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Ukraine's recommendations to
Belgium's Presidency of the Council of the EU:
Political and Security Dimension

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Belgium is going to hold EU presidency in crucial times marked by fundamental changes, challenges but also opportunities both for Ukraine, European Union and entire international coalition of states supporting Ukraine in its fight against unfair Russian aggression. Thus, continuous Ukraine's counteroffensive campaign and necessity to liberate other temporary occupied territories is accompanied by tremendous political shift in Ukraine – EU relations and prospective full-fledged opening of accession negotiations. However, it is all taking place simultaneously with number of challenges posed among others by domestic electoral campaign in US, necessity for the EU to acquire more visible and significant role in supporting Ukraine, keeping Union's unity and preventing political manipulation regarding backing Ukraine.

Consequently, close dialogue with Ukrainian civil society and experts can be a powerful instrument to harmonize EU supranational interests with Ukraine's priorities and needs during Belgium's presidency in the first half of 2024. This brief presents Ukraine's experts recommendations to priorities for Belgium's rotating presidency, in particular in political and security policy domains.

Promotion of Ukraine's membership in the EU, namely opening of accession negotiations

In particular, once the European Commission's recommendation to open negotiations with Ukraine is approved at EU leaders summit in December, 2023, Belgium's Council presidency will acquire crucial significance for political and technical progress towards further stages.

Political support on the side of Belgium's presidency will be extremely important for presentation, getting support and approval from the member states of the negotiating framework for Ukraine's accession process.

Besides of that, timing will also play significant role in this regard. In particular, the best case scenario is to divide in time expected intergovernmental conference to open accession negotiations with Ukraine, on the one hand, and internal political process, namely elections to the European Parliament, on the other hand. This suggestion is based upon idea to minimize the risks of manipulations and politicization around opening accession talks with Ukraine on the wave of domestic electoral campaigns in various EU member states.

Hence, not only ambitious, but also politically safe scenario both for Ukraine and Belgium's presidency would be to aim to organize intergovernmental conference as soon as possible after development of negotiating framework, namely in April 2024.

Secure Ukraine's political voice in functioning of the EU's bodies

Though not binding or obligatory for the EU, but Ukraine's ministers' participation in the meetings of the Council of the EU became not only symbolic, but practical instrument of bilateral rapprochement and harmonization of policy-making between candidate country and EU.

Moreover, it is not less important to keep Ukraine and other candidate countries as involved as possible into EU's internal discussion about the enlargement reform. This process of EU's preparations for further enlargement will be going on simultaneously with Ukraine's accession process. Inclusion of Ukraine and other candidates into respective discussions will be politically beneficial for both Ukraine, and the EU. Belgium during its presidency can take a leadership role in developing this format of Ukraine's involvement into shaping EU's future.

Strengthen EU's performance as an actor in the fields of defence and security policy

On a practical level Belgium has been playing and will continue to do so in supporting Ukraine on a number of fundamental issues. This will allow Belgium's presidency to serve politically for further encouragement of the EU's and its member states' stronger commitments to supporting Ukraine. This necessity in taking a lead becomes even more crucial taking into regard expected political turbulence in US before 2024 elections.

In particular, Belgium plays one of the most vital roles in the international aircraft coalition created this summer and aimed to provide Ukraine with modern Western air combat platforms such as F-16. Since Belgium officially joined the Coalition on 15 September, it's active role strengthened joint resolve to speed up deliveries of the F-16s to Ukrainian Air Forces.

Thus, intensive support to Ukraine in defense and security domains on a national level would politically enable and justify Belgium's prospective advocacy for EU's stronger performance as a single actor as well.

Speeding up or updating already existing initiatives in the field of military aid to Ukraine and EU's defence policy

2024 is highly likely to be a challenging period of internal debates between EU member states about models and instruments which will be able to secure long-lasting and sustainable military aid to Ukraine. Until now the European Peace Facility appeared to be rather efficient instrument but changing situation will require more and deeper engagement on the side of the EU to secure this support for the mid-term perspective.

Role of political leadership on the EU level in respective debates seems to be crucial, including during the time of Belgium's presidency. Ongoing process is coinciding in time with continuous search for security guarantees and assurances options for Ukraine after G7 Declaration on Viulnius summit. As of now EU's discussion about possible allocation of dedicated €20 bln to Ukraine's military aid for the next 4 years has faced challenges from some member states. Thus, timely and active promotion of EU's shift from short-term support to dedicated funds can be one of vital political tasks for rotating presidency in the EU.

Another practical issue demanding attention is already agreed 1 mln artillery ammunition delivery to Ukraine as a part of EU's major €3,5 bln military aid package, which is going to be completed in time. Although the prolonged negotiations over the project participants shifted its timelines, it's also clear there are additional efforts needed to bring the project up to speed.

It's not only the issue of providing military support for Ukraine, it's also a vital problem of replenishing the EU member-states arsenals as 50% from the promised 1 mln ammunition were to be delivered from the EU member nations' armories.

Belgium could send important messages urging EU member-states to make additional efforts in boosting their military-industrial complexes' capabilities and promoting closer security and industrial cooperation between EU members as part of the Union's strategy addressing Russian aggression against Ukraine as a vital threat to European security.

It's also worth looking into promotion of the military industrial cooperation between the EU member-states and Ukraine, as it would be beneficial from both the current situation and Ukraine's future accession to the EU.

Advocate for EU and G7 joint moves enabling raiding of frozen Russian financial assets to fund Ukrainian post-war reconstruction projects.

In October 2023 the EU leaders backed unprecedented moves to use profits generated from Moscow's state assets for reconstruction, and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen promised to deliver firm plans by the end of this year.

However, several European governments are privately worried about the risks to financial markets from such a move.

Belgium harbors the majority of Russian state assets frozen in the EU at the onset of Vladimir Putin's February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Although having a leadership role in using the income tax on frozen Russian assets the Belgian government seems to be reluctant to agree raiding the funds for Ukrainian reconstruction without the rest of the G7 moving with the EU at the same time.

Under Belgian leadership, the EU could make all the necessary preparations and in a joint move with G7 nations make a tremendous shift in anti-Russian sanctions' efficiency and Western non-military toolkit to further deter and contain Russian aggressive stance.