

BRIEFING PAPER
444
November 2026

Europe–Ukraine defence partnership

Investment in shared security

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Summary

- Ukraine's emerging role in European defence encompasses strategic, industrial and military cooperation. This includes contributing to balancing Russia's military power, the co-development of defence technologies, joint exercises and the exchange of intelligence and battlefield experience.

- While the future of the Europe–Ukraine defence partnership ultimately depends on political developments and the outcome of the war, several practical and technical issues can already be addressed to facilitate deeper cooperation.

- Long-term investment frameworks and institutional mechanisms are key to supporting military co-innovation, knowledge exchange and mutual learning. To that end, this paper calls for a Multiannual Ukraine Defence Fund and proposes a new Military Innovation Learning and Experience Sharing (MILES) programme.

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Introduction

Europe is facing unprecedented challenges in maintaining credible defence and deterrence amid complicated alliances, scarce resources and intensifying geopolitical rivalry. European states not only need to forge and strengthen new defence partnerships, but also close the gap in defence technological innovation and internalise the lessons of modern warfare. In this equation, Ukraine is part of the solution.

Ukraine is pursuing deeper integration into European defence structures, and although full membership in either NATO or the EU remains a distant prospect, Ukraine's defence partnership with Europe is already advancing on multiple fronts and in different frameworks. The task of integrating Ukraine's battlefield-driven defence innovation, combat experiences and capabilities into European political, economic and military structures is becoming increasingly urgent.

After briefly reviewing the context of the partnership, this Briefing Paper examines Ukraine's potential contributions to European defence structures. By defence structures, the paper refers to the multilayered architecture of European defence arrangements, encompassing national defence capabilities, military alliances and minilateral defence cooperation formats as well as enabling institutional frameworks. Within this architecture, NATO remains the cornerstone of European collective defence. The EU, in turn, not only regulates and finances capability development but also provides an increasingly important political and strategic framework for developing European defence and advancing Ukraine's integration into it. Finally, the paper puts forward concrete policy recommendations for strengthening a relationship that is not only beneficial but vital to both sides.

From restrained cooperation to historic security agreements

Ukraine has pursued integration into Western military cooperation frameworks since gaining independence in 1991. In 2019, the goal of EU and NATO membership was enshrined in the Ukrainian constitution. European security cooperation with Ukraine has long been characterised by restraint, as evidenced by reservations about Ukraine's EU and NATO membership and the limited scale of military assistance provided before 2022.

Following Russia's full-scale invasion, a series of major breakthroughs transformed the Europe-Ukraine defence partnership, including unprecedented weapons deliveries to Ukraine and both the EU and NATO opening the prospect of future membership. While Ukraine's NATO accession remains suspended indefinitely amid the ongoing war and lack of consensus among allies, and its full EU membership continues to be a long-term prospect, the EU has taken significant steps to facilitate Ukraine's integration into European capability development programmes.[1] Additionally, military cooperation is increasing through bilateral arrangements and the Coalition of the Willing in support of Ukraine.

1 See, e.g., European Commission (2025) White Paper for European Defence and the ReArm Europe Plan. See also Karjalainen, Tyyne (2026) "European Security through Interactionist Role Theory: Understanding the Loosening Restraint in Military Support to Ukraine". *Cooperation and Conflict*.

"For Ukraine's defence innovation, the wartime context is both an asset and a burden."

Ukraine has only recently begun to be considered a military frontrunner. Before 2022, its defence industrial development was slowed by lack of foreign investment and persistent shortcomings in public procurement. Incomplete reforms of its armed forces, combined with foreign policy turbulence, corruption and fears of escalation hindered cooperation and integration into European defence structures. Today, its defence industrial ecosystem is characterised by decentralisation, market-driven innovation (in contrast to the previous state-led model), unprecedented production speeds and record high domestic military spending, albeit at levels that may be unsustainable in the long term. These factors enable the mass production of affordable weapons systems which are continuously developed based on battlefield feedback.[2]

Ukraine is deeply embedded in international supply chains and benefits from extensive international military support, including intelligence sharing. However, it remains largely isolated from the European defence market, the EU's defence industrial programmes and NATO's capability planning. Amid wartime demand, its domestic production remains in a resource deficit and dependent on external funding and critical supply chains, including enabling technologies, microelectronics, batteries and energetic materials.

From the point of view of Ukraine's defence innovation, the wartime context is both an asset and a burden. While Ukraine's advances have generated momentum in the war, the risk of losing advantage in the technological race remains. The unstable business environment and damaged manufacturing capacities, combined with a particular regulative framework and remaining corruption, continue to disincentivise both foreign investment and military partnerships with Ukraine. At the same time, the conditions – including war-resilient industrial sites, greater regulatory flexibility in defence innovation and immediate feedback from the front lines – attract unprecedented levels of international investment and security-political attention across European capitals. Ukraine's drone production ecosystem in particular has received global coverage.

While Ukraine receives immediate feedback on its performance on the battlefield, the consequences of Europe's own capability shortfalls remain largely untested. Decades of underinvestment in defence, compounded by industrial production shortfalls, declining competitiveness, limitations in technological sovereignty, lagging position in the AI race and dependence on critical supply chains, constrain European capability development. Investments in defence industries and technological innovation are hence increasingly viewed as part of the pursuit of rebuilding deterrence. The key question is, which new partnerships could make European defence, including the industrial ecosystem, more resilient.

The volatile international politics surrounding Ukraine, particularly shifts in US policy, complicate long-term planning in Ukraine–Europe military relations. Inside Ukraine, risks continue to include democratic backsliding and instability in the context of prolonged warfare, which would undermine the political conditions for Ukraine's European integration. From the EU's perspective, potential obstacles include the electoral success of Russia-friendly political forces in Europe that may oppose closer military cooperation with Ukraine, as well as political obstacles in Ukraine's EU accession process. Moreover, Ukraine cannot contribute to European defence if it is unable to preserve its independence and sovereignty. Other concerns include the risk of a one-sided transfer of innovations, skills and expertise from Ukraine to Europe. Addressing these concerns requires cooperation frameworks that are genuinely mutually beneficial, foster a level playing field and promote constructive forms of competition.

2 See Dee, Stuart et al. (2025) "Looking ahead. Enablers of innovation and scale for the future of Ukraine's defence-industrial base". December 2025, *RAND*. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA3833-6.html; Zagorodnyuk, Andriy (2026) "Wartime Innovation in Europe's Defence Transformation". *ICDS Diplomaatia*, 19 June 2026, International Centre for Defence and Security. https://icds.ee/en/wartime-innovation-in-europes-defence-transformation/; Vdovychenko, Victoria (2026) "Towards a 'Smart' Approach: Ukraine and the Transformation of European Defence Policy Paper". Kyiv-Cambridge Publications. https://www.cfg.cam.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/Towards-Smart-Defence.-Victoria-Vdovychenko-2.pdf.



An operator remotely controls an unmanned ground vehicle during the Wild GRS military robotics competition in Truskavets, western Ukraine, on 10 November 2026.
Source: Danylo Antoniuk, Ukrinform / Sipa Press / Lehtikuva

Ukraine's contribution to European military development

Support for Ukraine is no longer only viewed as an investment in a defence system that acts as a protective bulwark for the whole of Europe; it is increasingly seen as an investment in a military revolution that has the potential to spread throughout European armed forces.[3]

The widespread adoption of autonomous platforms across all domains – aerial and naval drones, and ground robots – together with a model of constant and bottom-up innovation, often driven by frontline units and the civilian sector, has shaped a military revolution with Ukraine at the forefront. This revolution takes advantage of the increasing affordability of precision strikes and prioritises mass-production at the lowest possible cost. This challenges the norm in Western armed forces, which in recent decades have prioritised investment in a small number of very sophisticated and expensive weapons, with long procurement and innovation cycles.

This revolution also challenges NATO's traditional emphasis on air supremacy, as the proliferation of drones – particularly at low and medium altitudes – and the use of saturation tactics complicate the ability of manned aircraft to control airspace.[4] More generally, Ukraine's capacity to "learn while fighting", with "tight feedback loops between frontline units, engineers, software developers, and commanders" is in stark contrast with the slow acquisition cycles in NATO's armed forces.[5]

For EU and NATO member states, the problem is not only to adapt their armed forces to the most effective modern combat techniques, but also to

3 See also Ålander, Minna and Elena Davlikanova (2026) "The Missing Piece in Nordic–Baltic Security: Ukraine as a Natural Ally". SCEEUS Report 6, May 2026, Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies. https://sceeus.se/publikationer/the-missing-piece-in-nordic-baltic-security-ukraine-as-a-natural-ally/.

4 Zagorodnyuk, Andriy (2026) "The new revolution in military affairs". 20 April 2026, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2026/04/ukraine-russia-war-changing-warfare-practice-military-strategy.

5 Kostiuk, Bohdan, Daryna-Maryna Patiuk, Anastasiya Shapochkina and Élie Tenenbaum (2026) "Mapping the miltech war: Eight lessons from Ukraine's battlefield". *Focus stratégique* 132, February 2026, French Institute of International Relations, 70–71. https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/2026-02/ifri_tenenbaum_et_al_miltech_war_ukraine_2026_0.pdf.

be prepared to face a Russia that is also learning from its experience in Ukraine and has significantly expanded its precision strike capabilities, even if not all lessons from the war in Ukraine are necessarily applicable to a regional conflict involving NATO.[6]

However, not being directly involved in the conflict tends to limit the competitive pressure felt by European armed forces and their incentive to adapt to these challenges. Assisting Ukraine through industrial and military cooperation can thus be viewed as a way to get closer to the realities of modern warfare, that is, as an investment into a key "learning mechanism".[7]

At the industrial level, the European diffusion of this military revolution is facilitated by the modular nature of the systems concerned. Ukrainian aerial, naval and ground-based drones are generally designed around a universal platform into which various sensors, tools or weapons can be plugged to meet evolving military needs and keep pace with technological innovation. This modular logic facilitates the international opening of production chains and collaboration between large companies and small and medium-sized enterprises.

The European-Ukrainian anti-ballistic missile defence initiative, FREYJA, is a case in point. Ukraine's Fire Point serves as the system integrator in a coalition including seven EU member states, the UK and Norway to develop new anti-ballistic missile interceptors that would be cheaper and more scalable than existing ones.[8] Another objective is to allow European partners to benefit from Ukraine's unique combat experience in countering massive ballistic missile strikes.

More generally, several arrangements have allowed Ukrainian drones to be produced in the EU. A 2025 Danish-Ukrainian agreement allowed Ukrainian defence companies to establish part of their production in Denmark. In 2026, a joint venture between Germany's Quantum Systems and Ukraine's Frontline Robotics completed production of the first batch of Ukrainian-designed drones manufactured in Germany for the Ukrainian army. In September 2026, Finland and Ukraine signed a Drone Deal seeking to facilitate industrial cooperation and joint manufacturing of drones. While these initiatives remain modest in scope, they point to a trend: industrial innovations developed in Ukraine are increasingly spreading across Europe.

At the military level, joint training and exercises between Ukrainian and NATO countries' forces have proved to be a powerful means of disseminating knowledge about the new realities of warfare and the new practices and doctrines that this revolution entails.

For example, during NATO exercise Hedgehog 2025, a small team of Ukrainian drone experts using the Ukrainian Delta system – which gathers and analyses battlefield intelligence in real time to coordinate strikes – highlighted the lack of preparedness among NATO forces by inflicting heavy losses.[9] Ukrainian drone operators were also invited to participate in the Swedish-led Aurora 26 exercise. Similarly, the US Army's 173rd Airborne Brigade sent soldiers to Ukraine to learn from the country's drone experts. Further, during the 2026 Saber Junction exercises, a dozen Ukrainian military personnel assisted US forces with insights on drone warfare and lessons learned in combat operations.

NATO and the EU have begun, to some extent, to institutionalise and systematise these types of initiatives. In technological innovation, BraveTech EU is an EU-Ukrainian initiative, relying in particular on the European Defence Fund (EDF), to support collaboration between Ukrainian and EU companies in developing new battlefield-tested defence technologies. In terms of production, the EU-Ukraine Drone Deal seeks to help build joint ventures between Ukrainian and European companies and support the joint production of

6 Kaushal, Sidharth and Sam Cranny-Evans (2026) "The evolution of Russia's precision strike: Adopting mass precision". August 2026, Royal United Services Institute. https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/research-papers/evolution-russias-precision-strike-adopting-mass-precision.

7 Kostiuk et al. 2026, 71.

8 Fire Point (2026) "Fire Point is the architect of the new pan-European missile defense system, FREYJA". 14 July 2026. https://firepoint.technology/en/blogs/fire-point-is-the-architect-of-the-new-pan-european-missile-defense-system-freyja/.

9 Melchior, Jillian Kay (2026) "NATO has seen the future and is unprepared". *The Wall Street Journal*, 12 February 2026. https://www.wsj.com/opinion/nato-has-seen-the-future-and-is-unprepared-887eaf0f.

drones and counter-drone systems. At the military level, the NATO-Ukraine Joint Analysis, Training and Education Centre (JATEC) was established to develop recommendations for NATO based on operational insights from Ukrainian experts.

"Existing financial commitments do not provide a sustainable basis for Ukraine's defence or long-term Europe-Ukraine defence cooperation."

Financial conditions for Europe-Ukraine defence cooperation

The main problem with recent initiatives is their limited or temporary nature, which is particularly evident in their financial backing. Although remarkable in the EU context, existing financial commitments do not provide a sustainable basis for Ukraine's defence or long-term Europe-Ukraine defence cooperation.

The EU's support for Ukraine's defence through the Ukraine Support Loan – of which €60 billion is earmarked for the defence industry and the procurement of military equipment – represents a step forward compared to support provided through the European Peace Facility (EPF). Indeed, disbursements under the Ukraine Support Loan are based on a comprehensive assessment of Ukraine's priority military needs, whereas weapon transfers reimbursed by the EPF are more dependent on donor countries' ad hoc initiatives. For example, the Commission has recently been able to support the purchase of air and missile defence systems by Ukraine. However, the loan is limited to financing requirements for 2026 and 2027. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has already asked his European partners to consider a further tranche of aid for 2027, to which end the Commission has proposed a new loan of €45 billion, including €25 billion for defence.[10]

For the EU, funding Ukraine's military and defence industrial capabilities is not merely a matter of supporting the current war effort. Even in the optimistic scenario of a ceasefire, Ukraine would need to have sufficiently robust military capabilities to deter any further aggression. Ukraine will continue to be heavily reliant on European support to fund its defence in the foreseeable future. The ad hoc nature of the loans exposes European support for Ukraine to political risks, including the possibility that electoral outcomes in member states could undermine or reverse the bloc's collective Ukraine policy. It is therefore essential to ensure the longer-term sustainability and predictability of the positive dynamics launched by the Ukraine Support Loan through a multiannual funding instrument.

Against a difficult budgetary backdrop, in which some member states are calling for the EU's multiannual budget to be reduced rather than increased, making financial support for Ukraine's defence more permanent will only be politically acceptable to EU leaders and citizens if there is a clear return on investment in military and industrial terms. That is why these funds should gradually be channelled into industrial and procurement projects that implement a clear EU-Ukraine convergence strategy.

A Multiannual Ukraine Defence Fund would serve as the backbone for disseminating Ukrainian innovative defence technologies across Europe. It would not only finance the procurement of weapons needed by Ukraine, preferably manufactured in Europe, but also support EU-Ukrainian joint ventures, the production of Ukrainian products on EU soil, the development of innovative modular weapons incorporating components from both sides and the joint procurement of the same models by Ukraine and EU member states. It would also facilitate the establishment of shared standards, ensuring the compatibility of their modular systems. It would thus be clear that the EU is not only strengthening the Ukrainian bulwark for the defence of Europe but also directly investing in the development of its own technological and industrial capacity.

10 Zelenskyy, Volodymyr (@ZelenskyyUa) (2026) "Address to the European Council". X, 16 October 2026. https://x.com/ZelenskyyUa/status/2111076654105641393.

Institutional arrangements for Europe–Ukraine defence cooperation

The experience of the war in Iran has shown that the deployment of hundreds of Ukrainian experts to pass on their knowledge was essential, particularly in anti-drone operations. Industrial cooperation must therefore be complemented by structured military cooperation between Ukrainian armed forces and those of EU member states. The aim would be to facilitate joint learning and the convergence of doctrines relating to the use of innovative weapons. For European armed forces, the challenge will be not only to focus on individual experiences from Ukraine, but also adapt their military systems to the cycle of experiences-to-innovation, where battlefield experiences are turned into defence innovation and rapidly adopted by armed forces.

Determining the multilateral organisation best suited to further facilitate military learning and experience-sharing between Ukraine and Europe is not straightforward. Given NATO's role as the cornerstone of European defence, NATO-anchored frameworks provide favourable conditions for concrete cooperation grounded in existing capability targets and operational planning structures. The new Ukraine–NATO organization JATEC, which is part of NATO's command structure, serves the objective to an extent. However, with Ukraine's NATO accession effectively on hold and US-Ukraine relations fluctuating, the political conditions for deep cooperation may not be in place and remain subject to change.

At the same time, EU-based initiatives face the opposite challenge: while politically feasible, their capacity to translate into concrete cooperation relevant for European collective defence is more uncertain. The EU's advantages, on the other hand, include financial and regulatory competences that can help translate military learning and experience-sharing into defence innovation. Another option would be to utilise flexible, minilateral cooperation frameworks. The Coalition of the Willing's Multinational Force Ukraine (MNF-U), in particular, could serve as a temporary platform for exchange and cooperation. However, its deployment depends on a ceasefire and its ad hoc nature does not provide the financial or institutional foundations required for systematic, long-term collaboration.

Rather than relying on a single institutional framework, a pragmatic strategy may be to pursue cooperation through multiple platforms simultaneously. How the EU could contribute to this shared endeavour is elaborated below. Given the Commission-led expansion of EU defence policies in recent years, facilitating military innovation and lessons learned within the EU framework would not represent a departure from the established EU–NATO division of labour. Rather, it would continue the existing trend of developing complementary functions with the EU increasingly contributing throughout the capability development cycle.

By drawing on its legal competences in research and industry, the European Commission could establish a dedicated "Military Innovation Learning and Experience Sharing" programme – called, say, MILES – to support military innovation, learning and experience sharing between Ukraine and Europe. The MILES programme would consist of joint training sessions for military personnel from EU member states and Ukraine, aimed at enhancing the dissemination of innovative military technologies and associated practices and doctrines. By institutionalising exchanges between EU and Ukrainian armed forces, MILES would facilitate the emergence of joint bottom-up industrial projects and sharing experiences of innovative equipment tested on the front line. Ultimately, MILES would facilitate the adoption of the same equipment and doctrines across EU and Ukrainian armed forces. MILES could serve as the ideal framework for jointly training EU and Ukrainian units specialising in multi-domain drones, enabling them to pass on their experience to other units. Ideally, the programme would also be institutionally linked to NATO, including JATEC, hence potentially serving as a novel step in EU–NATO cooperation. In any case, the effort should be aligned with NATO's defence planning and capability targets.

While the EU is already investing in research and development, production capacity and joint procurement, MILES would complete the process by incorporating the crucial stages of military learning and feedback from combat experience. Strong synergies between MILES, EU financial support for Ukraine's defence and EU's defence industrial policies would provide the EU with clear value in

supporting this form of military cooperation. For example, lessons learnt from combat experience on the front line could be shared among participants within the MILES framework and subsequently lead to collaborative industrial projects and joint procurement supported by EU funding. While JATEC plays an important role in helping to adapt NATO's operational planning to the lessons learnt from the war in Ukraine, MILES would thus allow the EU to strengthen the overall coherence of Europe's defence industrial strategy.

Conclusion

While Kyiv has actively sought security guarantees and signed security agreements with most EU capitals, the relationship is bidirectional: European capitals increasingly view Ukraine as a potential guarantee to, or an additional layer of, security and defence. Ukraine's ability to contribute to European defence structures depends on political developments in Ukraine, the US, the EU and beyond. The ongoing war simultaneously motivates and complicates the EU–Ukraine defence partnership: it creates a strong sense of urgency for closer cooperation while also generating uncertainty around the partnership.

Ukraine's integration into European defence structures is happening at a time when established approaches to defence capability development are being reassessed. Public–private relations in the defence sector, supply chains, technological dependencies and innovation ecosystems are all being reconsidered in response to intensifying geopolitical competition and the increasingly rapid innovation cycles characteristic of modern warfare. The challenge, therefore, is not limited to integrating Ukraine into existing structures but extends to European defence more broadly.

"Ukraine's ability to contribute to European defence structures depends on political developments in Ukraine, the US, the EU and beyond."

This Briefing Paper has argued for advancing Ukraine's integration into European defence structures despite the volatile and challenging geopolitical environment. In particular, it has proposed a shift in mindset from just "supporting Ukraine" towards investing in long-term military innovation that strengthens both Ukraine and Europe. Ukraine's innovations, operational lessons and military capabilities will not automatically transfer to Europe. Effective diffusion requires adequate institutional frameworks, long-term financial and political commitments, and dedicated cooperation mechanisms that are perceived as legitimate and beneficial by EU and Ukrainian political and military leaders, defence-industrial actors, and citizens alike.

BRIEFING
PAPER
444
November 2026

ISBN 978-951-769-869-6
ISSN 1795-8059
Language editing: Spoken Oy
Cover photo: AFP Photo / Ukrainian Presidential Press Service / Lehtikuva

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