

Resilience and vulnerability: Impressions from a freezing Ukraine

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Executive Summary

Ukraine's resilience this winter remains remarkable, even as Russian attacks on energy infrastructure and the cumulative strains of war deepen human vulnerability and risk worsening domestic cleavages. European policymakers should respond with urgent military support, rhetorical clarity, humanitarian aid, a credible EU accession process, and strengthened local cooperation to reinforce Ukraine's capacity and signal Europe's agency.

The atmosphere in Ukraine this winter is depressed but stubbornly resilient. Many Ukrainian citizens, including in the capital, are without heating, electricity and water amid freezing temperatures. Unable to make any frontline breakthroughs, Russia continues its systematic attacks on Ukraine's energy infrastructure. It is also attempting to create a false impression of Russian invincibility and Ukraine's inevitable loss.

Russia's terror against Ukrainian civilians is a clear violation of humanitarian and international law, and underscores its lack of interest in ending the war – regardless of the [negotiation theatre](#) closely covered in the western media. Given the stark contrast with realities on the ground, Ukrainian citizens are sceptical about the prospects for achieving results in such talks and few expect the war to end soon.

In 2022, the challenge was to demonstrate Ukrainian resilience; today, it is to acknowledge that resilience does not eliminate human vulnerability. The situation for the elderly and other vulnerable groups is critical. Some leave temporarily for the countryside or to visit relatives further west in the country to get some warmth. Another wave of refugees to Europe, however, is unlikely for now – those who wanted and were able to leave Ukraine have left already.

Despite the unfolding humanitarian crisis, the concern is not immediate societal collapse. Ukrainians know that surrender means capitulation, subjugation or extinction, and will continue to fight. A recent [survey](#) found that most Ukrainians reject territorial concessions and are ready to endure war for as long as necessary. Nonetheless, the cumulative psychological, social and political effects of prolonged strain are substantial and could, over time, affect social cohesion, resilience and Ukraine's ability to advance on its European path.

As daily pressures intensify, the risk of domestic cleavages increases. Political leaders, including the Mayor of Kyiv, have been criticised for lack of preparedness. Political relations at the local level are also becoming more conflictual amid unclear responsibility chains, insufficient resources, and socioeconomic differences. In regions with local military administrations, overlapping mandates and unclear methods for dealing with controversial issues such as mobilisation add to an underlying sense of frustration and discontent.

Amid the pressures of war and winter, stakeholders at all levels of governance are continuing their impressive work on reform and European integration. However, there is also inertia in the Ukrainian political system. By not passing laws that have been duly drafted, the Verkhovna Rada slows down reform, holds up macro-financial support from the Ukraine Facility, and worsens Ukraine's image in European capitals. The problem is not resistance to reform, but rather a lack of engagement on behalf of uninterested or overworked parliamentarians.

A parliamentary election could have brought new political energy into the system. Even though some national and local political stakeholders seem to be preparing for or launching electoral campaigns, however, the practical difficulties, legal challenges and serious risks of conducting elections in Ukraine remain.

Amid these domestic challenges, a credible prospect of EU membership is ever more important. Discussions about so-called membership lite, which would allow faster accession but with limited rights, have been received pragmatically but sceptically. Ukrainians are painfully aware of the political [blockages](#) to their country's accession. Frontloading the accession process, which continues the technical negotiations without a formal cluster opening, is depicted as necessary for now but unsustainable in the long term.

Talks about creative accession methods are seen as positive insofar as they signify a shift from pure formalism to solutions capable of responding to new security and institutional challenges. Many emphasise that Ukraine is a security provider for Europe, and thus its accession is primarily a political process in the strategic interest of the EU.

That said, Ukrainians are sceptical that the EU could agree new methods of enlargement without a more general reform of the EU itself. Some question what it would mean for Ukraine's sovereignty if it were obliged to follow EU regulations without voting rights. Others are concerned that a phased inclusion of Ukraine might allow the political establishment to cherry pick parts of the *acquis* while reducing the leverage for making more painful reforms in sectors such as agriculture.

This freezing winter has shown that Ukraine's resilience remains remarkable. Limiting the effects of mounting vulnerabilities, however, will depend on sustained and purposeful European engagement.

Recommendations to European policymakers

1. Military support: European states, including through coalitions of the willing, should urgently scale up military assistance to Ukraine. They should also continue to exert pressure on relevant partners to provide long-range weapons that allow Ukraine to continue to conduct effective and proportionate deep strikes. Beyond strengthening Ukraine's ability to defend itself, military support sends an essential signal about Europe's agency, while countering Russia's false narrative of invincibility.
2. Rhetorical clarity and humanitarian aid: To prevent normalisation of Russia's terror, a coalition of willing European states should sign a joint declaration that its attacks violate international humanitarian law, expanding the Nordic and Baltic [statement](#) to a broader European base. Such rhetorical clarity could be backed up by more rapid deliveries of air defences and expanded provision of generators and humanitarian support to vulnerable civilians.
3. EU accession and sectoral integration: European policymakers should include Ukrainian stakeholders from the outset when exploring alternative accession methods, ensuring that there is no perception of compromise on Ukraine's full membership. This should be paired with faster sectoral integration, for instance through an EU-Ukraine protocol on delivering the opportunities foreseen in the Association Agreement, notably customs facilitation, and energy and industrial market access. This would show that legal harmonisation delivers mutually beneficial results and help to reinvigorate the momentum for reform.
4. Local engagement: European partners should enhance direct communication and cooperation with [local](#) authorities in Ukraine to make support for reform more effective and to strengthen social cohesion, for example, by setting up local offices and travelling more in frontline regions. Donors could also engage more with the existing regional offices of hromada associations, allowing hromada leaders to raise and discuss local challenges.



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