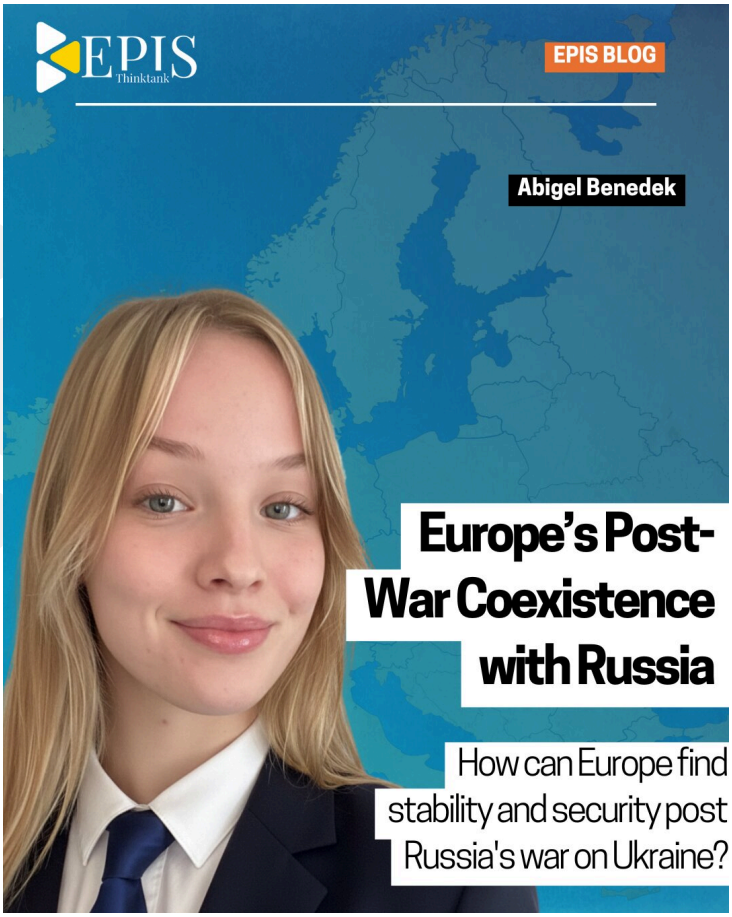
Europe's Post-War Coexistence with Russia

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Perhaps the most obvious misjudgement about Russia's war on Ukraine was that it would end quickly. On 22 January 2026, the war marked its fourth year, with no clear sign of its end. The conflict has highlighted the fragmentation within the EU and the broader Western alliance in their approach to seeking security with Russia. Yet, paradoxically, it has also catalysed greater military co-operation and strengthening of collective power. To find peaceful long-term coexistence with Russia, Europe must build credible deterrence and prepare for a post-war security dialogue that distinguishes

between Russia's legitimate security concerns and its illegitimate use of force. For this, it is critical that Europe sustains a collective front.

Divisions in strategy

The division between European and NATO nations in dealing with Russia has crystallised over the four years. This is apparent from the variance between countries' willingness to support Ukraine. Hungary and Slovakia's leadership have starkly deviated from the common EU path. Whilst across the Atlantic, President Trump has swayed to Russian narratives, expressing the desire to "reestablish strategic stability" with Russia in their National Security Strategy.

At the same time, Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelensky remains the central figure and voice of opposing Russia's aggression and reaffirming Ukraine's will to keep fighting. On 22 February 2026, Zelensky gave an interview to the BBC stating that Ukraine will be victorious, and will win all the land back "it is only a matter of time". However, he highlighted the critical issue that Ukraine's fighting capability greatly depends on the financial and military support it receives from its partners.

Ukrainian public opinion reinforces Zelensky's stance, according to the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS), 65% of respondents "agreed with the statement that they are ready to endure war for as long as necessary". The prevailing view across Ukrainian society is that the country "would not be made safer by meeting Russian demands to give the Kremlin Ukraine's Luhansk and Donetsk regions." For now, Ukrainian sovereignty is central to establishing a peace deal and negotiating with Russia, however the support from allies has increasingly fractured, threatening Europe's collective power.

Building European Deterrence

Divisions appear to weaken European credibility. However, the war has also triggered extensive co-operation amongst EU member states and allies. At the 2026 Munich Security Conference, Emmanuel Macron said that once a settlement on Ukraine is reached, Europe "will have to define rules of coexistence that limit the risk of escalation." The French president initiated a holistic approach to nuclear deterrence amongst European allies, and called to have a "new strategic dialogue" on nuclear arms to explore how sovereign interests can be interwoven into collective security.

The war has led to notable developments regarding European security. The EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) has introduced the Strategic Compass serving as a plan, translating power into actionable steps to security. Davide Genini argued that the Strategic Compass is a key sign of political unity, that is building towards a "strategic defence culture." Nevertheless, the European Peace Facility (EPF) has played a crucial role in financing the EU's CFSP, which has been given the highest level of funding of 17 billion euros between 2021 and 2027 in the history of the CSDP. This has shown the will of Europe to financially back Ukraine and invest in its security, amplifying Europe's role as an active military power. Between 2021

and 2024 member states "increased defence spending by 30%, reaching a record 326 billion euros," and Denmark rejoined the CFSP initiative in 2022 after a 30-year opt-out "reinforcing the EU's security role in Europe". These unifying developments are building towards stronger and more credible European deterrence. However, deterrence by military strength alone cannot provide stable long-term peace with Russia. Rather it can risk a shift towards permanent confrontation and colder relations. Therefore, military power needs to be balanced with seeking diplomatic relations to avoid conflict.

Post-war security dialogue

Not all analysts interpret the root causes of the war the same, thus they draw contradictory suggestions on the path to take to achieve long-term stability and security. Prominent American academics like Jeffrey Sachs from Columbia University and John Mearsheimer from the University of Chicago have emphasised that the Western alliance has played a part in triggering aggressive behaviour from Russia. Mearsheimer interprets Moscow's actions not as inherently expansionist, rather as rational. He argues that America's obsession with bringing Ukraine into NATO was an existential threat for Russia, which provoked the war. Similarly, Jeffrey Sachs argues that NATO's inability to recognise Russia as a legitimate actor that has legitimate core security concerns, has applied a "double standard". **The NATO alliance did not consider that its spread would pose an existential threat for Russia, leading to its heightened security-seeking behaviour.** Sachs and Mearsheimer push for Ukraine to be a neutral buffer zone between Russia and the West.

Building Deterrence then Dialogue

Unity amongst allies is crucial for building Europe's deterrent power on the international stage. It is essential for Europe to be militarily powerful before negotiating with Russia, to leverage it for long-term coexistence. Despite Russia's lack of intent to engage in a co-operative security dialogue, the EU and member states must pursue it, as it would be a "failure of imagination and diplomacy if the crisis in Ukraine were to result in a long-lasting era of colder relations and reduced co-operation" leading to an unstable and threatening landscape.