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'This would be a very clear political signal to Putin: Ukraine will never become a part of Russia'

While scepticism toward Ukraine's EU membership prevails, Alyona Getmanchuk and Leonid Litra propose a middle-ground - integration in stages

On the European Council held on 23-24 June, you demand a strong signal from the EU: A candidate status for Ukraine. Why do you think this is so important now? Aren't there other things which are more important in the face of the current war than debating a membership which might only happen in many years in the future?

While Ukrainians are heroically fighting for Ukraine's survival as a state today, we should take care about Ukraine's future as well. And Ukraine's future, from the perspective of its people, is strongly linked to becoming a part of the EU. The idea of a future EU membership is supported by a record number of 91 per cent of Ukrainians, including 82 per cent in the Eastern part of Ukraine, where the most severe fighting is taking place at the moment. But – let's make it clear – we are not talking about an instant membership of Ukraine to the EU, we are talking about granting Ukraine an EU candidate status.

To stop Putin's aggression in Ukraine, we have three large scale, not partial or limited demands. First, we need a large supply of weapons, especially heavy weapons. There has been no green light from Western countries for heavy weapons until recently and pledges of weapons, unfortunately, did not always transformed into deliveries. Second, we need large scale sanctions, which can hurt Putin's regime and the main sources of his income. Even after more than three months of war, there is still no ban on Russian oil and gas. Lastly, we need the granting of a full-fledged candidate status to the European Union, not a potential one. That's something which only the EU can provide to Ukraine – not the US, nor the UK. This would be a very clear political signal to Putin: Ukraine will never become a part of Russia because it will be a part of the European Union. And it will

make his fight and his strategy pointless because he still hopes that Ukraine, at some point, would be incorporated into Russia.

A clear political commitment from the European Union could force him – sooner or later – to recalculate his policy and reconsider his agenda. That's why it's very important from a geostrategic and security point of view to let Ukraine become a candidate country.

The candidate status could also create a momentum for reforms in Ukraine - maybe the most powerful in its history. It would be much easier for all pro-reform forces, both in the government, parliament, and the civil society, to push forward reforms due to the candidate status. Without the candidate status, or by granting only a so-called potential status, this would undermine the reform agenda and would certainly encourage Putin.

There is an unprecedented support for the future membership of Ukraine not only from the Ukrainian society. A candidate status would be, as for now, the strongest possible signal of the EU's solidarity and a huge moral boost for us, Ukrainians, in our nation's existential fight. As we say in Kyiv, it's better to be under Russian missile strikes, than under Russian occupation. But this idea is also strongly supported by Europeans. For example, in Germany, according to the last Eurobarometer poll, 61 per cent of Germans are in favour of EU membership of Ukraine, when Kyiv is ready.

Many politicians in the EU were saying that while it is possible to grant Ukraine a candidate status, there is no chance for a fast membership. Are you optimistic?

We are not naive. We understand that it takes time. We realise that Ukraine is not qualified for a fully-fledged membership, but we think that Ukraine is qualified to receive the candidate status – both by meeting the basic Copenhagen criteria and from the practical integration of Ukraine to the EU in many areas.

Ukraine is ready to receive the candidate status. We deserve it because we implemented more than half of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement. However, I know there is a lot of scepticism. Therefore, we want to provide a possibility that keeps Ukraine's ambition alive, but at the same time accommodates the fears which prevail in the EU.

There are three fears we noticed, and we have a proposal on how to address them. The first is the issue of the Western Balkans. It is often said that the EU cannot engage in a further process of enlargement in Eastern Europe until the stalled enlargement process there is fixed. The second issue is about the internal reform of the EU decision making process. We've been hearing about the need to first deepen

the integration of the existing EU member states, before beginning to further widen the union. The third issue is the unlikelihood of a fast-track procedure for a membership of Ukraine.

Let us start with the West Balkans.

We must avoid the Balkan scenario, the 'full membership or nothing at all' situation. There are countries in the Balkans who have been candidates since 2005, like North Macedonia, and 17 years later they are not much closer to a membership. Turkey is another example, it received the candidate-status in 1999, by the way when the death penalty there was still in place. We want to avoid these double standards. That is why we propose a gradual EU-integration.

Can you explain this further?

So far, the EU-membership was an all-in process. One day you were out, the next day you were in. We propose an incremental integration in stages. As a first step, our candidature would start in June, when we would get full access to the EU single market to integrate into. This will take some years, but it is a process which partially started already with the Association Agreement. Afterwards we gain access stage by stage to the four freedoms – the free movement of goods, the free movement of people, the freedom of services and the freedom of movement of capital. This means we will have to create something similar to the European Economic Community together with all the aspiring EU countries. Therefore, instead of waiting years to become a full member, we integrate over time, adopting more and more features of the EU and fulfilling the required standards. At the end of this process, we will be a full member.

This approach to EU-membership could also unblock the stalled integration processes of the Balkans, addressing the issue in a constructive way. It's a win-win both for the EU, the Balkans – and for Ukraine as well. This brings us to fear number two…

…the need to reform the EU.

Yes. Incremental integration until full membership will give the EU enough time to address the issues of internal reforms while at the same time not delaying EU-membership and practical integration of candidates.

What responses did you get from within the EU?

We have received a lot of interest on this proposal. But many decision makers, especially in Germany, require more time to debate. The

issue, however, is that the decision on the first step in our plan – which is the candidate status – needs to be taken now, in basically a couple of weeks. It is not about receiving membership on a fast track, fear number three. We don't know how the situation will be in half a year or one year. What does the EU have to lose? Ukraine would only be a candidate, which means if the country doesn't deliver, the process of integration won't continue. But if it fulfils its commitments, successfully adapting the European acquis, it can progress because we believe in a merit-based accession process.

I would like to underline that the candidate status is not only politically symbolic which is extremely important for a nation under such a brutal military attack. But the EU candidate status is also about practical issues such as cementing Ukraine's reform agenda and rebuilding and reconstructing the country after the war. It is worth reminding here that the most impressive anticorruption and rule of law reforms in Ukraine were conducted thanks to Ukraine's European integration process. As an example, our independent anticorruption institutions were launched as a part of Ukraine's visa liberalization process with the EU.

The EU was born as a project of peace, of joint economic development, of making conflicts unthinkable. EU enlargement and a membership of Ukraine would also mean making this current conflict impossible in the future. We are having a historical window which could close very soon. We need to act now.

This interview was conducted by Alexander Isele.



Alyona Getmanchuk
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