

BRIEF

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At the Versailles Summit in March 2022, EU heads of state and government recognised that a large-scale war in Europe – Russia’s war in Ukraine – meant that the continent was facing a fundamentally different security reality to which they would have to respond collectively. They declared that “Russia’s war of aggression constitutes a tectonic shift in European history. At our meeting in Versailles, we discussed how the EU can live up to its responsibilities in this new reality, protecting our citizens, values, democracies, and our European model.”¹ This brief examines how the EU has helped Ukraine to push back against Russia. Although there has been constant internal and external pressure for the EU to do more throughout the war, it has taken measures to counter the Russian invasion that have been in many ways both unexpected and unprecedented – certainly for an organisation often considered to be a weak actor on the international stage. These measures should not, however, be a complete surprise. Over the past decade or so, the EU has been shaped by successive crises and has developed tools and instruments that have moved it towards being a more geopolitical body.

The EU’s immediate response to Russia’s full-scale war in Ukraine has taken two broad forms. First it has provided Ukraine with financial, humanitarian, and military assistance, and legal support to prosecute war crimes. Second, it has sought to weaken Russia through sanctions.

ASSISTING UKRAINE

The EU has provided financial assistance to support Ukraine’s macroeconomic stability against the economic challenges posed by Russia’s aggression – essentially, to keep the

Ukrainian state working during the war. This assistance has been in the form of loans taken by the Commission on behalf of the EU from the international financial markets, on-loaned at favourable rates (including the possibility of interest subsidies) to Ukraine.² The EU has granted two such packages of financial assistance, the first, in February, worth 1.2 billion euros and the second, in July, worth 1 billion euros. EU assistance could reach 9 billion euros overall (of a need estimated by the International Monetary Fund to be USD 39 billion) and builds upon a 6.2-billion-euro package of similar assistance allocated since 2014 to support Ukraine’s reform programmes.³

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The Commission’s European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations has also been active in Ukraine since 2014.⁴ Through it, the EU has, in 2022, coordinated the delivery of humanitarian supplies to Ukraine and provided humanitarian assistance through various channels valued by the Kiel Institute for the World Economy’s Ukraine Support Tracker at 1.2 billion euros.⁵

The EU has provided legal support, assisting Ukraine in its efforts to prosecute Russian war crimes. This effort too builds on earlier cooperation, in this case the EU Advisory Mission Ukraine (EUAM Ukraine) established under the CSDP in 2014 to help improve the compliance of Ukraine’s civilian security sector – police, border guards, and justice – with European anti-corruption and rule of law standards.⁶ The task of supporting Ukraine’s inquiries into Russian war crimes was added to the EUAM’s mandate following Russia’s full-scale invasion (EUAM

Ukraine is not an executive mission – it can only assist the Ukrainian authorities, not act itself).⁷

The provision of lethal weapons and military equipment to Ukraine through the European Peace Facility (EPF) has, however, been an entirely novel form of EU assistance. The EPF

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was created in 2021 with two purposes: the financing of the common costs of EU operations with military or defence implications; and the provision of financial aid to partner countries to enhance their security. Created off-budget to avoid treaty limitations concerning the EU's supply of arms, the EPF included provision that assistance might include "military equipment, or platforms, designed to deliver lethal force."⁸ This shift, intended to give a new dimension to the EU's security and defence policy in line with its growing geopolitical ambitions, stirred some controversy. Critics argued that the supply of weapons to fragile regions could be destabilising and accused the Union of moving away from its traditional foreign policy priorities of promoting peace and human rights.⁹ Few could have imagined that the first use of the EPF, only a year later, would be to supply advanced and heavy military capability to Ukraine as it defended itself against Russian aggression.

Overall, the Union has disbursed a total of 2.5 billion euros in five tranches of 500 million euros each to support the Ukrainian armed forces. In practice, the funds are used to reimburse Member States for part of the replacement costs of weapons and equipment they have donated bilaterally to Ukraine. The first tranche was very swiftly approved by the Council on 28 February 2022, the same day it approved the third package of sanctions against Russia.¹⁰ This development, perhaps the most unexpected response from the EU is, without doubt, evidence of the EU's move towards a more active international role, at least as far as the war in Ukraine is concerned.

TARGETING RUSSIA

Targeting Russia through sanctions is intended to support Ukraine's efforts in the war by weakening

Russia's ability and will to fight. The six sanctions packages passed at the time of writing have been unprecedented in their severity, their speed of adoption, and in some of their instruments, representing another turning point in EU foreign and security policy.¹¹

The first EU sanctions were adopted after Russia's recognition of the independence of the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, and mostly targeted Russian individuals such as Defence Minister

Sergei Shoigu and entities such as the Internet Research Agency and Bank Rossiya.¹² Later packages were more significant.¹³ The second and third packages (25 February to 2 March) directly, if perhaps largely symbolically, targeted Vladimir Putin's and Sergey Lavrov's assets, but also included measures harmful to the Russian economy. Seven Russian banks, including Promsvyazbank, Rossiya Bank, and Sovcombank, were disconnected from the SWIFT system and

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the assets of the Russian central bank in Europe were frozen to promote a fall of the rouble on the international markets and inflation in Russia.¹⁴ EU airspace was closed to Russian aircraft and disinformation outlets Russia Today and Sputnik were banned in the EU.¹⁵ On 9 March, similar sanctions were imposed on Belarus for its role in supporting Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The fifth (8 April) and sixth packages (3 June, agreed by the European Council on 30 May) focus more on hydrocarbons, the backbone of Russia's economy. Coal imports from the Russian Federation were prohibited as were imports of oil, except those through pipelines to landlocked Hungary and Czechia which have no alternative means of supply. As a result, crude oil imports from Russia will be reduced by roughly 90% by the end of 2022.¹⁶

Given Moscow's contempt for the EU and its foreign policy presence, it likely did not expect this response from Brussels, in particular as Russia apparently assumed that it would defeat Ukraine quickly and be able to return equally rapidly to business as usual with the West.

Nonetheless, the economic shock of the EU and other Western sanctions has been tremendous. In 2019, the EU was the leading importer of Russian goods, while Russia's imports from the EU were second only to those from China.¹⁷ With most economic ties severed, inflation in Russia had grown to 15% by the summer of 2022 and the economy is projected to shrink by 6% in the same year.¹⁸

COHESION

The EU Member States have collectively agreed on the necessity of sanctioning Russia for its aggression against Ukraine, demonstrating unusually high levels of cohesion and unity. (Hungary has been a notable exception becoming increasingly vocal in its objection to sanctions as the war has progressed.¹⁹) Relations between the eastern and western parts of Europe have sometimes been tense, with the continent seemingly divided between those states more willing to promote a speedy agreement between Ukraine and Russia (Germany and France, for example) and those (the eastern and northern European countries) advocating tougher responses such as a ban on Schengen visas for Russian tourists and a total ban on gas imports from Russia. Nonetheless, their collective response has been far from the lowest common denominator and has remained solid throughout the war, giving the EU greater prominence as a global actor.

A GEOPOLITICAL EU

The most ground-breaking elements of the EU's response to Russia's war in Ukraine – the supply of weaponry and the robust sanctions packages – did not, however, come from nowhere. They reflect a years-long evolution of the EU's institutions against the backdrop of successive crises, including the financial crisis, the migration crisis, Ukraine 2014, and Covid-19. Although throughout the war in Ukraine internal and external critics have urged the EU to do more, that it has been able to react at all is in part due to its steady development of appropriate foreign policy tools over these years.

The High Representative/Vice-President position, created by the Lisbon Treaty, is a focus for implementing EU foreign policy, a face for the

EU abroad, and the head of a growing diplomatic service: the European External Action Service. Since 2016, the EU has also taken concrete steps to improve Europe's military capabilities with programmes such as Permanent Structured Cooperation and the European Defence Fund which facilitate and finance joint weaponry projects.²⁰ The EPF, meanwhile, has certainly proved its value as an EU security instrument, even if it has been used for a purpose that was probably not in the minds of its creators.

While it remains too early to judge the practical outcomes of programmes such as PESCO and the EDF, they have at least strengthened the idea of the EU as a geopolitical actor with competences in security and defence. Conceptions of the EU have thus shifted. For example, Dutch philosopher Luuk van Middelaar has argued that the EU is not an entity defending values but a finished political body whose existence in a world of crisis have obliged it to be aware of its status and defend its interests, to set boundaries and to learn to seize opportunities.²¹ These are not merely academic conceptions, but appear, for example, in the EU's Strategic Compass which is first and foremost a catalogue of threats and interests.²² Meanwhile, politicians such as Emmanuel Macron have advocated the related concept of European sovereignty, arguing that Europe has to shape its own destiny in a hostile world.²³ And in her inauguration speech at the European Parliament, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen spoke about the urgent need for a "*geopolitical Commission*" to help secure Europe's place in the world.²⁴

The EU's rapid and robust reaction was also underpinned by the practical experience in crisis management that the institutions and national leaders had nurtured and sharpened in the preceding years. Key individuals such as Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte (since 2010), Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki (since 2017), French President Emmanuel Macron (since 2017), Spanish PM Pedro Sanchez (since 2018), Chancellor Olaf Scholz (who was Angela Merkel's Economy Minister during the Covid-19 crisis), and Mario Draghi (a key character during the euro crisis) were used to working together and ready to react to unexpected events.

Conceptions of what Europe should be, and real-world experiences have thus seen the EU reach a certain level of maturity on the global

stage. Its role as an international actor is far from complete and remains controversial with

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at least some Member States. The countries of central and eastern Europe have, for example,

been very supportive of the use of the EPF to support Ukraine despite their usual preference to see the EU as a trading bloc and single market, rather than as a political, and still less geopolitical, body. But the EU's international role has certainly been advanced by its response to Russia's war in Ukraine. Whether this advance is sustainable or transferable to other international circumstances remains, of course, to be seen.

ENDNOTES

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