirations in a more diverse, heterogenous Europe: for some to pursue a path of greater integration, for others to retain the freedom not to follow it."

## **EUROPOWER**

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Russia's aggression has forced a historical disambiguation over where Europe starts and where it ends. The war in Ukraine exposed Europe's vulnerabilities and catalyzed decisions on rearmament and economic security. It also made

clear the need for continental integration. Keeping Moldova, Ukraine, and the western Balkans outside the bloc leaves them open to interference by foreign powers, which imperils the rest of Europe. Conversely, permitting their entry into the union reinforces the security of all.

France understands that a larger, more united Europe is geopolitically stronger and better equipped to face security challenges posed by bad actors such as Moscow. For decades, France had believed that when it came to Europe, smaller was better. When ten post-Communist countries entered the EU 20 years ago, France worried that their accession would constitute an impediment to the emergence of *L'Europe puissance*—literally, “a powerful Europe,” a French concept signifying the continent’s capacity to act autonomously, similar to Macron’s notion of a “sovereign Europe” or European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen’s “geopolitical Europe.” When other member states, such as the United Kingdom, believed Europe’s strength resided in its common market, France believed it lay in its common policies.

For two decades, German and French leaders operated under the illusion that they could work with Putin’s Russia. Macron even believed that he could help deliver an agreement with the Russian leader on the security architecture of Europe. It took several months of brutal war for him to realize that the Russian regime was not looking for an off-ramp, and several more to grasp that the Ukrainians, however determined, could not sustain an effective resistance without substantially more support from Europe. Macron has come to understand that Europe’s security, sovereignty, and prosperity would be irretrievably threatened if the EU were to allow its neighbors to fall prey to aggressive powers.

For France, making the case for the integration of Ukraine into the EU at a time of war—and refusing to rule out the dispatching of Western troops to defend Ukraine—sends a clear message to Putin: you don’t get to decide Europe’s future. Every act of territorial aggression will be met with more integration and more determination.

Macron’s message of strength has been criticized as escalatory by opposition parties in France. Leaders of the far-right National Rally, the center-right Republicans, and the leftist France Unbowed have all accused Macron of sleep-walking toward a direct conflict with Russia. But there is a constituency in France for supporting Ukraine, as the recent European Council on Foreign Relations poll shows: more French people believe Europe should support Ukraine’s goal of regaining all its territory (35 percent) than believe Europe

should push Ukraine to negotiate a peace deal with Russia (30 percent). Considering that 21 percent say they don't know what Europe should do with respect to Ukraine, the French president can hope to gather public support for a firm stance on Ukraine.

Despite some European leaders' negative reactions to Macron's implication that Western troops may yet be deployed to defend Ukraine, the French president has captured in his remarks an appropriate degree of urgency and forced a conversation on the matter at the European level. Several European countries, such as Poland and Lithuania, have joined France in sending a strong message to Russia. In a meeting in Berlin on March 15, the German chancellor, the Polish prime minister, and the French president sent a message of unity to support Ukraine "for as long as it takes." A few days earlier, Radoslaw Sikorski, the Polish foreign minister, had put it even more bluntly: "I appreciate President Macron's initiative because it is about making Putin fear us, not us fear Putin."

When Macron advocated talks with Russia in 2021 and 2022, the rest of Europe rolled its eyes. Now, France is demonstrating resolve and moral clarity, but it has yet to convince skeptical partners of the need to scale up support for Ukraine. Some critics believe that Macron is being unduly provocative; others that his timing is poor. But it is precisely because Ukraine is struggling on the battlefield—and because U.S. support is wavering—that Europeans need to step up. If Donald Trump returns to the White House in 2025 and reneges on the United States' commitment to Ukraine, France might find itself leading Europe in advancing a collective response. With its new status as a champion of Ukraine, France stands a better chance than ever of making the case for European unity and power.

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