

The accession of Ukraine is a historical turning point in the History of the EU, but it comes with the need for reformation

Interview with Nona Mikhelidze

It has been several years now that the world seems out of order on many levels. The global order true for 1989 is not true for today. Climate change, the pandemic, the Russian war against Ukraine, the Israel-Hamas war and several conflicts in Africa put liberal Western democracy to the test.

When it comes to the obstacles the EU is facing in present times, how would you judge the discussion around the accession of Ukraine?

To initiate accession negotiations with Ukraine was a historical decision, especially as the monumental choice has taken place under unprecedented circumstances. Ukraine is facing the challenge of integration amid a large-scale Russian invasion, marked by the loss of thousands of lives—both military and civilian—and the devastation of the nation's infrastructure. Yet, amid this turmoil, Ukrainian society has demonstrated remarkable resilience and determination.

When we speak about said determination and resilience, we oftentimes refer to the Ukrainian people as the defendants of European values and democracy. Would you agree?

Since 2014, the beginning of the war, Ukraine has embarked on a path of transformation characterized by significant reforms and institutional changes. These include strengthening political competition through the expansion of parliamentary powers; decentralizing finances and administrative territories to stimulate regional development and increase political competition; implementing civil service reforms, as well as creating anti-corruption bodies to combat political corruption; introducing public funding for political parties to reduce dependence on oligarchic capital; introducing an electronic declaration system to curb political corruption by promoting transparency; adopting a proportional representation electoral system with preferential voting to improve fairness.

Does this need for transformation reflect in society? How do Ukrainians feel about joining the EU?

Currently, over 90 percent of Ukrainians support democracy as their preferred form of governance. The country declares itself ready to strengthen democratic institutions,

undertake reforms, and align with European standards in the political, economic, and social sectors.

You seem quite positive about the possibility of Ukraine becoming a EU member state. However, there are critical voices who sustain that the discussion is purely hypothetical (eventually comparing to what happened with regard to Turkey). How likely is it that Ukraine will actually become a full member state - especially when still under attack?

The reformations necessary for the accession can only be realized once the invasion ceases. Despite Ukraine's successes in regaining control over the Black Sea and facilitating grain exports, the counteroffensive to liberate occupied territories has been insufficient. Delays in Western military support have allowed Russia to fortify its positions, leading to a positional warfare with the potential for a stalemate. After two and a half years of war, we find ourselves exactly where Western strategy—allowing Ukraine to defend itself but not to win, employing an approach called 'escalation management'—has brought us: a situation where Ukraine cannot liberate further territories, and on the other hand, Russia cannot conquer new territories. According to Western calculations, this scenario should have forced President Vladimir Putin to the negotiating table by now. However, this has not yet happened and will not happen in the future, for one simple reason: Putin wants to subjugate the entire Ukraine.

So there is no way to put Putin under pressure in a way that actually could end the war?

I wish it were that simple. It is evident that a simple armistice will not be enough to end the conflict. Even the complete liberation of Ukrainian territory and the cessation of hostilities will not mark the end of the war. The persistence of the authoritarian regime in Russia, combined with its imperialist and expansionist aspirations, foreshadows future escalations and conflicts. This fundamental reality significantly influences the course of Ukrainian democracy both during and after the conflict.

The democratic progress made by Ukrainian society amid the war has come at an enormous cost: the loss of thousands of lives. Realizing the gravity of this sacrifice will undoubtedly influence the country's long-term trajectory. With many Ukrainians having lost friends and relatives during the war, along with ongoing sacrifices, the extent of the suffering is simply unbearable. Ukraine finds itself, and will likely remain for the foreseeable future, a society grappling with post-war trauma, haunted by a pervasive sense of insecurity stemming from Russia.

What is the biggest risk you see for Ukraine and its perspective of becoming a member state, other than the loss of human lives, of course?

Excessive securitization. Now, what do I mean by that? A prevailing sentiment is emerging in Ukraine: faced with present and future security challenges, Ukrainians must rely primarily on themselves. Consequently, efforts to strengthen the security and defense sectors, along with progress in the military industry, are gaining momentum.

In a society devastated by war and its aftermath, characterized by heightened security anxieties, there is an imminent risk of excessive securitization. This, in turn, could lead to a significant slowdown in democratic development. Such a scenario could coincide with the monopolization of power, a trend frequently observed in post-war nations. Moreover, the sharp deterioration of economic conditions, coupled with rising unemployment and other negative consequences of the conflict, further exacerbates the potential slowdown in democratic development.

What can the European Union learn from Ukraine?

Ukraine's struggle against Russian aggression transcends mere state survival; it embodies a fight for democracy itself. At this critical moment, the EU has the responsibility to help Ukraine preserve its democratic fabric during wartime and facilitate its recovery in the post-war era. While the EU's pressure for internal reforms through conditional approaches is ongoing, it may not be sufficient. To ensure the longevity of Ukrainian democracy, security guarantees, necessitating NATO membership, are imperative.



Centro italo-tedesco per il dialogo europeo
Deutsch-Italienisches Zentrum für den Europäischen Dialog

IM RAHMEN DES PROJEKTES „RE-KONSTRUKTIONEN“ | NELL’AMBITO DEL
PROGETTO “RE-KONSTRUKTIONEN”

