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**UN NUOVO RINASCIMENTO  
PER L'EUROPA:  
IL RUOLO DELLA RICERCA  
E DELLA FORMAZIONE**

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<b>AREA 7</b>	
<b>Economia, scienze finanziarie e organizzazione aziendale</b>	703
<b>Possible new scenarios for monetary challenges in the years to come</b> <i>Angelo Federico Arcelli</i>	705
<b>Le competenze distintive delle persone a garanzia del successo di Banca Ifis</b> <i>Mauro Baracchi</i>	709
<b>Urban Mobility: What Future Scenario for Public Transportation?</b> <i>Vincenzo Mergioti</i>	713
<b>L'interazione uomo-macchina e i processi decisionali per la competitività delle imprese nella trasformazione intelligente</b> <i>Mario Risso, Mirko Di Bernardo, Elisa Cecconi</i>	737
<b>AREA 8</b>	
<b>Economia e territorio</b>	751
<b>Qualità istituzionale e geografia elettorale in Europa</b> <i>Bernardo Cardinale, Dante Di Matteo</i>	753
<b>Providing military assistance to Ukraine: ethical concerns and economic aspects in the EU</b> <i>Atanas Dimitrov</i>	767
<b>Il Mediterraneo, metafora del mondo</b> <i>Marina Fuschi</i>	785
<b>Trasformazioni Demografiche e Sfide Economiche nell'Unione Europea</b> <i>Alfonso Giordano</i>	799
<b>La gestione delle emergenze in Europa</b> <i>Domenico Capulli</i>	823
<b>AREA 9</b>	
<b>Filosofia, politica e diritto</b>	845
<b>Filosofia, politica e sviluppo umano nell'età digitale e tecnomorfa. Insegnamento, formazione universitaria, ricerca</b> <i>Fiammetta Ricci</i>	847
<b>Nota sulla formazione scolastica e sui suoi riflessi civili</b> <i>Giulio M. Chiodi</i>	857

## **Providing military assistance to Ukraine: ethical concerns and economic aspects in the EU**

Atanas Dimitrov<sup>1</sup>

### **1. Introduction**

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, that began on 24 February 2022 and which at the moment of writing is still ongoing, has caused devastation across the country. Thousands of civilians have been killed and many more injured, while millions of Ukrainians have sought a refuge in other European states.

The war has severely affected many countries in both economic and political terms, which has been especially visible in some of the EU member states. From an economic perspective, the most evident consequence has been the sharply rising prices of energy and other commodities. From a political point of view, the war has resulted in further political divisions and a rise of populism and cynicism. Two main topics have become a bone of contention: the economic sanctions imposed on the Russian Federation and the (lethal) military assistance to Ukraine.

For every single country, the decision to support or reject such proposals is inextricably linked to choices that are also ethical in their nature. That said, one might ask what then should be an ethical response to what has been happening in Ukraine since February 2022? Does each country have a moral obligation to protect the UN Charter, in particular the right of another state to preserve its independence and territorial integrity? Is it enough to simply condemn the Russian invasion and impose sanctions that we consider in theory sufficient to make the aggressor change its course of action and seek a peaceful resolution to the conflict? The list of questions can go on and on. Even if we narrow it to these decisions only, they contain ethical dilemmas with the potential to have a serious impact on our nations in economic, political and social terms.

Therefore, it is important to know what the reasons behind a decision to provide or not (lethal) military assistance are. Are they politically, economically or ideologically motivated? If a country makes a

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decision, for example, to provide weapons to Ukraine, could that be because it is believed that the latter is a victim of military aggression and thus, it has the right to defend itself against it? This is all the more valid if we consider the Russian invasion a threat to international peace. Or maybe a country will provide military assistance to Ukraine out of a will to balance an unjust intervention. It is also crucial to always bear in mind what the short- and long-term consequences would be in the case of our intervention, that is, if we provide or not military assistance.

This paper makes an attempt to examine the EU member states' provision of military support to Ukraine from an ethical perspective. At the same time, it explores some economic aspects of doing so, and respectively upon refusal to provide such assistance.

## **2. Ethics in the defence field**

Ethics regards virtually every single human activity. This applies to both the individual and the group. People often face ethical dilemmas while being employees of governmental or international institutions or in private companies whose specific activities have the potential to negatively affect the lives of other individuals. In some cases, this impact can regard hundreds, thousands and even millions of people in one or more countries and regions.

In this line of thinking, some of the most important ethical dilemmas not only to the state, but to humankind as well, lie in the defence and security field: waging war, production, storage and usage of weapons of mass destruction, easy availability of small arms and light weapons, AI weaponizing, cybersecurity transparency and possible harms to privacy, participating in peace operations, just to name a few.

Ethics concerns business as well. Despite its core functions and aims, the military industry and the security sector in general are a business field millions of people around the world work in. For example, in 2020, more than 462 000 people were employed in the European defence sector alone, while its turnover amounted to approximately 120 billion euro (ASD, 2021). The products and services that the military industry provides inevitably raise some ethical concerns. With regards to this, Newall (in Burgess et al. 2016, p. 278) poses the question whether ethics should be limited to business ethics or expand to society when it comes to defence acquisition and procurement.

Narrowing the subject to arms supply, the literature deals mainly with the case of providing weapons to rebels. Pattison (2015) argues that arming rebels should be avoided and regarded generally as impermissible, with some exceptions that can be justified to some extent from a moral point of view. According to Christensen (2018, p. 118) there is one particular consideration in favour of providing arms, namely this can be a less costly option compared to sending troops. Undoubtedly, in the case of Ukraine, the latter is all the more complicated by the fact that most countries that provide lethal military support to Kiev are NATO members, that is, apart from the evident immediate risk to their soldiers, there is also a risk of engaging in direct military conflict with Russia.

Furthermore, ethics is also related to the imposition of economic sanctions. They are inextricably linked to the spheres of defense, security and business, especially when the sanctions are being implemented as a consequence of an armed conflict. Although it is widely believed that economic sanctions make a given armed conflict less desirable, they alone cannot be perceived as a victory over the target country.

Economic sanctions and more precisely economic isolation, limits the target country's strategic decision-making. By doing so, that state goes towards riskier decisions that can initially expand the conflict, but then often lead to a defeat (Sand, 2020). Whereas sanctions are aimed at making a military engagement less desirable in the event of armed conflict, especially in the long-term, they go hand in hand with both expected and non-intended economic consequences for all parties involved. Cortright et al. (1997, p. 15) argue that the increasing globalization of trade and finance makes every nation – and particularly poor and weak countries, or those heavily dependent on exports and imports – vulnerable to economic coercion. Bearing this in mind, economic sanctions inevitably relate to some moral questions. As Ellis (2021, p. 410-411) states, if properly imposed, the economic sanctions are potentially very harmful to the people in the target country, thus the application of just war principles to economic sanctions can be regarded as misconceiving. Nonetheless, at the same time the application of nonviolent sanctions allows national leaders to 'do something' while avoiding the risks that a military involvement of their armed forces would bring (Cortright et al., 1997, p. 15). Yet, given the fact that economic sanctions have costs in both the sender and the target countries,

the former can try to design the sanctions in such a way that they will have a less negative impact on its economy, which in turn will make the sanctions less effective (Van Bergeijk, 2021, p. 16). This is all the more significant in the case of sanctions imposed by a group of states, which can be observed in the EU in terms of the war in Ukraine.

Certainly, as a valid reason for imposing sanctions some would point that they are more humane and therefore, preferable compared to military engagement. Cortright et al., (1997, p. 17), however, argue that this has nothing to do with some humanitarian values, but rather with a less political price in the country imposing the sanctions as well as with the lower risk of losing credibility in the event of failure.

Last but not least, ethics are inextricably linked with defence spending. Although the war may be per se a good reason for a government to increase military expenditures, it should be said that they put us in front of other ethical dilemmas, especially when the competition with other public sectors such as healthcare and education is taken into account. Crane et al. (2019, p. 540) note that ethics is deeply involved in the defence industry for many deals are being conducted with a high degree of confidentiality, combined with a relatively small number of buyers and sellers and other prerequisites for corruption to flourish. The war in Ukraine can also be seen in this line of thinking, as many military deals and investments are being discussed and defence budgets increasing. As De Agostini (2022, p. 4) highlights, the absence of a comprehensive, detailed, and disaggregated dataset on military spending leads to transparency and parliamentary control over military budgeting processes being obstructed.

### **3. Ethical concerns in providing military assistance to Ukraine**

Since 24 February 2022 all EU member states have faced the ethical dilemma whether to provide or not military assistance to Ukraine, especially under the form of lethal military equipment. Across the countries, this dilemma has been further exacerbated by the dependence on Russian energy sources, the geographical position of Ukraine, as well as by the fact that Russia is a nuclear power and permanent member of the UN Security Council. In other words, it should not be surprising that these aspects act as deterrent factors for some states in terms of providing arms.

Furthermore, the seizure of parts of Ukrainian land that has been labelled by Russia as ‘returning and reinforcing’ Russian territories (e.g. Roth, 2022), is a very sensitive topic for those countries that find to have some important similarities with Ukraine. Such are, for example, a large percentage of mixed population, a significant in numbers minority group in some parts of the national territory, as well as historical ties and a political and economic ‘elite’ connected to the USSR/Russia.

There are also other Russian narratives that are expected to serve as a deterrent in terms of providing military support to Ukraine. One of these is the claim that the sanctions that the USA, the EU and other states imposed on Russia as a result of its military aggression are ineffective. As the U.S. Department of State (2022) highlights, this is not only aimed at convincing the Russian citizens of the force of the president Putin and the Russian Federation itself, but also at discouraging any future actions in that direction, while at the same time the senders’ economies suffer.

At the same time, Moscow has been accusing the United States and NATO of using the conflict in Ukraine as a proxy war against Russia. Pfaff (2022) argues that such claims can be indeed interpreted in this way, for the Alliance is engaged in a Cold war type of armed conflict. In this line of thinking, a major point that seems to find support among the local population in some states, is that the Russian military aggression in Ukraine is rightfully changing the world order for the better, though at the expense of the right of the Ukrainian state to choose its own destiny. This is fueled to a lesser or greater extent by certain military engagements of some Western countries throughout their history in other states. As Francis (2004, p. 127) states, the West is acting very arrogantly demanding other states to follow certain rules of conduct that it clearly does not adhere to, especially in the defence and security field. It can be argued that this, in turn, leads not only to an increase in cynicism, but also to rising populism in a number of countries, especially in those that can be considered to be on the edge of their political course and trying to balance between the West and Russia.

Usually, one of the main arguments of those who oppose the provision of military assistance to Ukraine is that in this way the conflict will deepen, hence this will bring over the time to more civilian casualties. With regards to this, Maletta and Héau (2022, p. 1-2) note that the EU

supplies of weapons to Ukraine raise serious concerns about further intensifying the armed violence and respectively about more victims among the civilian population because of it. In other words, this could be regarded as what Petterson (2015) refer as 'escalation objection' in the case of arming rebels. He states that by doing so we can significantly escalate hostilities, as the other part in the conflict will possibly intensify its military response and thus, the situation will be lengthened and can lead to even more innocent victims. In addition, a long-lasting conflict can also result in a number of economic negatives as well: from galloping inflation to mass impoverishment and even chronic hunger in some parts of the world.

Nonetheless, such a narrative can be disputed. Firstly, if the aggressor is not held responsible and the country subject to the unjust military aggression is forced to make painful concessions, this can result in a repetition of the tragic events in another part of the world. Secondly, increased defense capabilities would help the attacked country - in this case Ukraine - to defend itself and thus its importance in a global aspect would not possibly lead to the mentioned negative economic and social aspects. This has already been observed in practice during the conflict in Ukraine. Taking into account that Ukrainian agricultural products are essentially important for the global food security, in August 2022 a deal between Ukraine and Russia to resume the agricultural exports via the Black Sea was signed and brokered by the UN and the Republic of Turkey. As a result, within a few months the total quantity of grain and other foodstuffs exported from the three Ukrainian ports on the Black Sea - Odesa, Chornomorsk, Yuzhny - have amounted to more than 11 million metric tons (United Nations, 2022).

Also, regarding the concerns about a possible escalation of the conflict as a consequence of providing arms to Ukraine, it should be noted that most of the provision of weaponry has been so far aimed at defending the country and not at giving it the possibility of attack on Russian territory. For example, although the U.S. supplied HIMARS missile launchers to Kiev, their longest-range ones were not included, as these can be potentially used to attack Russian territory (Congressional Research Service, 2022).

When it comes to armed conflicts, another ethical dilemma concerns to what extent a country should be responsible for a possible sub-

sequent sale/shipment of its military equipment to parties in another conflict, including rebels and other armed groups. Although Ukraine is not a member of NATO and the EU, it is considered an important ally. Yet, the concerns regarding where the weapons will end up or how they will be used persist.

In addition, some political actors highlight that supplying arms to Ukraine can lead to empty stocks necessary for the defence needs of the sender country. “In fact, this is a problematic issue known within the EU, where «sending military equipment to Ukraine and stocks tailored to peacetime has resulted into urgent and critical gaps in terms of military equipment» (European Commission, 2022). One might argue that such concerns also indicate, to a lesser or greater extent, a lack of trust in the EU and NATO defence capabilities in the case of an escalation of the conflict.

That said, it should be underlined that in the course of the Russian invasion some countries decided to provide weapons, although at the beginning there were against it or had been following a policy of not providing arms to conflict parties. This is, for example, the case of Norway, whose restrictive policy regarding the export of defence-related products was interrupted, for the war in Ukraine was regarded as a whole new situation where the provision of military lethal equipment was necessary (Norwegian Government Security and Service Organisation, 2022). At the same time, after a referendum in June 2022, Denmark abolished its policy of staying out of the EU Common Security and Defence Policy, while military not-aligned Sweden has decided to significantly increase defence expenditures.

Even in Bulgaria, where historically Russia has had and still has a strong political and public support, some changes in the state’s policy towards providing weapons have been recently observed. For a long time, political parties (inside and outside the Parliament), public figures and many citizens have publicly spoken against the idea of supplying any military assistance to Ukraine. The thesis that is usually defended, depicts the friendly relations between the two peoples and Russia’s positive role for Bulgaria, including in economic terms. The politically motivated narratives have even led to many Bulgarian citizens openly criticizing the reception of Ukrainian refugees (mostly for economic reasons) as well as to a widely spread opinion that the coun-

try should maintain neutrality in relation to the conflict (ESTAT, 2022), which they consider to be a vital Bulgarian national interest.

Eventually, on the 3rd of November 2022 the Bulgarian National Assembly decided that the Council of Ministers within a month had to present «a draft resolution on the provision of military and military-technical support to Ukraine as a contribution to the general efforts of the international community to assist the victims of aggression in accordance with the Bulgarian capabilities and guaranteeing the security and protection of the population» (Bulgarian News Agency, 2022). However, the list with the type of military production was classified. Yet, in January 2023 it became known that during the coalition government (13/12/2021 – 02/08/2022) of the then Prime Minister Kiril Petkov, Bulgarian weapons actually reached Ukraine, although not directly, but through Poland and Romania (Volkman-Schluck, 2023). What is more, according to the current ministry of Defence Dimitar Stoyanov, the total value of that export was approximately 1.3 billion euro (News.bg, 2022). In other words, although being a sensitive topic, the arms sales are beneficial for the national defence industry and, respectively, for the national economy of one of those countries that are among the most reluctant to provide arms to Ukraine.

Another factor that can be used as obstructive to the supply of military assistance to Ukraine and which is ethical in essence, is what may look like double standards and cynicism by some EU member states. For instance, in July 2014 the Council of the European Union imposed «a prohibition of the direct or indirect sale, supply, transfer or export of arms and related material of all types, including weapons and ammunition, military vehicles and equipment, paramilitary equipment, and spare parts therefor to Russia» (Council of the European Union, 2014). Nonetheless, according to Brillaud et al. (2022), since then some member states exported military equipment to Russia for as much as €346 million, using for this purpose some legal loopholes (e.g. contracts signed before 1 August 2014). Although the exported military equipment in that case might not be significant in terms of quantity or share of arms imports in Russia, it is nonetheless notable with respect to integrity and ethics, especially when the EU ordinary citizens are expected to bear the brunt of the war and the sanctions imposed by their governments.

Also, when it comes to the economic sanctions that the EU member states have imposed on Russia, we can find some activities which have remained so far out of their sanctions' scope. For example, at the time of writing, Belgium still imports diamonds from Russia, all the more that the Russian state controlled diamond company Alrosa had previously participated in the funding of a B-871 combat submarine (Rankin, 2022).

In the case of Russia, the purpose of economic sanctions is to deprive the country of huge resources necessary to finance its military actions in Ukraine and possible aggression against other countries. However, if the economic sanctions lead to damages in the sender state that outweigh the sanctions effect in the target country, this can provoke public discontent with all related negative consequences in political terms. As a matter of fact, from an ethical point of view, the imposition of economic sanctions often has negative consequences for certain vulnerable groups and directly affects the poorest part of the population. For example, Alnasrawi (2010) argues that the sanctions imposed on Iraq in the aftermath of the invasion of Kuwait in 1990 led to massive impoverishment of the population. Also, in the case of Haiti, the economic sanctions in 1993-1994 resulted in many problems: poverty, a significantly reduced access to clear water among the urban poor, increased prices of medical and other humanitarian supplies and less educational opportunities, just to name a few (Gibbons, & Garfield, 1999).

What is more, when economic sanctions are imposed, this often contributes to the expansion of the shadow economy and other illicit activities, which many ordinary citizens may regard necessary in order to alleviate their financial problems provoked by the economic sanctions in questions. This, however, can enhance organized crime and corruption practices which will have negative consequences in both the short- and long-term, and not only in the target country. In other words, such circumstances will be very likely used by the target country in its favor by promoting certain narratives.

Last but by no means least, it has to be highlighted that despite various narratives that one might encounter, from a moral point of view, Moscow fails to recognize the right of Kiev to decide the country's future on its own, stating on many occasions that the Ukraine's will to become a NATO member is a security threat to the Russian Federation. This contradicts a number of international treaties to which

both countries are parties, such as for example the UN Charter. What is more, Russia not only unjustly attacked Ukraine, it also directly caused suffering to millions of people in Ukraine and indirectly affected many more around the world, the latter mainly in terms of their economic and food security.

#### **4. Economic aspects of the military assistance to Ukraine**

The Russian unjustified military aggression in Ukraine has prompted the EU for the first time to authorize arms delivery to a third party through the so-called European Peace Facility. This instrument has been used on several occasions to «contribute to strengthening the capabilities and resilience» of the Ukrainian armed forces, including supplying lethal military equipment. At the time of writing, the allocated resources for this purpose have amounted to approximately €3.1 billion. In total, the EU member states and institutions have provided to Ukraine military, financial and humanitarian assistance for more than 50 billion euros (Kiel Institute for the World Economy, 2022). The type and amount of military aid to Ukraine by individual states, of course, varies. This is affected, among other things, by the proximity to the conflict, the likelihood of a similar scenario to take place in the given country, the dependence on Russian gas and oil, other commercial-economic and historical-cultural relations with Russia, just to name a few.

Not surprisingly, the US has been the biggest provider of military, financial and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine since the beginning of the Russian invasion. At the end of August 2022, the total U.S. military assistance to Ukraine during the Biden administration alone, exceeded \$10.5 billion (U.S. Department of State, 2022). In absolute terms, that was roughly twice the military aid to Kyiv from all EU member states and institutions combined. What is more, the U.S. military support is provided to a country where the country's military forces are not directly involved. At the same time, as a percentage of the GDP, the government support from Latvia and Estonia to Ukraine was four times as much as that from the U.S. government and much more than many EU member states when it comes to military commitments (Antezza et al., 2022, p. 22). In other words, the Baltic countries perceive to a greater extent the immediate threat from Russia and send a clear signal that they consider both their present and future inextricably linked to the EU and NATO

membership. With some exceptions, the same applies to a lesser or greater extent to other former communist countries as well (figure 1).

Figure 1 Government support (military commitments) to Ukraine - bilateral aid (% of GDP) in selected ex-communist countries in the period 24.01.2022-20.11.2022

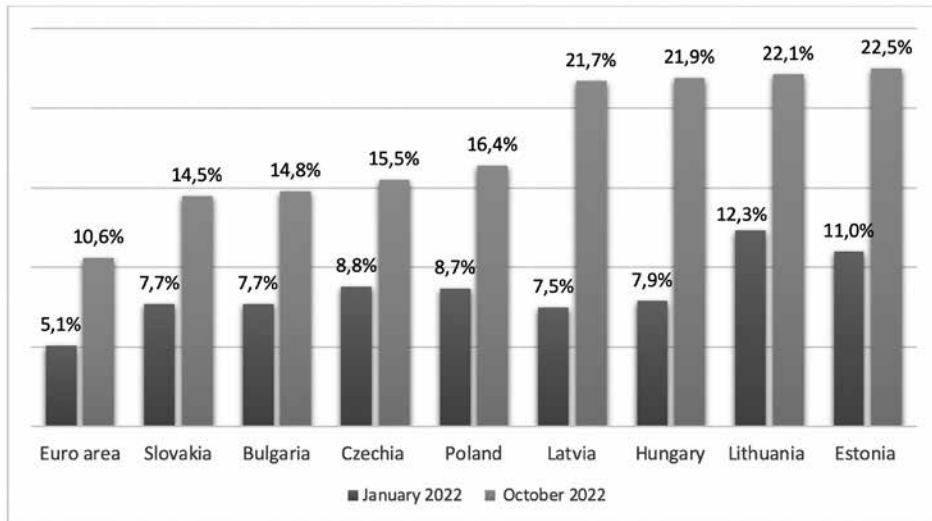


Source: Antezza et al., 'The Ukraine Support Tracker' Kiel WP, 2022

Undoubtedly, the war has been negatively affecting the economies of the EU member states, although not with the same pace. Among the most affected are those largely dependent on Russia in terms of importing natural gas and raw materials as well as on both Russia and Ukraine for other commodities (such as wheat or sunflower, especially in the case of the latter). Furthermore, according to the World Bank (2022), for low- and middle-income countries will be much harder to recover from the economic impact of Covid-19 given the current war in Ukraine.

Given the above-stated, many that oppose the idea of providing military lethal assistance to Ukraine, would argue that by doing so, an economic turmoil can be expected in the sender country. However, it is difficult to sustain such a claim, at least in the short-term. In fact, the data show, for example, that the current inflation rates in the EU are not directly related to the supply of arms to Ukraine, given the fact that as of October 2022, Bulgaria and Hungary had one of the highest levels of inflation within the EU, despite their unwillingness to support Kiev militarily (figure 2).

Figure 2 Annual inflation rate in the Euro area and in selected countries in January and October 2022



Data: Eurostat, 2022

In addition, there has not been an increase in the unemployment rates in those member states that provide military assistance to Ukraine. On the contrary, according to Eurostat data, in the third quarter of 2022 all of them registered a decline in the unemployment rates compared to the previous two years (Eurostat, 2022). Although this can likely be attributed to the end of the Covid-19 emergency situation in virtually all member states, the capacity of the EU to overcome the economic challenges of the war in Ukraine should not be underestimated as well.

The impact of the war in Ukraine on the EU member states will likely be different in the long-term. It also has to be taken into consideration that there is some unknown or controversial data that may affect the final assessment. Concerning this, Smith (2014, p. 246) argues that in the literature the purpose of the estimates regarding the costs of armed conflict is usually not very explicit.

Nonetheless, the provision of military assistance from the EU to Ukraine can be seen as enhancing the member states' security. For example, Thrall and Dorminey (2018) point out that the U.S. arms sales are based on the assumptions that in this way the country's security is being

enhanced, for military capabilities of allies are also enhancing; behavior and foreign policies of client nations are influenced; there is a positive impact on the U.S. economy, including on the U.S. defense industrial base. In strictly economic terms, providing military aid, including weaponry, to Ukraine, could mean some positives to the economies of the member states. This is due to the involvement of the given national defence industry and/or less defence spending compared to the case of success of the aggressor.

Taking into account the above-mentioned, the provision of military assistance to Ukraine inevitably concerns defence expenditures. As mentioned earlier, its increasing in many EU countries is among the most important consequences of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Back in March 2022 the Council of the EU declared that the member states were expected to increase defence spending, including the R&D investments (Council of the European Union, 2022). In fact, in 2020 alone, the total defence spending of all EU member states (excluding Denmark) amounted to a record of 198 billion euros, of which 36 billion euros were in defence equipment procurement and 8 billion euros in defence R&D (European Defence Agency, 2021). Globally military expenditures have been on the rise for several years, reaching \$2113 billion in 2021 (SIPRI, 2022). Although the increase in military spending in the 21st century can be seen as a result of the ever evolving security environment, from a public perspective, a new significant increase in that respect, even against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine, can be perceived primarily as an unnecessary burden. This is all the more valid if we consider some moral concerns related to the number of vital problems to resolve globally such as hunger, disease, extreme poverty etc. For instance, while defense spending has been increasing in recent years, the same goes for social inequality. The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2020, p. 22-23) argues that income inequality within and across countries might be even greater than thought.

## **5. Conclusion**

The war in Ukraine has expectedly led to both economic and political upheavals at the national and regional levels. The ethical considerations surrounding the EU member states' response to the Russian military aggression, more precisely, the provision of lethal military as-

sistance to Ukraine and to a lesser extent, the imposition of economic sanctions on Russia, will undoubtedly continue to be among the main political topics and one of great public interest. However, to what extent they will influence the decision-making in the coming months, it will depend not only on what happens in strictly military terms, but also on the economic situation in the single member states.

In fact, there are some questions that need answering as soon as possible. One of these is undoubtedly the rising inflation and the accompanying impoverishment of many people even within the EU. Higher commodity prices for a long period of time increases the risks of stagflation and social unrest, especially when we take into account the economic problems and challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic. This, in turn, will probably have a political impact, particularly in those countries where there has already been a prominent polarization of opinions regarding the military assistance to Ukraine and upcoming parliamentary and/or presidential elections.

Future research on this topic should also address the need for a common EU response to crises, including armed conflicts, and how to achieve it without jeopardizing its future and common principles and values. This may also bring to the fore the issue of the further development of the European defense industry.

Also, the duration of the conflict will very likely directly affect the rearmament and the allocation of more resources to defense in many countries. This, in turn, can give rise to or strengthen corrupt practices in the defense sector. Therefore, a particular focus on it should be paid by scholars and political actors. This is important not only because of a possible misuse of public funds, but also because of the need to maintain a joint response in moral terms, which in the current situation in Ukraine also includes the provision of military aid.

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