

Zelensky's Choice: Peace and EU Candidacy or "Protracted Conflict" on Washington's Demand

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French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi and Romanian President Klaus Iohannis arrived in Kiev on June 16, where they met with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. During this trip, the European leaders announced their support for Ukraine's candidate status for EU membership, however, other reports suggested that they also pressured Zelensky into accepting the loss of Crimea and Donbass.

A day after their visit, the European Commission formally recommended EU candidate status for Ukraine, something that does eventually need approval from all 27 member states of the bloc. Russian President Vladimir Putin said during the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum:

"We have nothing against it. It's their sovereign decision to join economic unions or not... It's their business, the business of the Ukrainian people."

Moscow does not oppose Ukraine's EU membership as the bloc is not a military threat, unlike NATO. Putin said that as far as Ukraine's economic integration is concerned with the EU, it was their choice and is something that has widespread popularity across Europe, even amongst non-EU member states.

It is recalled that the trip of Macron, Scholz, Draghi and Iohannis to Kiev comes just a day after the visit of EU candidates Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia, whose leaders, Edi Rama, Dritan Abazović and Dimitar Kovačevski, respectively, issued with Zelensky a joint statement in support of granting Ukraine candidate status for EU membership.

However, reports are emerging that the major European powers are attempting to make Zelensky realize that territorial concessions are a reality he must accept.



Data as of June 2, 2022 at 3 p.m. ET

Notes: "Assessed" means the Institute for the Study of War has received reliable and independently verifiable information to demonstrate Russian control or advances in those areas. Russian advances are areas where Russian forces have operated in or launched attacks, but they do not control them. "Claimed" areas are where sources have said control or counteroffensives are occurring, but ISW cannot corroborate nor demonstrate them to be false.

Sources: The Institute for the Study of War with AEI's Critical Threats Project; LandScan HD for Ukraine, Oak Ridge National Laboratory

Graphic: Renée Rigdon, CNN

It is likely that the European powers, despite the incessant pressure from Poland and the Baltic states, accept that Russia will achieve its goals in seizing all of the territory of Luhansk and Donetsk.

Until recently, the EU believed that sanctions would force Russia to end its military operation. Again, the realization has set in that sanctions, which in the interim will certainly remain and perhaps even intensify, will not deter Moscow's determination from achieving its aims.

In this way, it would appear that Zelensky has no choice but to accept the new reality that Ukraine is once again becoming a territorially smaller country. Kiev appears determined to defy what the Europeans want - a quick conclusion to the war. Due to this, the war will remain protracted, something that the Biden administration wants.

According to a Washington Post article published on June 17, a senior State Department official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to describe ongoing international deliberations regarding the war in Ukraine, said: "Biden administration officials had discussed the possibility of a protracted conflict with global spillover effects even before February, as US intelligence suggested Putin was preparing to invade."

The official said that the Biden administration hopes that new weaponry, successive waves

of sanctions and Russia's diplomatic isolation, will make a difference in an eventual negotiated conclusion to the war, potentially diminishing Putin's willingness to keep up the fight.

The problem from this viewpoint is that Moscow is not diplomatically isolated, but just rather from the West. In fact, the UAE and Saudi Arabia snubbed opportunities to meet with US officials earlier in the war and India has only increased its economic relations with Russia.

Poland and the Baltic states fervently defend the US viewpoint that Russia is isolated and must be opposed at every opportunity, a decision that the rest of the EU took but now feels the effects it had on the economy and domestic politics. For this reason, the EU's major players want Ukraine to quickly find a way out of the war without publicly announcing it in a direct manner.

The EU seemingly now acknowledges the impossibility of establishing an anti-Russian front. China was never going to be drawn into such a position but perhaps most surprisingly was the European shock that India was less than enthusiastic in unnecessarily ruining its decades long close partnership with Russia.

Effectively, Zelensky has a choice – find a peace with Moscow and open an eventual path towards EU membership, or carry out US orders of a pointless “protracted” war when Ukraine does not have the strength or means to recapture lost territory, which in turn only protracts the suffering and destruction in the country.

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