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## UKRAINE AS A SHIELD FOR EUROPE: THE RUSSIAN INVASION AND THE RESHAPING OF INTERNATIONAL SECURITY

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### Abstract

This article explores the impact of the Russian-Ukrainian military conflict – de facto a war – on the transformation of the international security system. The full-scale invasion launched in 2022 exposed critical vulnerabilities in global governance and challenged the foundational principles of peace and sovereignty across the European space. The study aims to analyse Ukraine's evolving role as both a security actor and a normative force. To this end, it examines the country's repositioning in regional and global structures, outlines the key consequences of the war, and assesses how the conflict has reshaped strategic thinking in Europe.

Methodologically, the article applies historical, comparative, and analytical approaches, combining periodisation, analogy, and actualisation to examine legal, military, and political dimensions of the conflict. In addition to academic literature and institutional reports, the research draws on expert interviews and news-based analysis to provide a multidimensional understanding of the war and Ukraine's place within it. Special attention is given to the concept of Ukraine as a civilisational 'shield of Europe' – a state that has historically functioned as a defensive frontier against eastern authoritarian expansion. This perspective helps situate Ukraine's modern struggle within a broader cultural and geopolitical continuum.

The article addresses key challenges posed by the war, including food insecurity, mass displacement, energy crises, environmental degradation, and legal disruption. It also highlights Ukraine's contribution not only to military defence, but to democratic resilience, legal coherence under existential pressure, and the defence of international norms. Ukraine's consistent appeals to international law and cooperation with global institutions demonstrate its normative potential in a time of democratic backsliding and authoritarian revisionism. The article concludes that Ukraine has moved from the margins of Europe's security system to its normative centre, playing a strategic role in shaping the continent's future security architecture.

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**Keywords:** Ukraine, Russian invasion, hybrid war, security, European values, international law, resilience, normative actor

## УКРАЇНА ЯК ЩИТ ЄВРОПИ: РОСІЙСЬКЕ ВТОРГНЕННЯ ТА ТРАНСФОРМАЦІЯ МІЖНАРОДНОЇ СИСТЕМИ БЕЗПЕКИ

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### Анотація

У статті досліджується вплив російсько-українського збройного конфлікту – фактично війни – на трансформацію міжнародної системи безпеки. Повномасштабне вторгнення, розпочате у 2022 році, виявило критичні вразливості глобального управління та поставило під сумнів основоположні принципи миру й суверенітету в європейському просторі. Метою дослідження є аналіз еволюції ролі України як актора безпеки та нормативної сили. З цією метою розглядається зміна позиціонування України в регіональних та глобальних структурах, окреслюються ключові наслідки війни та оцінюється, як цей конфлікт вплинув на стратегічне мислення в Європі.

У методологічному аспекті стаття поєднує історичний, порівняльний та аналітичний підходи, використовуючи періодизацію, аналогію та актуалізацію для вивчення правових, воєнних та політичних вимірів конфлікту. Окрім наукової літератури та інституційних звітів, дослідження спирається на інтерв'ю з експертами та аналітичні новинні джерела, що дозволяє сформувати багатовимірне розуміння війни та місця України в її контексті. Особливу увагу приділено концепції України як цивілізаційного «щита Європи» – держави, що історично функціонувала як оборонний форпост проти східної авторитарної експансії. Такий підхід дозволяє розглядати сучасну боротьбу України в ширшому культурному та геополітичному континумі.

У статті висвітлюються ключові виклики, спричинені війною, зокрема продовольча нестабільність, масове переміщення населення, енергетичні кризи, деградація довкілля та порушення правопорядку. Також підкреслюється внесок України не лише у воєнну оборону, а й у демократичну стійкість, правову послідовність в умовах екзистенційного тиску та захист міжнародних норм. Звернення України до міжнародного права й співпраця з глобальними інституціями демонструють її нормативний потенціал в епоху демократичного відступу та авторитарного ревізійзму. У підсумку робиться висновок, що Україна перейшла з периферії європейської безпекової системи до її нормативного центру, відіграючи стратегічну роль у формуванні майбутньої архітектури безпеки континенту.

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**Ключові слова:** Україна, російське вторгнення, гібридна війна, безпека, європейські цінності, міжнародне право, стійкість, нормативний актор

**Problem statement.** Russia's military invasion of Ukraine, which began on 20 February 2014 with the occupation of Crimea and later the escalation in Donbas, marked the start of an undeclared hybrid war that flagrantly violated international law. The full-scale phase of this war, launched on 24 February 2022, became not only a logical continuation of Russia's long-standing expansionist policies but also a turning point in European and global security. Emerging from the aftermath of the Revolution of Dignity (Revoliutsiia Hidnosti) and the collapse of the Yanukovych regime, Ukraine has found itself at the epicentre of one of the deepest socio-political and civilizational fractures of the modern era.

Since 2014, and especially after the beginning of full-scale hostilities in 2022, Ukraine has assumed a dual role: as both a frontline state defending its territorial integrity and a key normative actor upholding core European values – dignity, freedom, sovereignty, and the rule of law. Russia's aggression against Ukraine, as well as its broader hybrid offensives against the West, have not only destabilised Eastern and Central Europe – regions still marked by the legacy of totalitarianism and Moscow's dominance – but have also exposed critical vulnerabilities in the international security architecture.

The war has catalysed global shifts, including disruptions in energy and food supply chains, the weaponisation of migration, nuclear blackmail, and large-scale environmental degradation. Simultaneously, it has forced transatlantic institutions to revisit their foundational principles and defence postures. Ukraine's response – characterised by resilience, democratic mobilisation, and institutional coherence – has increasingly positioned the country as a 'norm entrepreneur', shaping discourses of collective defence, international justice, and moral leadership.

Analysis of previous research and publications. The Russian-Ukrainian war, ongoing since 2014 and escalating into a full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022, has become the focus of extensive interdisciplinary research. Among Ukrainian scholars, significant contributions have been made by Valerii Hrytsiuk and Oleksandr Lysenko (Hrytsiuk & Lysenko, 2023), who proposed a detailed military-historical periodisation of the conflict. A more comprehensive framework was presented by Pavlo Hai-Nyzhnyk (Hai-Nyzhnyk, 2022), who emphasized the evolving nature of the war – from a localized armed confrontation to a total war encompassing political, humanitarian, economic, and geopolitical dimensions. Olha Brusientseva (Brusientseva, 2022) has conducted a comprehensive analysis of the challenges posed by Russia's war against Ukraine, addressing them across socio-economic, humanitarian, security, and several other aspects.

Among other critical areas, the global economic implications of the war have been explored in detail by the Economist Intelligence Unit (2022), which highlighted the war's disruptive effect on macroeconomic stability and trade. Similar conclusions were drawn by economist Sebastian Galiani (Galiani, 2023), whose analysis underscores the war's long-term impact on food security, commodity prices, and financial markets. These findings are consistent with assessments by the World Food Programme and the UN (WFP, 2025a), which identified the war in Ukraine as a major driver of global hunger and economic instability.

Another important line of scholarly inquiry concerns Ukraine's civilizational role in defending Europe. In particular, the concept of the 'Ukrainian Shield', originally proposed by Yuriy Kotlyar and elaborated in a joint publication with Marharyta Lymar, frames Ukraine's resistance as part of a long-standing historical mission to protect Europe from eastern invasions – from the Pechenegs and Mongol-Tatars to the modern 'Moscow horde' (Kotlyar & Lymar, 2023). This symbolic framing resonates in policy and academic narratives alike, reinforcing Ukraine's identity as both a security actor and a moral anchor of European civilization.

While various dimensions of the war – military, economic, humanitarian, environmental, and legal – have been individually analysed, an integrative approach that situates the Russian-Ukrainian war within the broader crisis of the international security system and the defence of European values remains both timely and necessary.

**Purpose of the study** is to examine Ukraine's evolving role as both a security actor and a normative force in Europe by analysing its defence and promotion of core European values, as well as the broader impact of the Russian invasion on global and regional security structures. In doing so, the article pays particular attention to Ukraine's contribution to the transformation of the international security system and to its emerging position within a redefined European defence order. The analysis focuses on the multidimensional consequences of the war – economic, demographic, ecological, and legal – and highlights Ukraine's role not only as a security buffer but also as a strategic architect of Europe's future.

**Research methods and techniques.** This study applies a combination of general scientific and specialised historical methods to examine the transformative impact of the Russian-Ukrainian war on the international security system.

Among general scientific approaches, the research relies on *analysis*, to break down complex issues such as the war and its global implications; *synthesis*, to integrate findings from historical and contemporary sources; *induction*, to generalise from observed patterns; and *deduction*, to draw conclusions regarding the war's influence on the evolving European security architecture.

In terms of specialised methods, the study utilises *periodisation*, *actualisation*, *analogy*, and the *historical-comparative method*. Periodisation enables the structuring of the war's progression into analytically distinct phases. While no unified periodisation of the Russian-Ukrainian war (2014-2024) exists, two influential frameworks are widely cited. The first periodisation was developed by military historian Hrytsiuk (Hrytsiuk, 2022: 45), who identified three key stages of the war: the occupation of Crimea, the Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) / Joint Forces Operation (JFO) period, and the full-scale invasion beginning in February 2022. This framework was later elaborated in detail in collaboration with Lysenko, particularly regarding the third stage, which they further divided into four operational phases (Hrytsiuk & Lysenko, 2023; Ilnytskyi & Kutska, 2023). The second, proposed by Hai-Nyzhnyk (Hai-Nyzhnyk, 2022), introduces a more detailed multi-phase chronology that traces the conflict's transformation into a total war with geopolitical and civilisational dimensions.

The *method of analogy* facilitates the comparison of Ukraine's experience with other regional security complexes (Kotlyar, Lymar & Tykhonenko, 2020). This comparative lens contributes to broader historical generalisations and highlights Ukraine's role as both a subject and agent of global security transformation.

By combining these methods, the study aims to uncover not only the factual progression of the war but also its symbolic, legal, geopolitical, and normative ramifications within a crisis-ridden international system.

**Presentation of the main material.** To understand Ukraine's evolving role within the international security system, it is essential to examine the multifaceted consequences of the Russian invasion – not only in terms of military dynamics but also through the broader socio-economic, ecological, demographic, legal, and geopolitical dimensions. These interconnected spheres reveal the scale of disruption caused by the war and Ukraine's response as a resilient actor and value-based partner. The analysis below focuses on several critical domains in which the war has generated systemic shifts, beginning with the global economic ramifications.

**Economic disruption and inflationary spillover.** The Russian invasion of Ukraine has triggered profound disruptions in global markets, exacerbating inflation, destabilising supply chains, and accelerating systemic crises across both developed and developing economies. As one of the world's key exporters of grain, corn, sunflower oil, and other critical commodities, Ukraine has traditionally played a stabilising role in global agri-food and resource markets. However, the war and the blockade of Ukrainian ports have drastically reduced export volumes, intensifying global food insecurity and commodity price shocks.

In 2022, the World Trade Organisation forecasted a slowdown in global GDP growth

from 5,7% to 2,8%, while global trade projections were revised down due to instability in energy and agriculture markets. The Economist Intelligence Unit downgraded its global growth forecast from 3,9% to 3,4%, attributing the shift to the war's far-reaching impact. These projections aligned with World Bank data showing that over half of Ukrainian businesses had ceased operations, while the remaining enterprises functioned under severe constraints. At that stage, the total damage to Ukrainian infrastructure was estimated at more than two-thirds of GDP.

By early 2025, the cost of Ukraine's recovery and reconstruction was officially estimated at \$524 billion over the next decade, based on a joint assessment by the Government of Ukraine, the World Bank, the European Commission, and the United Nations (Updated Ukraine recovery and reconstruction needs..., 2025). This amount equals nearly 2,8 times the country's 2024 nominal GDP. Ukraine's economy is expected to grow by 2% in 2025 (Mukhina, 2025), although inflation remains high at 12,6%, and the state faces external financing needs of around \$42,8 billion (European Commission worsens forecast for Ukraine's economic growth, 2025; Updated Ukraine recovery and reconstruction needs..., 2025).

Ukraine and Russia were among the world's leading agricultural producers and, prior to the full-scale war, the two largest exporters of grains and oilseeds – jointly accounting for approximately 30% of global wheat exports in 2021 and nearly 80% of international trade in sunflower oil and related products. Ukraine, in particular, has been a major supplier of corn and other key agricultural commodities consumed globally, playing an especially vital role in food security across Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa, including countries such as Egypt and Lebanon whose political and economic stability are of critical regional importance (Brusientseva, 2022: 843).

According to the UN World Food Programme (Ukraine, 2025), prior to the invasion Ukraine produced enough food to feed 400 million people, making it a critical pillar of global food security. In an attempt to disrupt the sowing season and undermine Ukraine's role in global food supply, Russian forces deliberately targeted the country's agricultural sector. They shelled agricultural infrastructure and fuel depots, looted grain and transported it to Russian territory, mined fields and farming equipment, and blockaded key Black Sea ports through which Ukraine exports much of its agricultural produce. Despite the Black Sea Grain Initiative (2022-2023), renewed Russian attacks on port infrastructure in Odesa and Mykolaiv in 2024 undermined global confidence and pushed millions toward food insecurity (Welsh, Glauber & Dodd, 2024).

Although Ukraine succeeded in restoring its agricultural exports to nearly pre-war levels – reaching \$24,5 billion in 2024 (In 2024, Ukraine reached its pre-war export levels, 2025), including substantial volumes of sunflower oil, corn, and wheat – the global food security situation remains deeply troubling. According to the United Nations, over 295 million people in 53 countries experienced crisis-level or worse hunger in 2024, a 5% increase compared to the previous year (Global Report on Food Crises 2025, 2025). The primary drivers of this deterioration include armed conflict, climate-related disasters, and economic shocks, which increasingly intersect and reinforce one another. The crisis is expected to escalate further in 2025 due to substantial cuts in humanitarian food assistance, including a significant reduction in funding by the U.S. Agency for International Development.

In Europe, economies already weakened by the COVID-19 crisis were hit hard. Energy insecurity, inflation, and redirected public spending toward refugee assistance and military aid forced significant budgetary adjustments. Countries such as Germany and Italy, previously reliant on Russian gas, were compelled to reconfigure their energy strategies and accelerate green transitions, despite immediate economic losses.

Although earlier projections estimated that the cumulative global economic cost of the war could reach \$1,5 trillion by 2025, recent developments suggest that this figure may soon be surpassed – not only due to sustained disruptions in trade and inflationary pressures, but also because of rising reconstruction costs and a projected surge in defence



spending. Europe alone is preparing for what has been described as a 'big bang' moment, potentially unlocking over one trillion dollars in new military investments over the next decade, in response to the erosion of U.S. support and the need to reinforce the continent's own security architecture (Monaghan, 2025). When combined with the existing burden of humanitarian aid, military assistance, industrial disruptions, and infrastructure losses, the total cost of the war is likely to exceed earlier estimates.

As Professor Sebastian Galiani observes, the war has reshaped the structure of the global economy in at least three fundamental ways: by accelerating the energy transition, pushing inflation to unprecedented levels, and destabilising the financial foundations of emerging markets. The feedback loop created by disrupted grain and fertiliser exports, logistical breakdowns, and geopolitical fragmentation threatens to redefine the rules of global trade and investment for years to come (Galiani, 2023).

**Demographic crisis and humanitarian fallout.** The Russian invasion of Ukraine has precipitated one of the largest displacement crises in Europe since World War II. As of August 2024, approximately 6,7 million Ukrainians fled abroad, including over 6,2 million residing in European countries. Also, Ukraine still hosts around 3,7 million internally displaced persons (Ukraine: Global Appeal 2025 situation overview, 2025: 2). These movements have profound implications for Ukraine's labour market, demographic stability, and post-war recovery.

Since 24 February 2022, almost 6,5 million people fleeing Ukraine have been documented globally as of 15 February 2024 (Crisis Movements – Ukraine, 2024). By June 2023, more than 8 million Ukrainians were living abroad – roughly 20% of the country's pre-war population, including 63% of adult citizens and 22% of children (Number of Ukrainians and Their Migration Abroad., 2023). Despite some return migration, many refugees still held temporary protection status in the European Union. Countries like Germany, Poland, and the Czech Republic hosted the largest Ukrainian populations. As of 17 April 2025, 6,357,600 Ukrainian refugees were officially registered in Europe – an increase of over 350,000 compared to the figures from February 2024. This rise reflects ongoing population displacement caused by escalating hostilities and deliberate attacks on civilian infrastructure (Ukraine refugee situation, 2025).

The economic implications for host countries have been considerable. According to *Goldman Sachs*, the four largest EU economies – Germany, Poland, France, and Sweden – allocated up to 0,2% of their GDP to support Ukrainian refugees in 2022 (Chaliuk, 2022). As of 2025, European countries have spent over €117 billion to support Ukrainian refugees, with the largest contributions coming from Germany (€30.6 billion) and Poland (€26,5 billion) (How much money have European countries spent on aid., 2024). Despite the fact that many Ukrainians have actively integrated into host societies and entered the labour market, expenditures on housing, social benefits, education, and healthcare remain substantial. Particularly significant is Poland's support, which allocated 4,2% of its GDP to refugee assistance – the highest proportion among all EU member states (Poland helps Ukraine with almost 5% of its GDP., 2024).

Within Ukraine, civilians in occupied territories suffer constant shelling, lack of basic resources, and the collapse of public services. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has documented serious humanitarian violations, including sexual violence, forced disappearances, and the targeting of civilian infrastructure.

The war has also resulted in extensive cultural destruction. According to UNESCO, at least 110 cultural heritage sites were damaged in the first two months of the full-scale invasion (How Russia is destroying Ukraine's national and cultural heritage, 2022). By mid-2023, Ukraine's Ministry of Culture reported that over 664 sites, including 84 of national significance, had been damaged or destroyed (The Ministry continues to record damage and destruction., 2023). Attacks have also targeted Holocaust memorials, such as Babyn Yar in Kyiv and Drobytsky Yar in Kharkiv, in cynical contradiction of Russia's own propaganda.

Despite these devastating impacts, the Ukrainian diaspora has mobilised extensively to support the homeland. Razom for Ukraine (Since start of full-scale invasion, over USD 100 million., 2023), for instance, raised over \$100 million for medical and mental health assistance, while the Ukrainian World Congress (2024) has coordinated the delivery of military and humanitarian aid across continents.

**Nuclear risk and ecological destruction.** Russia's war against Ukraine has inflicted large-scale environmental destruction, combining nuclear safety threats, ecocide, and long-term ecological degradation. These consequences transcend national borders, posing serious risks to regional and global environmental security.

Nuclear safety remains a persistent concern. Since March 2022, Russian troops have militarised the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (NPP), Europe's largest, using it as a military base and obstructing maintenance operations. The plant has faced repeated shelling, blackouts, and operational uncertainty. Earlier in the war, Russian forces also seized the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, triggering international alarm due to radiation risks and hostage-taking of plant personnel. These incidents undermine global nuclear norms and highlight gaps in international enforcement mechanisms.

The destruction of the Kakhovka Dam on 6 June 2023, widely recognised as an act of ecocide, caused massive flooding, environmental contamination, and damage to critical biodiversity zones. Over 150 tonnes of oil spilled into the Dnipro River. Flooding has significantly affected three nature reserves: the Nizhnedniprovsky National Nature Park (NNP), the Kamianska Sich NNP, the Biloberezhzhia Sviatoslava NNP, and the Black Sea Biosphere Reserve, which is protected by UNESCO. In addition, the Kinburn Spit Regional Landscape Park with a total area of almost 18,000 hectares; sites of the Volyn Forest Black Sea Biosphere Reserve, Dovhyi Island, Kruhlyi Island with an area of 2,700 hectares; and the Vysunsko-Inhuletskyi Regional Landscape Park with an area of 2,700 hectares were also affected (The destruction of the Kakhovka HPP caused at least \$2., 2023). The dam's collapse also disrupted the water supply for cooling reactors at Zaporizhzhia NPP, further compounding nuclear risks.

Experts of the State Environmental Inspectorate have recorded that the salinity level of the Black Sea near Odesa is already almost three times lower than normal. Such changes can irreversibly affect the entire ecosystem and lead to massive deaths of the Black Sea flora and fauna. The Black Sea is threatened with catastrophic pollution due to the explosion of the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (Zakharchenko, 2023).

Beyond these major disasters, the war has contaminated air, soil, and water across much of Ukraine. As of 2025, Ukraine is one of the most mine-contaminated areas in the world (Mine Action Update: Ukraine, 2025). Toxic emissions from industrial sites, oil leaks, and disrupted sewage systems have polluted ecosystems and threaten long-term public health.

Russia's actions in Ukraine demonstrate the weaponisation of nature as a tool of war. The concept of ecocide is increasingly used to frame these actions within international legal discourse, reinforcing calls for accountability and compensation through global environmental justice mechanisms.

**Energy security and the role of Ukraine.** Russia's invasion of Ukraine exposed Europe's acute vulnerability to energy coercion. For decades, Russia leveraged its dominance in fossil fuel exports – particularly natural gas – as a geopolitical tool, shaping foreign policy decisions across the continent. The war marked a turning point, triggering what EU leaders have called a 'tectonic shift' in the region's energy doctrine.

Ukraine has played a critical role in this transformation – not only as a transit state for gas, but increasingly as an agent of resistance against energy blackmail. Despite attacks on infrastructure and the occupation of key energy facilities, Ukraine has maintained energy flows where possible, resisted Russian attempts to destabilise its grid, and accelerated its own path toward energy independence. The country is now a testing ground for distributed energy resilience, with growing investments in renewables, energy efficiency, and decentralised systems.

At the European level, Ukraine's struggle has catalysed reforms. The EU's REPowerEU strategy was fast-tracked in response to the war, aiming to reduce fossil fuel dependency and diversify supply routes (EU action to address the energy crisis, 2025). Countries like Germany and Italy, previously heavily reliant on Russian gas, have begun restructuring their energy sectors under pressure from both geopolitical necessity and Ukrainian advocacy.

Ukraine's experience has also exposed the dangers of the 'resource curse' – a concept highlighted by scholars such as Michael Ross (2012) – which links fossil fuel wealth to authoritarianism. In this context, Ukraine's defiance serves not just a defensive purpose, but a normative one: challenging autocratic control over energy flows and promoting democratic resilience through transparency and reform.

Thus, Ukraine functions not merely as a victim of energy aggression, but as a normative and infrastructural shield – defending European societies from economic coercion and accelerating the continent's shift toward sustainable, decentralised energy futures.

**Legal order, international norms, and the Ukrainian commitment to values.** The Russian invasion of Ukraine constitutes one of the most egregious violations of international law in the twenty-first century. Since 2022, Russia has breached multiple foundational principles of the UN Charter and customary international law, including the prohibition of the use of force, respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, the inviolability of borders, and the protection of civilians in times of war. The use of indiscriminate weapons – cluster munitions, phosphorus bombs – and deliberate attacks on civilian infrastructure such as hospitals, schools, and energy grids have triggered global condemnation and calls for accountability.

In parallel, Russia's disregard for international obligations under the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, the Geneva Conventions, and the Law of Armed Conflict has undermined the very foundations of the rules-based international order. Its militarisation of occupied territories, weaponisation of food and energy, and systemic disinformation campaigns not only destabilise Ukraine, but threaten the credibility of global governance mechanisms writ large.

In stark contrast, Ukraine has consistently aligned itself with international legal norms and democratic values, even under conditions of existential threat. Kyiv has initiated legal proceedings at the International Court of Justice and cooperated with the International Criminal Court on war crimes investigations. Despite the devastation of war, Ukraine has maintained its commitment to human rights conventions, rule of law, and democratic governance – upholding the very values enshrined in the European and international legal traditions.

Ukraine's conduct in war reinforces its position not only as a victim of aggression but as a defender of legal and moral order. As European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen stated during her visit to Kyiv in May 2023, Ukraine has become a place where European values are defended daily – not just in rhetoric but in practice (Kanevskyi, 2023). This commitment has accelerated Ukraine's integration into the Euro-Atlantic legal and security space and has bolstered its status as a normative actor capable of reinforcing the legitimacy of international institutions from within.

Ultimately, Ukraine's legal posture exemplifies the normative power of value-based resistance. While Russia undermines international law to pursue imperial revisionism, Ukraine's resilience contributes to the reaffirmation of global norms – and to the reconstitution of international security architecture on the basis of rights, justice, and shared democratic ideals.

**Ukraine as a strategic and normative shield of Europe.** Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine is not merely a geopolitical rupture – it is a civilizational confrontation. Ukraine today stands at the epicentre of a historic struggle between authoritarian coercion and democratic resilience. As in earlier centuries, Ukraine has once again become the shield defending Europe from aggression, disinformation, and the erosion of core values.

Yet Ukraine's role in this war transcends the traditional image of a defensive buffer



zone. Through its battlefield resilience, legal initiatives, civil mobilisation, and diplomatic engagement, Ukraine has emerged not only as a frontline state but as a *security provider* and *normative leader* within the emerging European order.

Traditionally, aspirant countries in the Euro-Atlantic space are required to meet established standards before joining NATO or the EU. However, Ukraine's wartime performance has inverted this logic. Under conditions of existential threat, the country has demonstrated strategic competence, military innovation, and operational discipline that exceed those of several long-standing member states. The Ukrainian Armed Forces have successfully absorbed and institutionalised NATO principles – from interoperability and decentralised command to battlefield logistics – under the most extreme conditions imaginable.

Ukraine's battlefield has become a real-world environment for understanding the dynamics of modern warfare. These experiences are already informing doctrinal updates within NATO and shaping the alliance's long-term adaptation strategy. In this sense, Ukraine is no longer merely aspiring to join Western defence structures – it is already contributing to their strategic relevance and evolution.

Equally significant is Ukraine's function as a *normative actor*. In contrast to authoritarian regimes that exploit state power to suppress dissent, Ukraine has sustained democratic practices, rule of law, transparency, and respect for civil liberties even under martial law. Its wartime governance – including initiatives in digital governance, civil society coordination, and international legal advocacy – reflects a resilient value ecosystem aligned with the foundational principles of the European Union.

Ukraine's appeals to international law, human rights conventions, and multilateral institutions are not instrumental or selective; they are rule-based and consistent. Whether through its engagement with the International Criminal Court or advocacy at the United Nations General Assembly, Ukraine has demonstrated that it is not merely aligning with European values – it is actively reinvigorating them.

This moral consistency is particularly evident in Ukraine's rejection of coerced peace. Despite mounting international pressure for compromise, Ukraine continues to uphold its right to just resistance. The missile strike on the Okhmatdyt children's hospital in Kyiv (July 2024) and the double attack on civilians in Sumy (April 2025) are just two among many examples that, despite widespread international condemnation, failed to stop Russia's aggression and further underscore the existential nature of Ukraine's struggle. Its refusal to appease mirrors the failures of past attempts to pacify authoritarian expansionism and affirms the moral clarity of Ukraine's position.

Ukraine's contribution to European security and its principled commitment to shared values demand a corresponding shift in integration policy. While the EU and NATO traditionally apply the principle of conditionality to accession, the current context necessitates a more flexible, partnership-based approach. Ukraine's reconstruction provides a unique opportunity to embed reforms into European frameworks from the ground up, creating a model of synchronised, accelerated integration.

Delaying Ukraine's institutional anchoring risks not only strategic fragmentation but also moral incoherence. Europe's long-term stability depends on locking Ukraine into its security and political architecture – not only to reward resilience but to consolidate deterrence against future aggression.

**Conclusions.** The Russian invasion of Ukraine has become a critical juncture in the evolution of the international security system, triggering multidimensional transformations far beyond the battlefield. This war has revealed the limits of existing institutional mechanisms, exposed vulnerabilities in economic and energy interdependence, and challenged the normative coherence of the global order. At the same time, it has elevated Ukraine from the position of a peripheral security recipient to that of a central actor – both strategic and normative – in shaping Europe's response to authoritarian aggression.

Ukraine's wartime experience has fundamentally altered its status within the Euro-

Atlantic community. Its ability to maintain institutional resilience, civil mobilisation, and legal coherence under conditions of existential threat has demonstrated a level of democratic maturity and strategic competence that exceeds the expectations typically placed on aspirant states. The country's economy, though severely damaged, has continued to function, supported by international partnerships and domestic innovation. Its agricultural sector, once a pillar of global food security, has adapted under fire to resume critical exports, while the Ukrainian diaspora has mobilised extensive humanitarian and logistical assistance across continents.

Equally transformative is Ukraine's role in accelerating Europe's energy transition. As country resisting energy blackmail and promoting energy diversification, Ukraine has not only defended its own sovereignty but also helped redefine the continent's energy architecture. In doing so, it has challenged the geopolitical logic of dependency and reinforced the normative imperative of democratic resilience over resource authoritarianism.

The environmental and humanitarian dimensions of the war – ranging from ecocide and nuclear risk to mass displacement and cultural destruction – have further underlined the systemic consequences of Russia's aggression. These effects are not limited to Ukraine's territory but threaten regional stability, global health, and ecological balance. Ukraine's response, grounded in appeals to international law and sustained civic engagement, has reaffirmed its commitment to the very norms that form the foundation of European and global governance.

Perhaps most significantly, Ukraine has assumed a new identity – not as a passive object of geopolitical contestation, but as an active defender and co-shaper of the European project. Its strategic adaptation on the battlefield has already informed NATO doctrine, while its morally grounded insistence on justice and accountability has strengthened the legitimacy of international legal institutions. In this sense, Ukraine has become not only a shield in the physical sense, but a normative compass, confronting the erosion of democratic values and reinforcing the moral coherence of the West.

In light of these developments, Ukraine's integration into the European and transatlantic institutional system should no longer be treated as a distant objective but as a necessary condition for continental security and democratic consolidation. The war has made clear that the future of Europe's defence, stability, and values depends not only on formal treaties, but on the inclusion of those who have demonstrated – through action, sacrifice, and conviction – their unwavering commitment to the principles that unite democratic nations. Ukraine's presence at the core of this architecture is not a symbolic gesture; it is a strategic and ethical imperative.

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