

**REPORT**

# After Putin's Land Grab, Zelensky Wants to Fast-Track NATO Membership

Ukraine likely won't join NATO anytime soon, but it's a big symbolic move in a war that's increasingly going against the Kremlin.

By [Robbie Gramer](#), [Jack Detsch](#), and [Amy Mackinnon](#)

SEPTEMBER 30, 2022, 2:49 PM

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky announced he was accelerating his country's bid to join NATO, hours after Russia declared it would annex four new regions of Ukrainian territory in a land grab widely denounced by the international community as illegitimate and illegal.

"De facto, we have already made our way into NATO," Zelensky said in a 7-minute message released on Telegram. "De facto, we have proven compatibility with alliance standards. De facto. Today, Ukraine is applying to make it de jure. ... under a procedure consistent with our significance for the protection of our entire community, under an accelerated procedure."

NATO chief [Jens Stoltenberg](#) said in a press conference on Friday that Ukraine has a right to apply for NATO membership, even as the alliance has sought to avoid entering a shooting war with Russia. "Every democracy in Europe has the right to apply for NATO membership," Stoltenberg said. "We have stated again and again that NATO's door remains open." Stoltenberg said the decision on Ukraine's possible membership was up to NATO's 30 member states, but he reiterated that in the meantime, the alliance would continue to support Ukraine because "inaction is a greater risk" to European security.

Zelensky's announcement is clearly a response to Russian President Vladimir Putin's illegal land grab and could also be aimed at sustaining morale among Ukrainians as Ukraine's military notches new battlefield wins. It also is a way to continue to apply pressure on NATO countries to offer more diplomatic and military support as it gears up for a longer-term war against Russia. But in practical terms, the announcement is unlikely to speed up Ukraine's

membership to NATO, according to three current and former NATO officials who spoke to *Foreign Policy*.

Western officials stressed there is not enough appetite within the 30-member alliance to bring Ukraine into the fold in the midst of its ongoing war against Russia, as top NATO and U.S. officials work to keep the conflict from spreading beyond Ukraine's borders. A foundation of the NATO alliance is its so-called Article 5 collective defense clause, which states that any attack on one alliance member constitutes an attack on all members, prompting a full alliance response. Expanding NATO requires approval from all 30 current member states' governments and legislative bodies.

"Adding new members to NATO is really hard to do, let alone with one in the middle of a war," said Jim Townsend, a former senior U.S. Defense Department official now with the Center for a New American Security. "And you can see why it is with Finland and Sweden."

Both Nordic countries applied to join NATO in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Adding Finland and Sweden led to rocky and tortuous negotiations for some NATO members, particularly Turkey, despite both Nordic countries being viewed as having some of the world's strongest democratic institutions with advanced militaries that are already closely integrated with NATO.

"I really have sympathy for Zelensky pushing that given where his country is today. But if there was a fast track out there, Finland and Sweden would've already skated right in," Townsend said. So far, 28 out of 30 NATO members have approved of Finland and Sweden's applications to join NATO. Turkey and Hungary remain the final holdouts.

NATO has debated whether to expand to Ukraine for over a decade. At a [NATO summit](#) in April 2008, in Bucharest, Romania, NATO members agreed that Ukraine and Georgia "will become members of NATO," supporting both former Soviet states in applying to the alliance's so-called membership action plan, which gauges the suitability of aspiring nations to join the alliance. But some alliance members later soured on the idea of bringing both countries into NATO at subsequent alliance summits after sharp backlash from Russia as well as Russia's war to illegally annex parts of Georgia later that year. Proponents of expanding NATO argue that bowing to Putin's demands will embolden him to attack other former Soviet countries to check the alliance's expansion, whereas

critics argue that expanding NATO on its vulnerable flanks could inadvertently drag the alliance into a military confrontation with Russia.

Several Ukrainian officials who spoke to *Foreign Policy* said Kyiv's move to send a fast-tracked application sent an important signal to Russia and proved that Putin's initial rationale for the invasion—preventing an eastward expansion of the NATO alliance—has blown up in his face.

“It's logic as much as the battle of symbols,” one Ukrainian official told *Foreign Policy*, speaking on condition of anonymity to speak about ongoing policy debates. “Russia annexes and is speaking to their domestic audience, and Ukraine says ‘OK, you know, fuck you, we're going to join NATO.’”

The official added that the bid would also allow Ukraine to accelerate military reforms that would be needed to join the alliance in the future. NATO allies have already begun trying to accelerate Ukraine's transition to alliance-grade equipment, moving Kyiv away from Russian standard 152mm artillery to 155mm artillery and finally toward modern Western systems, such as the U.S.- and European-made multiple launch rocket systems. Ukraine has already created working groups to aid in its bid for accession to the European Union and could do the same for NATO, the official added. In recent weeks, the United States has also begun pledging more modern military aid for Ukraine that could take months or years to arrive, a sign of long-term support to standardize the Ukrainian military along Western lines.

In his statement, Zelensky cited Finland and Sweden's move to join NATO without first entering the alliance's membership action plan program. “We know it's possible,” he said. “We have seen Finland and Sweden start accession to the alliance this year without a membership action plan. This is fair. This is also fair for Ukraine.”

Yet even if the bid is a long shot—to say the least—Putin's move to annex the eastern Ukrainian territories and Zelensky's request prompted a flurry of bureaucratic paper-rattling in the United States and other NATO member countries. The United States and Britain immediately slapped sanctions on the head of Russia's central bank, Elvira Nabiullina, while the Biden administration also moved to impose sanctions on Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu's wife and daughters in an effort to further isolate the Kremlin's elite after a monthslong drumbeat of sanctions.

Putin, announcing his faux land grab on Friday, vowed that the people of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia are “becoming our citizens forever.” Sham referendums held at gunpoint in the four regions over the past week were condemned by Ukrainian and Western officials. On Friday, Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said Putin doesn’t immediately plan to travel to the newly annexed territories, adding that the Russian president has “lots of work to do.”

The international community and Ukraine—which continues its counteroffensive in a bid to retake parts of the occupied territories—have dismissed the results of the referendums. But Moscow may use them to reframe the war as a defensive operation to defend the newly absorbed territories or as a pretext to escalate, claiming Ukraine has attacked Russian territory.

Putin devoted much of his speech, which was angry even by his own standards, to denouncing the West, rattling off lists of grievances dating back to the 17th century. He accused the West of seeking to turn Russia into a colony, railed against LGBTQ rights, and again made veiled references to nuclear weapons, noting that the United States had “setting a precedent” for their use at the end of World War II.

U.S. officials expressed defiance after Putin’s announcement. “This territory is and will remain Ukrainian,” U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a news conference alongside his Canadian counterpart on Friday.

Russia’s speech, aimed at intimidating Western countries that support Ukraine, will sharpen the debate in Brussels, Washington, and other capitals on whether Ukraine should join NATO, officials said, even beyond Zelensky’s announcement.

“For now, we should respond with words of reassurance to Ukraine,” Townsend said. “But then we need to table the talks on NATO membership and focus on passing the ammunition.”

---

**Robbie Gramer** is a diplomacy and national security reporter at *Foreign Policy*.

Twitter: [@RobbieGramer](https://twitter.com/RobbieGramer)

**Jack Detsch** is a Pentagon and national security reporter at *Foreign Policy*.

Twitter: [@JackDetsch](https://twitter.com/JackDetsch)

**Amy Mackinnon** is a national security and intelligence reporter at *Foreign Policy*.

Twitter: [@ak\\_mack](https://twitter.com/ak_mack)