As the war continues, Zelenskyy calls for EU membership in 2027, but Merz pours cold water on membership in 2027 or 2028

Yesterday's UK Defence Intelligence update on the battlefield situation in Ukraine.

As yesterday's British Defence Intelligence map of the battlefield situation in Ukraine indicates, the Russian forces continue to attack in the area south of Sudzha toward the Ukrainian city of Sumy and at a number of points along the long contact line between the Russian and Ukrainian forces in eastern and southeastern Ukraine – westward from the area south of Kupiansk and the area south of Siversk toward the cities of Sloviansk and Kramatorsk in the northern portion of Donetsk region, toward the area around Pokrovsk in the western portion of that region, and in the area near the junction of Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson regions in southeastern Ukraine, as well as at many other points along the 1,000 kilometer contact line between the forces in eastern and southeastern Ukraine. And as they do, the Ukrainian forces continue to attack the Russian forces at the southeastern corner of Dnipropetrovsk region and at many other locations along the contact line.

Russia's war against Ukraine continues in the air as well as on the ground. One measure of the magnitude of the Russian attacks with drones and missiles that occur each night is the fact that Ukraine Defense Minister Mykhailo Fedorov reported in a post on Telegram Monday that Ukraine shot down 33,000 Russian drones in March. But as impressive as that statistic is, many drones, as well as ballistic and cruise missiles, get through the Ukrainian defenses every night in Russia's continuing effort to destroy essential infrastructure and inflict pain, suffering, and death on Ukrainian men, women, and children.

As the war continues on the ground and in the air, the EU leaders met informally in Cyprus on April 23 and 24. President Zelenskyy attended the meeting and urged the EU to speed up the pace of the accession process for Ukraine. In an address to the leaders, he said, "We seek the same full membership that every EU nation has –

from Cyprus to Poland. The only thing we ask is speeding up the full membership, with a clear start date for membership." He has widely suggested next January as a possible start date. But while the EU clearly supports the principle of eventual Ukraine membership, the Commission has not proposed a specific date, saying the enlargement process is complex and "merit-based" – meaning it depends on the progress made by a candidate in regard to a number of economic and political objectives. And importantly, the EU has also made it clear that, before a date for membership can be discussed, there must be a ceasefire in the war and a peace treaty between Russia and Ukraine. And that would, of course, require an agreement in regard to the two most contentious issues between the two countries – the extent to which the Ukrainian territory now held by Russia will remain under Russian control and the extent and form of a post-war security guarantee for Ukraine.

On Monday, German Chancellor Merz poured a good amount of cold water on Ukraine's ambition for EU membership in the near future. He said bluntly, "Zelenskyy had the idea of joining the EU on Jan. 1, 2027. That will not work. Even Jan. 1, 2028, is not realistic." Merz suggested that Ukraine instead be offered some type of observer status, allowing it to participate in the EU institutions without voting rights – an alternative to membership that has never previously been proposed let alone implemented with any other state. Importantly, Merz also suggested that EU membership for Ukraine will depend on a settlement of its ongoing war with Russia – meaning not only a ceasefire but a peace treaty. And that, he suggested, might involve territorial concessions: "At some point, Ukraine will sign a ceasefire agreement. At some point, hopefully, a peace treaty with Russia. Then it may be that part of Ukraine's territory is no longer Ukrainian." He suggested that if Zelenskyy wanted public support for a treaty that would give Russia some of Ukraine's territory he might have to hold a referendum: "Then he must at the same time tell the people: 'I have opened the way to Europe for you'."

After the informal summit concluded, European Commission President von der Leyen praised Ukraine's reform efforts and continuing commitment to joining the EU. But she underscored that the pathway toward membership is difficult and takes time: "It's a two-way contract if you are a candidate country. It's hard reforms that the candidate countries have to do." And she added, lest anyone forget, that accession requires the unanimous approval of all of the member states. European Council President Costa added, more positively, "We need to be creative to solve problems, especially with a country with a dimension and in the current situation of Ukraine. But we believe in the future of Ukraine, and we believe that the future is in the European Union." On another positive note for Ukraine, the Cyprus summit was the last meeting of EU leaders attended by Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán. Following the dramatic defeat of Fidesz on April 12, he will step down from power on May 9 or 10 and be succeeded by Péter Magyar, the leader of the victorious Tisza party and a strong supporter of Ukraine.

David R. Cameron
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