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Ukraine's EU membership ambition

Before the war, Ukraine's dream to become part of the EU was exactly that – a dream. But the new political reality could make it come true

Russia's invasion of Ukraine changed and to some extent even destroyed the familiar international political reality. Up until 24 February, Russia had been integrated into the global economy, had excellent growth prospects, and the construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline was almost finished. Moreover, NATO had no intention of expanding in any direction and Ukraine joining the EU seemed to be a very long way off given the usual plethora of domestic problems the country was facing.

The Kremlin has chosen a calculated gamble to play to its own advantages, at great cost to many. Russia's war against Ukraine is a profound crisis capable of dramatically changing how things pan out in the future, making certain developments highly probable which just two months ago seemed utterly implausible.

One such scenario relates to Ukraine's EU membership. On 28 February in the besieged capital of Kyiv, the fate of which at that point was entirely unclear, President Zelenskyy signed a formal request to accede to the European Union along with a joint declaration with the prime minister and head of the Ukrainian parliament. At that point, Kyiv had already been clinging on for four days, and the first doubts regarding Russia's ability to wage a quick and successful campaign were beginning to plunge Europe into a state of strategic uncertainty.

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This was a great symbolic moment for Zelenskyy. For many Ukrainians, it was a light at the end of the tunnel, and for the EU it provided a potential basis for the future restructuring of the entire system of international security. And there is little doubt that the system needs restructuring.

In March 2014, a similar sense of symbolism and hope for the future

accompanied the signing of the EU–Ukraine Association Agreement, less than a week after the Crimean status referendum and at the height of the complex and volatile revolutionary events in Kyiv. This step made a crucial contribution to the consolidation of Ukrainian statehood, to the country's vision for the future and to its fundamental system of values. Stripped of the hope of rapid accession to the EU – the fact that the Association Agreement never provided for membership is often called to mind in Europe – Ukraine could at least focus on realising the potential of the most extensive association agreement in history.

In 2022, the context of the negotiations regarding EU–Ukraine relations changed dramatically. From an ever-moving prospect, Ukraine's integration into the EU became one of very few elements capable of making some form of progress when it came to resolving the conflict.

NATO is not an option

It is all about security guarantees. The Russian invasion forced Ukraine to prepare for the next war. No promises — whether written or verbal — would be enough. From now on, when it came to relations with Russia, any Ukrainian government would have to proceed on the basis of a worst-case scenario regarding the course of events.

The only way of preventing renewed aggression from Russia is either to rely on direct security guarantees, or to invest a significant share of resources in constructing and supporting effective, modern armed forces. Membership in NATO could also be an effective mechanism to guarantee security but this does not seem realistic and Russia has declared it a threat to its security. The rationale that prevailed before the war continues to apply here: a high risk of direct conflict with Russia makes Ukraine's aim of NATO accession more difficult. In light of this, there are ongoing discussions about security guarantees on the individual country level and even on a multilateral basis outside NATO.

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This is a complex debate. Firstly, few are in a position to give such guarantees, especially when we are talking about a potential conflict with Russia. The US is probably the only country that could provide effective and credible guarantees. It is the only country with the capacity to project its military power to an extent that would deter Russia. Secondly, there are not many countries that would be willing to provide security guarantees carrying such high future risks. That said, the West cannot afford

to refuse a dialogue on the issue of security guarantees because a continuation of the conflict in its current state presents Europe with serious problems.

Membership of the European Union, on the other hand, does not seem to antagonise Russia in the same way. In its pre-war rhetoric, Moscow never raised the issue of EU expansion and never accused the EU of being a threat to its security. This creates a certain amount of scope to pursue other possibilities.

Of course, EU membership cannot be seen as providing a complete security guarantee. However, it is capable of increasing the costs of aggression for Russia and providing the prospect of recovery for Ukraine's frail economy. Such recovery would be a precondition for Ukraine to be able to sustain effective defence capabilities.

An open door for European membership

Obviously, it is not as simple as this. At the conceptual level, and this is something many European officials have already pointed out, it is impossible to force EU membership, even with the 'accelerated procedure'. It is a lengthy and complex process requiring coordination of a myriad aspects, from legislation to technical standards. Even the most optimistic assessments of Ukrainian politicians and diplomats suggest that the process could take several years. Austria, Sweden, and Finland joined in record speed, and the process still took around four years. Since then, the situation has not got any easier, indeed it has arguably become more complex as the number of legal norms and standards within the EU has increased significantly. Moreover, there is already a 'queue' of five other countries waiting to join. These are all undeniably relevant obstacles, given the strong impact of EU bureaucracy and procedures even in these exceptional circumstances.

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At the political level, there must be a consensus among all the member states of the EU. The overall situation in Europe has changed so much that rather than the purely symbolic support provided before the war in the form of declarations signed by a number of European states, today there is a broad social consensus when it comes to Ukraine's European future. This consensus was already manifested in the official statements from heads of various Eastern European countries asserting that

> Ukraine deserved to be provided the immediate prospect of membership. Public opinion throughout Europe is gradually leaning towards supporting this idea – this is also evident in the reactions of national parliaments to the addresses given by the Ukrainian president.

Today, there are very few European politicians who would formally object to the very idea of Ukraine having a future in Europe. Of course, the task will not necessarily be easy. The sympathy and empathy expressed by Europeans towards Ukraine now needs to be translated into political results. Mobilising the support of the most influential EU member states – Germany and France – will be of critical importance. What is required here is extremely delicate diplomacy and a thorough understanding of Berlin's and Paris' interests. This includes restoring European security. Furthermore, taking this path would require putting an end to old disagreements or, at the very least, map out the prospects of this being achieved.

A question of European security

Yet all the key arguments pertain to security matters. It is not just about Ukraine protecting Europe from Russian revisionism at the cost of so many lives — and how EU membership could serve as a gesture of recognition of the importance of the country's contribution to European security. The issue is also that this European security is unlikely to be possible if Ukraine, as before the war, continues to remain in Europe's 'grey zone', without allies, guarantees or a certain future. The threats for Ukraine may not be the same threats as for Europe – however, since Russia's invasion, everything has fundamentally changed.

In the two months since the start of the conflict, Ukraine is no better prepared for EU membership than before the war. For Europeans, Ukraine joining the EU will be associated with certain risks and problems. But something else has changed as well – the overall situation when it comes to European security. A continuation of the war will cost Europe far more. The EU can no longer stand by and wait, it, too needs to find a way out of the war being waged by Russia.

If Ukraine is granted the candidate country status in June, this will be an encouraging signal for everyone. That which up until 24 February seemed an impossibility, would become a subject of discussion and an entirely realistic, albeit somewhat remote prospect.



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