

Mose Apelblat

EU needs to accelerate its political and military support to Ukraine

ЄС має прискорити політичну та військову підтримку України

Мозе Апельблат, колишній чиновник в Європейській комісії (ЄК), а нині журналіст-фрілансер, пише, що ЄК не поспішає готувати початок переговорів про вступ з Україною та прискорювати військову допомогу країні на тлі ескалації російських ракетних ударів по цивільних об'єктах і війни на виснаження, що триває на українсько-російському фронті. Європейська Рада запропонувала прийняти рамки переговорів для України після того, як Україна зробить кроки, викладені в рекомендаціях ЄК в Пакеті про розширення від 8 листопада 2023 року. Згідно з оцінкою ЄК, Україна виконала чотири із семи кроків процесу реформ (1, 2, 4 і 6) і понад 90% дій на всіх етапах. За іншими кроками (3 - антикорупційний, 5 - антиолігархічний та 7 - про національні меншини) потрібно прийняти лише чотири закони. Переговорна база буде прийнята, коли Україна прийме всі закони.

<https://www.brusselstimes.com/eu-affairs/876776/eu-needs-to-accelerate-its-political-and-military-support-to-ukraine>



European Council, roundtable, 15 December 2023, The Council adopted an unanimous decision to open accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova. Credit: EU

The European Commission is in no hurry to prepare the opening of accession negotiations with Ukraine and to speed up its military aid to the country amid an escalation in Russian missile strikes against civilian targets and the on-going war of attrition along the Ukrainian-Russian front lines.

As [previously reported](#), the European Council in mid-December last year resulted in a unanimous decision to open accession negotiations with Ukraine after Hungary's Prime Minister, who had threatened to use his veto against the decision, left the meeting room during the vote. As regards the financial assistance to Ukraine, he used his veto to block a decision.

The European Council invited the Council to adopt the negotiating framework for Ukraine once the relevant steps set out in the Commission recommendations in its Enlargement package of 8 November 2023 are taken. According to the Commission's own assessment, Ukraine had completed four of the seven steps in the reform process (1, 2, 4 and 6) and more than 90 % of the actions under all steps.

Under the other steps (3 anti-corruption, 5 anti-oligarchs and 7 national minorities), there were only four laws that need to be enacted. The negotiating framework will be adopted once Ukraine has enacted all the laws.

Just before the European Council meeting in December, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen stated in a speech in the European Parliament that Ukraine had enacted three of the four outstanding recommendations that need to be implemented effectively. Among others, the Ukrainian parliament (Rada) has approved an amended law on national minorities.

Commission still preparing next step

From this one could expect that it would not take much more time for the Commission to finalise the negotiating framework or even start the screening of the whole *acquis* (community law). The screening is a detailed examination of a candidate country's compliance with EU law. Normally, the formal screening starts after the intergovernmental conference opening the negotiations.

In Ukraine's case, because of the urgency of sending a political signal to both Ukraine and Russia, the Commission seemed ready to accelerate the process to save time. A candidate country is obliged to transpose and implement the *acquis* during the accession process before joining the EU.

Gert Jan Koopman, Director-General of DG NEAR, told The Brussels Times in November that he had already instructed his teams to go to Ukraine (and Moldova) and [start the screening](#) as soon as the European Council had taken its decision.

Asked if the screening process already had started, a Commission spokesperson replied last Thursday that not much time had passed since the European Council decision and that the Commission was still "preparing" the screening. It could not say when it would start. It also needed time to analyze if Ukraine has addressed the remaining conditions. "Basically, we are organizing ourselves for the next steps."

The spokesperson rejected any link between the delay in starting the screening process (or completing the analyse of Ukraine's remaining reform steps) with Hungary's opposition against the approval of €50 billion in financial assistance to Ukraine for 2024 – 2027 under EU's Macro-Financial Assistance (MFF).

Decisions about the MFF requires unanimity among all 27 member states. This is the preferred priority, Commission President von der Leyen said at joint press conference with the Belgian Prime Minister at the launch of the Belgian EU Presidency. But she did not exclude innovative "operational solutions" to overcome a possible Hungarian veto at the special European Council meeting on 1 February.

Some preparation for that eventuality is apparently already on its way. The member states' EU ambassadors approved last week a partial negotiating mandate to set up a new single dedicated [instrument](#) (Ukraine Facility) to support Ukraine. The mandate does not include budget-related issues, in particular the overall size of the instrument and the share of grants and loans, which will depend on the final outcome of the negotiations on the mid-term revision of the MFF.

Delays in supplying ammunition

The EU has also problems in fulfilling its pledge to Ukraine to supply it with enough weapons and ammunition to defend itself against Russia.

Last year the EU adopted a new regulation to ramp up the [EU's capacity to produce ammunition](#) in response to the war in Ukraine and the need to address the shortage of ammunition and missiles in the EU. The EU also agreed on a plan to urgently supply ammunition and missiles to Ukraine and to help the member states refill their own stocks.

In the short-term perspective, the EU pledged to deliver 1 million ammunition shells over 12 months (by March this year) from the existing stockpiles of the member states (track 1 of the plan) and to launch a joint procurement process on their behalf by the European Defence Agency (EDA) to replenish the stockpiles and deliver more shells to Ukraine (track 2).

Asked whether this goal would be achieved in time, the Commission's spokespersons replied that it was a political goal. It still remains but that the actual deliveries are lagging behind. Until now about 300,000 ground ammunition (shells) and 3,300 missiles have been delivered to Ukraine. By the end of December, 20 framework contracts had been signed for at least 180,000 more rounds of ammunition.

The Commission stressed that the pledge was made at a time when Ukraine needed artillery shells more than anything else and was made in addition to other military aid to Ukraine. On the positive side, the Commission announced that the European defence industry has increased its *annual* production capacity to 1 million rounds of ammunition. It does not mean that the EU will reach its goal of supplying 1 million shells to Ukraine by March this year.

The issue of supplying Ukraine "faster and more" military aid will be discussed at next foreign affairs council meeting in January, Peter Stano, EU's lead spokesperson on foreign affairs, said. He stressed that it is up to the Member States to produce the ammunition and to place the orders for them in the joint procurement.

Critical juncture in the war

In the US, the biggest donor of military aid to Ukraine, there is no bi-partisan agreement on approving more aid, which makes the European aid more urgent. Nor are there any signs that Kremlin is prepared to negotiate a cease-fire or political solution to the conflict.

Ukraine's counter-offensive last year failed and the war has become a bloody war of attrition along the front lines. While Russia more easily can resupply itself with artillery shells, Ukraine is starting to run out of ammunition.

Russia has also resumed its attacks by drones, ballistic missiles and hypersonic missiles against civilian targets. On Saturday, the Ukrainian air-defense managed to intercept some of the missiles and blocking most of the others from reaching their targets by electronic means. This time. Ukraine is desperately needing more ground-to-air missiles and fighter aircraft to defend its air space and ground forces.

"He (Putin) is not going to seek any appeasement before the American elections, which he hopes will favour his imperialist plans," EU's foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said in a [recent speech](#). "The high-intensity war will therefore continue, and we must prepare for it. To start, we need to develop our defence industry, which is nowhere near adequately prepared to meet the challenges we face."

“If Ukraine were to lose the war, it would encourage Russia to further pursue its imperialist ambitions,” he added. “But, as I was saying, not all Member States share this view. Some do not see Vladimir Putin’s Russia as a strategic threat. Does disunity on this existential issue threaten the future of the European Union? It is impossible to say at this stage.”

Update: A previous version of the article has been updated as regards the negotiations on the financial aid to Ukraine. The Belgian EU Presidency confirmed on Monday (15 January) that the new mandate for the Ukraine Facility is under Quality Majority Voting (QMV). This means 55 % of the member states voting in favour (15 out of 27), supported by at least 65 % of the total EU population. A blocking minority must include at least 4 member states.

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