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# Ukraine's integration into West dashed by war and corruption

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV March 26, 2019 GMT

MOSCOW (AP) — Five years into Ukraine's conflict with Russia, Moscow seems to have Ukraine pinned against the ropes. Ukraine's ambition of joining the European Union and NATO is indefinitely stalled. It has no realistic way to reclaim control of Russian-annexed

Crimea, or to end the war with Russia-backed separatists in the east.

It's no wonder a comedian is leading in the polls for Sunday's presidential election.

The Kremlin has long seen Ukraine's plan to join NATO as a threat that must be fended off at all costs, and its calculations that the conflict in eastern Ukraine's Donbass region would scuttle the nation's membership bid seems to have worked.

"The Russian strategy is to keep the Donbass conflict smoldering for a long time and use it as an instrument to influence Ukraine's internal political situation and also as a major obstacle to Ukraine's membership in the EU and NATO," said Volodymyr Fesenko, head of the Penta Center, a Kiev-based thinktank.

"As long as the territorial problem of Crimea and Donbass remains, as long as the fighting in Donbass continues, it will be a decisive argument against letting Ukraine join the EU and NATO," he said.

In February 2014, Ukraine's former Russia-friendly president was ousted by mass protests sparked by his refusal to sign an association deal with the EU. Moscow saw his ouster as a Western-staged plot and responded by quickly annexing Ukraine's Crimea, a move seen by most countries as illegal, and backing a separatist insurgency in eastern Ukraine.

Ukraine has since signed an association deal with the EU and won a much-coveted visa-free travel deal with the bloc. But its hopes for joining the EU appear as elusive as ever, and that has contributed to public disenchantment and eroding the popularity of President Petro Poroshenko.

The U.S. and the EU have maintained strong political support for Ukraine, most recently over Russia's seizure of Ukrainian ships and their crews in November. But both NATO and the EU have made it clear they are not going to put Ukraine on a track to membership any time soon.

Asked last week when the EU and NATO could open the doors for Ukraine, German Chancellor Angela Merkel's spokesman Steffen Seibert said curtly "that is still not on the table for us."

Stefan Meister, an analyst at the German Council on Foreign Relations, said that German leaders feel that opening the path to NATO for Ukraine would further strain relations with Russia and fear that the commitment for mutual defense of alliance members could lead to open conflict with Russia if Ukraine were to join. "There is more or less a consensus on this

with the allies,” he said.

Meister added that the EU is still dealing with integrating its youngest members — including Romania and Bulgaria — and putting Ukraine on that path now would be unworkable.

“I think it’s something where people just say we will create problems for ourselves,” he said in a telephone interview from his office in Berlin.

Western allies also have been increasingly exasperated with the slow pace of Ukraine’s institutional reforms and efforts to combat corruption.

Earlier this month, the U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine, Marie Yovanovitch, issued an unusually harsh statement criticizing a Constitutional Court ruling that absolved Ukrainian officials of the obligation to prove legitimate the origin of their assets. She called that a “serious setback in the fight against corruption in Ukraine.”

“It is increasingly clear that Ukraine’s once-in-a-generation opportunity for change, for which such a high price was paid five years ago ... has not yet resulted in the anti-corruption or rule of law reforms that Ukrainians expect or deserve,” she said.

In a spat reflecting the tensions, Ukraine’s top prosecutor claimed that Yovanovitch had given him a list of people his office shouldn’t prosecute — a claim the U.S. State Department rejected as false.

While Putin may have succeeded for now in impeding Ukraine’s closer integration into Western alliances, Russia has paid a high price for annexing Crimea and backing rebels in eastern Ukraine.

The U.S. and the EU have hit Moscow with several waves of economic and financial sanctions, restricting its access to global financial markets and cutting supplies of key energy and defense technologies.

In 2015, France and Germany brokered a peace agreement that reduced the scope of fighting in eastern Ukraine that has left about 13,000 dead. The Minsk deal required Ukraine to grant sweeping autonomy to the rebel regions, effectively allowing them to run their own affairs — a provision that was broadly rejected by Ukraine’s political forces. A political settlement has stalled and regular clashes have continued.

The conflict in the east and rampant official corruption aren’t the only problems in Ukraine worrying the West.

Last week, ambassadors of the Group of Seven leading industrialized nations sent a letter to

the Ukrainian Interior Ministry, voicing concern about the threat posed by extreme right groups ahead of the elections.

International human rights organizations have long raised alarms about the rise of the ultra-right groups, who have targeted gay and women's rights activists and Roma encampments around the country.

The state-sponsored glorification of leaders of Ukraine's World War II-era nationalist movement — which included an insurgent army that sided with the Nazis — has angered Israel and Poland. Tensions have also simmered between Ukraine and Hungary over the alleged violation of ethnic Hungarians' rights in western Ukraine, following the adoption of an education law that practically eliminated the use of Hungarian and other minority languages.

Ukraine's media freedom record has drawn rebukes too.

Earlier this month, Austria strongly criticized Ukraine's refusal to grant entry to a reporter as an "act of censorship" defying European values. Ukraine shot back, accusing Austria of being too friendly to Russia.

"Ukraine looks more like a source of tensions and conflict, both geopolitically and economically, than an equal and attractive partner," said Andriy Yermolayev, director of the New Ukraine research center. "A full-fledged membership in the EU and NATO is just a beautiful political utopia."

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Yuras Karmanau in Kiev, Ukraine, and David Rising and Frank Jordans in Berlin contributed to this report.

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