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The future of Europe will be decided in Ukraine

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The world is going through a period of profound upheaval[1]. Some time ago, a question began to surface at international conferences and in the media: Is the era that shaped the post-Cold War order still current? As discussions in Davos and Munich have shown, this question has gradually given way to a thought-provoking conclusion. For many, that era is over. The rules, assumptions, and habits that structured international life no longer function as they once did. Yet the order likely to replace them has not yet fully taken shape. What is clear is that great-power politics is back. Relations between the great powers—their agreements, their compromises, and even their spheres of influence—are being redefined. For Europe, the question is clear-cut: will there still be a Europe in this new era, or will we fragment into smaller entities over which others will vie?

The future of Europe will not be decided by comments, speeches, or articles—including this one. It will be decided by the results we achieve. The most important political issue shaping Europe's future today is Russia's aggression against Ukraine. The outcome of this war is existential for Ukraine. The same is true for Europe.

The outcome of the war matters because Russia's objectives have not changed. Vladimir Putin continues to pursue two closely linked goals: the subjugation of Ukraine and the reshaping of the European security architecture to reestablish a sphere of influence along Russia's western borders. What he cannot achieve by military force, he will attempt to seize through negotiation. For him, control of Ukraine and strategic depth along Russia's borders are not tactical preferences; they are presented as existential necessities. The restoration of the empire requires both.

We must not be lulled into a false sense of normality simply because the war has been going on for several years. Duration is not synonymous with normalization. And normalization—the illusion of an endless war that simply continues to smoulder—is precisely that: an illusion. Wars end at decisive moments. They are followed by structural changes. There are victors and losers. The agreement that will end this war will shape Europe for decades.

In discussions across Europe, several misconceptions persist and must be addressed head-on. First, there is a tendency to frame the debate as a clash between advocates of peace, and those who promote war. This is false. Peace will come. Every war has an end. The real question is what kind of peace: a just peace—or a Munich-style agreement that rewards aggression and simply postpones further escalation.

Second, some claim that negotiation itself is the solution. Of course, there will be negotiations. There always are. The real question is not whether talks will take place, but on what terms they will conclude. Are we prepared to relinquish our objectives, or can we compel the Kremlin to reconsider its own?

Third, there is increasing talk that the war has become too exhausting and that we—or Ukraine—need a break. Wars are terrible, and the toll they exact—especially on the civilian population—is enormous. But history cannot be put on pause. Nor does time rewind to the last day before the war after a ceasefire, as if nothing had happened. Even in the best-case scenario—an unambiguous Ukrainian victory—Europe will face a demanding period of rebuilding its own security, integrating Ukraine, and adapting to a more hostile strategic environment.

Ultimately, the debate boils down to a simple but unsettling truth: there is no viable compromise

[1] This text was originally published in the "Schuman Report on Europe, State of the Union 2026", éditions Hémisphères, Paris, May 2026

between the restoration of a Russian empire that dominates Ukraine and secures a sphere of influence along Russia's western borders, and a free and united Europe founded on sovereign equality and voluntary alliances. The two options are not reconcilable. One implies limited sovereignty for those caught in the crossfire and negotiated hierarchies among states. The other rejects this logic. Any attempt at reconciliation would not produce stability; it would institutionalize instability.

There are therefore only two possible outcomes: either we abandon our goals, or we find a way to compel Russia to abandon its own. We have sought to pursue the latter path by supporting Ukraine and raising the cost of aggression. The first track has focused on material aid: financial assistance, military equipment, training, and reconstruction. The second has centered on sanctions and political and economic isolation. Progress has been made in both areas. Yet in neither have we brought the full weight of our collective capacity to bear, especially given what is at stake.

Supporting Ukraine "for as long as it takes" cannot mean keeping it on the brink of survival. It must mean enabling Ukraine to prevail. This requires predictability, scale, and speed. Predictability so that Ukrainian planning is based on what will happen, not on what might happen. Then comes scale, because in a war of attrition, marginal gains do not accumulate fast enough — and then speed, because time lost on our side is time gained for Russia. This implies commitments spanning several years, faster procurement and production, and fewer self-imposed restrictions on how Ukraine uses what it receives, in accordance with international law.

We must also remember that in times of war, and in politics, hope is one of the most powerful tools at our disposal. Russia understands this well. Much of its behaviour in Ukraine is aimed not only at gaining ground, but also at destroying the Ukrainian people's conviction that the path they have chosen can succeed. The systematic targeting of civilians, the destruction of infrastructure far from the front lines, and the relentless message that Ukraine will never truly belong to Europe serve a single purpose: to undermine confidence that independence from Moscow and integration into Europe are achievable goals. When voices in Europe echo the argument that Ukraine will never become a fully integrated European state, they bolster Russia's efforts.

Failing to sustain hope would render much of our material support strategically meaningless. Ammunition, aircraft, financial aid: none of this can substitute for the power of conviction in the chosen national path. If Ukrainians stop believing that their path toward a free and European future is achievable, even a stable front line could become insufficient. Armies defend territory; hope defends direction.

This is why advancing Ukraine's integration into the European Union cannot remain just one political option among many. It must be central. Enlargement is not a bureaucratic process detached from the battlefield. It is a strategic instrument. Europe must demonstrate, concretely and visibly, that Ukraine's European trajectory is real and moving forward. Not through rhetoric, but through decisions, timelines, and open chapters. An enlargement process at a standstill does not breed neutrality; it breeds strategic defeat.

Material support and keeping hope alive are only one part of the equation. The other is cost—the cost imposed on the aggressor. Wars end when one side concludes that its course of action is no longer tenable. If we want Russia to reconsider its objectives, we must alter its cost-benefit analysis.

Sanctions are Europe's primary tool in this effort. To date, the European Union has adopted twenty successive rounds of sanctions targeting financial institutions, sovereign assets, technology transfers, military supply chains, and key figures. This is not a symbolic policy. It has real macroeconomic consequences.

But our approach has a structural weakness: a gradual escalation, package after package, gives the target time to adapt. Each additional step allows for adjustment and circumvention. When pressure is predictable, it is easier to build resilience. If the goal is a strategic recalculation, predictability works in the other party's favour.

Sanctions must therefore be understood strategically. Their purpose is not punishment but ensuring that the

costs of aggression consistently and visibly exceed any conceivable gain.

These costs must be structural and cumulative. At the macroeconomic level, this means limiting Russia's ability to finance the war. Energy exports remain the central pillar of its revenue model. As long as this pillar remains even partially intact, the Kremlin retains a degree of flexibility. It is therefore essential to act more decisively on energy flows. If revenues persist, so does endurance.

Macroeconomic pressure alone will not suffice. Even authoritarian systems have a political dimension. Leaders must preserve cohesion and maintain a general perception of stability. One of Russia's fundamental promises has been stability—not only geopolitical assertiveness, but also the normality of daily life. For many, this normality included access to the European way of life: travel, property, education, and consumption. Europe was part of what seemed normal.

This perception must be eroded—and visibly so. This is not primarily a moral argument. It is a strategic one. Those who are part of the system—decision-makers, economic actors, citizens—must understand that normal life will not return as long as the war continues. Confrontation with Europe cannot coexist with access to European markets, financial systems, education, and travel.

If the state's capabilities are limited and the perception of normality deteriorates, the message becomes unequivocal: continuing the war leads to decline. A reversal becomes the only path back to stability.

However, altering the costs is not enough. We must also undermine the foundations of Russia's theory of victory.

At the heart of this conflict lies a single strategic variable: time. Russia's theory of victory rests on the conviction that time is on its side: democracies run out of steam, political cycles erode resolve, economic strains weaken unity, and attention wanes. In a war of attrition, this conviction is decisive. Moscow does not need a spectacular breakthrough if it can hold out longer politically. When Western commitment appears temporary, delay becomes a strategy.

That is why time trumps any weapons system or set of sanctions. Military aid matters. Sanctions matter. But credibility matters most. As long as Moscow assumes that European resolve will fade, any compromise remains pointless. Once it concludes that Europe will persevere for as long as necessary, a reassessment becomes rational.

Time is not neutral. It is shaped by politics. Europe's task is to ensure that time becomes a constraint on Russia, not its ally.

If Russia assumes that democracies are fleeting, our strategy must include elements that outlast governments. Accountability is one such element.

War crimes prosecutions before the International Criminal Court and the creation of a special tribunal for the crime of aggression are not symbolic gestures. They are structural signals. They carry consequences that cannot be undone by a change in leadership. Courts operate on a longer horizon than politics. Indictments and arrest warrants create lasting accountability and limit normalization without a change in behaviour.

Ensuring accountability is not just a matter of justice. It is about demonstrating a capacity to sustain the effort over time. It signals that this war will not sink into diplomatic amnesia and that electoral cycles will not erase accountability. In this sense, accountability directly addresses the time variable: Russia cannot simply keep us at bay while waiting out the clock.

Combined with sustained sanctions and credible support for Ukraine, these measures will tip the balance. Time becomes a constraint rather than an asset. Only then will a just peace become possible. Yet, once achieved, a just peace will not sustain itself.

If hostilities cease, Ukraine will face challenges similar to those Western Europe faced after World War II: securing its territory, restoring economic stability, and consolidating democratic institutions. Western Europe's recovery required American leadership—from the Marshall Plan to NATO. These were not acts of charity; they became the pillars of American success.

Ukraine will need a comparable effort.

The European Union and NATO remain the only frameworks capable of anchoring long-term security and prosperity. Enlargement offers the clearest path to peace. But membership cannot happen overnight. Peace must take hold the moment the guns fall silent. There will be a gap between the end of hostilities and full integration. This gap must be bridged deliberately, through credible security arrangements, sustained reconstruction, and structured political integration.

And this transition effort must be designed, funded, and implemented primarily by Europeans.

This is not a costly project. Just as the Marshall Plan and NATO were strategic investments, Ukraine's integration must be viewed as an investment in Europe's future. A secure, democratic, and integrated Ukraine would be the most powerful antidote to Russian imperial resurgence and one of the most important strategic projects of this century.

Previous enlargements have strengthened Europe. Without integration, half the continent would now comprise a belt of instability. Integration succeeded then. It can succeed again.

In Ukraine, in European security, and in the broader transformation of the international order, Europeans must accept a simple reality: the United States will not carry this burden indefinitely. American support has been indispensable. It cannot be a substitute for European responsibility.

Assuming this responsibility requires a strategic awakening—and strategic capacity. The capacity to define objectives, formulate policies, allocate resources, and implement decisions through the institutions we lead. Not in words, but in deeds.

The question of Europe's strategic awakening will be answered in Ukraine—or nowhere.

Europe has the capacity: 400 million citizens, the world's largest integrated market, cutting-edge technology, capital, industrial strength, and institutional depth. What has too often been lacking is not capacity, but conviction.

For too long, we have been repeating what we cannot do. The moment demands that we decide what we are going to do.

History does not stand still. It moves forward—with or without our consent. The choice is whether Europe enters this era as a coherent strategic actor. Or as a contested space shaped by others.

That choice is ours.

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