

Editorial Team: Grzegorz Gil (Director of ICE), Anton Saifullayeu (Deputy Director of ICE), Agnieszka Zajdel (Editorial Assistant), Spasimir Domaradzki, Bartłomiej Krzysztan, Damian Szacawa, Agata Tatarenko

No. 1673 (178/2026) | 29.07.2026

ISSN 2657-6996

© IEŚ

Jakub Bornio, Agata Tatarenko

The Coalition of the Willing and changes in Europe's security architecture: Implications for Central and Eastern Europe

On 13 July 2026, another summit of the so-called Coalition of the Willing was held in Paris. The consolidation of this format constitutes yet another indication of a changing approach to organising security in Europe. Flexible forms of cooperation bringing together states willing to undertake concrete military commitments are growing in importance, regardless of the formal mechanisms of NATO or the European Union. The summit confirmed not only a shift in the instruments of cooperation but also a movement of the centre of gravity of European security policy towards Central and Eastern Europe.

The Coalition of the Willing¹ emerged in response to growing uncertainty regarding long-term support for Ukraine and the need to strengthen Europe's capacity to respond independently to security threats. Its original objective was the establishment of peacekeeping forces that would either conduct a peace operation in Ukraine or contribute in some other form, as yet undefined, to stabilising the situation in the country. As the implementation of this concept proved difficult, the initiative launched by the UK and France in early 2025 evolved into a framework bringing together states prepared to undertake concrete political and military commitments in support of Ukraine. The intention was to go beyond existing mechanisms coordinated by NATO and the EU. Its stated objectives continue to include preparing European states for potential participation in future stabilisation measures, providing post-war security guarantees² for Ukraine, and developing the capacity for coordinated responses to future crises. The emergence of the Coalition was not the result of a weakening of NATO's role. Like any alliance or international organisation, NATO is a collective body whose decisions are based on consensus. It was not designed to provide assistance to a third state and therefore faces inherent structural limitations. The practice of supporting Ukraine has demonstrated that military transfers are mainly undertaken on a unilateral basis – now increasingly within smaller coalitions of states – rather than through alliance mechanisms, although they are generally preceded by consultations with NATO partners or conducted after informing them, in keeping with efforts to manage escalation risks. The Coalition of the Willing should therefore be understood primarily as an attempt to overcome the divisions that have emerged within NATO, largely as a consequence of America's gradual withdrawal from its traditional role in Europe and the continuing need to support Ukraine. Another key motivation behind the initiative has been France's ambition to play a leading role and to act as a coordinator of European security efforts³. In this respect, the Coalition may fill the space between

¹ The term has been used since the 1970s to describe an informal group of states that voluntarily decide to undertake joint action on a specific issue outside, or alongside, the formal mechanisms of international organisations. It gained widespread recognition in 2002-2003 in connection with the United States' creation of an international coalition of states supporting the intervention in Iraq. In subsequent years, the term was also used to describe other ad hoc arrangements involving states cooperating in the fields of security, military operations, humanitarian assistance, or support for Ukraine.

² See, for example, SwedishPM on X.

³ The Paris summit itself reflected on this ambition. During the meeting, President Emmanuel Macron announced that France intended to provide Ukraine with licenses enabling the production of SCALP cruise missiles, Hammer family precision-guided glide bombs, and Aster 30 surface-to-air missiles used in the SAMP/T medium-range air defence system. It is difficult to avoid the impression that, in particular, the proposal concerning the production of air defence systems constitutes a response to the American initiative to establish licensed production of PAC-3 missiles, presented during the Ankara Summit (IEŚ Commentaries, No. 1666), and reflects French ambitions, and perhaps even the personal ambitions of the French President. It is difficult to assess the tangible outcomes of this decision, especially given the prospect of a change of government in France and the practical challenges associated with launching defence production under wartime conditions.

the institutional frameworks of NATO and the EU and the need for quick, flexible action by states willing to assume greater responsibility for European security. The format also extends beyond Europe's traditional institutional security structures by including non-European partners such as Australia, Japan, and New Zealand.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has demonstrated that the contemporary security environment requires greater flexibility. NATO, operating within the framework of collective security and collective defence mechanisms, faces constraints even when it comes to actions that directly contribute to deterring Russia or imposing significant costs upon it, such as support for Ukraine, which in this context effectively serves as a proxy force. The need for rapid responses, coordinated weapons deliveries, training of Ukrainian forces, and planning for potential stabilisation missions has increased the importance of smaller and more flexible forms of cooperation alongside traditional organisations. In the academic literature, this phenomenon is commonly referred to as *minilateralism*. Its purpose is not to replace multilateral organisations but to enhance effectiveness through cooperation among states that share similar threat perceptions and are willing to undertake concrete commitments. In the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war, minilateralism does not undermine NATO or the EU. On the contrary, it strengthens their capacity to respond by creating flexible mechanisms capable of carrying out tasks that would be difficult to agree upon among all member states, or that do not require the formation of broader coalitions. Furthermore, not all states possess the practical capacity to participate in initiatives that they nevertheless support politically. Minilateral formats also make it possible to involve states outside formal alliance structures. The Coalition of the Willing represents one example of this model, although its scale makes the term somewhat problematic, as it currently includes more participants than NATO itself.

Implications for Central and Eastern Europe. The development of minilateral forms of cooperation is also transforming the position of Central and Eastern Europe within the broader European security architecture. For many years, the region was viewed primarily as an area requiring greater resilience against threats coming from Russia. Since 2022, however, the states of the region have assumed a much more active role. Poland has become a key pillar of security processes on NATO's eastern flank and the principal geopolitical rear area for Ukraine. The decision to organise the first exercises of the Coalition of the Willing in Poland confirms the country's growing importance in the military dimension of European cooperation. At the same time, given that both Poland and the wider Central and Eastern European region have hosted numerous defensive military exercises since 2014, the decision is primarily symbolic and political rather than operational in nature.

This transformation is also noticeable elsewhere in the region. Romania is playing an increasingly important role in Black Sea security, while the Baltic states are among the most active participants in initiatives designed to strengthen NATO deterrence. The position of the states is increasingly determined not only by geography but also by their ability to provide infrastructure, develop military capabilities, and demonstrate political willingness to undertake joint action.

The growing importance of task-oriented coalitions is also reshaping regional cooperation in Central and Eastern Europe. Formats organised around specific security challenges are becoming more significant, while traditional political cooperation platforms are losing their monopoly on coordinating regional action. This trend is particularly visible in the context of growing divergences within the region regarding support for Ukraine, from which countries such as Czechia, Hungary, and Slovakia have, to varying degrees, distanced themselves. At the same time, states are increasingly moving beyond their traditional regional frameworks and building partnerships with actors from other regions, including the Nordic and Baltic areas and the Black Sea region, where Turkey has become an important partner. This does not signify the disappearance of Central European regionalism but rather a transformation of its character. Cooperation is becoming more functional and selective. Individual states participate in different configurations depending on their strategic interests, military capabilities, and willingness to bear the costs related to joint action.

Conclusions. The Coalition of the Willing should be viewed as a manifestation of a broader transformation of Europe's security architecture. Russia's aggression against Ukraine has accelerated the development of task-oriented forms of cooperation that complement the institutional security system centred on NATO. Increasingly, what matters is not participation in formal structures but rather the ability of states to initiate joint projects and

their willingness to undertake concrete commitments. Under current circumstances, many defence-policy initiatives and support measures for Ukraine are being implemented through smaller coalitions.

For Central and Eastern Europe, this represents a qualitative change in the region's position. States with sufficient military capabilities, infrastructure, and political will are no longer merely recipients of security guarantees but are becoming co-creators of new mechanisms of defence cooperation. In this context, the organisation of the first Coalition of the Willing exercises in Poland has significance that is not only practical but also symbolic – it confirms the shift in the centre of gravity of European security policy towards NATO's eastern flank.