

The Guardian.- 19.12.2023

Paul Taylor

Despite the wrecking tactics of Viktor Orbán, the EU will find a way to get aid to Ukraine

Незважаючи на тактику Віктора Орбана, ЄС знайде спосіб надати Україні фінансову допомогу

Старший науковий співробітник аналітичного центру «Друзі Європи» Пол Тейлор вважає, що Європа ухвалила історичне рішення, знайшовши формулу, яка дозволяє домовитися про відкриття переговорів про членство з Україною. Але, на його думку, показавши Україні світло наприкінці тунелю, європейські уряди позбавили її палива, щоб утримати потяг, що заглук, на правильному шляху. Європейські та національні чиновники вже планують обхідний шлях, якщо В. Орбан продовжить перешкоджати фінансовому пакету. Лідери визнали, що ЄС доведеться провести внутрішні реформи – як свою власну політику та способи її фінансування, так і власні інститути, щоб гарантувати, що вони зможуть функціонувати в розширеному союзі. Вони пообіцяли прийняти дорожню карту таких реформ до середини 2024 року.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/dec/19/europe-ukraine-viktor-orban-aid-west-ern-balkans>

The Hungarian leader wants to deprive Kyiv of funding and to halt expansion plans, but officials are already mapping out a workaround

The European Union is never quite as bad or quite as good as it looks. Last week's summit on expansion was an example of the 27-nation union at its best – and its worst. A formula was found to enable agreement to open membership negotiations with Ukraine as it struggles to prevent Russia seizing more of its territory.

That agreement, which Hungary's prime minister, Viktor Orbán, had vowed to block, produced triumphant headlines that made the union look fleetingly as if it were finally grasping its historic responsibility to extend the European area of freedom and prosperity right up to Russia's borders.

Yet the next morning, Orbán, who had stepped out for coffee while the accession talks decision was taken, vetoed a far more urgently needed deal on a €50bn four-year assistance package for Kyiv, threatening to deprive the Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelenskiy, of the funding he desperately needs to keep fighting the war for survival against Russian aggression.

All of a sudden, it looked as if Europe had failed Ukraine in its hour of need, just as the Republican-dominated US Congress was refusing to approve further financial aid for Kyiv. Having shown Ukraine the light at the end of the tunnel, European governments were denying it the fuel to keep its stalling train on track.

This impression, too, may be illusory. There is a good chance that EU ministers will either approve the aid package unanimously next month, after Orbán has had his moment of glory to show his domestic audience that he has the power to stop Europe if necessary, or find another way to get the money to Kyiv.

EU and national officials are already mapping out a workaround if Orbán continues to obstruct the financial package. The other 26 members would contribute to an inter-government fund for Ukraine that

would be administered by the European Commission and tied to reform conditions. Hungary's GDP-linked contribution is anyway insignificant, and it would be unable to block the decision. A similar procedure was used to circumvent a British veto on an EU fiscal treaty in the midst of the eurozone crisis in 2011, back in the days when the UK was the leader of the union's awkward squad.

As ever, the EU is adept at muddling through and keeping the show on the road. But it manages to make historic decisions on Europe's geopolitical future look messy and irresolute. The historian and Guardian columnist Timothy Garton Ash rightly framed this summit in advance as a key moment in the epic struggle between liberalism and populism for the soul of Europe. As such, the outcome was a low-scoring draw.

To be sure, Europe took a historic decision that ultimately should mean that there will be no grey area between the democratic, integrated west and the Russian Federation. But EU leaders took it in a manner, and with caveats, that called into question the credibility of their commitment.

It is easier to decide to open a long and uncertain negotiating process than to make an immediate commitment of significant resources to keep the barbarians from the gates. By the time Ukraine is ready to join the EU, assuming it survives the war as a stable democracy, the current generation of European leaders will be long out of office. "Let our successors decide" is a classic EU response to an awkward question.

Worse, Europe's way of running its affairs feeds Vladimir Putin's cynical self-belief. At his annual press conference, held coincidentally just as the EU leaders were meeting, Putin not only doubled down on his war aims but, referring to signs of flagging resolve in the west, concluded: "There is enough for us not only to feel confident, but to move forward."

Watching the Brussels show, Putin may calculate rationally that if Donald Trump wins next year's US presidential election, the EU will not be able to provide the scale of political, military and financial support needed to sustain Ukraine's defences without American leadership. The EU urgently needs to plug the immediate financial gap to disprove such calculations.

Yet the Brussels compromise may not have been quite as bad as it looked. A couple of little-highlighted elements may give more substance to the prospect of eastward enlargement to embrace not only Ukraine but also Moldova, Georgia and the six western Balkan countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Kosovo) that were promised a "European perspective" 20 years ago but have made little progress since then.

Buried at the bottom of their rambling statement, EU leaders agreed on the principle of gradual integration for western Balkan candidates, which would give them more of the financial benefits, market access and political engagement of membership before they join the club. This, along with a €6bn growth fund for the western Balkans to promote regional economic integration and convergence with EU standards, may make the prospect of accession more real and incentivise overdue reforms to access the money. The fact that these six Balkan states may feel at risk of being leapfrogged by Ukraine could also serve as a stimulus to tackle the old demons of state capture, corruption, organised crime and impunity that are strangling their economies and perverting their politics.

The leaders also at least acknowledged that the EU will have to reform internally – both its own policies and the way they are funded, and its own institutions, to ensure they can function in an enlarged union.

They promised to adopt a roadmap towards such reforms by mid-2024, saying the enlargement and reform tracks should run in parallel. So perhaps, just perhaps, the Brussels summit wasn't quite as bad as it looked.

Paul Taylor is a senior fellow of the Friends of Europe thinktank