The Cost of a Permanent Frontier

ENLARGEMENT EUROPE IN THE WORLD NEW GEOGRAPHIES SECURITY UKRAINE

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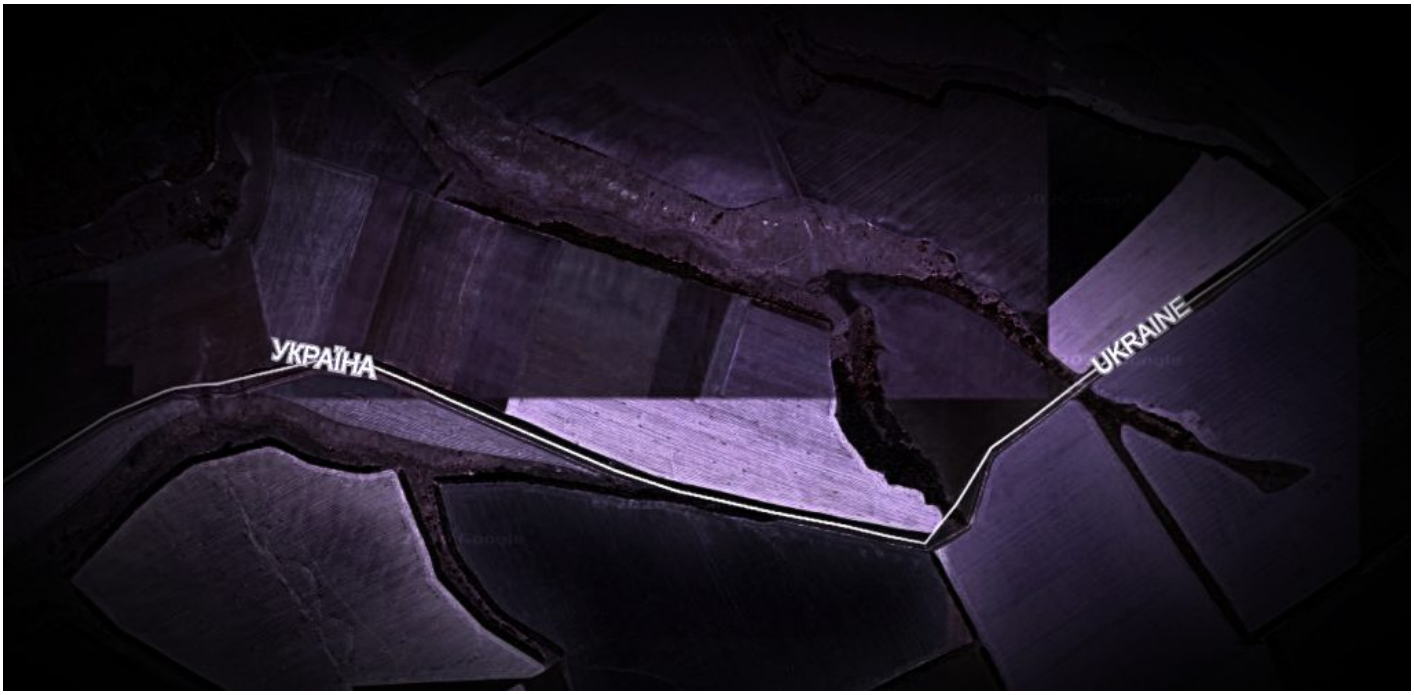

Ukraine may survive another winter under Russian attack. Europe must ask what that survival costs and what it can learn before the frontier crisis reaches deeper into its own politics.

I was in Kyiv at the end of August, when Russian attacks began to interrupt daily life in the capital with a new intensity. I remember sitting down to lunch and dinner while Ukrainian air defences hunted Russian jet-powered drones overhead. On some days, air raid alerts lasted as long as 17 hours. Russia's growing production of ballistic missiles and jet-powered drones gives it far greater capacity to destroy than Ukraine has to repair and rebuild.

> By attacking the rear with much greater intensity than ever, Moscow is trying to turn that imbalance into political pressure.

As autumn turns to winter, the question in Ukraine is no longer whether the electricity grid can produce enough power. By now it is whether a society can continue to function when an adversary repeatedly attacks the systems that sustain ordinary life. A damaged substation interrupts electricity; a strike on a heating plant can render homes uninhabitable; attacks on railways, bridges, data centers, fuel distribution and ports obstruct the movement of

workers, goods and soldiers. Each repair diverts money, equipment and people from another urgent need.

Ukraine will probably survive the winter. It has survived previous ones, repaired facilities under fire and learned to reroute supplies around damaged networks. But survival tells us little about the cost. For people whose apartments lose heat, whose children cannot attend kindergarten or school during frequent air raids, whose businesses close or whose families leave, a functioning state can coexist with an increasingly unbearable life.

> My Ukrainian friends no longer want to be told how resilient they are.

Surveys reflect that exhaustion, with a majority favouring a negotiated end to the war – though this does not imply agreement on what concessions to accept. The question is how many such winters a country can endure before the capacity sustaining its resistance begins to erode.

Europe should pay particular attention, for reasons that go beyond the rising cost of Ukraine's resistance. It has embraced Ukraine as part of its political future, but it has been slower to take seriously what Ukraine's experience says about its own. Whatever agreement eventually ends or pauses the fighting, Europe is likely to live beside an unstable Russian adversary for a long time. Its eastern frontier will remain a strategic, economic and psychological divide. Ukraine's winter is a warning about the demands of living with that condition and about the danger of praising resilience while leaving its costs to those closest to the threat.

> Nearly a decade ago, Dovilė Šukytė and I described the EU's Eastern Partnership as "hidden in the trenches."

Russia's attack on Ukraine had transformed the region's security environment. Europe's commitment to its eastern neighbours had grown, but the EU still hesitated over the costs of integrating them: investment, market access, economic modernisation and, ultimately, political responsibility. The vocabulary of partnership had begun to outgrow the policies beneath it.

Since then, Europe has crossed thresholds that were barely imaginable in 2017. Ukraine is an EU candidate, accession negotiations have begun, and the Union has established a €50 billion Ukraine Facility for 2024-27. European governments have taken in millions of Ukrainians and helped finance the Ukrainian state through war. These are substantial commitments, not empty rhetoric. Yet the old gap has taken a new form. Europe speaks as though Ukraine's security is inseparable from its own, while struggling to organise defence production, energy resilience, transport links, future budgets and enlargement around a confrontation that may last for decades.

> It is tempting to treat the coming winter as another Ukrainian emergency requiring another round of deliveries.

Certainly, the immediate deliveries matter: air-defence interceptors, transformers, spare parts and funds for repair can save lives. But the broader lesson concerns how a state and a society function when disruption becomes routine. Europe cannot assume that the fighting will one day end and its eastern policy can return to the pre-war

language of convergence.

Russia's strikes expose the vulnerability of concentrated infrastructure. Ukraine enters the winter better prepared, thanks in part to more decentralised electricity generation and heating. Yet the outcome will depend on the severity of the cold and, above all, the balance between Russia's growing capacity to destroy and Ukraine's increasingly depleted air defences. The government aims to raise available generation to 19.6 GW by November and 21.4 GW by year's end, enough to meet expected demand if restored capacity survives. Soviet-era nuclear plants, which supply more than half of Ukraine's electricity, remain the system's backbone. But newly built capacity closer to where power is needed is increasingly vital to survival: Ukraine has installed about 1.8 GW of distributed gas generation and more than 650 MW of commercial battery storage, while households and businesses have expanded their own supplies.

Gas reserves have reached the government's winter target. District heating remains particularly vulnerable: more than one-third of Ukrainian households were connected to centralised networks in 2022, leaving many dependent on shared plants and pipes whose damage can disrupt heat across entire neighbourhoods. A prolonged nationwide blackout remains unlikely, but concentrated attacks on substations linking nuclear plants to the grid are already causing outages in Kyiv in early October.

> Ukraine's nuclear backbone may hold the system together; decentralised capacity will help determine which communities can keep functioning when parts of it fail.

Technology alone does not keep the lights on. Local authorities know which buildings house vulnerable residents, which pipes are prone to failure and where a generator can do the most good. The quality of local governance matters, though. Kharkiv, close to the Russian border, was better prepared than Kyiv last winter, and continues to expand its decentralised energy and heating systems. Businesses have equipment, transport and workers; volunteers and neighbours find ways to reach people whom national systems miss. Ukraine's communities have repeatedly turned those connections into practical capacity. Their work deserves resources and authority, not only praise after the next strike.

Here lies a tension in Ukrainian governance. President Volodymyr Zelensky's wartime system has concentrated political initiative, governance and communication at the centre. Central direction can set priorities, secure foreign support and mobilise the country. Yet absorbing attacks depends heavily on local decisions and relationships. Kyiv illustrates the difficulty: disputes between the presidency, the elected mayor and the regional military administration have blurred responsibility, while winter preparedness has become another arena of political rivalry. Municipal failures deserve scrutiny, but competing centres of authority can make accountability harder precisely when cooperation is most urgent.

> The longer Russia presses Ukraine's rear, the more the country needs capable local institutions with clear responsibilities and resources to act.

There is an echo of this tension in Brussels, though the circumstances and mandates are very different. Ursula von der Leyen has sought to strengthen the Commission's role in setting priorities and overseeing their implementation, including through conditions attached to EU funding. Yet national governments remain responsible for financing and delivering much of the response and securing public consent. Common direction can help a fragmented Union act. But concentrating initiative in Brussels cannot substitute for capacity and accountability in the countries and communities expected to carry it out.

The lesson is therefore more demanding than "be resilient". Europe has time and resources that Ukraine lacked when the full-scale invasion began. It can strengthen grids and transport links, support municipalities, distribute critical capacity and agree in advance who pays when a frontier community faces disruption. It should use that advantage before improvisation becomes its default method of government.

Ukraine's ingenuity also has limits. Social Policy Deputy Minister Denys Uliutin estimated this year that only 22-25 million people were living on territory controlled by the Ukrainian government. He called the figure a catastrophe. It is an estimate, not a census: other Ukrainian demographers have put the number higher, at around 29 million, and the head of Ukraine's statistics service has warned that a precise count cannot be made during the war. But the disagreement does not make the demographic problem disappear. At the end of July, 4.43 million people who had fled Ukraine held temporary protection in the EU. Deaths, a low birth rate, displacement and the prolonged separation of families all narrow the country's future choices.

This is why admiration for Ukrainian endurance can become evasive. Europe often discusses the war in terms of the balance of power: how long Kyiv can resist, what Russia might gain, what a settlement would mean for the continent. Ukrainians must also ask what kind of nation will remain after more years of mobilisation, separation and damage. Survival through the winter is necessary. It is not, in itself, a strategy for demographic recovery or a sufficient answer to the people asked to bear the next winter's costs.

> That does not make compromise a straightforward option. A ceasefire is now a goal for both Ukraine and Europe. Ukraine needs a pause, but Kyiv still hopes to reach one from a stronger position on the battlefield.

Moscow, by contrast, appears to see an advantage in pressing Ukraine through attacks on its infrastructure, while using hybrid means to challenge Europe without risking direct war with NATO. Europe needs time to strengthen its defences, but for now its immediate priority is to preserve unity behind Ukraine. It has yet to develop either the military weight to change Moscow's calculations in Ukraine or an offer that would give Russia reason to accept a settlement. That leaves a difficult question for Ukrainians: how long can they bear the costs of continued resistance, and what terms would make a ceasefire serve the nation's future rather than merely pause the fighting?

> This is also a test of political communication.

Centralised narratives can sustain resolve during an emergency. Sustained over years, they can make honest discussion of losses and alternatives appear disloyal. Europe should not encourage that narrowing by treating

Ukrainian endurance as an unlimited contribution to European security. After all, the nation's interests cannot be reduced to its geopolitical usefulness as a barrier to Russia.

The shape of a settlement matters enormously. A ceasefire along a contested line, a negotiated arrangement with security guarantees and a continuation of high-intensity war would present different dangers. None is likely to restore the assumption that Europe's eastern neighbourhood is moving steadily towards a common political and economic order. Belarus, Moldova, the Black Sea and the EU's own borderlands will remain affected by Russia's ability to exert pressure, albeit in different ways. Both the EU and Russia need ways to directly manage incidents and risks and maintain limited diplomatic channels of communication, even when normal political relations remain out of reach.

> This is a challenge to Europe's understanding of itself.

The Union's achievement was to make borders among its members less consequential and to build integration around the expectation that cooperation would spread outward. It has always had an external border. What changes now is the prospect of a durable divide with a hostile power along a frontier that Europe may bring still closer through enlargement. That divide will influence investment, mobility, identity and the allocation of common funds. Eastern members already experience it in daily security choices; others may encounter it mainly in budget negotiations. If those experiences diverge too far, the frontier can divide Europe internally as well.

Ukraine would not simply join this arrangement as a passive recipient of protection. It has a large military and its own understanding of Russia, Belarus and the region. Kyiv now aims to define the region's security order. Bringing Ukraine into the EU would change the Union as well as Ukraine. Enlargement is therefore inseparable from decisions about defence, fiscal solidarity, institutional authority and the political voice of communities along the border.

> Europe's task is to prepare for a long confrontation without making continued Ukrainian warfare its only strategy.

First, governments should agree what military support they can sustain and how its costs will be shared. Defence, integration and reconstruction require distinct commitments: money announced in Brussels ultimately depends on governments willing to provide it and voters willing to support them.

Second, integration should produce tangible gains before membership: faster border crossings, reliable transport and energy connections, and workable access to European markets. Reconstruction must also respond to Ukraine emerging from the war: fewer people, a shifting economic geography, dispersed infrastructure and communities with sharply unequal prospects. Investment should follow where people can live and work, what communities can maintain, and which connections make the country economically viable within Europe.

Third, the European Council should mandate a small negotiating team, backed by member states willing to take responsibility, to maintain channels with Moscow and develop a conditional European offer in coordination with

Kyiv. Managing incidents, limiting infrastructure attacks and restoring commercial shipping could provide initial objectives. Europe must identify incentives it can credibly offer, specify the reciprocal steps it requires and establish how compliance would be verified. Its fragile unity makes diplomacy difficult, but also makes indefinitely financing Ukrainian resistance difficult to sustain.

> Becoming a geopolitical actor requires the capacity to negotiate as well as to support and deter.

Ukraine may once again endure a winter designed to break its will. Europe should not mistake that achievement for proof that endurance has no limit. It has welcomed Ukraine into its future. The harder step is to learn from Ukraine's present, and help preserve the people, communities and economic foundations on which that future depends.

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