

Ukraine is not a charity case

GIVE EUROPE credit for stepping up when many doubted it could. Since Donald Trump cut American military aid to Ukraine, Europe has managed to fill the breach. It is accelerating the flow of money and arms eastward, while stiffening sanctions on the Russian aggressor. Partly as a result of European help, Russia's grim losses on the battlefield are putting pressure on Vladimir Putin. With American diplomatic efforts to end the war fizzling, some in Europe are asking whether it is time for them to take the lead and talk to the Russian leader.

That time may come, but not yet. The more urgent question for Europe concerns its relationship with a country that has transformed itself from a ward of the West into a crucial security partner. Ukraine's battle-hardened army is making progress and its innovative defence industry is growing. If Europe is to defend its borders and wean itself off a reliance on transatlantic help, it needs Ukraine as badly as the other way round. Europe's priority should be to fully embrace Ukraine, and fast.

For Ukraine itself, the goal has long been clear: full EU membership, to cement links with the West and make up for territory lost to Russia. Four years after accepting Ukraine as a candidate for membership, this month the EU is expected to open the first negotiating "cluster", covering topics such as democracy and the rule of law. Some in Kyiv hope full membership could follow as soon as next year. In the EU, however, even enthusiasts doubt it can come within a decade. The gulf in expectations between the two sides is dangerous.

Some responsibility for that lies with Volodymyr Zelensky, Ukraine's president. He should do more to strengthen domestic, independent institutions, and especially to fight corruption. He should be more open to creative ways for Ukraine to take early steps into the union. Friedrich Merz, Germany's chancellor, recently proposed an

“associate membership”, with limited voting rights, as a waystation to full-fat accession. Mr Zelensky was rash to dismiss that out of hand.

But the bigger task falls to the Europeans. Too many still look at Ukraine as a kind of charity case. In reality Europe has much to learn from Ukraine’s achievements, especially in drone technology, production and deployment. Europe’s armies can bolster their own security by investing in their neighbour. Sweden’s defence minister says that testing arms systems in Ukraine brings innovations in weeks or months, whereas doing so at home takes years or decades.

Some Europeans worry about going too fast. They talk of the risks from rushing to bring a big, poor, institutionally weak country into their union. These concerns are not baseless, but they miss the bigger picture: Europe must act fast to acquire more of the hard power needed to defend itself in an increasingly hostile world. Folding Ukraine into Europe’s embrace is a means of confronting the obvious regional threat, Russia. Enlargement is not merely a bureaucratic process. It is a geopolitical tool for a continent that looks vulnerable among more predatory great powers.

Other ideas, such as a European Security Council that might include Britain, could help formalise a security partnership with Ukraine more quickly. But the priority must be to speed up the EU entry process for Ukraine. The EU should begin drafting an accession treaty now, as a sign of intent to Ukraine’s war-weary people as well as to investors who will fund its post-war reconstruction. In return, Ukraine should be open to delays in subsidies or freedom-of-movement rights to make it easier for Europe to find unanimity.

The alternative is bleak. Polls show some young Ukrainians souring on EU membership. That should ring alarm bells. Which is worse: letting a poor but enthusiastic Ukraine into the club, or leaving an embittered but powerful one outside?