



Watch List 2023 for the EU

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Autumn Update

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President's Take: Hot Spots Near and Far

Escalating tensions in Eastern Europe have added to the already challenging war in Ukraine. In her introduction to the [Watch List 2023 – Autumn Update](#), Crisis Group President & CEO Comfort Ero outlines which conflict prevention and conflict resolution strategies the EU could implement in international crises

The year 2023 has seen peace and security challenges both far from the EU's borders and closer to home. The latter, especially, have heightened in recent weeks and months, which have seen fighting in the South Caucasus and Kosovo, even as a second year of war in Ukraine stretches on. While the three crises are very different in nature, all suggest a worrying inclination on the part of some governments to seek solutions to disputes through force of arms. Insofar as this jarring trend involves a proliferation of new wars, large

and small, it flies in the face of the decades of energy that the EU has invested in turning the page on past conflagrations in Europe and its neighbourhood. Crisis Group is working on a report about how these conflicts are shaping the emerging European security architecture and how best to minimise the risk of future clashes. In the meantime, however, these three crises demand immediate attention. We have explored [all of them](#) in earlier work, but I want to share a few thoughts about recent developments.

Three Immediate Crises

Start with the South Caucasus. During a 24-hour military operation on 19 and 20 September, Azerbaijan regained full control of Nagorno-Karabakh (a Soviet-era name that Baku no longer uses). While internationally recognised as part of Azerbaijan, the enclave is primarily populated by ethnic Armenians. Azerbaijan lost control of the enclave and surrounding territory in the 1990s, after which the region was administered by de facto authorities in Stepanakert, and subsequently recovered some of it following a six-week war in 2020.

September's one-day war ended the enclave's three decades of de facto self-governance and triggered an exodus to Armenia of residents who were already traumatised by a nine-month long Azerbaijani blockade that had hindered access to basic necessities. Deeply mistrustful of rule from Baku, many, perhaps most, expect not to return. The government in Yerevan, which did not challenge its more powerful neighbor in September's conflict, is struggling to cope with the influx – already more than 100,000 people, it says; international [observers](#) say

only 50 to 1,000 ethnic Armenians remain in the Karabakh region. While fighting has largely subsided in and around Nagorno-Karabakh, flare-ups remain possible in areas along the border between Azerbaijan and Armenia, where skirmishes have occurred periodically since the end of the 2020 war. Baku has pushed Yerevan for new concessions, notably on a transport corridor through southern Armenia to connect Azerbaijan to its exclave, Nakhichevan.

There are a number of things the EU can do to mitigate the humanitarian crisis and lower the risk of tensions escalating between Baku and Yerevan. The first priority must be protection and support for those fleeing to Armenia. To meet immediate needs, the EU announced a relief package worth €5 million (\$5.1 million) and pledges have also been made by France, Germany and Sweden. Long-term assistance will also be needed to help those who want to settle permanently in Armenia make new lives and integrate fully. As Crisis Group has previously [counselled](#), governments with ties to Baku should reinforce the importance of protecting the enclave's very few residents who decide to stay and those who have yet to flee. Authorities should safeguard property and cultural heritage sites, ideally in coordination with the UN, to ensure transparency and accountability. A preliminary [UN mission](#) visited Karabakh on 1 October to assess the humanitarian situation, and donors should look to channel aid through the UN to the extent possible.

At the same time, to prevent hostilities along the border that separates them, work must urgently continue to find a political settlement between Armenia and Azerbaijan. If EU-facilitated talks due to take place between Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan on 5 October deliver confidence-building measures such as prisoner releases, it will be a step in the right direction. Success on the political front will require all actors with influence on the parties – including Russia, Türkiye and the U.S., as well as the EU – to increase the incentives for diplomatic, rather than military solutions. In

order to facilitate better coordination in maintaining border stability, the EU should also urge Azerbaijan to begin cooperating with the EU mission that deployed to Armenian territory with Yerevan's consent earlier in 2023.

Farther west, Kosovo-Serbia tensions are at their highest since the days immediately after Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008. On 24 September, the ambush of a police patrol in northern Kosovo sent tensions soaring. A large cache of military-grade weapons was retrieved when a Serb paramilitary group withdrew after taking control of a monastery overnight. It included mortars, anti-tank rockets, armour-piercing grenades, large-calibre sniper rifles and vehicles falsely bearing the insignia of KFOR, the NATO-led peacekeeping force. The size and make-up of this haul suggests that the group had planned a major attack on the Kosovo special police forces deployed in the Serb-majority north. The aim of the assault remains unclear, but it seems plausible that the group hoped to spark a crisis that would force KFOR to take over full responsibility for security in the north – and lead to the exit of at least some, if not all, of the Kosovan police stationed there. Although Belgrade denies involvement in the attack, the arms seized are more usually found in military stores than in the hands of militias, pointing to the strong probability of Serbian support.

While the risk of escalation has now increased considerably, hopes for [a deal between Kosovo and Serbia](#) were low even before the 24 September attack and the troop build-up. EU-facilitated normalisation talks between Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić and Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti Vucic on 14 September faltered due to Kurti's insistence that Belgrade de facto recognise Kosovo by treating it as a sovereign, independent country before Pristina would make progress on prior unfulfilled agreements, [according to Josep Borrell](#), the EU's high representative for foreign affairs. [Pristina has since indicated](#) that it has lost faith in EU mediator Miroslav Lajčák, and the recent events make the chances

of the resumption of EU-led negotiations even less likely. Nevertheless, the EU and the Quint (a coordination body consisting of France, Germany, Italy, the UK and the U.S.) should not stop trying. They should redouble their efforts to bring the parties to the table, with an initial focus on de-escalation and confidence building. When tensions ease, diplomats can switch back to getting the parties to implement the [Agreement on the Path to Normalisation](#) concluded in February. In the meantime, further reinforcements for KFOR are essential to help keep the two sides at arm's length from each other. The UK's deployment of a battalion of troops is a welcome step in this regard.

But the biggest and most geopolitically consequential of Europe's conflicts – both because of its escalatory potential and its global reverberations – remains Russia's war in Ukraine. Ukraine's resistance to Russian aggression, now approaching its second anniversary, remains a remarkable example of courage and resilience in the face of steep odds. It is also highly dependent on continued material and economic support from the EU, its member states and the U.S., as Russia understands well. Moscow's war plan depends in large part on this support faltering as the war drags on. Whether that will happen is an open question. With the prospect of a long war ever clearer – particularly given the slow progress of Ukraine's summer counteroffensive – the provision of Western support has become contested ground. This contest tends to pit incumbent political elites (which support Kyiv) against populist and often right-wing rivals (which have no such affinity and in some cases are drawn to Moscow). The Euro-Atlantic states have thus far remained largely united in judging Ukraine's success to be critical – not least because of a shared interest in preventing further Russian aggression, including acts directed at them. Indeed, the EU itself has led and continues to lead on support to Ukraine. But the domestic pressures on Ukraine's backers should not be underestimated.

The politics of sending massive assistance to Ukraine creates leverage for opponents who say the money would be better spent at home. Even in countries where support for Ukraine's war is steadfast, politicians are not necessarily willing to support Ukraine's economic needs if that will create costs domestically. For example, Hungary, Slovakia and Poland decided to ban Ukrainian grain imports, in violation of the European Single Market's rules, after farmers argued that they were being undercut by cheap wheat from Ukraine. While Polish backing for Ukraine remains strong, and Warsaw, which has reportedly now reached a new deal with Kyiv on grain transit, is unlikely to lessen its support either before or after its 15 October parliamentary elections, the same cannot be so easily said for either Hungary or Slovakia. Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has criticised, although not blocked, EU support for Kyiv for nearly a decade. In Slovakia, Robert Fico, whose Smer party came out ahead, although far short of a majority, in 30 September elections, has vowed to end weapons shipments to Ukraine. Whether he will do so will depend in large part on what coalition takes shape to control the government.

Populist parties are making inroads elsewhere, too. In Germany, the far right Alternative für Deutschland party, which has close ties to Moscow and is critical of military assistance for Kyiv, is polling better than the ruling Social Democrats, potentially calling even Berlin's long-term support into question. If, as seems possible, parties with a similar line on Ukraine do well in the June 2024 European Parliament elections, pressure to reduce spending on arms and aid will only increase. In addition, growing backlash among Republicans, whom might score a victory in the 2024 U.S. elections, leaves Europeans and Ukrainians worried about Washington's commitment not just to Ukraine, but to European security more broadly. The 30 September deal between Republicans and Democrats to avoid a government shutdown

excised aid to Ukraine. This move may reflect plans to use other vehicles for passing such a package, but it injects further uncertainty into

the prospects for continued assistance. Broader bipartisan support would have obviated the need for such machinations.

Whither Enlargement?

Amid all this uncertainty, the question of what will happen with Ukraine's bid for EU membership raises fundamental issues for the EU. Having been declared a formal candidate in June 2022, Kyiv is impatient to gain entry to the European club – in part because joining would surely help cement future aid flows. Ahead of important summits taking place in Granada, Spain in early October to discuss EU enlargement and the institutional reform it will necessitate, Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal [pledged to bring his country into the EU](#) within two years, claiming Kyiv has met all the criteria needed for accession talks to begin. EU leaders are faced with finding a way to manage not only Ukraine's candidacy but also the accession hopes of countries from the bloc's eastern neighbourhood and the Western Balkans – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia – as well as Türkiye, a candidate since 1999.

But if the EU is now thinking about how

to make possible and prepare for an EU 30+, the challenges are many. We discuss Türkiye's fraught relations with the EU in our Watch List entry below. Serbia's accession is contingent on the receding prospect of normalised relations with Kosovo. In the case of Ukraine, the EU would be extending its security guarantee to a country presently defending itself in a war with Russia. In other instances, it would be welcoming governments that seem less than wholeheartedly committed to democratic, institutional and economic reforms. The economic burden of integration would also be significant, as accessions would further strain the EU's budget and increase competition for its structural funds. Certainly, Shmyhal's two-year timeline for Ukraine seems highly optimistic. Indeed, it is not yet clear what reforms and actions would be needed to make more plausible the 2030 target proposed by European Council President Charles Michel for at least some enlargement attainable.

Challenges and Opportunities

While the conflicts on the EU's eastern borders will likely pull the attention of the EU and its member states inward, this Watch List Update is a reminder that Europe cannot allow itself to lose sight of challenges elsewhere – or its interests and responsibilities in helping meet them. What follows is not a comprehensive list of the world's crises. It does not feature, for instance, the recent flooding in Libya, violence in Ethiopia's Amhara state or the brutal civil war in Sudan. Rather, the Update is a discussion of five of many situations where the EU has an important opportunity to use its resources

to help prevent conflict or mitigate its ravages. These include providing a lifeline to Rohingya displaced from their homes in western Myanmar; supporting President Gustavo Petro's ambitious "total peace" agenda in Colombia; steering Tunisia away from debt default; forging a pragmatic approach to Niger's junta; and seizing opportunities created by a thaw in relations with Türkiye. If nothing else, these entries remind us that, even as Europe works to manage local crises, there is much it can do to promote peace and security around the world. ■