

TRIBUNE - For the official recognition of Ukraine as a candidate state for EU membership

Eight years ago, the then Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich was deposed by his parliament and fled to Russia. His departure came after more than a hundred demonstrators were killed when he gave the order to evacuate by force the Independence Square in Kyiv. These demonstrators had been gathering for 3 months following the Ukrainian government's decision not to sign an association agreement with the European Union and to favour a rapprochement with Russia. These young people died, some with the European flag in their hands, because they wanted to be free to choose the future of their country. They felt European and sovereign. This was their only crime.

Since this "revolution of dignity", and despite the annexation of Crimea and the occupation of the Donbas, Ukrainians have not deviated from their European aspirations. On the contrary, each election has confirmed this desire to join the family of European democracies. According to a poll by the Ukrainian institute Rating Group published on February 17, 2022, 68% of respondents support membership in the European Union.

In 2015, the European Union recognized "Ukraine's European aspirations" and welcomed "its European choice." In 2017, the Ukrainian parliament, the Rada, passed a law making EU membership one of the strategic goals of Ukraine's foreign and security policy. This law, which came into force in 2019, enshrines this goal in the country's constitution and thus marks, according to the speaker of the parliament at the time, "the irreversibility of our European choice."

Ukraine cooperates with the European Union within the framework of the Eastern Partnership and has already adapted most of its legislation and economic policies in accordance with the association agreement signed with the European Union and entered into force in 2017. However, unlike Serbia or Montenegro, accession negotiations with Ukraine have not begun. Unlike Albania and Northern Macedonia, Ukraine is not officially recognized as a candidate state for EU membership. A formal application must be submitted, but most European states have not officially stated their support for Ukraine's future membership in the European Union.

We believe that it is time to officially recognize Ukraine as a candidate state to the European Union, paving the way for opening accession negotiations. We want to see a clear timetable with detailed objectives and milestones for Ukraine's full integration into the EU.

This recognition of a common goal of Ukraine's accession does not mean that Ukraine is ready to join the EU tomorrow. It has a long way to go. For example, Croatia was officially recognized as a candidate in 2004 and only joined the EU in 2013. So the accession negotiations are progressive, with chapters to be opened that require deep reforms to ensure convergence with the EU. However, this would be the best way to encourage Ukraine to continue to make the necessary reforms, particularly in the area of justice and the fight against corruption, and to strengthen the rule of law. These negotiations will therefore be demanding on both sides and will only be concluded when Ukraine is ready and if it so wishes at that time.

In the context of Russian aggression and threats to its territorial integrity and sovereignty, Ukraine needs support, both economically and politically. Recognizing the common goal of EU membership would send a strong signal to the Ukrainian people who have chosen the family of European democracies. It would also contribute to the economic stability of the country by offering long-term prospects for investors. Following the example of Horizon Europe and Euratom - of which Ukraine is a part - it would allow Ukrainians to participate in many European cooperation programs, to join the internal energy and digital market, and to accelerate its integration into the European single market, contributing greatly to the development of the country.

One only has to walk through the streets of Warsaw, Bratislava, Tallinn, Bucharest, or Vilnius to see the beneficial effects that EU membership has had on these cities. The countries of Central and Eastern Europe contribute fully and greatly to making the European Union an economic, political and technological power. The youth of Kyiv, a city full of life, innovation, and creation, aspires to the same success and opportunities.

Since 2014, Ukraine has paid dearly for its thirst for freedom and belief in the European ideal: Crimea has been annexed, the Donbas is occupied, more than 150,000 Russian soldiers are massed on its borders. Despite the attacks, despite the threats, Ukrainians want to join Europe. They show us, if we had forgotten, what being European means: sharing values and history, and being free to choose one's destiny. Let us listen to their call and reach out to them.