



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

The Ukraine-EU summit – expectations management



The government in Kyiv prepared a welcome for EU leaders at the first EU-Ukraine summit in wartime conditions with the arrest of one of the richest men in Ukraine, and a series of forced resignations of high-ranking state and local officials due to corruption.

Kyiv greeted the first set of the Brussels administration on Thursday and Friday after two major anti-corruption operations.

At the end of January, under pressure from the Government after accusations of corruption, several high-ranking government officials resigned, including the Deputy Minister of Defence and Deputy Chief of Staff to President Volodymyr Zelensky.

Two days before the EU-Ukraine summit, a search was made of the house of one of the wealthiest Ukrainians, Ihor Kolomoisky, a tycoon on whose TV station Volodymyr Zelensky became famous by portraying the president in the series *Servant of the People*.

Kolomoisky was later sanctioned by the US for alleged "significant corruption" during his time as governor of the Dnipropetrovsk region.

Ukrainian authorities say that his corrupt practices amount to about 1 billion USD, and suspect embezzlement schemes and tax evasion in the two largest oil companies, in which Kolomoisky holds a large share.

How to manage high expectations?

These large-scale anti-corruption actions were supposed to be proof to the high-ranking guests from Brussels that Ukraine seeks to solve its biggest peacetime problem, which is also its biggest obstacle to its desired EU membership.

Ukraine has the most widespread corruption in Europe, with the exception of Russia. According to Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (CPI), the corruption is somewhat less toxic even in

neighbouring Belarus and Moldova.

President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen and President of the European Council Charles Michel may have been impressed by the anti-corruption efforts of the government in Kyiv.

However, judging by the conclusions of the summit, Ukraine's path to EU membership will not be as fast as the candidate expects.

In June last year, the European Union accepted Ukraine's candidacy for full membership, as strong political support for its fight against Russian aggression.

But Brussels thereby drastically raised Ukraine's expectations that it could jump the queue, without meeting many criteria that took others a decade to fulfil.

Many in Europe warned that expectations were excessive. The last EU enlargement was in 2013 with the admission of Croatia.

Turkey became a candidate country in 1999, only to have its membership negotiations suspended in 2016 due to human rights violations. Other Balkan countries have been fulfilling the criteria for membership for 20 years and are still not close to the goal.

Ukraine's fight against Russian aggression, which was supported by everyone in the EU from day one, opened up expectations for a "fast lane", which Brussels further encouraged with its decision last June to accept its candidacy.

That's why Denys Shmyhal, Ukrainian Prime Minister, said before the summit with the EU that his government has set an "ambitious goal" to join the Union in two years.

Collision with reality

The summit in Kyiv on Friday was the first test of the justification of such expectations after last year's celebratory acceptance of candidacy and according to the joint

statement from the Summit, the first dampening factors arose.

“The EU acknowledged the considerable efforts that Ukraine has made in recent months to meet the objectives required for its EU candidate status”, said the joint declaration, in the usual bureaucratese of the Brussels administration when it comes to EU enlargement.

The EU accepted Ukraine's candidacy, under the pressure of the war, and that was the best it could offer at that time, if the substantial financial and military aid of its members were excluded.

However, ambitions for rapid accession to the EU have started to cool down since the Kyiv summit on Friday, and there is every chance that this will continue in the next negotiation rounds.

The EU itself is not entirely united in its enthusiasm for Ukraine to be admitted for membership under terms of an urgent procedure.

While one group of member states, led by Poland, unreservedly demands the fastest possible admission of Ukraine, there is a strong influence of countries where enlargement is traditionally unpopular, such as the Netherlands and Denmark.

The EU remains the main support pillar of Ukraine

The support for the Ukrainian candidacy last June was only a strong symbolic step in support of the fight against the Russian attack, but things are different with regard to practical fulfilment of the numerous and difficult conditions for full membership.

Several of the most influential members of the Union, such as Germany, France and Italy, requested before the Kyiv summit that the conclusions should not be overly and unrealistically optimistic.

This is why the expectation that the bloc of 27 will continue to provide Ukraine with significant financial, political, diplomatic and military support to achieve the defence of its country, is much more realistic.

So far, the EU has helped Ukraine with 50 billion euros, of which 12 billion has been for military support, plus about 10 billion euros for around 4 million refugees on the territory of the Union.

Since the very beginning of the aggression against Ukraine, all of them have enjoyed benefits from the EU emergency mechanism, which allows them to exercise all rights throughout the EU for as long as they need.

The EU will certainly remain the main supporter of Ukraine in defence against Russian aggression, particularly through financial support programmes, and will also provide the main framework for the post-war reconstruction of the country.

By granting candidate status, the EU has committed itself to keep Ukraine close and to support reform according to European criteria.

But that path will not be short, or simple, and not as fast as Kyiv expects.