

Ukrainian president seeks support from Western powers

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Newly elected Ukrainian President and former comedian Volodymyr Zelensky headed to Brussels this week to meet with EU and NATO officials in an attempt to shore up support for his government among the imperialist powers. The trip marked his first official foreign visit.

During a meeting with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg on Tuesday, Zelensky made clear that his pre-election, equivocal statements on Ukraine's entrance into the EU and NATO were a ploy intended to gain the support of voters in the predominately Russian-speaking areas of the country where opposition to NATO membership remains especially high.

"The strategic course of Ukraine to achieve full-fledged membership in the EU and NATO, which is secured in the Constitution of Ukraine, remains unchanged. This is the priority of our foreign policy," Zelensky declared this week. Previously, he had implied that any prospect of Ukraine joining NATO and the EU was far in the future and would be subject to voter approval through a national referendum.

While stating that he was willing to hold talks with Moscow over the pro-Russian separatist movement in Ukraine's eastern Donbass, Zelensky also made clear his commitment to winning and maintaining the support of the US and its European allies at Russia's expense.

"We are ready for the negotiations with Russia. We are ready to fulfill the Minsk agreements," Zelensky said, adding, "But first of all we must be able to protect ourselves. I am grateful for the support Ukraine receives from the Alliance and allies."

In a separate meeting with European Council President Donald Tusk, Ukraine's new president indicated his support for the continuation and intensification of the EU's anti-Russia sanctions.

"I today informed Mr. Donald Tusk and other partners about ongoing Russian aggression in Donbass and Crimea. I expressed my gratitude for the EU's unchanged position in support of Ukraine and called for further consolidation of international efforts and strengthening of sanctions pressure in order to bring peace to Ukraine," said Zelensky.

Prior to winning the presidency, Zelensky met privately with French President Emmanuel Macron allegedly to discuss ending the five-year old war in Eastern Ukraine that has claimed over 13,000 lives. Since his election, he has increasingly decried Russian "aggression."

Zelensky also used his trip to Brussels to reaffirm his commitment to implementing the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) austerity policies. Distancing himself from comments made by Ukrainian oligarch Igor Kolomoisky that the country should snub the IMF and default on its massive external debt, on Twitter Ukraine's president stated that he told EU officials his administration had "nothing in common" with Kolomoisky's views. His advisors have made clear in recent weeks that Ukraine will remain in the current \$3.9 billion IMF program, which requires drastic hikes in the price of consumer gas.

In his efforts to drum up support among the Western powers, Ukraine's president increasingly finds himself enmeshed in the growing tensions between the United States and the EU, in particular Germany.

In a meeting with EU officials in May, Zelensky appealed "for the EU's solidarity in the matter of countering the completion of Nord Stream 2" gas pipeline, which threatens to undercut Ukraine's position as the main transit country for Russian gas to Europe by transporting supplies directly to Germany via the Baltic Sea.

There is significant fear within the Ukrainian ruling-class that should Nord Stream 2 be completed as planned, support for Ukraine's entrance into NATO and the EU within Europe would be significantly weakened. Zelensky's predecessor, Petro Poroshenko, called the Nord Stream 2 a "Trojan horse" which would make Europe dependent on Russia.

NATO member Poland has backed Ukraine in its opposition to the pipeline, with Poland's Foreign Minister Jacek Czaputowicz stating that the pipeline "will kill Ukraine."

Germany, which supported the so-called "Maidan Revolution" against elected President Viktor Yanukovich in 2014, would be the main beneficiary of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. The infrastructure project would ensure that Germany would receive Russian gas regardless of its policies towards Ukraine and the rest of Eastern Europe.

The pipeline has been a central component of the rapidly escalating tensions between Washington and Berlin. President Donald Trump, despite being depicted as a subversive Russian-agent by Democrats, told German Chancellor Angela Merkel to "to stop buying gas from Putin."

US officials have also threatened Germany with sanctions over the pipeline. A bi-partisan bill that would target companies working on the project was introduced into the US Senate by Republican Senators Ted Cruz, John Barrasso and Tom Cotton and Democrat Jeanne Shaheen.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel has so far refused to budge on the Nord Stream 2 issue and adopt the rapidly hostile posture demanded by Zelensky and the United States. "Geostrategically, Europe can't sever ties with Russia," she recently told *Deutsche Welle*.

This week, a Zelensky advisor revealed that Trump has invited Zelensky to Washington after the upcoming G20 summit in Japan later this month. "Zelensky has been given a certain credibility from the United States," he said.

Prior to the Ukrainian elections in April that brought to Zelensky to power, the United States ruling class tacitly supported the continuation of the Poroshenko regime, with Washington-based think tanks such as the Atlantic Council issuing warnings about Zelensky's business ties to Russia through his TV production company.

Subsequent to Zelensky's election, Kurt Volker, the United States Special Representative to Ukraine, in an interview with Hungary's *Valasz* news magazine, sent a veiled threat that a negotiated deal between Ukraine and Russia would not be tolerated.

Zelensky "will insist on the full restoration of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity and he supports the process that is already in place to do that. Doing otherwise would turn people against him very quickly," said Volker.

Zelensky's first official trip took place as criticism is already beginning to appear in Ukraine that his presidency does not substantially differ from that of Poroshenko.

This week, two Ukrainian policemen were arrested for killing a five-year old boy in Kiev while drunkenly shooting their weapons at empty cans.

The boy, Kyrilo Tlyavov, was initially brought to the hospital in the capital with claims by police that he had fallen and hit his head. The story proved to be made up, with doctors finding bullet fragments in his skull. The head of the police force where the incident took place has resigned.

In Kiev and around the country there have been rallies calling for the removal of Interior Minister Arsen Avakov, who controls the country's police forces. Avakov so far has refused to step down. Zelensky, who has already removed several Poroshenko-allied ministers, has not moved against Avakov. He has instead called for an investigation of the official on his Facebook account.

The interior minister is said to have a close relationship with oligarch Igor Kolomoisky, who openly backed Zelensky against Poroshenko in another saga of the long-running, inter-oligarchic disputes that continue dominate Ukrainian politics.



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