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Dark Clouds Over the Black Sea

A Readout From the Munich Leaders Meeting in Bucharest
in November 2022

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Summary

More than 270 days after the start of Russia's war in Ukraine, the transatlantic partners reaffirmed their steadfast support for Ukraine at the Munich Leaders Meeting in Bucharest. Participants discussed the war's repercussions for Southeastern Europe, the Western Balkans, countries in the Global South, as well as for the future of the European security architecture. They also came up with concrete priorities for joint action to address the diverse but interconnected challenges.

From November 27 to 29, 2022, the Munich Security Conference (MSC) hosted a Munich Leaders Meeting (MLM) in Bucharest. It brought together around 80 high-level decisionmakers and senior experts, including heads of state and government, cabinet ministers, and members of parliament, from Europe and its direct neighborhood as well as from the United States (US).

During the discussions, participants agreed that Russia's war in Ukraine represents a "Zeitenwende" and has both produced and exacerbated a series of multidimensional and mutually reinforcing crises spanning from Southeastern Europe to other regions of the world. Participants stressed the importance of both supporting Ukraine in defending itself against Russia and avoiding setting a precedent that aggression pays off. They placed the wider Black Sea region at the heart of their discussions and reflected upon implications of the current challenges for the design of a future European security architecture. Another recurring theme was the question how to engage in the "global battle of narratives" to reduce the spread and impact of the Russian narrative that NATO is to blame for the war.

The discussions in Bucharest produced a list of ambitious proposals across various policy areas to deepen transatlantic cooperation and prevail in the systemic competition. These action items have been added to the "transatlantic to-do list," which the MSC started to compile at the MLM in Washington, DC, in May and which has been further updated in light of additional MSC events, such as at a European Defense Roundtable in Paris, an Energy Security Roundtable at the ONS Summit in Stavanger, and several COP-related events in Sharm El Sheikh.

Dark Clouds Over the Black Sea



“We have never seen such unity in both NATO and Europe.”

Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, Turkish Foreign Minister, Munich Leaders Meeting in Bucharest, November 29, 2022

The Munich Leaders Meeting (MLM), which took place from November 27 to 29, convened transatlantic decision-makers and experts in Bucharest amid massive and indiscriminatory Russian missile attacks all across Ukraine. As participants discussed how to help Ukraine weather the winter and address the war's repercussions for Southeastern Europe, the European security architecture, and countries in the Global South, the Russian strikes served as a sobering reminder of the horrors the Ukrainian people face on a daily basis.

Building on the MLM in Washington, DC, in May,¹ the MSC held its first formal meeting in Southeastern Europe, acknowledging that Russia's war had adverse spillover effects on the region. Moldova, Ukraine's neighbor, experiences crippling energy blackouts, while tensions are boiling in the Russian-backed breakaway region of Transnistria. Belarus serves as a potential launchpad for Russian attacks, confirming its role as Moscow's satellite state. Movements of millions of refugees from Ukraine put the solidarity of many of its neighboring countries to the test. Almost three million refugees have crossed the Romanian borders alone. Russian meddling and lost trade and tourism revenues risk further destabilizing Montenegro, while Moscow stokes conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina and between Serbia and Kosovo. Meanwhile, the war has generated new geopolitical dynamics in the Black Sea region: Turkey plays an increasingly prominent role (not least as mediator in the grain export deal) and NATO has reinforced its presence in Romania.

Over three days, heads of state of governments, cabinet ministers, members of parliament, and other senior figures from governments, armed forces, business, and research institutions therefore discussed concrete ways to address the pressing security challenges besetting the region and beyond. What became clear was that – from Ukraine, to the wider Europe, to the Global South – the Russian war of aggression has produced an array of multifaceted and mutually reinforcing crises. These include surging food and energy prices around the world, regional political instability, and increased polarization among great powers with concomitant repercussions for cooperation in other areas. The transatlantic partners must not view them in isolation but recognize their connections to address these crises.

Boosting Transatlantic Support for Ukraine

The Munich Leaders Meeting began 277 days after the start of the Russian war of aggression at a point when Ukrainian forces have the momentum on their side. After initially repelling the Russian attacks on Kyiv, Ukrainian troops have recaptured large swathes of land previously occupied by Russian forces. But the Russian attacks on Ukraine's civilian infrastructure are taking their toll. Meanwhile, looming ammunition shortages as well as the Russian mobilization of allegedly 300,000 troops may halt the Ukrainian advances and plunge the two sides into a war of attrition. Indeed, one participant stressed that "Russia has not lost this war yet." Several experts said that tactical nuclear weapons would make no meaningful difference on the battlefield and expressed hope that transatlantic allies, and China's warnings, would continue to deter Putin from using them; but the possibility should nonetheless not be ruled altogether, one participant noted. As the cold and dark winter sets in, Ukraine needs continued transatlantic support.

Throughout the three days, the transatlantic leaders present in Bucharest affirmed their unwavering commitment to Ukraine. Romanian President Klaus Iohannis called upon the transatlantic partners to "provide Ukraine with what it needs to defend its sovereignty and democracy, for as long as it takes." Participants agreed that appeasing Russia and prematurely opening peace negotiations would merely buy Russian forces time to regroup before they would launch the next attack. Instead, concrete ways to provide military, economic, humanitarian, and technological support for Ukraine were at the top of the agenda throughout the MLM.

Christoph Heusgen, Chairman of the Munich Security Conference, expressed his support for the proposal that European nations should form a consortium to deliver Leopard 2 tanks to Ukraine.² But tanks are not enough. Ukraine needs more air defense systems to protect itself against Russian missiles, participants concurred, as well as spare parts and much more ammunition for already delivered systems such as howitzers. Military experts pointed out that the EU has the potential to coordinate and encourage ramping up armaments production across the continent. One participant also delivered a stark reminder that almost 50 percent of Ukraine's energy infrastructure is destroyed. Millions of civilians lack basic supply of electricity, heat, or running water. To avert a humanitarian catastrophe as temperatures drop below freezing, Ukraine desperately needs more spare parts to repair the energy infrastructure, generators, and mobile radiators.



“The thunderstorm in the Black Sea [...] has led to death and destruction but also to social and economic consequences for countries including Moldova.”

Natalia Gavrilita, Moldovan Prime Minister, Munich Leaders Meeting in Bucharest, November 29, 2022

A sense of urgency thus permeated the discussions, which carried over into sessions on how to deal with the ramifications of the war in Southeastern Europe.

Refocusing on Security in Southeastern Europe

For too long, the transatlantic partners have not paid enough attention to NATO’s Southeastern flank, even though the region had been rife with frozen conflicts, organized crime, Russian disinformation campaigns, and challenges to maritime transport and energy supply. But Russia’s war of aggression and its blockade of Ukrainian grain exports in the Black Sea have duly focused attention on Southeastern Europe. The MLM therefore put regional security in Southeastern Europe at the center of its agenda with sessions on security dynamics in the Black Sea, the Western Balkans, and NATO’s reorientation following the Madrid Summit. The discussions included several representatives from the region, including from Turkey, Moldova, Belarus, and the Western Balkans.

Participants agreed that the war in Ukraine accelerated the transformation the Black Sea region has been undergoing for years and that it has added to the region’s existing challenges. The war has prompted an increase of NATO troops in neighboring countries, such as in Romania. In July, Turkey and the UN helped broker a deal between Russia and Ukraine aimed at allowing grain exports to leave Ukraine, lifting Russia’s blockade of Ukrainian ports, which demonstrated Turkey’s growing weight in the region. But the EU should do more to discourage Turkey’s continued hedging between Russia and NATO, one participant said. In general, a recurring theme in the discussions was the interconnectedness of the challenges Southeastern Europe faces. In Belarus, for example, the threat of Russia’s revisionist efforts, which has now manifested itself in Ukraine, has long been warned against. However, several participants noted that cooperation between Black Sea countries was still insufficient. Cooperating more closely and speaking with a single voice was thus considered crucial to confront the region’s challenges.

In Moldova, policymakers are grappling with the question of how to ensure national security in the long run and how to define the country’s relationship with NATO. Participants recognized, however, that in the short-term, rising energy prices, blackouts caused by infrastructure damages in Ukraine, as well as Russian hybrid warfare and disinformation pose pressing threats to the stability of the country, which requires urgent





“We have to repeat the word ‘compromise’ over and over again. Only painful compromises can succeed.”

Miroslav Lajčák, EU Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue and other Western Balkan Regional Issues, Munich Leaders Meeting in Bucharest, November 28, 2022

transatlantic support. Immediate help with strengthening critical infrastructure in Moldova stood out as a central task for transatlantic partners.

The war in Ukraine has important repercussions for the Western Balkans, too. Participants noted the progress in the region in the past decades and highlighted positive examples of regional cooperation in the field of youth and connectivity. They were, however, also concerned about continued tensions in Bosnia and Herzegovina and between Kosovo and Serbia, which the fallout of the war in Ukraine and Russian meddling could exacerbate. Participants agreed that there was no alternative to diplomatic initiatives for addressing regional tensions. The EU remains a key player and investor in the region and EU membership is still a widely shared dream. The EU’s decision to grant candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova has given the enlargement process new momentum and brought the Western Balkan membership perspectives back to the top of the EU’s enlargement agenda. Participants, however, warned that there is a risk of falling back into complacency and called on the EU to make the enlargement process both more political and more credible. Offering a serious path toward EU membership would also make countries of the Western Balkans less receptive toward Russian overtures.

Laying the Ground for a New European Security Architecture

The Russian war of aggression raises wider questions about the future design of the European security architecture.³ The dogma that security in Europe can only be achieved together with Russia has lost many believers. Most participants agreed that the future European security architecture will have to contain rather than integrate Russia, at least in the short to medium term. Discussions at the MLM centered on three facets of the future architecture. First, the most immediate question was how to ensure Ukraine’s security after a hypothetical ceasefire with Russia. Christoph Heusgen summed up the views in the room when stating that “a ceasefire agreement or a peace treaty with Russia are not worth the paper they are written on unless there are credibly security guarantees.” There was less agreement on what exactly such security guarantees could look like. While some argued that Ukraine should become a NATO member and thus be protected by Article 5, others cautioned that Ukraine’s NATO membership perspectives were tenuous and unlikely to realize in the near future. Instead, some suggested the EU should review the security guarantees provided under its mutual assistance clause. While the end of the war is not in sight,



“We must prioritize accountability for Russian war crimes and need to learn the lessons from the war in the Balkans.”

Tanja Fajon, Slovenian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Munich Leaders Meeting in Bucharest, November 29, 2022

transatlantic leaders should already lay the groundwork for Ukraine’s future security.

Second, participants discussed the relationship between NATO and the EU and the concomitant role of the US. Participants agreed that NATO had proven, once again, that it is the anchor of European defense. The major decisions taken at the Madrid Summit in June to reorientate the Alliance toward collective defense and reinforce the Eastern flank found much support among transatlantic leaders. Referring to Sweden’s and Finland’s applications to join the alliance, one participant proclaimed that “NATO is not brain dead but has received two new organs.” Pointing to the enormous domestic challenges to liberal democratic values, some warned against the erosion of the common value base that serves as the crucial glue that keeps the alliance together. A transactional alliance, so the argument went, would lose much of its credibility, which rests on solidarity among NATO members.

Countering fears that the US pivot to the Indo-Pacific would diminish its security involvement in Europe, several speakers pointed to the substantial US military, financial, and intelligence support to Ukraine, which have been vital for Kyiv’s defense and recent advances. The US proved indispensable to European security once more. Notwithstanding significant European contributions, many Europeans were self-critical of what they saw as their insufficiently ambitious military and financial support. For some, it was therefore understandable that Germany and France, often seen as the main laggards, had lost trust in Central and Eastern European capitals. “Europe needs to get its act together,” as one participant forcefully put it.

Doing so requires among others strengthening the European pillar in NATO. Participants underlined that Europeans should not only spend more on defense but also jointly procure weapons systems and ensure interoperability to reduce costly duplication. Many transatlantic leaders agreed that the EU has a central role to play in fostering and coordinating joint procurement. Referring to recent disputes among EU partners, one participant demanded that “industrial competition should not spoil our political projects.” Participants also pointed to the EU’s economic and soft power as major contributions to European security in complementarity to NATO, while highlighting the potential of the EU’s forthcoming Rapid Deployment Capacity as a new potential tool to inter alia address challenges in the South. Participants also saw the need for better intelligence-sharing among allies.



“The impact of the war is global and multi-dimensional.”

Nicolae-Ionel Ciucă,
Romanian Prime Minister,
Munich Leaders Meeting in
Bucharest, November 28,
2022

Third, transatlantic leaders debated how to deal with Russia in the future. There was a broad consensus that hopes for Russia to reckon with its war crimes, pacify, and at least roll back some of its recent dictatorial domestic reforms after the war were elusive. Some participants therefore proposed to rely on military deterrence alone. Others acknowledged that some format for basic talks with Russia would also have to be found, not least to discuss arms control and incidence prevention. The OSCE surfaced at several points as a potential forum for such talks, though several participants noted that the organization had been a collateral of the war. For many participants, Russian war crimes also warrant a special tribunal to ensure accountability.

From Regional Security to Global Impact

The broader impact of the war in Ukraine on other regions of the world was another recurring theme during the discussions in Bucharest. Participants highlighted the disruptions of food markets worldwide, causing shortages of grain and fertilizer and spiking food prices. Prior to the war, Ukraine ranked among the world’s nine largest grain exporters which cover almost 80 percent of the world’s population. However, due to Russian mines, which prevent Ukrainian farmers from cultivating their crops, and reduced capacities of Ukraine’s Black Sea ports and land routes, Ukraine encounters difficulties in harvesting and exporting grain. While Russia is clearly responsible for aggravating the global food crisis, using food as a weapon of war, the participants also addressed the persistent view of countries in the Global South that Western sanctions against Russia are to blame. They were clear on the need to counter these narratives created by Russia to foster divisions in the world and to impair the transatlantic partners’ relations with countries from the Global South.

In addition, several discussants highlighted Russia’s role in the “global battle of narratives.” There was agreement on the need for the transatlantic partners to communicate clearly to partners in the Global South and beyond that Russia’s war does not only aim at Ukraine but represents an attack on the fundamental principles of the international order. It was considered important to underline that the war is not merely a European one but represents a global crisis.





“Ukraine is not Putin’s final destination.”

Svitlana Tsikhanouskaya,
Belarusian Opposition
Leader, Munich Leaders
Meeting in Bucharest,
November 28, 2022



“We need a to-do list for enhancing the security in the Black Sea.”

Bogdan Aurescu, Romanian
Foreign Minister, Munich
Leaders Meeting in
Bucharest, November 28,
2022

Extending the Transatlantic To-Do List

From the MLM in Washington DC, to the European Defense Roundtable in Paris, to the MSC activities at COP27 in Sharm El Sheikh, there was a broad consensus at the many events the MSC organized in 2022 that the manifold challenges besetting the rules-based international order require deeper transatlantic cooperation. The MLM in Bucharest was no different and produced additional action items for an ambitious transatlantic to-do list. The complete list of items is enclosed in this Munich Security Brief.

Discussions reaffirmed and specified many of the existing items such as investing more in security and defense, bolstering the resilience of liberal democracies, reducing dependencies in critical goods, establishing a special tribunal to hold Russian war crime perpetrators accountable, and engaging with states from the Global South on equal terms. But the sessions also crystalized several tasks tailored to regional demands in Southeastern Europe. These include formalizing the NATO-Ukraine dialogue by unblocking the NATO-Ukraine Commission; providing security guarantees to Ukraine, Moldova, and other countries at risk of Russian coercion; ramping up support for Ukraine’s agricultural sector; and aligning and intensifying transatlantic engagement with the Western Balkans.

By no means exhaustive, the transatlantic to-do list offers 120 concrete, actionable items that derive from seven high-profile events with hundreds of high-level participants and covers a broad spectrum of policy areas. As the war enters a new phase, the transatlantic partners must retain their resolve and address the manifold local, regional, and global consequences. Our transatlantic to-do list should provide some ideas for leaders on both sides of the pond on where to focus.





Key Points

- ① Amid massive Russian missile attacks on Ukraine, transatlantic leaders reaffirmed their unwavering commitment to support Ukraine at the Munich Leaders Meeting in Bucharest.
- ② To bolster Ukraine's resilience, the transatlantic partners must deepen their military and financial support. To avert a humanitarian catastrophe, they urgently need to help repair and protect Ukraine's critical infrastructure and supply aid.
- ③ The future European security architecture must contain, not integrate, Russia, at least in the short to medium term. Doing so also requires the transatlantic partners to provide credible security guarantees to Ukraine and its neighbors, and pay greater attention to the Black Sea region.
- ④ The transatlantic partners must counter Russia's propaganda in the Global South by emphasizing that the war is a fundamental attack on the key principles of international law. Alleviating the food crisis would help gain much needed credibility.
- ⑤ The discussions generated several items for the transatlantic to-do list compiled over the course of the year. The list offers transatlantic leaders concrete priorities for joint action in light of heightened systemic competition.

Endnotes

- 1 Randolph Carr and Julia Hammelehle, “Building a Transatlantic To-Do List: A Readout From the Munich Leaders Meeting in Washington, DC, in May 2022,” Munich: Munich Security Conference, Munich Security Brief 2, May 2022, <https://doi.org/10.47342/TGHT8654>.
- 2 Gustav Gressel, Rafael Loss, and Jana Puglierin, “The Leopard Plan: How European Tanks Can Help Take Back Its Territory,” Berlin: ECFR, September 9, 2022, <https://perma.cc/9DBY-WJNX>.
- 3 Tobias Bunde et al., “Munich Security Report 2022: Turning the Tide – Unlearning Helplessness,” Munich: Munich Security Conference, February 2022, <https://doi.org/10.47342/QAWU4724>, 96.

Image Sources

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