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EU support to Ukraine: Navigating three interlinked agendas

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The EU's engagement with Ukraine is increasingly shaped by the convergence of three agendas: security, reconstruction and EU accession. While security remains a precondition for recovery, reconstruction decisions are already shaping Ukraine's future economic and institutional integration into the EU, and accession has become a geopolitical and security imperative. Yet these agendas continue to advance through largely separate EU institutional and political tracks.

The EU has developed an extensive architecture of financial instruments and coordination mechanisms to support Ukraine. While these have helped support assistance and align broad priorities, no single mechanism provides strategic oversight across the three agendas. Responsibilities remain fragmented across EU institutions, member states and international coordination platforms, limiting the EU's ability to address their interdependencies coherently.
This fragmentation is particularly problematic as the EU assumes greater responsibility for Ukraine amid declining US engagement. Beyond mobilising resources, the challenge is to ensure coherent political steering, reconcile different priorities and timelines, and strengthen the EU's capacity to engage with Ukraine as a credible partner and 'critical friend', supporting reforms while recognising Ukraine's agency and wartime constraints.

This paper proposes two recommendations to strengthen coordination and political steering: Firstly, a dedicated Council configuration or a permanent RESUA working party with a revised mandate, providing strategic oversight and more systematic coordination. Secondly, an EU–Ukraine resilience hub, jointly owned by both counterparts, provides a common political space to align priorities across the three agendas. Both options aim to move towards a more integrated and politically driven approach to the EU's long-term engagement with Ukraine.

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Acronyms

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location & Event Data
CMI	Crisis Management Initiative - Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation
COELA	Council's working party on Enlargement and Countries Negotiating Accession to the EU
COEST	Council's working party on Eastern Europe and Central Asia
EC	European Commission
ECOFIN	Economic and Financial Affairs Council
EPF	European Peace Facility
EU	European Union
G7 / G7+	Group of Seven / Group of Seven Plus
MFF	Multiannual Financial Framework
PSC	Council's Political and Security Committee
RDNA	Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment
RESUA	Council's working party on Reconstruction and Support for Ukraine
SAFE	Security Action for Europe
TEU	Treaty on European Union
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States

Executive summary

The EU's engagement with Ukraine is entering a more demanding phase, increasingly shaped by the convergence of three interconnected agendas: security, reconstruction and EU accession. Security remains a precondition for recovery and economic growth, while reconstruction decisions taken today will shape Ukraine's future institutions, infrastructure and economic integration into the EU. Accession, in turn, is increasingly understood as a geopolitical and security imperative, with implications for both Ukraine's future and the EU's own security and resilience. Yet, despite these interdependencies, **the three agendas continue to advance through largely separate EU institutional, financial and political tracks, without a common framework for strategic coordination and political steering.**

The EU has significantly expanded its support to Ukraine since Russia's full-scale invasion, developing an architecture of financing instruments, policy frameworks and coordination mechanisms. Its security agenda has evolved beyond the (emergency) provision of military equipment towards strengthening Ukraine's defence-industrial capacity and integrating it more closely into European defence structures. At the same time, reconstruction is taking place amid continued destruction, with recovery needs now estimated at over €500 billion over the next decade. Mobilising private investment, strengthening implementation capacity and prioritising resilience-enhancing investments remain central challenges. On the accession front, negotiations have advanced following the lifting of Hungary's veto in 2026, but political support among member states remains fragile, while Ukraine faces the difficult task of implementing reforms under wartime conditions.

These developments reinforce the need to consider security, reconstruction and accession together, rather than as separate or sequential processes. Investments in energy, transport and critical infrastructure are essential for both economic recovery and Ukraine's ability to withstand continued attacks. Reconstruction choices also need to be consistent with future EU standards and accession requirements. Meanwhile, Ukraine sees EU integration as an important element of its long-term security. The EU's largely technocratic accession framework does not fully reflect these security considerations, highlighting the need to advance security cooperation and institutional integration together.

The EU's existing coordination architecture has played an important role in keeping financing flowing, aligning donor priorities and supporting implementation. However, **no overarching strategy links these three processes together: there is no shared political vision on either the EU or Ukrainian side that connects security choices to reconstruction priorities and accession**

benchmarks. Within the EU, responsibilities are distributed across different Council working parties, Commission services and financial instruments, with limited systematic coordination between them. At the international level, the Ukraine donor platform provides an established framework for reconstruction and civilian assistance, while military and security support is largely coordinated through separate bilateral and multilateral arrangements. Although recent developments, including the growing security dimension of the Ukraine recovery conference, suggest greater recognition of these connections, institutional fragmentation persists.

This coordination gap is particularly consequential as the EU assumes greater responsibility for Ukraine following the reduction of US engagement. Beyond mobilising additional resources, the EU faces the challenge of providing sustained political leadership, reconciling different priorities and timelines, and ensuring that decisions across the three agendas reinforce one another. It also needs to strengthen its role as a 'critical friend': maintaining credible reform conditionality and engaging frankly with Ukraine on governance and implementation challenges, while recognising Ukrainian agency, wartime constraints and the importance of civil society and local ownership. This requires better information sharing, but also clearer political direction and a more coherent articulation of the EU's own strategic interests.

To address these gaps and strengthen political steering across the three agendas, there are two recommendations:

- **A dedicated Council configuration or a permanent RESUA working party with a revised mandate.** This would provide a more structured space for member states to consider security, reconstruction and accession priorities together, rather than through separate institutional channels. In the near term, expanding RESUA's mandate and making it a permanent working party appears the most actionable option. More systematic coordination with other relevant Council bodies, particularly those dealing with enlargement and security, could strengthen strategic oversight, improve information flows and ensure greater coherence between financing decisions, reform priorities and security considerations.
- **An EU–Ukraine resilience hub.** A more ambitious option would be to establish a jointly owned political coordination mechanism bringing together EU institutions and Ukrainian counterparts to align priorities across the three agendas. Unlike existing arrangements, this would provide a common space for strategic dialogue and political steering, recognising Ukraine as a partner rather than primarily a recipient of assistance. Its effectiveness would depend on meaningful involvement beyond central government, including regional and local authorities, civil society and

private-sector actors, whose contributions are essential to Ukraine's resilience, reconstruction and reform process.

As the EU prepares its next Multiannual Financial Framework for 2028–2034, decisions on institutional arrangements and financing priorities will shape its engagement with Ukraine for years to come. Strengthening coordination and political steering is therefore particularly timely. Ultimately, the challenge is to move beyond parallel support mechanisms towards a more integrated strategic approach that connects Ukraine's immediate security and recovery needs with its longer-term reconstruction and accession objectives, while also reflecting the EU's own security, economic and political interests.

Introduction

The EU's engagement with Ukraine is entering a more demanding phase, increasingly shaped by the convergence of three agendas: **security, reconstruction and accession**. Security remains the precondition for recovery and reconstruction, but reconstruction is already shaping the institutions, infrastructure and economic model Ukraine will bring into the EU, while accession is a geopolitical investment and geostrategic choice about Ukraine's place in Europe and the EU's own security (European Council, 2024).

The European Commission's pre-enlargement policy reviews package, adopted on 6 October 2026, reflects the growing recognition that future enlargements will require the EU to adapt its own governance, policies and budget (European Commission, 2026a), while the Foreign Affairs Council discussion of 12 October 2026 on the security impact of an enlarged EU explicitly acknowledged the contribution that candidate countries, and Ukraine in particular, can make to European security and defence (European Council, 2026a).

These developments point to a broader shift in how enlargement is understood, increasingly not only as a process of regulatory and institutional alignment, but also as a strategic choice with implications for the EU's own security, resilience and capacity to act. Yet the extent to which this political recognition translates into more coherent approaches to security, reconstruction and accession remains an open question.

This discussion paper focuses on the **coordination and political steering** needed to hold these agendas together. Section 1 first takes stock of where each agenda currently stands, while Section 2 examines the institutional and political gaps created by their largely separate management. The paper concludes with implications of the gaps and recommendations for future coordination.

Our analysis draws on desk research and around 40 interviews conducted between May 2025 and October 2026 with EU institutions, member state representations, European financial institutions, civil society and the Government of Ukraine, complemented by an informal roundtable with European Council's working party on reconstruction and support for Ukraine (RESUA) delegates and the European Commission under the Danish Presidency in October 2025 and an ECDPM–CMI closed-door roundtable on societal resilience in April 2026.

1. Three connected but parallel agendas

Security, reconstruction and accession agendas cannot be neatly sequenced nor separated. As long as Russia destroys infrastructure, disrupts energy provision and logistics, displaces people and deters investment, recovery remains exposed. At the same time, the more Ukraine moves towards EU membership, the more security becomes an issue internal to the EU, also because Ukraine's future membership raises unprecedented questions about the application of the EU's mutual-assistance commitment under Article 42(7) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU)[1] while a member remains under attack (Batchik and Johnson, 2026).

Beyond the unbearable human cost, this makes ending the war indispensable, but argues against a simple 'security first, reconstruction and accession later' logic. **At the moment, security, reconstruction and accession processes are advancing simultaneously but remain managed through separate institutional tracks, separate budgets, and separate interlocutors.**

Moreover, different agendas also mean reconciling different timelines. Ukraine needs security and military support in the short term, continuity of financing and oversight over the medium term, and a longer-term pathway linking recovery, economic transformation and acquis-based reforms. **But none of these agendas fits squarely into a single timeframe**: security is no longer only an emergency concern, accession is already a live political process, and reconstruction decisions taken now will shape Ukraine's future for decades. The following sections therefore look at each agenda in turn, before returning to the question of how they can be steered more coherently and in a more integrated manner.

1.1 Security as the precondition for reconstruction and economic growth

The meaning of the EU's security support to Ukraine has broadened considerably. What began primarily as an emergency effort to supply weapons and ammunition through the European Peace Facility (EPF) has increasingly become a **longer-term agenda aimed at sustaining Ukraine's capacity to deter future aggression, strengthening its defence-industrial base and connecting it more closely to Europe's own defence architecture.**

For example, the 2025 White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030 (European Commission, 2025a) places Ukraine firmly within Europe's wider defence strategy and created the €150 billion Security Action for Europe (SAFE)

[1] Article 42(7) states: "If a Member State is the victim of armed aggression on its territory, the other Member States shall have towards it an obligation of aid and assistance by all the means in their power, in accordance with Article 51 of the United Nations Charter. This shall not prejudice the specific character of the security and defence policy of certain Member States." See European Parliament, 2012.

instrument, which supports joint procurement and defence-industrial investment by member states while allowing Ukraine to participate in eligible projects. Similarly, the European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP) includes a dedicated Ukraine Support Instrument to strengthen Ukrainian production capacity and facilitate integration with the European defence industry, while the European Defence Fund allows Ukraine to associate, henceforth offering further opportunities for joint defence research. These efforts were further reinforced by a new EU–Ukraine defence-industrial partnership signed in July 2026(EEAS, 2026) (see Annex 1 for further details on these instruments).

EU member states' support to Ukraine on a parallel track

Member states are also directly supporting Ukraine's defence industry, building on the so-called 'Danish model' (Defence Ukraine, 2026). Developed in 2024, this is a 'government-to-government-to-business donation' where partner governments pay for weapons produced and used in Ukraine, shortening delivery chains while helping sustain Ukraine's own production, maintenance and technological capacity. A significant share of EU member states' security support to Ukraine falls outside formal coordination frameworks, making it difficult to assess aggregate exposure, avoid duplication, or link defence financing to broader political conditionality. This off-budget dimension deserves explicit attention while reviewing the EU's security architecture.

Taken together, these developments point to a broader change in the nature of EU support. While military assistance remains essential, **the emphasis is progressively shifting from the provision of equipment towards building a more sustainable defence ecosystem in which Ukraine is increasingly integrated** into European procurement, production, research and industrial planning.

Security is broader than defence

The EU's actions in support of Ukraine's security are, however, broader than just military assistance or territorial defence, and include supporting the resilience of the state, economy and society to continue functioning under sustained attack. Rebuilding an electricity grid to withstand repeated attacks, restoring water systems, protecting information space, or improving transport connectivity are examples of reconstruction investments, but they also strengthen Ukraine's ability to withstand, absorb, and recover from continued aggression (see box 1 for other examples).

Box 1. Supporting Ukraine's energy security

Energy is perhaps the clearest example of the EU's broader approach to security, as the EU supports Ukraine's energy security by providing generators and transformers, strengthening grid resilience and decentralisation to reduce reliance on a small number of large generators, and securing heat supply through gas purchases, among other measures. The EU mobilised around €4 billion since the beginning of the war, and is now planning to gradually integrate Ukraine into its energy market to increase its resilience. Similar support extends to water and transport infrastructure, with a €30 million EU-funded project rebuilding the water system in Kryvyi Rih, and more than €2.8 billion mobilised to strengthen the EU–Ukraine Solidarity Lanes, upgrade road and rail border crossings and progressively integrate Ukraine into the trans-European transport network.

Source: *European Commission, 2026b; EEAS, 2025; European Commission, 2025b*.

The EU's 2024 security commitments to Ukraine already reflect this broader logic, linking military and defence support with macro-financial stability, reconstruction, resilience and reforms (European Union and Ukraine, 2024). Recent instruments have begun to bridge this divide. The €90 billion Ukraine Support Loan for 2026–27, for example, combines macroeconomic and defence-industrial support within one financing framework. It does not remove the different implementation channels, but it shows that maintaining the Ukrainian state's finances and sustaining its defence capacity are increasingly being treated as parts of the same strategic problem.

At the political level, discussions also increasingly acknowledge the interconnection between the agendas. For example, the Foreign Affairs Council of 12 October 2026 acknowledged the **security dimension of enlargement**, marking an important recognition of Ukraine as a partner country whose security needs to be supported by the EU, but whose military experience and defence capabilities can contribute to Europe's own security (Burilkov et al., 2025). Yet, the implementation of the accession process, reconstruction and security cooperation continues to be managed through largely separate institutional channels, as we explain in Section 2.

An additional challenge in the EU's ambitions as a security actor is making sure it plays a (substantial) role in the formal peace negotiation process of Ukraine, so far led by the US. While Europe can now sit at the next peace talks table (Parrock,

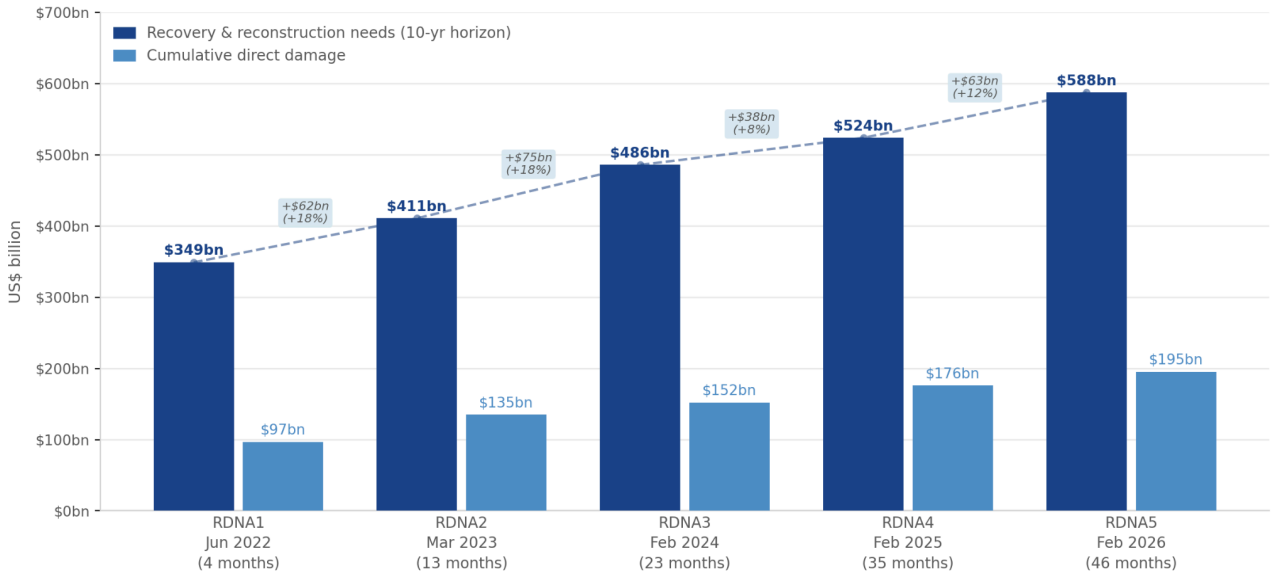
2026), member states' different priorities (and divisions) may hamper a strong Europe speaking with one voice. Ukrainian interlocutors have expressed concern that the lack of a united Europe could limit the EU's ability to influence the conditions of a future settlement, despite the implications such an agreement would have for all three agendas (Interviews, 2026).

1.2 Reconstruction and recovery: progress under fire

Reconstruction in Ukraine is taking place while destruction and the conflict continue. Intensifying attacks, particularly on critical infrastructure such as energy facilities, logistics and transportation, and data centres and internet providers (ACLED, 2026; Davies and Adams, 2026; Sauer, 2026), highlight the need for both reconstruction and for investments that strengthen the resilience of essential infrastructure and sectors.

As destruction continues, recovery and reconstruction needs have steadily increased (see Figure 1), with the latest Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment (RDNA5),[2] published in February 2026, estimating the total cost at over €500 billion over the next decade, nearly 3 times Ukraine's estimated 2025 GDP (World Bank, 2026).

Figure 1. Ukraine's recovery and reconstruction needs and cumulative direct damage (US$ billion, 2022-2026)



Source: Generated with Claude by authors, based on World Bank, 2026.

[2] The RDNA is the joint periodic evaluation published by the Government of Ukraine, the World Bank Group, the European Commission, and the United Nations to quantify the destruction and financial costs caused by Russia's invasion.

The EU put in place instruments that serve the dual purpose of immediately restoring essential services and economic activities while rebuilding systems that are able to withstand continued attacks. ECDPM has consistently published analyses on the reconstruction instruments in Ukraine, including the Ukraine facility, whose investment framework is also used to support defence capabilities and industries while delivering civilian benefits, further strengthening the link between the security, resilience and reconstruction agenda (ECDPM, Dossier 2026; Sabourin et al., 2026).

Several challenges exist within the overall reconstruction agenda

Among the challenges concerning the reconstruction agenda, the first is that **private capital has yet to be mobilised to meet Ukraine's reconstruction needs,** despite repeated commitments at Ukraine recovery conferences. Our recent research highlights that public finance sits at almost every layer of reconstruction, and frequently substitutes for private investment rather than crowding it in (Bekken, 2026). However, the participation of the private sector will be key to unlocking important additional funding to rebuild Ukraine, as public finances alone won't be able to meet the (growing) target. The EU has earmarked €100 billion for further support to Ukraine under the 2028-2034 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), which is a considerable effort, but also just a fraction of the reconstruction and recovery needs identified by the RDNA5. Member states and other donors can still mobilise additional resources, but existing pressures (including increasing their own defence budgets) leave them with limited room for manoeuvre (Ditrych, 2026).

Second, technical assistance is also a pressure point. Pillar 3 of the Ukraine facility is specifically intended to strengthen the capacity of Ukraine's administration, civil society and local and regional authorities, including to prepare and implement reforms and make effective use of EU financial support. But interviews conducted for this paper suggest that this capacity-building function is increasingly stretched, particularly following the termination of major USAID-funded programmes, which left important gaps in support to municipalities, public administration and civil society (Interviews, 2025; Lutsevych and Barbieri, 2026). Weaker technical capacity means it is harder to prepare bankable projects, manage procurement and absorb investment at the local level, with direct repercussions on reconstruction efforts.

The European Commission has sought to widen available resources by opening the facility to additional voluntary contributions: Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Lithuania have made individual contributions, while Norway and the UK are the two non-EU countries to contribute to the facility (European Commission, 2026c;

European Council, 2026b). These contributions strengthen the facility's role as a common European and like-minded financing platform. They do not fully compensate for the wider loss of technical assistance capacity, especially at sub-national level. That is why ECDPM's research argued for a more strategic link between technical assistance and investment, so that capacity support is targeted at the institutions and projects needed to turn available finance into implementable reconstruction (Sabourin et al., 2026; Karaki et al., 2025).

Third, from Kyiv's perspective, beyond the volume of support, the challenge is also the limited absorption and implementation capacity. Despite an established recovery architecture, institutional fragmentation, capacity shortages and weaknesses at the local level continue to hamper implementation (OECD, 2026). Our interviews highlighted that shortages of skilled labour, wage pressures and weak competition in procurement mean that injecting large volumes of finance too quickly can increase costs and inflation without ensuring implementation. These constraints affect the implementation of donor-funded projects, and under these conditions, prioritising immediate, resilience-enhancing recovery (energy, shelters, health, education, housing and critical connectivity) may be more realistic than attempting full-scale modernisation while the war continues (Interviews, 2025).

Long-term reconstruction choices made during the current ongoing conflict will lock in infrastructure, industrial capacity and regulatory pathways for years to come. Ukrainian interviewees consistently resist a framing of reconstruction as restoration of pre-war conditions. The aspiration and the political expectation are to re-build differently: **to use the reconstruction process as the transformative moment the accession agenda promises but has not yet delivered**. In June 2026, Ukraine presented its 'economy of the future' strategy, a 15-year strategic framework developed with the World Bank for a more innovative, private sector-led and investment-driven economy, explicitly anchored in Ukraine's future EU membership (Government of Ukraine, 2026). **Yet at the moment no overarching strategy links these processes together on either the EU or Ukrainian side, setting coherent objectives for security, reconstruction and accession. Nor is there a single authority responsible for ensuring that investments made today are consistent with the standards Ukraine will be expected to meet upon accession**, which is the last of the agendas discussed in this paper (Nazarov and Teperik, 2026).

1.3 Accession: an unblocked but fragile track

Until recently, Ukraine's accession process and negotiations were effectively frozen by Hungary's veto under former Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. Following the change of government in April 2026, Hungary lifted its veto, allowing negotiations to advance (Buras and Zerka, 2026). Of the six negotiating clusters, cluster 1 on 'fundamentals' (covering the rule of law, democratic institutions, public administration reform and economic criteria) opened in June 2026, followed by cluster 6 on 'external relations' (including foreign, security and defence policy) in July and clusters 2 and 3 on the 'internal market' and 'competitiveness and inclusive growth' in October (European Council, 2026c).

Hungarian opposition provided an obvious explanation for the lack of movement in Ukraine's accession process, with other member states unofficially (and conveniently) hiding behind Hungary's veto. But with Hungary no longer weaponising the EU's unanimity rule, **the question now is whether the EU and its member states are truly committed to moving ahead**. This sustained political support will be central to Ukraine's accession, but seems rather fragile, as Europe's political landscape is volatile and fragmented, especially after the 2024 European Parliament elections (Chiodi, 2025; Momtaz, 2025).

The opening of negotiations in 2026 does not mean there is a settled consensus on eventual membership. Several interlocutors warn that individual **member states could still raise objections and delay decisions as the accession process moves towards more complex and politically sensitive reforms** (Interviews, 2026). Concerns among member states range from the institutional and budgetary consequences of a larger EU to the impact of Ukrainian accession on agriculture, transport and other economic interests, alongside bilateral issues (Lehne, 2026).

The accession process remains politically sensitive, particularly as the European Commission increasingly frames enlargement as a geopolitical and security imperative (Zeneli, 2025). At the same time, **the accession process itself remains largely technocratic in practice**, centred on acquis alignment and benchmarks (Orana, 2026). The Commission's October 2026 pre-enlargement policy review proposals aimed at bringing Ukraine (and other candidate countries) closer to the EU even before formal accession, and ensuring that previous (traumatic) experiences with rule-of-law backsliding and veto politics of some member states would not de facto paralyse the EU machinery. This shows that the debate is shifting from whether candidate countries are ready to join, to whether the EU is institutionally and politically ready to absorb them (Sabourin and Gianesello, 2026).

On the Ukrainian side, the opening of the clusters also shifts the emphasis from adopting reforms towards implementing and sustaining them under wartime conditions. The Commission has recognised Ukraine's considerable progress despite the war, while continuing to flag concerns around the independence and effectiveness of anti-corruption and rule-of-law institutions (European Commission, 2025c). The EU has now set interim benchmarks under the 'fundamentals' cluster, meaning that progress on the judiciary, fundamental rights and governance will directly determine the pace of the overall negotiations. This reinforces the importance of conditionality, also largely supported by Ukrainians (Penska, 2026), but also of realism about state capacity: the accession process requires Ukraine to undertake increasingly complex institutional reforms while simultaneously defending the country, maintaining public services and rebuilding damaged infrastructure.

For Ukraine, accession also means anchoring the country within the European security architecture to deter future Russian aggression (Howard and O'Hanlon, 2026). **But the lengthy and largely technocratic accession process risks falling short of Ukraine's security needs**, a gap that could undermine confidence in the process and create opportunities for Russian interference, highlighting the importance of advancing EU accession and security cooperation together (CMI and ECDPM roundtable, 2026; Meister, 2026).

Taken together, the three agendas reveal clear synergies and links between security, reconstruction and accession. **A joint political vision, as well as a single governance framework that ties together these agendas, is, however, currently lacking**. The Ukraine plan has helped connect reform and reconstruction, while recent EU instruments increasingly recognise the overlap between security and economic resilience. But these connections remain partial and uneven. Security is still too often treated as a separate policy domain, rather than as a cross-cutting condition shaping investment, reform and accession choices for Ukraine.

2. Coordination architecture: what works, what is missing

The fragmented governance is the result of different EU bodies retaining responsibility for different agendas without a joint political vision on the EU's side. The EU's response to the war in Ukraine has generated a complex, multilayered coordination architecture made of international donor forums, EU institutional mechanisms, and national capitals. This was built at speed and has strengthened progressively and considerably since 2022. It functions well enough to keep financing flowing, to align broad donor priorities, and to prevent major forms of overlap and duplication. But the mechanisms to financially support Ukraine have

now brought two other problems into relief: the disconnect between the donor-reconstruction track and the security-military track identified in section 1; and the absence of a strategic steering function, where the three agendas are managed together, where Ukraine is engaged as a partner rather than a recipient, and where the EU defines its own interests with clarity and openness.

2.1 EU-internal coordination: political steering vs. coordination in the field

The EU manages its support to Ukraine through distinct governance tracks that do not systematically coordinate with each other:

- the Council's working party on reconstruction and support for Ukraine (**RESUA**) is the main working-level body for coordinating member states' positions on Ukraine's recovery, reconstruction and related financial support, and oversees the Ukraine facility (particularly Pillar 1 on the disbursements);
- the **investment framework steering board** governs the Ukraine investment framework (in particular Pillar 2 of the Ukraine facility);
- the **Ukraine facility committee** is a comitology committee, meaning that it enables EU member states to exercise formal oversight over certain implementing decisions taken by the European Commission;
- the Council's working party on enlargement and countries negotiating accession to the EU (**COELA**) is the EU's main working-level body responsible for the enlargement process, including Ukraine's accession negotiations;
- the Council's economic and financial affairs council (**ECOFIN**) and the G7 track (including extraordinary revenue acceleration (ERA) loans, macroeconomic support);
- the Council's political and security committee (**PSC**) coordinates member states' positions on EU foreign, security and defence policy, including support to Ukraine, while the foreign affairs council (**FAC**) provides political direction and adopts decisions on the EU's foreign, security and defence engagement with Ukraine at ministerial level;
- The **EPF**, **SAFE**, and **EDIP** add an additional set of institutional relationships, mostly focused on security and defence support, sitting largely outside the civilian architecture.

Figure 2. No single coordination mechanism holds the three governance tracks together



Source: authors, based on the research 2025-2026.

No single Council body or Commission service holds a comprehensive view across all of them simultaneously, and the fragmentation exists within institutions as well as between them. Directorate-General for Defence Industry and Space (DG DEFIS), the one for Economic and Financial Affairs (DG ECFIN), the one for Enlargement and the Eastern Neighbourhood (DG ENEST), and the European External Action Service (EEAS) each hold pieces of the Ukraine picture. Where a cross-cutting view does exist, it tends to depend on the presence of particular individuals with the relationships, mandate, and authority to hold the threads together. In practice, this role is played by a small number of senior officials at DG ENEST and the EEAS, without a formal mandate or dedicated resources. This person-dependence is a structural vulnerability, because institutional integration of the three agendas remains informal and fragile rather than embedded in the EU's coordination architecture.

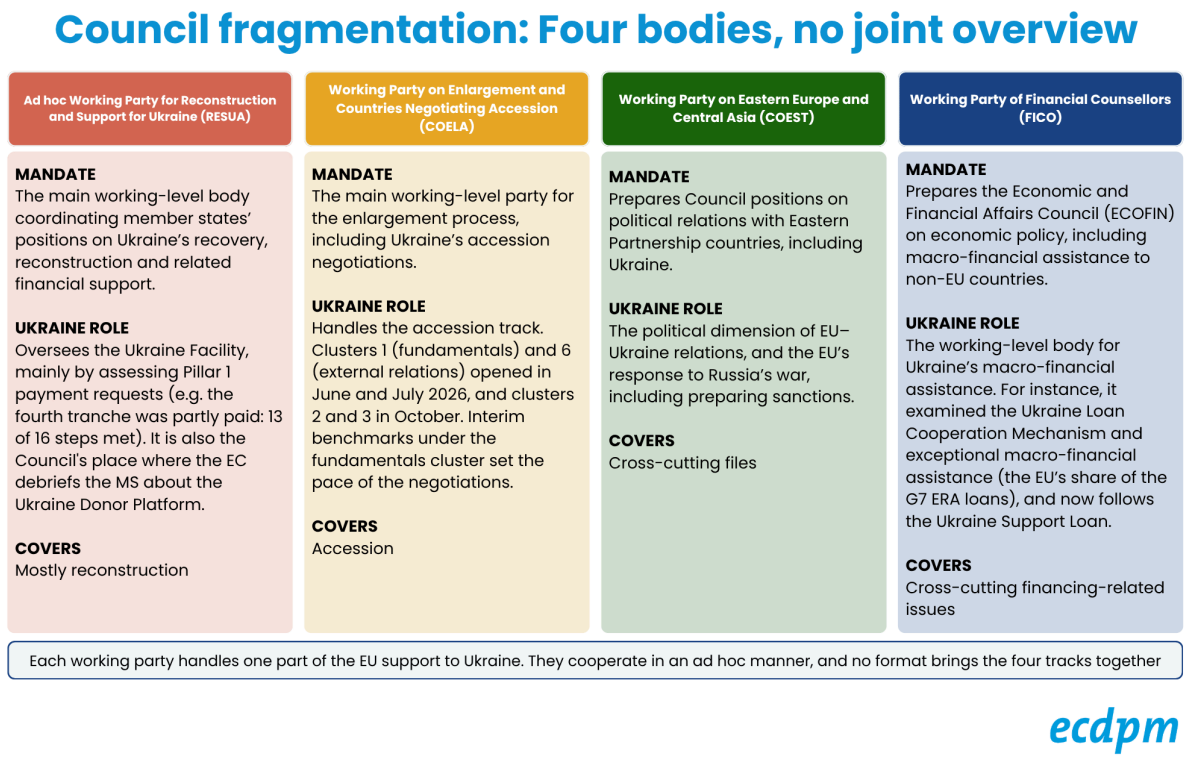
Equally, within member states, responsibilities are typically distributed across foreign affairs, finance, and development ministries with limited internal coordination. This relies on national-level organisation, and often operates without a formal mandate to steer the three agendas coherently. At member

state level, the institutional arrangements for coordinating Ukraine support vary considerably across capitals. In some, a dedicated inter-ministerial mechanism coordinates positions across security, recovery, and accession tracks; in others, the portfolio remains split across ministries with no systematic coordination mechanism. This variation in national administrative capacity can affect the consistency of the engagement in Brussels-level processes.

The RESUA ad hoc working party, which is the Council's primary mechanism for Ukraine (Sabourin et al., 2026), has struggled to move beyond a procedural role. This limitation is not unique to RESUA, as Council working parties generally operate at a technical level rather than a strategic one. But what distinguishes RESUA is probably both the scale and cross-cutting nature of the Ukraine dossier, as well as the absence of any higher Council formation endorsing this role. Widely described by delegates as a mechanism whose main output is assessing payment requests, successive Council presidencies have increasingly invested in it with the purpose of broadening its mandate beyond payment oversight (see options in section 2.4).

The suboptimal information flow between the Commission and EU member states as a result of the fragmented division of labour is compounded by the EU-internal parallel between Brussels and Kyiv. The EU Delegation in Kyiv has the most complete operational picture of the facility (across pillars, across sectors, across the Ukrainian government's own coordination dynamics). Yet, that picture does not flow systematically back to Brussels in ways that inform Council deliberation. Reducing this gap, without simply adding administrative burden, requires structured reporting formats that go beyond the current RESUA debriefs, and a clearer mandate for the EU Delegation to exercise a coordination function rather than only an implementation one.

Figure 3. Council fragmentation: four working parties, no joint overview



2.2 International coordination: donors and the security / military nexus

Two distinct architectures underpin international support to Ukraine: the Ukraine donor platform, and the coalition of the willing, covering security and military support through bilateral and minilateral channels. They run in parallel, with no formal coordination mechanism between them.

The Ukraine donor platform coordinates recovery and civilian assistance in a G7+ format with 25 permanent and temporary members and observers,[3] and is widely regarded as an effective mechanism for international donor coordination (Interviews, 2025). Its 17 sector working groups, reduced from the 27 announced at the beginning of the war, operate within Ukraine's own sectoral coordination architecture under the government's Recovery and Reform Delivery office, providing a strong and structured interface between donor priorities and Ukrainian government ownership (OECD, 2026). The EU Delegation in Kyiv co-chairs these groups alongside the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), giving the EU a direct operational presence in Kyiv's recovery governance that complements the Platform's Brussels-based steering committee. At the 17th steering committee, held on 24 June 2026 in Gdańsk just before the Ukraine

[3] Permanent members are Ukraine and the G7 members (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, UK, US, EU). Seven temporary members join the Platform: Denmark, Estonia, Republic of Korea, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, and Sweden.

Recovery Conference, cumulative donor commitments reached $308.4 billion (approximately €276.22 billion), including $244.4 billion (approximately €218.90 billion) in budget support and $63.9 billion (approximately €57.23 billion) in sectoral assistance. Between February 2022 and the end of May 2026, Ukraine had received around $176 billion (approximately €157 billion) in actual budgetary disbursements, with the International Monetary Fund estimating Ukraine's external financing needs for 2026 at approximately $52 billion (approximately €46 billion).

The Platform's core strength is information sharing and donor alignment at the macro level. It has helped Ukraine speak with one voice to its partners and has prevented, to the extent possible, duplication and overlaps in terms of programming (Interviews, 2025). June's steering committee also provided a collective signal on reform conditionality: members explicitly called for accelerating pending measures on the rule of law, anti-corruption, governance of state-owned enterprises, and regulatory improvements for investment (Ukraine Donor Platform, 2026; European Council, 2026d). This is the closest the Platform has come to exercising a collective "critical friend" function (Sabourin et al., 2026), and it is worth noting as a development, even if it remains far short of the structured reform-engagement capacity the US previously exercised through its bilateral channels and through the G7 ambassador group in Kyiv (Court, 2023; Havrylets, 2023) (see section 2.3 for more information).

Several structural limits remain. First, the Platform is formally built around a G7 core that excludes most EU member states. Most EU member states receive information primarily through RESUA debriefs rather than direct engagement. This creates an information asymmetry that risks a two-tier approach within the EU itself, especially at a moment when the MFF negotiations require broad member states' buy-in for sustained Ukraine support after 2027. At the same time, the Platform's secretariat, which supports the steering committee and should operate in both Brussels and Kyiv, remains operationally centred in Brussels. Strengthening its in-country presence or ensuring some linkages with the coordination in Kyiv is key to ensure that support to operational coordination, not only political alignment, remains a priority.

Second, the US disengagement since early 2025 has effectively materialised, including through the absence of any G7 communiqués, budget support, or active push for reform-conditionality. It has reduced the Platform's political edge while leaving it formally intact at the same time. The presence of a US Acting Coordinator at the 17th steering committee in Gdańsk signals formal continuity, but the operational gap in reform engagement is real and has not been filled.

The most fundamental structural gap, however, is the absence of coordination of the donor-military/security nexus. While reconstruction financing runs through the Ukraine donor platform and the Ukraine facility, security and military support run through a separate architecture, bringing together a 'coalition of the willing', which includes a range of bilateral channels, SAFE, the EPF, and UK-led formats. The two tracks operate in institutional silos even as they converge operationally (as section 1 illustrates): rebuilding energy infrastructure, supporting demining, and integrating Ukrainian defence-industrial capacity into European supply chains are simultaneously reconstruction and security activities.

The 2026 Ukraine recovery conference's new security and defence dimension, formalised in Gdańsk, is the first institutional step toward bridging this gap. It does not, however, integrate the underlying financing instruments or governance tracks. This dimension sits largely outside the Ukraine donor platform coordination, but would benefit from being more integrated into the Platform's work, to avoid fragmentation and strengthen the coherence of the EU's position across the three agendas. That remains the central unresolved design challenge for the coordination architecture, which needs to be addressed, especially in the accession perspective.

2.3 The 'critical friend' gap

The 'critical friend' role refers to the EU's capacity to engage Ukraine as a genuine political partner: exercising frank influence over reform priorities, governance quality and the pace of conditionality, while sustaining political solidarity, and taking into consideration internal politics. It is not specific to Ukraine, as the EU performs a version of it also with all accession candidates through the enlargement process. Playing this role in an effective manner requires both political will and institutional capacity, including the mandate and the authority to speak frankly at the appropriate level.

The institutional complexity, suboptimal information sharing, and the lack of single steering over the EU's Ukraine agenda **effectively undermine the EU's role as a critical friend.** The US was perceived as exercising this role directly before January 2025. This led to frank political engagement with Ukraine on reform pace, governance quality, and the difficult choices that addressing accession and reconstruction simultaneously requires. The US exercised this influence through several complementary channels, including the G7 ambassador group in Kyiv, USAID-funded reform advisors embedded in several Ukrainian ministries, and explicit political engagement at the highest levels on more sensitive topics, such as the fight against corruption.

Since January 2025 and the withdrawal of the US both politically and through their financial support, **the EU has de facto inherited the role, without however having prepared or strengthened its institutional capacity to exercise that function**.

The challenge is twofold. First, for the EU and the Commission in particular, the relationship with Ukraine is led by technical aspects linked to the implementation of the association agreement, and now to the accession process. Second, it might be difficult to simultaneously endorse this technical role and a more political and more critical role, which could be potentially more uncomfortable. The EU's unanimity rule, as well as the geopolitical context, also makes it difficult to publicly hold a frank critique of Ukraine, risking being used by member states and/or internal Ukrainian politics against the accession process or the reform agenda. As a result, one would say that the relationship lacks political credibility to push effectively on the reforms that matter most. Paradoxically, the same geopolitical framing that has supported Ukraine in EU political discourse has not translated into a political engagement that the critical friend requires. The EU institutions most visible in the relationship are often constrained in a technical, accession-based dynamic.

Despite this limit, member states have begun to act more critically. In 2025, the partial disbursement of the fourth tranche of the EU's budget support to Ukraine (13 of 16 steps met; €3.2 billion disbursed rather than the full €4.5 billion) demonstrated that the conditionality is real (Sabourin et al., 2026). The sequencing of the conditionality is a political choice and contributes to playing this critical friend's role (Interviews, 2025; Penska, 2026). Moreover, the latest Ukraine donor platform's steering committee gave an idea of what this collective critical engagement could look like by underscoring the need to 'accelerate pending and forthcoming measures in priority areas, including rule of law, anti-corruption, governance of state-owned enterprises, and regulatory changes to improve the investment climate'.

But playing the critical friend role also includes a cultural shift: this function is about dialogue that takes Ukrainian agency seriously, includes civil society, subnational voices, and citizens, and holds both the EU and Ukraine accountable for their engagement. This also includes supporting the conditions for local anchoring, namely the decentralised, society-rooted ownership that makes reforms durable.

2.4 Towards integrated steering: institutional options

The analysis so far points to a common deficit: the absence of a political space where the three agendas, security, reconstruction and accession, are held

together, where Ukraine's agency is genuinely engaged, and where the EU's own strategic interests are articulated and defended. Two possible institutional options exist, each addressing a different dimension of the gap: (1) a dedicated Council configuration or remandated RESUA; and (2) an EU–Ukraine Resilience Hub.

Recommendation 1: A dedicated Council configuration or remandated RESUA

The fragmentation identified in sections 2.1 and 2.2 is partly the product of how the Council organises itself: ECOFIN handles the ERA loan, COELA the accession track, the PSC the security dimension, COEST the broader Eastern Partnership framework, and RESUA the implementation of the Ukraine facility, with the NDICI-Global Europe working party cutting across development and external financing dimensions. No format sits above all these. A dedicated Council configuration at ministerial level, or a remandated working party with a cross-cutting mandate, would give member states a forum for genuine political steering rather than approving sectoral decisions in isolation, and would create the accountability that currently no single formation provides.

The most actionable near-term step is making RESUA a permanent Council working party with an expanded mandate covering strategic oversight across all three agendas. In practice, this would mean structured coordination with COELA and COEST, for instance through joint briefings, shared analytical inputs, or a standing agenda item tracking accession-conditioned spending and security-reconstruction overlaps, as well as a formal linkage with the instruments-related working party. This falls short of a fully dedicated Council configuration but would significantly reduce current information fragmentation without requiring institutional treaty change. A possible merger of COELA and COEST would not necessarily be viable given their different mandates and memberships; hence, elevating RESUA's format and cross-cutting mandate remains the most politically feasible path.

Recommendation 2: an EU–Ukraine resilience hub

A second option, more structurally ambitious, is a format that could be developed along the lines of what was proposed by Ukraine's National Platform for Resilience and Social Cohesion, and discussed during a roundtable co-organised by ECDPM and CMI-Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation (CMI and ECDPM roundtable, 2026): an EU–Ukraine resilience hub. It could be set up as a joint body bringing together EU institutions and Ukrainian counterparts to provide integrated political oversight across the security, reconstruction and accession tracks. Unlike existing mechanisms, which are either sectoral or asymmetric, a resilience hub would be

co-owned by design, creating a political rhythm above the working parties and Council formations.

This model echoes, in part, the logic of the Berlin Process, the informal but institutionalised dialogue that structured EU engagement with Western Balkans candidates since 2014. It created a political rhythm above formal accession structures and opened space for civil society and local actors. A comparable format for Ukraine would need to go further, incorporating the security dimension and operating under wartime conditions.

Co-ownership, however, cannot be limited to the central government. Ukraine's reconstruction and reform trajectory is being shaped at every level, including by regional and local authorities managing recovery and planning reconstruction, by civil society organisations that have become indispensable service providers and accountability actors, and by the private sector driving the economic transformation accession requires. An integrated steering format that speaks only to Kyiv ministries will miss the resilience it claims to support. Genuine local anchoring, including through structured channels for municipalities, civil society networks, and women's organisations to inform strategic priorities, should therefore be built into the Hub's design from the outset, without adding unnecessary institutional complexity.

These options are not mutually exclusive, but rather complementary. They share a recognition that the EU's coordination deficit is not primarily technical but political. What is missing is the will to use the existing machinery in an integrated way.

Conclusions

The EU's engagement with Ukraine is entering a more demanding phase. Four years of crisis-driven innovation and adaptation have produced a financing architecture of remarkable scale and speed; they have also produced a coordination gap. Security, reconstruction and accession are advancing in parallel, each with its own instruments, sequences and institutional spaces, yet no current mechanism holds them together strategically. That gap is the paper's central finding.

The machinery exists and is moving full steam ahead. What is missing is a political space shaped in a format that effectively brings together the three agendas, and where the EU is prepared to articulate its own interests alongside its commitment to solidarity in a rather complex context.

The EU also needs to name its own interests more candidly than it currently does. Ukrainian security is European security: that argument is made, but its implications for EU institutional design and resource allocation are not yet drawn. European firms' participation in reconstruction is a legitimate EU interest, but the current operationalisation through the Ukraine facility's regulation's Article 11 is inadequate (see section 1).

Improving the coordination and steering at this moment in time will shape the institutional and financial architecture before the 2028-2034 MFF negotiations lock in a structure for 7 years. The incoming Global Europe Instrument, under Heading 3, will place Ukraine in the Europe pillar alongside other enlargement candidates, but funded through a separate Ukraine reserve over and above the standard MFF expenditure ceilings. The decisions taken in the coming months about institutional design will determine whether the political capital invested so far translates into long-term strategic engagement or fragmentates into parallel silos.

The October 2026 European Council called for timely disbursement of committed funds. That is necessary. But the central question of how the EU sustains coherent political leadership across three agendas simultaneously, into the next MFF cycle, remains open. The answer will define not only what kind of partner the EU is for Ukraine, but what kind of actor it is prepared to be in its own neighbourhood.

Annex 1. The EU's architecture to support Ukraine's security and defence

The European Peace Facility (EPF) became the EU's principal instrument for financing military support to Ukraine after Russia's full-scale invasion. Created in 2021 with an initial ceiling of €5.6 billion, the EPF is an intergovernmental instrument financed outside the EU budget because the EU's legal base prohibits the use of its regular multiannual budget to fund activities of military nature (Hauck, 2022). Between 2022 and 2025, €6.4 billion was mobilised for Ukraine to finance lethal and non-lethal equipment and supplies, including ammunition and missiles (European Council, 2026e). It also finances the common costs and training equipment of EUMAM Ukraine, the EU military assistance mission launched in November 2022; by September 2026, EUMAM had trained around 97,000 Ukrainian soldiers, with €610 million in EPF support for training and related equipment. In March 2024, the EU created a dedicated **Ukraine assistance fund within the EPF**, increasing the EPF ceiling by €5 billion and ring-fencing that amount for Ukraine, making military assistance for the country more predictable.

Consistent political vetoes from former President of Hungary, Viktor Orbán, left the EPF vulnerable and exposed to blocks in disbursement, leading the EU to find alternative, less politically exposed ways to support Ukraine, including bilateral military assistance from member states, and voluntary national contributions (Neubert, 2026). Other short-term instruments to support Ukraine while addressing the weaknesses in Europe's own defence-industrial base included the European Defence Industry Reinforcement through Common Procurement Act (EDIRPA), a €300 million short-term EU instrument running from October 2023 until December 2025 to incentivise member states to jointly procure critical defence capabilities, to which Ukraine could participate; and the Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP), to accelerate the production of ammunition and missiles, both to support deliveries to Ukraine and to replenish member states' stocks.

From 2025, the EU has increasingly **integrated Ukrainian production into Europe's emerging defence-industrial architecture**. The ReArm Europe Plan/Readiness 2030 established the **Security Action for Europe** (SAFE), the €150 billion EU financial instrument created in May 2025 to provide long-term loans at low interest rates to EU member states for joint defence procurement and industrial defence capability reinforcement. While only EU member states can directly access the loans, Ukraine can participate in common procurement and production projects on equal terms with EU member states. Projects must generally involve at least two member states, with Ukraine eligible to take part, while most production must take place within the EU. As of September 2026,

€130.5 billion has already been allocated to 19 member states,[4] 15 of which presented national plans which include projects with Ukraine. Discussions are currently ongoing over the allocation of the remaining approximately €20 billion, following Italy, France and Hungary requesting less financing than had initially been earmarked for them (Tidey, 2026).

This is complemented by the **European Defence Industry Programme** (EDIP), adopted in December 2025. EDIP provides €1.5 billion in EU-budget grants for 2026–27, including a dedicated €300 million Ukraine Support Instrument aimed at strengthening Ukraine's defence-production capabilities, modernising its defence-industrial base, and facilitating its closer integration with the European defence industry. From December 2025, Ukraine can now associate with the **European Defence Fund**, opening opportunities for joint defence research with the EU.

The most significant financial support, however, is the €90 billion **Ukraine Support Loan** to cover Ukraine's budgetary and defence industrial capacity needs in 2026 and 2027. The disbursement is linked to a conditional framework, which includes adherence to the rule of law. Its indicative allocation combines €30 billion in macroeconomic support (channelled through macro-financial assistance or the Ukraine Facility) with €60 billion for defence-industrial capacity and procurement. For 2026, €28.3 billion was made available for defence-industrial purposes; by September 2026, €11.7 billion had been disbursed for defence procurement (European Commission, 2026d). This comes on top of bilateral assistance by EU member states.

[4] The list of the 19 states is available at this link: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/safe/#allocations

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