



# The Russian War on Ukraine: Perspectives from Central and Eastern Europe

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Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has reshaped Europe's geopolitical, security, and economic landscape, with particularly acute consequences for Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). This thematic cluster provides an interdisciplinary snapshot of these transformations, emphasizing the region's role as both a frontline and a catalyst for broader European change. Drawing on international relations, security studies, economics, political science, sociology, and anthropology, the contributions examine how the war has accelerated European Union security integration, including unprecedented military assistance to Ukraine, expanded defense coordination, and rising defense expenditures. The introduction highlights the war's devastating human, economic, and environmental costs for Ukraine, alongside spillover effects across Europe, such as mass displacement, energy shocks, inflationary pressures, and heightened social and political tensions within CEE states. It situates these developments within contemporary scholarly debates over international order, realism and liberalism, and the limits of aggregated European analyses that obscure regional variation. Collectively, the articles explore geopolitical repositioning, energy transformation, public opinion, and lived experiences of war and displacement, offering insight into Europe's evolving political and institutional trajectory amid an ongoing conflict.

**Keywords:** *Russia's war on Ukraine; Central and Eastern Europe (CEE); European security and defense; energy dependence and transformation public opinion*

"The centre of Europe is moving eastwards."

—German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, 9 September 2022<sup>1</sup>

This thematic cluster of five articles offers a condensed, interdisciplinary survey of the impact of the Russian Federation's war on Ukraine on the wider region, and in particular, on Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Drawing from security studies, economics, international relations (IR), political science, and quantitative sociology, this cluster draws our attention to the wide-ranging consequences of the war—global in nature, of course, but with a particular emphasis for Ukraine's near-neighbor countries. This is a constantly changing scenario, as different stages of the war unfold and develop, and the editors and authors acknowledge that we can only provide a snapshot of a much larger story that is still being told. However, we feel it is vitally important to conduct research and analysis as often as possible during this conflict to provide material for future work in the post-conflict era, to support policy makers facing difficult decisions, and to keep the matter in view as new conflicts erupt elsewhere that threaten to distract public attention from Ukraine and the crisis it is still facing.

## **Shifting Geopolitics**

Within the European Union (EU), security concerns became more acute following Russia's full-scale invasion, generating a strong impetus to consolidate European efforts in the fields of security and defense. This consolidation has taken place across several dimensions. First, the EU made an unprecedented decision to finance military assistance to Ukraine through the European Peace Facility, which by 2024 had mobilized *over €6 billion* to reimburse member states for the provision of military equipment and ammunition.<sup>2</sup> Second, the adoption of the Strategic Compass in March 2022 provided a shared threat assessment and a common framework for EU defense policy. Third, from 2023 onward, the Union moved to strengthen joint procurement and expand defense-industrial capacity through new instruments aimed at accelerating production and reducing fragmentation. Reflecting these shifts, EU member states collectively increased defense spending significantly, reaching approximately €343 billion in 2024.<sup>3</sup>

## **Events in Ukraine and Their Impact on European Countries/ CEE**

The full-scale invasion of the Russian Federation into Ukraine on 24 February 2022 started a new countdown of history from a global perspective, causing a devastating impact on all spheres of Ukrainian life and spreading waves of political, economic, and social disturbances to other countries.<sup>4</sup> The EU was the first to fall under the wave, accepting refugees and offering packages of financial and military aid to the Ukrainian state. Some seven million Ukrainians have left the country to

become refugees abroad since 2022, while close to four million are internally displaced; in all, almost a quarter of the pre-2022 population.<sup>5</sup> Three years later, over four million Ukrainians were living in the EU.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, the war in Ukraine united European countries around common human and civilizational values through a conscious choice to support Ukraine, regardless of the associated economic and political risks. In response to Russian military aggression, the EU has imposed extraordinary packages of economic and individual sanctions.<sup>7</sup> In December 2023, the decision to open the accession negotiations with Ukraine was made by the European Council.<sup>8</sup> Despite exceptional financial and military support, and as a result of economic and social tension in European countries, Ukraine is paying the biggest price in this Russian war. Military aggression caused many broken lives and transformed the fate of many people. During the military operations, many cities were completely bombed, and a huge number of buildings and infrastructure facilities were damaged or destroyed. The ongoing war in Ukraine increases the negative impact on the human, economic, and ecological potential of the country. In December 2023, the Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment (RDNA3) of the costs necessary for the recovery of Ukraine was carried out based on the analysis of twenty sectors that suffered a devastating impact, and this estimate was \$486 billion.<sup>9</sup> As of 19 November 2024, the Minister of Environmental Protection and Natural Resources of Ukraine stated at a press conference during the UN Climate Change Conference (COP29) in Baku that military actions have led to environmental damage of \$71 billion and 180 million tons of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, which also has an impact on air pollution in EU countries.<sup>10</sup> She noted at that time that “Combustion products released into the air as a result of Russian missile strikes have already reached Romania, Moldova, Bulgaria, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Serbia, Croatia and Poland.”<sup>11</sup>

## **The Economic and Social Impact**

The war in Ukraine became another shock wave that set back a world economy that had just begun to revive from the COVID-19-related lockdown and had an initial negative impact on the economic development of European countries.<sup>12</sup> The economic impact of a full-blown war in Ukraine was caused by disruptions in supply chains, high inflation, increasing commodity prices, and rising interest rates that strengthen pressure on households and industry. Price shocks were eventually weathered, but energy-intensive industries in Germany and the countries of Central Europe did initially face significant economic pressure.<sup>13</sup>

Despite cautious positive forecasts for the economic development of European countries for the coming years, the development scenarios may be different due to numerous unpredictable geopolitical, economic, environmental, and social risks.<sup>14</sup> A significant challenge for the countries of CEE remains their dependence on the

supply of gas and fossil fuels. The rapid rise in energy prices due to economic sanctions and inflation temporarily hampered economic development, increasing industry costs and reducing the purchasing power of households.<sup>15</sup>

The economic situation is exacerbating social tensions and is increasingly influencing the CEE public attitudes toward the war in Ukraine. A public opinion survey in ten European countries conducted in February 2023 showed that, against the background of overwhelming support in all countries for the need to maintain sanctions and recognize Russia's responsibility for military aggression, such support was more muted in Hungary and Italy, which were more dependent on Russian gas supplies.<sup>16</sup> Pro-Russian politicians and mass media continue exerting pressure on the public opinion in European countries toward the war in Ukraine through disinformation and other tools of hybrid warfare, in particular by actively using the widespread Orthodox Christian faith in the Balkans.<sup>17</sup> The increasing influence of misinformation and disinformation is confirmed by the Global Risk Report 2025, which identifies “misinformation and disinformation” as the risk with the biggest expected impact in the next two years.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, the “state-based armed conflict” is seen as the main risk for a possible material global crisis in 2025. Concern about the situation in Ukraine is confirmed by the Flash Eurobarometer survey in the summer of 2024 on the perceptions and expectations of citizens of the twenty-seven EU countries for the future, according to which the war in Ukraine and irregular migration are named by 50 percent and 41 percent of respondents, respectively, as the biggest challenges facing Europe today.<sup>19</sup>

## **International Relations and Contemporary Scholarship on Ukraine**

Within the discipline of IR, the war has led to several debates over causality. Should the causes of war be located at the systemic or unit level? Was it caused by international events, or developments within Russia (and Ukraine)? For many, the post-Cold War zeitgeist was captured by Francis Fukuyama's notion of “the end of history,” a phrase more referenced than understood.<sup>20</sup> It was a period in which liberal IR scholarship thought that world order would increasingly rest on interdependence, cooperation, and the role of international institutions. Looking back, it was also a period of overconfidence, of committing what E. H. Carr identified as “utopianism's” eternal flaw: the tendency to mistake one's ideals for political reality.<sup>21</sup> Liberal assumptions about international politics and particularly about international law and order suddenly looked shaky in the face of Russian power politics.

For some (neo-)realists, the Ukraine War has been taken as disproving all liberal notions of any rules-based world order. In this telling, most famously by John Mearsheimer, the war was provoked by Western delusions, by the aggressive pursuit

of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and EU expansion in Russia's legitimate sphere of influence and of democracy promotion, which posed a mortal threat to Russia.<sup>22</sup> Other self-described realists, like Christopher Layne or Andrew J. Bacevich, both associated with calls for U.S. strategic restraint and skepticism toward alliance commitments, have largely echoed Mearsheimer's views on U.S. culpability.<sup>23</sup>

Not surprisingly, many have countered Mearsheimer's views as being reductionist, as denying Ukrainian agency, ignoring domestic political factors, conflating the Putin regime's interests in stopping the spread of democracy with Russia's national interest, and for an all-round poor grasp of what motivates dictators toward war.<sup>24</sup> The emphasis on theory at the expense of historical facts, the obsessive focus on the United States' role, and the general tendency to accept Russian claims at face value led to a memorable rebuke by Alexander Motyl of the "surrealism of realism."<sup>25</sup> The predictive record of the "(neo-)realist" position has also not held up well. Mearsheimer's confident prediction that Putin, whom he described as a "first-class strategist," harbored no ambitions at all for conquering the whole of Ukraine looks particularly ill-founded today. For those seeking unit-level explanations, the tendency is rather to look for the characteristics of the Putin regime and the strategic miscalculations to which such a regime is prone.<sup>26</sup>

Among area studies specialists, and those with actual knowledge of Ukraine, the Mearsheimer position has been criticized for its poor grasp of history. Scholars like Serhii Plokhyy and Andrew Wilson have demonstrated that conflicting national narratives between Russia and Ukraine and differing paths of political development have led to this point of conflict. In this telling, much of the blame lies with Russian irredentism and a persistently imperial mindset.<sup>27</sup> A notable exception among area studies specialists, though, is Richard Sakwa—himself a controversial figure—who, although rejecting Mearsheimer's structural determinism, still considers the West to blame for the conflict, by constructing a Post-Cold War security order that excluded Russia.<sup>28</sup>

From the first moments of this crisis, scholars have been responding with a variety of perspectives and formats, from policy-oriented immediate responses (for example, Ivan Safranchuk and Iliya Kusa's essays in the first 2022 issue of *Policy Perspectives*) to more general public-facing statements about the impact of the war on larger bodies politic (see Timothy Garton Ash's 2023 essay "Postimperial Empire: How the War in Ukraine is Transforming Europe" in *Foreign Affairs*).<sup>29</sup> Within this period, several important special issues have been published with direct relevance for this thematic cluster of *East European Politics and Societies (EEPS)*. Already, in the summer 2022 issue of *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development*, editors Vuk Jeremić and Damjan Krnjević featured a wide range of responses to their challenge about "The Return of History," placing the recent crisis in Ukraine in a global perspective of a new world order.<sup>30</sup> A year later, another global perspective can be found in the Spring/Summer 2023 issue of *Journal of International Affairs* ("War in Ukraine: the World Responds"), which takes into

account many new developments in the region and around the world, as well as new alliances and ideological sympathies that have arisen in the wake of the conflict.<sup>31</sup> Closer to Eastern Europe as a region is a special issue of the *Journal of European Integration* guest edited by Mitchell A. Orenstein, “Transformation of Europe after Russia’s Attack on Ukraine” (May 2023). This collection of articles examines the internal dynamics of EU alignments, security policies, sanctions, and energy sector concerns.<sup>32</sup> More recent scholarship has begun to extend these debates beyond the immediate aftermath of the invasion by focusing more explicitly on CEE and on the longer-term institutional consequences of the war, through comparative analyses of national responses to the invasion, examinations of shifting EU policy orientations, or broader reconceptualizations of the EU’s political identity in light of the conflict.<sup>33</sup> Complementing these regionally focused studies, other contributions adopt a wider European institutional perspective, analyzing the war’s implications for European integration, boundary formation, enlargement, and economic and demographic adjustment.<sup>34</sup> Taken together, this recent literature addresses a range of interrelated dimensions—including security and defense policy, institutional reform, enlargement dynamics, economic consequences, and political discourse—while still leaving room for more sustained engagement with CEE as a distinct regional framework.

Despite the growing body of scholarship on the war in Ukraine and its ramifications for Europe, important gaps remain. While some recent contributions focus explicitly on CEE responses, most notably comparative analyses of national policy shifts, there remains a relative paucity of in-depth country-level case studies, particularly with regard to smaller CEE states. Moreover, much of the literature concerned with European integration and enlargement continues to approach the EU or “Eastern Europe” as largely aggregated categories, offering limited micro-level analysis of sub-regional or state-specific variation, such as differences among the Baltic states, the Western Balkans, or individual EU member states including Poland, Hungary, and Romania. Finally, longitudinal studies examining public opinion dynamics across CEE before and after 2022, as well as detailed analyses of energy-sector responses in non-EU Eastern European countries, remain comparatively scarce, appearing more frequently in policy reports and think-tank publications than in peer-reviewed academic journals. This region is simultaneously within the EU and outside of it, with a kaleidoscope of East-West alignments because of its energy infrastructure, asymmetric economic situation, historical experiences of empire, and role as an emerging market for larger economic powers. Articles collected in this special session of thematic cluster of *EEPS* offer this regional framework as a complementary, but also necessary, addition to the ongoing synthesis of current events.<sup>35</sup> Of course, it is not meant to be comprehensive, focusing more on interlocking areas of IR, economics, and public opinion that affect the region. In what follows, the cluster editors provide a short overview of the relevant background to support readers’ comprehension of the articles themselves.

## Contributions to the Special Section

In this special section, we have attempted to consider the impact of the war in Ukraine on the countries of CEE. This perspective shows a deeply revealing shift in the international and security policy of the countries of CEE and public opinions and attitudes. Kristian L. Nielsen's article, "How Russia's war on Ukraine changed Eastern Europe's position in the EU and NATO," delves more deeply into the meaning behind Scholz's quote from the opening of this introduction, asking whether and how the center of gravity did indeed shift within the EU and NATO, and what the implications might be for the future. Nielsen considers many contributing and external factors, including the transformations in transatlantic relations with changing U.S. leadership, the role of Poland and Lithuania in previous Eastern-facing policy questions, and the impact of trade agreements and the economic background on internal block dynamics. His analysis focuses on the political narratives of the country's leadership, the economic potential and energy dependence of national economies, and the dominant cultural and social values of individual countries. Nielsen seeks an answer to the question of whether the increased influence of the countries of CEE among the EU countries, which was formed after the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Russia into Ukraine, will remain.

Beata Piskorska's article "A Paradigm Shift: Geopolitical and Diplomatic Awakening of the EU as a Full-fledged Security Actor in the Context of Russia's War in Ukraine" analyzes the change in the political paradigm of the EU through various combinations of foreign and security policies of its member states, in particular in the context of political, economic, and military support for Ukraine. Piskorska looks specifically at the EU security situation in the immediate aftermath of the Russian invasion, and the consequences of this new scenario for Poland and the region in general, to determine whether the transformation of the guiding political principles may indicate a "geopolitical awakening." Her analysis suggests a new division in Europe on a diagonal axis, distinguishing those states more proactive against Russian aggression in the East and North against those still hoping for some reconciliation in the West and South.

While the first two contributions focus on broader, transnational frameworks in relation to the region, Mariusz Baranowski and Piotr Jabkowski's article "The Russian War in Ukraine and the Visegrad Group Countries: What Is the Impact on Energy Transformation?" draws on entirely local sources: the responses of the Visegrad Four (V4) nations in the 2023 Eurobarometer survey (EB 98.2). The authors use attitudes recorded in the region on energy transformation and energy security to measure the impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, taking into account the wider economic and security background. The significant divergence of Poland from the other V4 countries in the perception of Russia as a threat, as well as the Polish attitudes toward sanctions (highly supportive, as opposed to

Slovaks who were markedly less so), echoes strongly with Nielsen and Piskorska's political repositioning of Poland within the region. Finally, Baranowski and Jabkowski's conclusion that all V4 publics show interest in reducing fossil fuel dependence and improving new energy infrastructure offers some small hope that not all impacts on the region are negative.


The statistical analysis presented by Baranowski and Jabkowski on the attitudes of selected Eastern European countries is further complemented by two qualitative studies. These articles explore perceptions of wartime realities and shifts in sense-making and identity among respondents situated at two contrasting regions of Ukraine: the Polish and Russian borders. The article by Mateusz Błaszczuk, Yuriy Pachkovskyy, Piotr Pieńkowski, Khrystyna Ilyk, and Małgorzata Felińska, "Russia's Invasion of Ukraine as Witnessed by Ukrainian and Polish Students," offers a comparative view of the perceptions of the younger generation on both sides of the border about the outbreak of the war. The findings reveal a similarly strong reaction of shock in both groups, as well as active efforts to demonstrate support for Ukraine and assist refugees. These shared responses are accompanied by varying levels of concern for personal and family safety, particularly among students in Western Ukraine.


The final article in the cluster, Tatiana Zhurzhenko's "Displaced Borderlands: Civilizational Belonging in the Narratives of Kharkiv Residents Relocated to the European Union after February 2022," examines the historical roots of polarized attitudes in the eastern border region of Ukraine. The geopolitical choice between integration with the EU and alignment with Russia is framed through the lens of civilizationalism. The study also highlights narratives of Kharkiv residents displaced to EU member states, particularly their perceptions of the city's future role shaped by its geographical position, economic potential, and the possible course of the Russia–Ukraine war. Both studies underscore the significant influence of information flows on shaping public perceptions of the war and on coordinating societal responses to its consequences.<sup>36</sup>

## Conclusion

These articles represent only a few disciplinary and methodological approaches to evaluate the impact of Russia's war in Ukraine in Eastern Europe, and by definition, this impact is a condition that is changing as we measure it. An entire special issue of *EEPS* could easily be devoted to this topic—and no doubt more articles will follow, as the longer-term consequences and impacts become clearer. However, this special section is meant to simply mark where we are today and allow us a moment of reflection four years into an ongoing event, so that we can improve our understanding in collecting data and observations for future studies on the other side of this conflict and crisis—hopefully sooner rather than later.

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