

VIENNA PEACE AND SECURITY TALKS 2026

INTEGRATION IN THE SHADOW OF WAR: UKRAINE AND THE EU

MONDAY, 28 SEPTEMBER 2026

SUMMARY PAPER

The conference was attended by a variety of stakeholders from multilateral institutions, academia, and think tanks. Different views and arguments expressed at the conference do not necessarily reflect the views of the organizing institutions. The panel discussion was open to the public.



Geopolitical developments are increasingly shaping domestic politics across Europe. With a number of consequential elections approaching in the coming years, the debate over Ukraine is becoming intertwined with broader questions about Europe's economic prospects, energy security and its place in a changing international order. Support for Ukraine is no longer being questioned only at the political fringes, while far-right movements have increasingly used the issue as part of a wider critique of Europe's direction. The persistence of these narratives also reflects the absence of compelling alternative visions of Europe's future.

The language used to describe the conflict is itself becoming politically significant. Terms such as "hybrid war" and, increasingly, "incidents" can capture important dimensions of Russian activity, but may also frame threats as occasional, temporary and geographically contained. This can contribute to a perception that the war is primarily a Ukrainian issue rather than a wider European security challenge. In countries sceptical of support for Ukraine, such as Italy, reframing the debate from "supporting Ukraine" towards "cooperating with Ukraine" could connect the issue more directly to national interests. The significant differences between threat perceptions in Northern and Eastern Europe, particularly in the Baltic states and Poland, and those in Southern Europe raise a broader question of how a common European strategy can be developed when countries differ substantially in how they perceive and describe the threat.

These pressures coincide with a period of potential change in the European project itself. The year 2027 will see crucial elections in several key EU states, including France, Italy and Poland, following Spain's snap general election in November 2026. Assessing the future of the EU before the results of these elections are known is difficult, as they could significantly reshape both the political debate and the EU itself. Several scenarios are possible, ranging from a gradual weakening of the EU to preserving a single European framework while developing stronger partnerships beyond the EU's membership, potentially involving countries such as Canada, the United Kingdom and Ukraine. Another scenario would combine fragmentation with deeper integration, producing several overlapping European projects: a Northern and Eastern European defence grouping involving countries such as Poland and the Nordic states, potentially including Ukraine, the United Kingdom and Norway; deeper cooperation among countries interested in capital markets and technological investment; and other groupings organised around different priorities.

Ukraine's Democratic Future: Between Wartime Governance and Political Competition

Ukraine's political system has been profoundly shaped by more than four years of war. Political competition and electoral processes have been largely frozen under martial law, but this has not meant the disappearance of democratic aspirations or institutions. Ukrainian society continues to express strong support for democracy, while parliament, civil society, volunteer movements and newly emerging defence-related businesses remain important sources of pluralism. At the same time, the war has strengthened the executive, particularly the Office of the President, while local government has been sidelined and political power has become increasingly concentrated.

This creates a central democratic tension. Measures that may be justified by the demands of wartime governance can also weaken the institutional checks, political competition and decentralisation needed for a functioning democracy. The question is therefore not simply whether Ukraine remains democratic during the war, but whether it will be able to transition from wartime concentration of power to genuinely competitive politics once the war ends. This transition could be complicated by the continued influence of established and emerging economic interests, the uncertain return of refugees and displaced people, and the growing political role of veterans and the security sector. At the same time, the decline of some traditional oligarchic structures, the strength of volunteer networks and the emergence of new defence-related actors could provide opportunities for democratic renewal. Supporting Ukraine therefore also

means engaging with its democratic institutions as they exist in reality, rather than only with an idealised model of Ukrainian democracy.

Ceasefire and Peace: From Ending the Fighting to Ensuring Lasting Security

The prospects for a ceasefire and peace are equally complex. Military, political and economic considerations are inseparable, while Ukraine's ability to remain sovereign will depend on credible security guarantees, military capabilities and a viable economic future. At the same time, any sustainable settlement will require channels of communication with Russia. One fundamental obstacle is that Russia does not appear to view a ceasefire simply as an opportunity to stop the fighting. Its objectives extend beyond battlefield gains and concern the political orientation and sovereignty of Ukraine itself. This makes negotiations fundamentally different from resolving a conventional territorial dispute: Ukraine may be willing to discuss concessions, but the parties continue to disagree over the basic conditions for a viable post-war Ukrainian state.

A ceasefire would itself be unprecedented and would require robust monitoring, verification, demining and mechanisms for managing incidents along a potentially very long line of contact. The OSCE, subject to the necessary political will among its participating States, could play an important role in supporting such arrangements. Rather than necessarily assuming responsibility for a comprehensive mission, the OSCE could contribute to a broader international mechanism through targeted functions where it has established expertise and legitimacy, including election observation, demining, non-proliferation and control of small arms and light weapons, veteran reintegration, and border management. It could also provide a framework for a joint Ukrainian-Russian military commission or military coordination centre to facilitate communication and incident prevention. Technical arrangements may be solvable, but fundamental disagreements over the future European security order are considerably more difficult. Any settlement would also have to reconcile the pursuit of negotiations with the principle that aggression should not be rewarded. Long-term stability would depend not only on stopping the fighting, but on creating conditions in which Ukraine can deter renewed aggression and remain economically and politically viable.

Northern Europe: A Changing Security Architecture

Northern Europe is also undergoing a profound transformation of its security architecture. Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO has facilitated more integrated military planning, while Ukraine is increasingly becoming part of a broader Northern European security space through defence cooperation, drone development and other forms of military integration. Military and hybrid threats increasingly need to be treated as part of the same continuum, with deterrence extending from the High North to the Black Sea.

Smaller coalitions of capable states are likely to play an increasingly important role, particularly where existing institutions cannot respond quickly enough. Such arrangements can strengthen deterrence and provide greater operational flexibility, while remaining connected to broader European and transatlantic structures. The emergence of these groupings also raises questions about how a stronger core of capable countries can contribute to European security without leaving other European states outside the strategic conversation.

Ukraine's democratic future, negotiations with Russia and European security are therefore closely interconnected. The future of European support for Ukraine cannot be separated from the broader question of what European societies understand themselves to be defending and how they envision Europe's role in the emerging international order. The challenge is not simply how to end the current war, but how to create the political, democratic and security conditions for a stable post-war Europe while maintaining sufficient European cohesion to act collectively.