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Invasion of Ukraine

Joining EU, NATO: Between a Rock and a Hard Place

By Frederick Kliem

SYNOPSIS

It is both legitimate and understandable that the Ukrainian government has requested European Union accession, and previously also to join NATO. While all could benefit from the prospect of Ukrainian EU membership, neither organisation should be overzealous.

COMMENTARY

QUITE UNDERSTANDABLY, Ukraine seeks to move even closer to the Europe and the collective “West”. Kiev officially applied for membership of the European Union (EU), and its president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, requested an expedited accession process. Some EU member states [expressed their support](#) for immediate Ukrainian candidacy status – a first in EU history.

Ironically, the Russian invasion has accelerated Ukrainian West-orientation which was at least partly Russia’s *casus belli* in the first place. Unsurprisingly, the president of the European Commission [reiterated the EU’s position](#): Ukrainians are of course Europeans, and in the long run, Ukraine belongs inside the EU. While this is not an immediate possibility and accession expedition would be a mistake, a membership prospect might offer a way out of the current crisis.

Sympathy Not Good Policy

Ukraine is entitled to apply for EU membership. But despite all sympathy for Ukraine, the EU should not be overzealous in its support. The indisputable freedom of

sovereign nations to choose their alliances does not, conversely, mean that alliances must or even should accept this choice.

The EU's primary responsibility is the integrity of European integration, and a somehow expedited accession process goes contrary to this duty. Unlike ASEAN, the EU has strict and very detailed [accession criteria](#), demanding high political, legal, economic, institutional, and social standards.

Translating this large volume of EU rules into national law and institutional architecture takes a long time. Poland, for example, took ten years before it joined in 2004, and some current applicants, such as North Macedonia, have been [candidates](#) for decades.

Ukraine has a long road ahead if they indeed aspire EU membership one day. In 2020, an official [EU assessment](#) found that, some progress notwithstanding, Ukraine is nowhere near being ready to even start the process. Inter alia, rule of law standards are inadequate, minority protection insufficient, and corruption is rampant – indeed last year's [Pandora Papers](#) revealed that President Zelensky himself uses offshore companies and has links to oligarchs.

Brussels' painstakingly meticulous insistence on due process and rules maybe tedious, but it is the EU's greatest strength; it is what differentiates the EU from its (semi-) authoritarian neighbours. EU unity and the integrity of its regulatory identity would suffer severe damages from making exceptions. Further, the current candidacy countries, especially in the Western Balkans, who are going through many years of difficult reforms, would rightly be displeased if Ukraine was granted exceptions.

NATO Expansion

Russia accuses the West of having broken promises with NATO expansion to include former Warsaw Pact countries. Washington and NATO reject that such promises were ever made. And they correctly point to the fact that it was the East European countries that requested NATO membership, not vice versa.

This is, of course, metaphorical water under the bridge, and there is much disagreement over what was agreed precisely in 1990. But no other historical issue divides post-Cold War Moscow and the West more than what Moscow perceives to be NATO's pro-active encirclement and isolation of Russia in its own strategic space.

In retrospect, NATO's Eastern expansion was a mistake. As I have [argued](#) previously, one may reject spheres-of-influence morally or out of principle, but they are a reality of international relations. As painful as this may be, we must reconcile our principles with the realities of geopolitics. That no great power will ever accept strategic rivals inching ever closer to its borders is self-explanatory. And both Moscow and Washington currently have spheres-of-influence.

It is equally true that sustainable peace in Europe can only be maintained with, not against Russia, and America's strategic interests, such as NATO expansion, are not necessarily in Europe's best interest. It is highly advisable to work towards strategic accommodation with Europe's greatest power.

A New European Compromise?

An interesting, albeit counterfactual, thought experiment: Could Moscow have been pacified with an alternative strategy?

It would have been possible in the early 1990s to lay out a clear pathway for some former Soviet Republics and Warsaw Pact members to join the EU, not NATO. Unlike NATO, which is a US-led military alliance, the EU is an indigenous European organisation, which has a security dimension but is predominantly a genuine peace project – arguably the most successful in human history. Such a solution might have taken care of both sides' strategic interests in a fair compromise.

EU membership would have realised Eastern Europeans' legitimate desire to join the West. And it might have been more acceptable to Russia back then and later, when the young president Vladimir Putin in the early 2000s in rather conciliatory manner proposed to include Russia in the design of a new joint post-Cold War European security order.

NATO can and should not expel its eastern members now, of course. But mistakes are not rectified by repeating them. Alas, Putin's early overtures were largely ignored. While this is no excuse to invade numerous sovereign countries since, from Georgia to Ukraine, the current tragedy should prompt us to reconsider strategy.

A future compromise could include closing NATO's door forever – to Ukraine and other currently interested parties in Europe. Simultaneously, Brussels should provide Ukraine with a realistic pathway to EU membership and all support Kiev needs to comply with EU standards.

This would include painful concessions to Russia, including territorial ones, but a new European compromise create a basis for a new strategic understanding with Russia and about mutual interests, of which there are many. War, after all, is the worst of all alternatives.

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