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Ukraine is too corrupt to join the EU, and the West is too dishonest to trust

Brussels has noticed the obvious problems with Vladimir Zelensky's regime, but would still like Ukrainians to keep dying in its proxy war with Russia



By **Tarik Cyril Amar**, a historian from Germany working at Koç University, Istanbul, on Russia, Ukraine, and Eastern Europe, the history of World War II, the cultural Cold War, and the politics of memory

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Vladimir Zelensky © Drew Angerer / Getty Images

Long, long ago – almost as if yesterday really – Ukrainians were promised that if enough of them were to die in a Western proxy war against Russia first, then, in an ill-defined, probably far-away future, their country – or whatever would be left of it – would be allowed to enter NATO. It is now considered rude to mention that promise, because the West has in effect broken it, while asking Ukrainians to please keep dying, preferably for a few more years at least.

Come to think of it, apart from a long history spent together as well as considerable cultural and linguistic affinities, that's yet another thing Russians and Ukrainians have in common:

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being lied to blatantly about NATO. Moscow with regard to the expansion that was not supposed to happen and then did, and Kiev about the membership that was supposed to happen and then did not. Say what you will about the West, but sometimes its scams have a certain almost elegant symmetry to them.

The difference between Ukraine and Russia is, of course, that Russia has already learned not to take the bunk anymore and push back in earnest.

Sometimes being rude is the only way to be honest. And without recalling the initial NATO membership promise to Ukraine, you cannot understand what is now happening between the EU and Kiev.

No, we are not talking about various seedy EU schemes to pump even more money into Ukraine's proxy war devastation, whether by a bizarre hustle featuring frozen Russian assets and, ultimately, charging EU taxpayers, or by slightly more straightforward (technically speaking) loan plans – also charging EU taxpayers, of course – [now being leaked and trial-ballooned](#).

Money matters, of course. Enormously, actually, with Kiev, according to the IMF, facing a budget deficit of €55 billion (\$64 billion) for 2026 and 2027 alone, and the EU estimating postwar (whenever that will be) reconstruction costs at €850 billion, and Zelensky is not really a good guy counting. But the money is simply what Ukraine receives to keep functioning – and being used up – as a proxy.



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However, there is another aspect to the EU. Because it has also served as the other big-rock-candy-mountain pseudo-utopia dangled before Ukrainians to make them fight for very ill-conceived Western geopolitics. Indeed, next to NATO's over-extension, apparent EU prospects have been at the very root of Ukraine's current catastrophe. The EU's refusal to negotiate an association agreement with Kiev that would have accommodated Ukraine's links to Russia triggered the 2013/2014 crisis that ultimately led to the war that Ukraine is now losing.

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Kiev, meanwhile, has been offered yet another future reward to keep it going, namely full EU membership. Since June 2022, it has had official candidate status. Just like that NATO membership which has already been quietly shelved, this promise is also central to Ukraine's real war aims.

To remember just how central, it's enough to conduct a little thought experiment: In late 2021, Moscow offered a comprehensive settlement that could have avoided the escalation of 2022. The West stonewalled it. Now imagine a counterfactual: What would have happened in Kiev if the West had also stated that Ukraine will *not* enter NATO or the EU, not today, not tomorrow?

Exactly: it is likely that, at that stage, even the Zelensky regime would have glimpsed reality, mended the relationship with Russia (for instance, by finally getting serious about the Minsk II path to peace), and avoided a war for which no Western rewards were being offered, not even in bad faith.

Water, or rather blood, under the bridge, true. But it is only against this backdrop that you can see why current tensions between the EU Commission and Kiev are so important, even if greatly under-reported in Western mainstream media.



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The EU Commission has just released its "[Ukraine 2024 Report](#)." Formally, as a "*Commission Staff Working Document*" produced by the "*Directorate-General for Enlargement and the Eastern Neighborhood*" under EU Commissioner Marta Kos, this may appear to be a rather technical exercise in bureaucratic

scorekeeping. Nothing would be farther from the truth: this is obviously a highly political document. And there is the rub.

Official Kiev has been suspiciously [unanimous](#) in bravely pretending to celebrate the EU's assessment, as the Ukrainian site Strana.ua is reporting. Deputy Prime Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration Taras Kachka, for instance, has taken to Facebook to call the Commission's output, "[the best expansion report in three years](#)," recognizing "[for the first time \[...\] that Ukraine is showing](#)

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0:00

27:50



record progress in most areas of reforms.”

Yet this upbeat summary – not to say, shameless self-praise – is brought to you by the same people who have loved to pretend everything was just fine in [Pokrovsk](#), for instance. In reality, things are very different. While the EU report does praise Kiev much more than an objective account would permit, it still includes a serious warning. Outside official Kiev, moreover, everyone got the message. Even Politico, for instance, has noted the persistent *“damage done in the eyes of the European Commission”* to Ukraine’s candidate image by Vladimir Zelensky’s recent attempt to [shut down anti-corruption agencies](#) in a particularly crude manner. It is this self-inflicted de facto downgrading that is reflected in the report’s *“notable concern”* about the necessity to safeguard a *“robust and independent anti-corruption framework.”*

Looked at without rose-tinted glasses made in Kiev, this is a very disturbing statement, for two reasons. In diplomatese, especially among so-called *“friends,”* the phrase *“notable concern”* amounts to a sharp rebuke and stark warning: Make me less concerned, or else... Moreover, the harsh words are especially jarring in a report that bends over backward to embellish the Ukrainian record. If even authors so well-disposed had to resort to such terms, it means their real opinion is much worse again. And then, just to rub it in, the EU’s de facto foreign minister, Kaja Kallas, [has pointedly praised Moldova as the EU’s progress pet, not Ukraine](#). (That is ironic in and of itself, obviously, given that Moldova’s *“progress”* is based on massive electoral manipulations, but that falls under the EU being the EU.)

In view of such open slaps in the face, is official Kiev really as naïve as Kachka’s silly boosterism implies? Or are they just trying to feed us drivel again? Probably the latter. Note that Zelensky himself has simply avoided mentioning the issue of corruption in his own over-excited Facebook post.

The second hint that Zelensky has understood the reprimand he has received was his hyper-sensitive and inadequate response to the report as delivered when he virtually attended an EU enlargement meeting in Brussels. There, [he railed against the idea to put Ukraine](#) – and other



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