

No concessions. Ukraine's response to Russia's annexation and nuclear blackmail

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Despite the escalation of Russia's aggressive actions – the annexation of occupied territories and nuclear blackmail – Ukraine has consistently maintained its position of refusing to make concessions and has announced the restoration of its full territorial integrity. Russian threats to use nuclear weapons, meanwhile, are being used by the Ukrainian authorities to put pressure on the West to increase military support. On 30 September, President Volodymyr Zelensky, together with the Verkhovna Rada's Chairman Ruslan Stefanchuk and Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal, signed an application for NATO membership under a fast-track procedure analogous to that followed by Sweden and Finland. Ukraine takes the risk of a Russian nuclear attack seriously, but completely rejects the possibility of dialogue with Russia. Public sentiment resonates with the attitude of the government – although Ukrainians fear the consequences of a possible nuclear strike, this is not converted into willingness to capitulate – it rather results in a further increase in support for NATO membership and a belief that there is no alternative but victory.

Nuclear blackmail by Russia

Ukraine's reaction to Russia's annexation of the occupied territories was calm and laconic – it stated that the pseudo-referenda were illegal and had no impact on the territorial structure of the Ukrainian state. On 4 October, two decrees by President Zelensky were published: the first stated that under no circumstances were negotiations with President Vladimir Putin possible in the current situation; the second stated that the decision to annex the four oblasts had no legal consequences. Furthermore, the Prosecutor General's Office of Ukraine initiated criminal proceedings under which all those involved in organising the "referenda" are to be prosecuted.

On 21 September, Putin once again threatened with the use of nuclear weapons. President Zelensky announced that he no longer regarded Putin's words as a bluff (a few months earlier, he had described the then threat of a nuclear attack as such), stressing that the only effective way to stop Russia was for the West to exert further pressure and make Moscow aware of the costs of such a decision. Other government officials spoke in the same vein, including Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba, who stated that Ukraine would not give in to nuclear blackmail from Russia and called on the world's nuclear powers to respond adequately. In turn, deputy head of military intelligence Vadym Skibitsky assessed the threat of nuclear weapons use as very high and considered that it could occur along the front line at locations where military personnel and equipment are deployed, or at important command posts and critical infrastructure facilities.

Nuclear mobilisation and blackmail once again provoked President Zelensky to address Russians and other nations living in the Russian Federation in his speeches. He portrayed the aggression as pointless, thus seeking to undermine Putin's rationality and effectiveness in the eyes of the population, especially in the context of Russia's successive military defeats and the increasing number of military casualties. This message, however, reached a limited audience, usually those who already have an anti-war mindset. It is an important element of Ukraine's information policy to portray Putin as an unpredictable and irresponsible person with whom there is no point in holding talks. This narrative, in turn, is intended to convince Western partners that military victory is the only way to stop Moscow's aggressive plans, and for this it is necessary to increase military aid. The threat of nuclear weapons, on the other hand, is presented as a global problem that should be solved by a concerted response from the "civilised world".

Russian threats to escalate the conflict in no way affect the actions of the Ukrainian army, which has been on an effective offensive on the southern and eastern sections of the front since early September. The annexed areas are the scene of increasing Ukrainian sabotage activity – assassinations are being carried out against representatives of the occupying authorities and the buildings they occupy are being attacked.

Consensus on NATO

The Ukrainian opposition and media were unanimous in their approval of the decision to apply for fast-track accession to NATO, seeing this as a step towards gaining real security guarantees. Public support for integration into NATO has reached record levels, including in the eastern regions of the country. According to an October survey by the Rating Group, 83% of the population is in favour of accession (just after the Russian aggression began, support rose from 62% to 76%), including as many as 69% of the inhabitants of the eastern regions (up from 55% in June). The Ukrainian people regard the war as a key moment in history, decisive for the continued existence of their country as an independent state.

However, nuclear threats resonate in a society traumatised by the experience of the Chernobyl accident. Ukrainians were already reacting nervously to reports of shelling at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant. The Ministry of Health, as recently as August 2022, issued a communiqué informing people of the risk of a catastrophe and providing preventive recommendations to avoid radiation sickness. The mainstream media routinely provides tips on how to behave during a nuclear explosion (as well as missile fire and other threats), and news websites publish advice on how to survive in the event of nuclear contamination.

Doubtful NATO accession prospects

Awareness of the lack of consensus within NATO about agreeing to Ukraine's accession had previously led Ukraine to seek alternative international security guarantees. The result was the proposal to create the Kyiv Security Compact, initiating a strategic partnership between Ukraine and the potential guarantor states of Ukrainian independence, announced in mid-September by a group led by the head of the Presidential Office Andrii Yermak and former NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen.

The acceleration of the bid for NATO membership should also be read as Ukraine demonstratively rejecting Russia's political and territorial demands. Stopping Ukraine's Euro-

Atlantic integration was one of Russia's declared goals of the invasion, so the signing of the application is a form of demonstration to show Ukraine's full determination to make sovereign decisions.

However, the prospect of integration into NATO seems extremely unrealistic in the near future because Ukraine is a country locked in armed conflict, with unregulated borders. The decision on accession is taken by consensus and the reluctant attitude of some member states (above all Germany, France and Hungary) may cause the process to be delayed for many years. This is supported by the restrained reaction of Western countries to Ukraine's proposal. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg asserted that, while 'the door to the Alliance remains open', the decision is up to member states, and the focus should now be on immediate support, to help Ukraine defend itself against the aggressor. Support for Ukrainian membership was expressed in a joint declaration on 2 October by the presidents of the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Poland, Romania and Slovakia. This confirms the position of these countries so far, but is unlikely now to translate into a change of approach for NATO as a whole. The fate of Ukraine's accession to NATO will depend on the outcome of the ongoing war, including Russia's further actions and Ukraine's attitude.