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Launch of EPIK: Why Ukraine matters (more than ever)

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We are living in volatile geopolitical times. Basic assumptions that have been taken for granted are gone, perhaps never to return. It is not clear what kind of new world will emerge from this turmoil, but it seems unlikely to be a better one. The shackles have come off.

Despite the chaos – or perhaps because of the chaos – Ukraine matters more than ever. Ukraine has been fighting not only for its survival, but also for the liberal principles that underpin the European Union: democracy, the rule of law and international law. The EU and Ukraine have a fundamental interest in fighting for these principles.

The outcome of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine will have consequences for European security for years to come. For Europe, the stakes are high – especially with Trump in the White House. It is clear that Europe can no longer rely on the United States for security but must build up its own military capabilities. This will take time – time that Europe does not have.

Ukraine therefore has a central role to play in Europe's new security architecture. Ukraine has the largest land force in Europe, knows how to use NATO weapons better than its members do, is highly advanced in drone technology and has been successfully carrying out NATO core business for many years. Ukraine will be Europe's security breadbasket for decades to come. Russia's aggression has shown how Ukraine's security is inseparable from Europe's security.

Setting up a new think tank – the European Policy Institute in Kyiv (EPIK) – in these circumstances is not easy. Ultimately, however, a think tank such as EPIK is exactly what is needed. It is important not only to understand the larger forces at play, but also to come up with forward-leaning policy solutions. This is the core of EPIK's mandate – to be a go-to hub for new and innovative policy ideas that will help decision makers in Kyiv, Brussels and other European capitals to navigate today's world.

What makes EPIK unique is not just that it is the first international think tank to be established in Kyiv, but that it is bringing together policy experts from Ukraine and the rest of Europe. EPIK's visiting policy fellow programme will attract leading experts to Kyiv to do policy research. EPIK's very first visiting policy fellow, Professor Andrew Wilson, spent time with us in Kyiv earlier this year and has written a policy brief on the complicated choreography of elections and a referendum following a possible ceasefire. Andreas Umland has also written about the inherent problems of security guarantees for Ukraine, should there be a ceasefire.

But a ceasefire seems a long way off, of course. Putin has shown no interest in a negotiated settlement; he still believes that he can achieve his objectives by continuing the war. His demands on Ukraine before even contemplating a ceasefire constitute a trap. We have commissioned a piece by Ukrainian military analyst Mykola Bielieskov that explains why Putin's precondition for a full withdrawal of Ukrainian troops from Donbas constitutes a deadly ruse for Ukraine. The EU's absolute priority should be to ramp-up its military support for Ukraine so that it can defend itself against Russia. This should be the principal goal for Europe today.

Ukraine also needs a credible EU membership perspective. Membership of the EU is of fundamental importance for Ukraine. Ukrainians are fighting not only for their survival, but also to be a part of the EU. Despite the damage that Hungary's veto of the opening of clusters has caused the accession process, Ukrainians remain strongly committed to membership.

The more time that passes without progress on accession talks, however, the weaker this commitment will become. It is therefore important to examine what the EU can do to move forward with sectoral integration. How can the accession process ensure that there is a constant stream of deliverables that improve the daily lives of ordinary Ukrainians? EPIK policy fellow Ivan Nagornyak and SCEEUS analyst Klara Lindström have written a policy brief on sectoral integration.

The discussion on innovative solutions for Ukraine's membership of the EU has also begun. Naturally, there is scepticism among some powerful member states, but there is also growing recognition that Ukraine's accession will not be like any other. It will require the EU to be creative and to think geopolitically. Ivan Nagornyak and I recently wrote this piece on "membership lite" for *Foreign Policy*.

One of EPIK's core tasks is to show how Ukraine is not merely a taker of support from the EU but also a giver. This is especially true when it comes to military technology and fighting modern wars. The United States and the Gulf countries experienced this first hand when Iran retaliated against the USA, Israel and several Arab states using swarms of cheap but deadly Shaheed drones. Europe also has a great deal to learn from Ukraine's military experience and know-how. EPIK will prioritise this work strand to show what can be learned from Ukraine. In this piece on the "Dronisation" of the Ukrainian economy and lessons for Europe, EPIK policy fellow Lesia Bidochko has written about how Ukraine has turned its economy into a hybrid war economy unlike the Soviet model Russia has used.

Fighting Russia's hybrid war is another area where Europe has a lot to learn from Ukraine. In this policy brief on Russia's "everywhere" war against Europe, Elena Davlikanova from the Sahaidachnyi Centre shows the vast scale and scope of Russia's sub-threshold war against Europe. This is EPIK's first joint policy brief with a Ukrainian partner think tank but certainly not the last. As the newest member of Ukraine's vibrant think tank community, EPIK is keen to collaborate with partner think tanks in Ukraine.

As EPIK is launched, it is a true honour to work with an amazing team to build up the Institute at this volatile time. I am certain that EPIK's team has the focus and dedication to make EPIK a success.

Fredrik Wesslau is the acting Director of EPIK