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Why is Ukraine still a long way from joining NATO?



NATO membership for Ukraine keeps fading. The longer Ukraine resists Russian aggression, the further away NATO's embrace seems. To paraphrase Lewis Carroll, the further I go, the farther I remain.

Recently, Keith Kellogg, a key figure in President Trump's administration and once one of Ukraine's strongest advocates, has stated that halting NATO's eastward expansion is under consideration. "Trump is ready to promise Putin not to expand NATO eastward if it becomes a condition for ending the war," Kellogg **said**, calling it "a fair concern."

Russia remains firm on this demand, though rejecting NATO offers no real guarantees to Ukraine and is far from Moscow's only condition. At the same time, the alliance itself has yet to reach a consensus on Ukraine's membership.

Even Kyiv's most reliable and powerful partners — the U.S., Belgium, and Germany — remain **opposed**, although most of the media backlash centres on Hungary and Slovakia.

At one point, Donald Trump was **criticised** for blocking Ukraine's path to NATO, but in reality, he has echoed a long-standing American stance: since the 1994 Budapest **Memorandum**, no U.S. president has actively supported Ukraine's rapid accession to the alliance.

Even Ukraine's invitation to the NATO-Ukraine **Council** during the upcoming **summit** in The Hague, Netherlands, on June 24–25 was unclear.

While not a member of the alliance, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy was previously invited to attend and speak — either in person or virtually — during the years of full-scale war. This year, however, no invitation has yet been extended.

One of Ukraine's Members of Parliament, Yehor Cherniev, said: "Rutte mentioned they're working on it, but emphasized they want to dedicate this summit to just one issue. I think it will be an extremely short summit, and I

seriously doubt they'll agree to convene the NATO-Ukraine Council." However, just yesterday, President Zelenskyy announced that Ukraine was invited to the summit without mentioning details.

A long way from joining

For years, Russian officials and propaganda have **used** NATO enlargement as a pretext for the Kremlin's wars — against Georgia and, Ukraine, and for hostile actions across the region.

Many Western capitals, seeing Russia's aggression and its commitment to war as an ideology of coexistence, have come to the conclusion that they must avoid direct confrontation—and are simply not ready to risk peace by entering into open conflict with Moscow over Ukraine.

A lack of transparency remains one of Ukraine's biggest challenges

But while this fear is real, it is not the only reason why Ukraine is still long way from joining the alliance of 32 member states.

The Ukrainian army is now one of the most experienced in Europe—battle-hardened and , tactically advanced, and even **sharing** its expertise with Western partners.

Still, political hurdles persist, especially when it comes to meeting NATO's formal requirements. Over the years, diplomats have quietly whispered to me that a lack of transparency remains one of Ukraine's biggest challenges.

Broadly speaking, NATO's **criteria** for future members include a commitment to democracy, a functioning market economy, civilian oversight of the military, respect for the sovereignty of other nations, and progress towards interoperability with NATO forces.

In Ukraine's case, both democracy and the market economy have been deeply strained by the ongoing war. As fighting is still active, civilian control over the armed forces remains fragile.

Internal challenges high on the agenda

At the same time, Ukraine ranks 105th out of 180 countries in Transparency International's latest **index**, slipping one place from the previous year.

The organisation attributes this decline to a broader pattern: "The current results suggest that many reforms are being implemented only formally, or that their implementation is being deliberately stalled."

Since gaining independence in 1991, Ukraine has undertaken an extraordinary number of reforms. But granting NATO membership to Kyiv now would mean admitting a country that, at this stage, struggles to meet even the minimum contribution requirements.

Financially, Ukraine is in a near-default state and **remains** heavily dependent on its Western partners. In effect, it would be the alliance — not the applicant — that would have to contribute additional resources to make Ukraine's membership viable.

"Formally implemented" reforms that fail to deliver real change on the ground remain a concern

Moreover, Ukraine would bring with it the challenges of an under-reformed state, potentially straining NATO from within.

The persistent issue of "formally implemented" reforms that fail to deliver real change on the ground remains a concern. And with Vladimir Putin still **threatening** that Ukraine's accession could spark a third world war, many member states remain unwilling to take that risk.

There is a prevailing narrative today that Russian propaganda has failed — after all, NATO enlargement did happen, with Finland and Sweden joining the alliance (in 2023 and 2024, respectively).

Finland shares a 1,300 km (808 mi) border with Russia and has a difficult historical relationship with Moscow, yet the Kremlin did not attack Finland or Sweden over their accession, nor did it follow through on threats against any other Western capital.

However, both Finland and Sweden bring to the table strong economies and a demonstrated commitment to reform—something Ukraine still struggles with.

These internal challenges remain high on the agenda as NATO members weigh the question of Ukraine's future in the alliance.

Ukraine's difficult question

Last year, 75% of Ukrainians **supported** the country's accession to NATO—a figure that rose sharply with the outbreak of full-scale war. Only 7% said they would vote against in the event of referendum, while 16% said they would not vote at all.

While most Ukrainians still see NATO membership as a matter of time — sooner or later — many perceived the alliance's hesitation during the invasion as a cold shower.



There has never been a promise to Ukraine that as part of a peace deal they would be in NATO - Mark Rutte

In conversations with ordinary citizens, it is clear that hopes were high following the expectations and the push from the Ukrainian leadership **made** in 2022 and 2023 about a fast-track path to membership—promises that, in hindsight, proved largely populist.

The alliance itself, as we now see, always maintained a cautious distance when it came to offering Ukraine a rapid path in. “There has never been a promise to Ukraine that as part of a peace deal they would be in NATO,” Rutte diplomatically **concluded** during one of the press conferences.

It is hard for Ukraine to let go of its aspirations for NATO membership while living next to such an aggressive neighbour. But it is also important to acknowledge that rhetoric alone will not bring Ukraine into the alliance.

The country already holds a special partnership status and regularly conducts joint exercises with NATO and its member states — even without formal membership.

Still, a more realistic approach may be needed. In the coming years, it might be more productive to shift focus from publicity and political pressure to addressing the internal challenges that continue to hold Ukraine back.

And perhaps, after so many years of unrelenting violence, it is time to ask the difficult question: is the pursuit of NATO membership at risk of echoing a Soviet-era maxim — sacrificing people in the name of a grand ideal?