

Erdo?an backs Ukraine's NATO membership, releases Azov commanders in Turkey

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9 July 2023

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an hosted Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in Istanbul on Saturday and declared that Ukraine “deserves” NATO membership. The meeting and statement came just ahead of NATO’s war summit in the Lithuanian capital, Vilnius, on July 11-12.

Speaking at a joint press conference with Zelensky, Erdo?an said, “Undoubtedly, Ukraine deserves the NATO membership.” Before that, he made clear his government’s support for Ukraine in the war against Russia, stating: “The Ukrainian people are defending their territorial integrity and independence in the war. ... We have since 2014, when Crimea was annexed in a way against international law, expressed on all the platforms our support for Ukraine’s territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence.”

A member of NATO, Turkey seeks to pursue a policy of maneuvering between NATO and Russia due to the Turkish bourgeoisie’s strong economic and military ties with both sides. Following the Russian invasion in February 2022, Ankara closed the straits to both NATO and Russian warships on the basis of the Montreux Convention, and called for a negotiated settlement.

Ankara’s support for Ukraine’s NATO membership shows that this policy has become increasingly untenable in the context of a sharp escalation of the US-led NATO war against Russia. Erdo?an had already paved the way for a major escalation against Russia in March, when he became the last leader to endorse Finland’s NATO membership. The vote in the Turkish parliament was unanimous, confirming once again that the Turkish bourgeoisie is in the service of imperialism.

Erdo?an declared his support for a criminal move that would bring NATO into a direct war with Russia, while

in the same speech he called for an “end to the war.” He said, “There is no loser in a just peace. It is our sincere wish that the parties, despite their differences of opinion, return to the quest for peace as soon as possible.”

Welcoming Erdo?an’s support for Ukraine’s NATO membership, Zelensky said, “I am grateful for Turkey’s support for our peace plan. We are working on the implementation of this peace plan.”

Zelensky’s so-called “peace plan” is an unfettered escalation of NATO’s war against Russia in Ukraine. The Biden administration’s announcement on Friday of its decision to send cluster bombs to Ukraine indicates that even more reckless moves are being prepared, from direct NATO involvement in the war to the deployment and use of nuclear weapons.

Erdo?an’s open support for Ukraine’s NATO membership came shortly before the Vilnius summit, where a more formal alliance with Kiev will be discussed. Ukrainian accession to the military alliance, which would drag NATO powers into a full-scale war with Russia due to the alliance’s Article 5, has been openly discussed in the recent period.

In April, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg declared, “Ukraine’s rightful place is in NATO,” adding, “All NATO allies have agreed that Ukraine will become a member.” In May, French President Emmanuel Macron said he supports a “path” for Ukraine into NATO.

After Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau visited Kiev in June and announced his support for Ukraine’s NATO membership, Ihor Zhovkva, the deputy head of the Office of the Ukrainian President, claimed that Canada was one of 20 NATO member states to agree in

writing that they support Ukraine becoming a member of NATO.

Erdoğan also announced that Russian President Vladimir Putin would visit Turkey in August. He said the two countries were seeking to extend the grain corridor agreement in the Black Sea, which expires on July 17, and that prisoner exchange talks between Ukraine and Russia were continuing.

Later on Saturday, however, Zelensky unexpectedly announced that the commanders of the fascist Azov Brigade held in Turkey had returned to Ukraine with him.

In a tweet ending with the fascistic slogan “Slava Ukraini,” he wrote, “We are returning home from Turkey and bringing our heroes home: Ukrainian soldiers Denys Prokopenko, Svyatoslav Palamar, Serhiy Volynsky, Oleh Khomenko and Denys Shleha. They will finally be with their relatives.”

The far-right commanders captured by Russian forces during the battle of Mariupol last year were slated to remain in Turkey until the end of the war, according to an agreement reached in September between Kiev, Moscow and Ankara.

The Kremlin, which closely followed the Erdoğan-Zelensky summit, reacted with sharp condemnation. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said, “The conditions of return were violated by both the Turkish and Kyiv sides,” adding, “Nobody informed us about this. According to the terms of the agreement, these persons were supposed to stay on the territory of Turkey until the end of the conflict.”

He said Turkey was under pressure to show solidarity with NATO ahead of the Vilnius summit, implying that Erdoğan had bowed to that pressure.

The Azov commanders, whom Zelensky and the Western media often call “heroes,” openly stand in the tradition of the Ukrainian fascists led by Stepan Bandera. This sordid tradition includes collaboration with the Nazis during the Second World War against the Soviet Union and complicity in the Holocaust as well as other massacres.

Prokopenko, one of the released Azov commanders, had previously referred to his grandfather, who fought against the Soviet Union on the Finnish side during the “Winter War,” saying, “It feels like I continued the same war, only on another section of the front, a war against the Kremlin’s occupation regime. My

grandfather had such a terrible hatred of communism, of Bolshevism, of the Sovok.”

Zelensky’s visit to Istanbul and Erdoğan’s declaration of support for Ukraine’s entry into NATO followed the latest round of talks between Ankara and Stockholm on Sweden’s NATO membership.

In the days leading up to the meeting, Washington stepped up pressure on Ankara to lift its veto and endorse Sweden becoming a NATO member at the Vilnius summit. After a meeting with Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson at the White House on Wednesday, President Joseph Biden said he “fully supports” Sweden’s NATO membership bid.

However, Thursday’s meeting at NATO headquarters in Brussels did not produce this outcome. Ankara argues that Sweden supports the Kurdish nationalist Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and its Syrian affiliate, the People’s Protection Units (YPG), which Turkey considers terrorist organizations, as well as individuals linked to Fethullah Gülen. Gülen is a long-time CIA asset and US-based preacher whom Ankara blames for the NATO-backed 2016 coup attempt against the Erdoğan government.

Referring to Sweden, Erdoğan said on Friday: “How can Turkey trust a country where terrorists run wild on the streets? How can a state that does not distance itself from terrorist organizations contribute to NATO?”

After the meeting in Brussels, NATO Secretary-General Stoltenberg said, “What we are working to achieve is a positive decision at the summit where Turkey makes clear it is ready to ratify.” Then he announced that Erdoğan and Kristersson would meet again in Vilnius.



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