

# Opinion – The European Union’s Status in the Russia-Ukraine Crisis

Written by Jayesh Khatu

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2022/02/02/opinion-the-european-unions-status-in-the-russia-ukraine-crisis/>

JAYESH KHATU, FEB 2 2022

The EU foreign policy chief, Josep Borrell, visited Ukraine in January 2022 amidst continuously soaring tensions along the Russia-Ukraine border, conveying a strong message of support to Kyiv. This came at a time when a series of security talks between Russia and the US, NATO, and the OSCE were scheduled to take place from January 10, 2022. The EU put forth its genuine concerns about its exclusion in the talks on the European security architecture and its portrayal as a ‘neutral spectator’. Borrell urged that ‘any discussion about European security must happen in coordination with and participation of EU’. After all, whatever happens in its neighbourhood affects the EU and its member-states’ security.

Since the crisis emerged at the Russia-Ukraine frontier in 2014, the EU has majorly assisted Ukraine in sharply reducing the latter’s economic dependence on its hostile neighbour Russia by supporting with over EUR 17 billion. The EU-Ukraine Association Agreement of 2014 has resulted in the EU becoming Ukraine’s largest trading partner surpassing Russia. But, what has cast a shadow on the budding EU-Ukraine bonhomie is the EU-Russia economic equation.

The EU is Russia’s biggest trading partner with 37.3% of the country’s total trade in goods in 2020. Thus, to its advantage, the bloc has attempted to use instrument of economic sanctions to deter Russia from any further misadventures in Ukraine and its neighbourhood. This policy of ‘hitting the bear where it hurts the most’ has not dissuaded Russia from lessening tensions on its border with Ukraine. Thus, the EU has vowed to impose further stricter sanctions in response by warning Russia: “aggression comes with a price tag”. Critics, including Ukraine, have not shied away from lambasting the EU’s ‘Russia appeasement policies’ for its failure to define this ‘price tag’.

The question remains – what hinders a stronger economic response from the bloc to avert Moscow’s belligerence in its neighbourhood? The crisis in the EU’s eastern neighbourhood is exacerbated by a deepening energy crisis at home. Both point towards a common cause: Russia, the main supplier of crude oil, natural gas, and solid fossil fuels to the bloc. The EU’s energy dependence on Russia has soared in recent times and Kremlin attempts to exploit Brussels’ energy insecurity to its advantage. This geo-economics of energy trade, largely in favour of Russia, makes Brussels’ position frail in dealing with Kremlin.

Moreover, Nord Stream 2, an offshore natural gas Baltic Sea pipeline running between Russia and Germany, has further added to the question of the EU’s dependence on Russia for energy security. If German regulators approve the project, the pipeline would transport 55 billion cubic metres of natural gas from Russia to Europe each year. With this development, possibilities of abandoning the existing Russian energy supply routes to the EU energy market, namely the Ukrainian transit line and the Belarusian-Polish gas pipeline, cannot be denied. This carries a huge economic cost for transit countries like Ukraine and Poland that fear losing out on revenues along with jeopardising their national security.

Nord Stream 2, to see the light of the day, remains in Russia’s economic interests. Whether Germany, to the EU’s advantage, should play the ‘Nord Stream 2 card’ and list it down overtly as the price for further Russian aggression have divided the member-states.

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The EU has fallen short of projecting its influence in the conflict zone in its neighbourhood. In December 2014, the bloc had initiated a civilian support mission, the EUAM Ukraine, aimed ‘to reform law-enforcement and rule of law institutions’. On the security front, Brussels plans to support Ukraine’s armed forces with EUR 31 billion in times to come through the instrument of the European Peace Facility.

But what remains missing is an EU-led military support mission to Ukraine even after almost eight years of the Russian annexation of Crimea and escalating tensions on the Russia-Ukraine border in the bloc’s neighbourhood. As the crisis is predominantly military, Ukraine has been calling for NATO assistance in case of attempts of invasion from its eastern border, seldom relying on EU military help.

The centrality of the bloc in European security has been questioned by its absence from any meaningful dialogue on the European security architecture surrounding the Russia-Ukraine crisis. The EU’s response is still taking shape when Russia is further amassing troops on its western border. Thus, for Brussels, the question should not be ‘what if Russia invades Ukraine?’, but ‘how to deter Russia from further misadventures in Ukraine?’. Unless it has a strong deterrence package against Moscow, Brussels would continue to be seen as an uninvolved spectator.

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