

Winning the War – the urgent need to boost political will in Europe

Main take-aways from the conference on 27 March 2025

“Three years of full-scale war with Russia: How can France strengthen its support for Ukraine in the field of security and European integration?”

Three years into Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, one truth continues to haunt the European response: despite growing awareness, rising budgets, and mounting military and diplomatic initiatives, political will remains insufficient. This gap is particularly stark across Western Europe, where bold decisions are too often delayed, diluted, or outsourced. As the war drags on and the U.S. increasingly distances itself from its traditional role as Europe’s security guarantor, the moment calls for decisive leadership and out-of-the-box thinking. The question is no longer whether to act—but how to act, in particular when it comes to security guarantees for Ukraine. But political will can also lead to concrete actions at diplomatic, economic and societal levels.

At the diplomatic level – from dependency to leadership

One of the clearest messages across Europe these days is the growing concern over U.S. reliability. From the aggressive speech by Vice President JD Vance at the Munich Security Conference to the dramatic Oval Office dispute between President Trump and President Zelensky, the signs are multiplying: *Pax Americana* is fading. Mistrust is high at a time when the United States is leading a highly criticized diplomatic process with Russia that appears to sideline both Ukrainian and European interests. In parallel, the U.S. continues to question its commitment to NATO while aggressively contesting territorial integrity of the EU in Greenland.

Europe can no longer afford to be a diplomatic bystander. Rather than waiting for invitations to discussions that overlook its strategic interests, Europe must reevaluate its alliances and assert its presence where decisions are being made. This requires a fundamental mindset shift: acting not as a buffer zone, but as a geopolitical actor in its own right. Europeans should, of course, remain attentive to developments in the U.S.-Russia talks—but they must not wait to react to decisions made in their absence. Especially, if the U.S. intends to switch sides seeing Russia as a potential ally in the looming confrontation with China. Instead, Europeans should proactively shape the terms of strategic dialogue on European security, with Ukraine as their closest and most vital ally. The real decision-making table is not in Washington D.C. or Moscow but in Kyiv.

At the military level – the end of illusions, strengthen Ukraine support immediately and prepare for war

Brussels and EU member states must confront an uncomfortable reality: European military posture remains fragmented and insufficient. With 27 national armies, no unified command, and limited combat

readiness, the EU is ill-prepared for sustained conflict. And while this assessment concerns only current military support for Ukraine, many experts warn that Europe must be ready for a potential large-scale confrontation with Russia within the next three to five years. Proposals such as peacekeeping or peace enforcement missions raise legitimate concerns regarding effectiveness, capacity, and political backing. The persistent lack of unity among EU member states makes coordinated action at the EU level nearly impossible while the US has opted out from ensuring any security commitment on the ground through NATO. In this context, a coalition of the willing—with France and the United Kingdom playing central roles—emerges as the only credible path forward for military engagement.

European support in the security and defence realm must now focus on practical and immediate measures to strengthen Ukraine's capabilities. Priorities include the deployment of additional air defence systems, sustained artillery supply, and the expansion of training programs and technical cooperation. A key strategic domain identified by the Ukrainian side is air security, which is seen as decisive for the outcome of the war. While discussions continue, what is urgently needed are rapid decisions that lead to operational outcomes—through joint planning, shared capabilities, and integrated responses. This must happen now, as Russia continues to target Ukrainian civilians daily, even while engaging in so-called "peace talks" with the United States.

At the economic level – put money where your mouth is

Europe's economic potential to support the defence sector is not in question—but its strategic use of financial resources is. The often-cited €800 billion for rearmament largely repackages existing funds. While the announcement was welcomed, it does not bring anything fundamentally new to the table. More importantly, it fails to answer a critical question: how to spend these resources efficiently? At the same time, national fiscal constraints, including in France, further limit the availability of funding for enhanced defence capabilities. Strengthening military support to Ukraine, while simultaneously developing Europe's own defence and security architecture, will require identifying new sources of funding in a tight timeframe. This includes the creation of joint ventures, as well as the mobilization of private capital. The role of key financial actors—especially the European Investment Bank—must also evolve to reflect the urgency of the current geopolitical environment.

What is needed is a true war economy mindset, underpinned by bold political choices—such as Germany's historic €500 billion infrastructure plan and its decision to suspend the debt-brake. But Europe must also think bigger. While filling existing gaps in its armed forces and defence systems is essential, it must also invest in the technologies of tomorrow to maintain credible deterrence over the long term. This includes cutting-edge domains such as drone production, artificial intelligence, and dual-use innovation. Here, Ukraine can play a pivotal role due to its experience from the battlefield. Its agile use of military technologies, and its culture of innovation offer valuable feedback for the European defence industry. Encouraging mutual exchanges of expertise can accelerate progress on both sides. Ultimately, these efforts must go beyond short-term resilience: they are essential for enabling Europe to emerge as a long-term security provider and to deter any future aggression on the continent.

At the societal level – Develop a truth-based narrative to sustain support for Ukraine

Ultimately, Europe's ability to help Ukraine win depends not just on leaders—but on citizens. Several speakers emphasized the growing sense of realism in French society and elsewhere. Parliamentarians

are more vocal, the media more engaged, and the public increasingly more aware of the stakes. Yet this momentum remains fragile. Governments must speak with their people, clearly articulating why Ukraine's victory is essential for Europe's own security and freedom, and in the case of France – French own national interests.

Support also needs a human face. Strengthening person-to-person ties—through field missions, civil society cooperation, and solidarity actions—builds the societal resilience required for long-term engagement. As Europe prepares its militaries for high-intensity warfare, it must prepare its societies too: not just materially, but mentally and politically. And this also requires political leadership as preparing a population for difficult times rarely brings political benefits. Therefore, the support of Ukraine needs to be seen by political leaders not as an item that may be affected by political calendar and developments but as a long-term investment in a more autonomous and stronger Europe.

Capable public administration at the heart of Ukraine's reconstruction and integration to the EU

The conference also addressed the ways France and partners can support Ukraine's European integration and reconstruction, as the country is set to “build back better” after the hostilities end. This “building back better” is impossible without a capable public sector in Ukraine that is effectively using the considerable investments that will be coming into the country both with the reconstruction and with EU integration processes. In fact, public administration reform is part of the “fundamentals cluster” under the EU-Ukraine membership negotiations. It is an essential horizontal policy area for the alignment with the EU Acquis. This means that progress on the public administration reform is crucial for a country's membership in the EU, as the fundamental cluster is closed last in the process.

OECD SIGMA Programme has been supporting Ukraine in its public administration reform since 2014 contributing to Ukraine's first Strategy for the Reform of the Public Administration 2016 and working with the Centre of Government in Ukraine to enhance the compliance with the OECD Principles of Public Administration. The Principles represent the requirements of the EU for the candidate countries in the area of public administration. Hence, continued assistance from the OECD to Ukraine in alignment with the Principles is critical for Ukraine's success in obtaining EU membership. Moreover, expanding the existing cooperation between France (i.e. Direction générale de l'administration et de la fonction publique) and Ukraine (i.e. Secretariat of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, National Agency of Civil Service) on the public administration reform through systematic dialogue and targeted assistance and training will strengthen public sector in Ukraine. It will also enhance absorption capacities of the national and local governments in Ukraine of the reconstruction funds and, later, of the EU structural funds. France, in return, can benefit from the Ukrainian experience in public sector adaptation in the time of crisis, in particular across digitalisation of public services and e-Government, to strengthen its crisis preparedness. Finally, donors and partners can play an important role in strengthening the civil society organisations that support public administration reform in Ukraine (e.g. trainings, seminars, etc.), enabling civil society actors to become powerful vectors of reform progress.

Managing the risks and opportunities of Ukraine's reconstruction: making it a win-win strategy

The reconstruction poses an immense opportunity but also a challenge both for Ukraine and for France. For Ukraine, it is an opportunity to attract investments, talent, knowledge, and technologies to “build back better”. However, it is also a challenge as in order to generate positive spillovers for the whole

economy and set it on a sustainable path which advances the country to EU membership, the reconstruction process should be organised in a transparent, cost-effective, efficient and inclusive manner. For France, Ukraine's reconstruction market of more than 500 billion represents not only an unprecedented opportunity for private companies in terms of investments and exports growth, but also a possibility of a strategic expansion of French economic presence in key sectors such as construction and engineering, energy, transport, agriculture and water management. The challenge is, however, to leverage French current economic presence so as to play "the early-mover advantage" and later to navigate the highly competitive reconstruction market.

The latest Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment 2025 by the World Bank sets Ukraine's recovery costs at 506 billion EUR over the next decade, almost three times higher than Ukraine's GDP in 2024. Addressing this important reconstruction need would be impossible without substantial private sector investments. In fact, during the conference the representatives of the regional administrations of Zaporizhzhia and Kharkiv, and of the city councils of Fastiv and Kryvyi Rih highlighted their readiness and willingness to build long-term partnerships with France in such priority areas for reconstruction as energy, housing, healthcare, education, and demining. These sectors are also listed among those requiring the highest investments, according to the World Bank assessment, with the housing sector on top of the list (81 bn EUR over the next 10 years), followed by transport (75 bn EUR), energy (66 bn EUR).

Since the start of the large-scale invasion, international partners have stepped up their support to Ukraine's resilience and reconstruction of de-occupied and heavily damaged territories (e.g. Chernihiv, Kyiv, Kharkiv regions). Agence Française de Développement (AfD), for example, has seen its mandate extended to Ukraine in January 2024 followed by an opening of an office in Kyiv in July 2024. Furthermore, the AfD Group strengthened its technical assistance provided to Ukraine since 2006 through Expertise France, and ramped up its support to private companies through Proparco present in Ukraine since 2019. Under the recently announced 200 million EUR assistance package by the French Government, AfD is working to derisk private sector investments in Ukraine and enhance French companies' participation in reconstruction projects in Ukraine.

When it comes to the French business presence in Ukraine, currently France has 180 companies operating in the country with a total amount of 4,4 bn EUR in investments by French enterprises since their arrival in Ukraine and 1,2 bn EUR only over the last two years. France is the first foreign employer in Ukraine and among top 10 foreign investors in 2024. The Franco-Ukrainian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCI FU) has been a major player in accompanying French businesses in Ukraine and fostering French business presence in the local market.

However, going forward, and if France is to leverage the "first-mover" advantage, it should build up its investments in Ukraine's reconstruction projects in sectors where it has competitive advantage, and which are priority for Ukraine. This includes, for instance, construction and engineering (e.g. companies such as Vinci, Bouygues, Eiffage), energy (e.g. EDF, TotalEnergies), agriculture and water management (e.g. SUEZ, Veolia). The government could be crucial in de-risking private sector investments in Ukraine with the growing role of AfD but also CCI FU, providing guidance and advice to companies entering the Ukrainian market. Moreover, Ukraine presents a great platform for testing

and generation of new ideas, technologies and products that can be scaled up beyond the Ukrainian market with benefits for the French, European and global economies.

Finally, Ukraine stands to benefit immensely from the French excellence and know-how in civil engineering, energy, utilities as well as other areas critical for the reconstruction. Transfer of knowledge and skills to Ukraine strengthened human capital and capabilities of the Ukrainian private sector to innovate and ensure long-term sustainable growth with direct implications for Ukraine's recovery and European future.

Altogether, Ukraine's reconstruction has a strong European dimension in two ways. It is not only a lever to accelerate Ukraine's membership in the EU but also an excellent opportunity to build a stronger and more competitive Europe in the context of increased fragmentation of the global markets and global competition from China and the US.

Time for boldness

Europe stands at a crossroads. The war in Ukraine is not just a battle over territory—it is a battle over the future of European security, sovereignty, and values. The time for hesitation is over. If Europe wants to reaffirm itself as a credible global actor, it must rekindle its political will, embrace its responsibilities, and lead with courage. Bold, coordinated, and innovative action across diplomacy, defence, economy, and society is not optional—it is existential. Ukraine's war is Europe's war and only by acting like it can Europe hope to shape peace on its continent.

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Draft Agenda

«Three years of full-scale war with Russia:

How can France strengthen its support for Ukraine in the field of security and European integration? »

Thursday, 27 March 2025

14.00 – 14.30	Registration Access through 128 rue de l'Université, bring your ID
14.30 – 15:00	Welcoming remarks Moderator: Arthur Keningsberg , President, Euro Creative <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pierre Heilbronn, Special Envoy of the French President for Relief and Reconstruction of Ukraine • Serhiy Sukhomlyn, Head of State Agency for Reconstruction and Development of Infrastructure of Ukraine (video) • Nataliia Aliushyna, Head of the National Agency of Ukraine on Civil Service (video) • Olena Chepurna, Head of PGA
15:00 – 16:15	Panel 1: Ramping up military support for Ukraine and geopolitical perspectives of the future of Ukraine. Moderator: Romain Le Quiniou , Managing Director of Euro Creative <u>Framing the discussion:</u> Andriy P. Zagorodnyuk , Ukrainian Centre for Defence Strategies, former Minister of Defence (2019-2020) (video) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frédéric Petit, Member of French Parliament, Member of the Commission of Foreign Affairs • General Nicolas Richoux, 7th armoured brigade, ex-Defence Attaché French Embassy Berlin • Yaroslav Azhnyuk, Founder of drone production company “The Forth Law” (video) • Gallagher Fenwick, Grand Reporter, Former Head of English-speaking France24 • Anastasia Shapochkina, President of Eastern Circles Q&A
16:15 – 16:45	Break
16:45 – 18:00	Panel 2: Enhancing support for Ukraine's European integration in the context of reconstruction and building public administration capabilities Moderator: Lyudmyla Tautiyeva , Public Policy Analyst at EFIS Centre (Brussels), PGA Board Member 2025 <u>Framing discussion:</u> Ivan Fedorov , Governor of Zaporizhzhia Oblast (video) Yurii Vilkul , Mayor of Kryvyi Rih (video) Kostiantyn Lisnychyi , Strategic Advisor, UkraineInvest <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cyrille Bellier, Head of Department Europe, Middle East, Asia, AfD • Oleh Syniehubov, Governor of Kharkiv Oblast (video) • Mykhailo Netiazhuk, Mayor of Fastiv, Kyiv region (video) • Gregor Virant, Head of SIGMA Programme, OECD • Bertrand Barrier, Former Head of Franco-Ukrainian Chamber of Commerce in Ukraine Q&A
18:00 – 18:15	Closing remarks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Romain Le Quiniou, Managing Director of Euro Creative • Hélène Banna, PGA Board Member
18:45	Cocktail reception