

On Good Track – from Aspirations to Candidate Status. The Final Stage of Ukraine’s Diplomatic Marathon.

By Marta Sydoruk

Missiles and the air-raid alerts have replaced breakfast for all Ukrainians in the early hours of February 24, 2022. It was the beginning of Russian invasion speed up and first inept attacks on Ukraine, with the EU's slow-motion reaction in the background.

“Never again” turned into a tragedy of war, once again possible in Europe in the 21st century. But as it turned out, Russia’s aggression is targeted not only against Ukraine. It is directed against the global security architecture across continents with political and economic effects. And therefore, it is against the fundamental values of the EU. The European Union as an international actor has gone into action, becoming a greater and greater geopolitical power.

The EU is a specific participant of international relations, the status of which depends on the status of a country or international organization. Within the development of the EU, a range of instruments was prepared, which aimed to influence “the Grand Chessboard”. It shapes a special external policy, which was developed in a more benign environment.

At the current moment, the EU is in the process of studying its own unique objectivity to allow its neighbors to become more effective sustainably. This war not only accelerated transformation in the EU’s foreign policy, but also forced it to fit new common area interests. As a result, within recent geopolitical threats, the decision-making process requires a more rapid and operative way without any delays and blockages.

In a groundbreaking move, as a response to Russian aggression, the EU accepted the exceptional challenge and demonstrated its capacity by consolidation and unity. The High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell called it “the birth of geopolitical Europe”. As a part of EU’s solidarity with Ukraine, the European Parliament passed the resolution on March 01, 2022, and three months later the

European Commission recommended Ukraine be granted the EU candidate status.

“In the view of the Commission, Ukraine has clearly demonstrated the country's aspiration and the country's determination to live up to European values and standards”, dressed in Ukraine's national colors, said Ursula von der Leyen, the European Commission's president during the official statement opinions on the EU membership applications by Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia applications on June 17, 2022 in Brussels.

“Yes, Ukraine should be welcomed as a candidate country. This is based on the understanding that good work has been done, but important work also remains to be done”, wrote on Twitter von der Leyen.

The European Commission has recommended granting Ukraine EU candidate status, but, according to the procedure, the next step – all 27 EU member-states should have agreed on Ukraine's joining the EU. Leaders of the 27-nation bloc discussed it during the Brussels summit on June 23-24, 2022. In recent weeks, officials said that some decision makers required more time to debate. At least three countries' public positions were opposed. The representatives of two of them were a part of the delegation during the first wartime visit on June 16, 2022 to Kyiv of the French, German, Italian and Romanian leaders. After the meeting with the President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the President of France Emmanuel Macron, Chancellor of Germany Olaf Scholz, Prime Minister of Italy Mario Draghi and President of Romania Klaus Iohannis declared support for Ukraine's membership bid, with the message that “Ukraine can count on us”. During the news conference the EU highest-profile policymakers were wearing white shirts, suits, and ties contrasted to the President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in military T-shirt and sneakers. It carried heavy symbolism, Ukraine reached European Neighborhood Policy aims – brought Europe and its neighbors closer. Ukraine is one step ahead in a Wider European Community. But each division within the EU risks buying Russia time and weakening Ukraine. And in order for Ukraine to be able to «wear a tie», Europe must not hesitate.

On the meeting at a summit in Brussels, the EU leaders approved granting Ukraine candidate status. It was a significant step for the European Commission

with an essential decision and a historic week for Ukraine. One of the most significant since 1991. “This decision strengthens us all. It strengthens Ukraine... And it strengthens the EU. Because it shows once again to the world that we are united and strong in the face of external threats”, Ursula von der Leyen tweeted.

Candidate’s status doesn’t mean membership, it is only a logical step to start the official negotiations process and to meet the Copenhagen criteria and the Madrid criteria for membership. Even once candidate status is granted, the process typically takes years or decades, because the country has to fulfill all the requirements. Based on experience of current EU member-countries, the average duration of the way, from the application to membership, takes almost five years. Though Finland, Sweden, and Austria passed it faster, within three years.

Now, in a changing world, in the case of EU still non-member states, this process looks like a long story. For example, among countries in Southern and Eastern Europe that are covered by the EU enlargement policy. In Balkan scenario, Türkiye’s experience now counts 22 years, North Macedonia’s – 17 years. In this case, candidacy may or may not result in a membership. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo remain, same as Ukraine, potential candidates for EU membership. But joining ambitions have hardened, and they did not get closer to the membership. Also, we should not compare Ukraine to these countries. Because, Ukrainians have one main principle in life – if you are going to do something, do it! Ukraine has answered the European Commission questionnaire within a record time – just 1 month, and that is during the full-scale war. Bosnia and Herzegovina needed more than 10 months. Kosovo is still not recognized by all EU member states. Moreover, “wrong answers” on Kosovo could menace Serbia’s EU membership aspiration.

So far, the EU has never granted candidate status to the country in the full-scale war. The EU's appropriate decision certainly brought Ukraine’s European integration and Victory closer. But even after Ukraine is granted EU candidate status, it will not “answer for tears” or special “fast track” procedure. Foremost, it is the EU's united response to Russian aggression. On the other hand, it is a logical continuation of deep transformation and long-term reforms in Ukraine. Their progress was confirmed in the European Commission’s latest report (2020)

on the implementation of the Association Agreement. The document outlined Ukraine's implementation of reforms toward European integration. “Despite Russia's destabilizing actions, conflict in the east and the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, Ukraine has continued to make progress on its reform path. It is crucial that Ukraine's political leaders continue these efforts and make reforms irreversible, particularly regarding the rule of law. The Ukrainian people expect it”, highlighted the EU High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell.

European integration of Ukraine did not start on February 28, 2022, with EU membership application. It began over a decade ago. Structural reforms and deepening sectoral integration had been implemented based on the Agreement on Partnership and Cooperation since 1998 and the Plan of Actions dated 2005. Ukraine started to achieve European standards by promoting the rule of law, democracy and human rights. Nine years later, the Association Agreement with the economic, political, security, and legal objective-based aims was signed in 2014, with the delay, because Russia invaded and occupied territories of Ukraine. It was one more very clear political signal. Ukraine will never be under Russian occupation, because it will become a part of the European Union.

After the unprecedented enlargement of the EU that took place in 2004, new EU members, regardless of individual differences, became en bloc promoters of Eastern dimension in the EU's Neighborhood Policy. From the point of view of regional policy, one of the most significant roles in Ukraine-EU cooperation was mainly played by then a newcomer – Poland. This country was always encouraging Ukraine's European democratic future. Together with Sweden, they were pushing forward the Eastern Partnership, aimed to transform the neighbors. This program allowed Ukraine to participate directly in the political and economic life of Europe.

From a long-term perspective, Ukraine may be a part of a further round of Eastern enlargement of the EU. But, even Ukraine is granted EU candidate status, it would not be a “fast track” to membership. It rather is a clear perspective road map on Ukraine's way in pursuing its European path. This realization carries important changes, which are significantly shaping public opinion. Russia's war

in Europe has changed the attitudes of many European countries to granting Ukraine's candidate status. The cross-country public opinion collection of the Eurobarometer survey (May 2022) demonstrated “large consensus among EU citizens in all EU Member States”. Respondents are widely in support of Ukraine and its people. In particular, more than 80% of respondents in Portugal, Estonia, Lithuania, and Poland agree that ‘Ukraine should join the EU when it is ready’. The exception is Hungary, where only 47% agree and where more than half of all respondents expressed the opposing viewpoint. The largest part of respondents with ‘don't know’ answer option (16%) also is found in this country. Among disagreeing countries are Luxembourg, Greece, Hungary, Austria, Bulgaria, Cyprus, and Slovakia (34-38%). Even more than 70% far likely to see Ukraine as part of the European coherent team.

After the granting of candidate status, according to the Maastricht Treaty, each current member state and the European Parliament must agree to accept the new member. We hope that the finish line tape of the marathon entitled European integration will be reached by the Ukrainian President “in a suit and tie”.

Ukraine is an integral part of Europe, and the European Union finded an appropriate answer to Ukraine’s desire to join. Ukraine is paying a too high price for its European dream, too many people are dying for freedom. No one knows when this war will end, but the world will never be the same again. The international security system needs to be improved and the guilty must be held accountable and prosecuted according to the legislative agreements.

“We must use our newfound sense of purpose first to ensure a free Ukraine, and then to re-establish peace and security across the continent” – Josep Borrell, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.