

Ukraine's Dissonance – Who Will Capitalise on It?

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On 16 September, in her State of the Union address, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said that she wanted to work on opening the way for Canada to become the first “associate member” of the European Union [1]. Such a status is not provided for in the treaties, its content has yet to be worked out, and, according to media reports, the member states had not been informed of the idea beforehand [2]. Prime Minister Mark Carney stresses, however, that Ottawa is not seeking membership but a special alliance with the Union.

For Ukraine, this formula is not entirely new. In May, Chancellor Friedrich Merz proposed that it could take part in meetings of EU institutions without voting rights, as a stage before full membership. President Volodymyr Zelensky rejected the idea in a letter to EU leaders: it would be unfair for Ukraine to be present in the Union yet remain without a say, and it had never understood membership as entry into a “half-union” [3]. Kyiv does not rule out elements of participation in the work of the institutions on the road to accession [4], but it does not accept a model that would replace membership. The reaction to the proposal for Canada was therefore calm: a spokesman for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that Ukraine welcomes the deepening of EU–Canada relations and will follow the initiative closely [5], while media and experts stressed that the Canadian formula is not an alternative to Ukrainian membership [6].

In the same week, Volodymyr Zelensky hosted in the Carpathians the Prime Minister of Poland and the leaders of several other states of the region at the summit of the Carpathian Integration Initiative. Kyiv presented this format in May and personally champions it; its aim is a macro-regional strategy that Ukraine wants to embed in EU instruments and have adopted at EU level by the end of 2027 [7]. Where possible, Ukraine is thus taking the initiative in the region instead of waiting for invitations to other people's projects. At the same time, its formal position remains that of a candidate: the process is merit-based, and, as Commissioner Marta Kos said in an interview with “Corriere della Sera” on 2 October, ruling out Ukraine's accession on 1 January 2027 as impossible, there will be no shortcuts for candidates [8].

A dual picture emerges: between how Ukraine perceives its own position and how it is treated, a dissonance arises. The greater it is, the easier it will be to feed it with narratives of being undervalued, of betrayal, or of allies being unnecessary. To what extent does such dissonance make Ukrainian public opinion susceptible to manipulation, and who could benefit from it?

Sovereignism and Ukraine as the “Second Israel”

Pride and resentment are two sides of the same coin, and the tension between them will most likely, to a considerable extent, define social moods in Ukraine. Two narratives about the country's place in the world currently coexist in Ukrainian public discourse, seemingly opposed to each other. The first presents Ukraine as an actor that has gained real agency thanks to the

war: it is building its own defence industry, initiating regional formats, and is at times compared to Israel as a state capable of ensuring its own security independently – outside structures such as NATO – and of defining the security situation in its region more broadly. The second presents Ukraine as an ally that has paid the highest price yet receives too little and too late from its partners: aid that, in the view of some Ukrainians, was too slow in coming and cost the lives of many people, and an accession process that, despite the war, holds it to the same standard as any other candidate. To this is added resentment over the change of mood in parts of European societies, which, after the first wave of solidarity with refugees, have moved to increasingly frequent expressions of hostility.

Although emotionally opposed, these two narratives may lead to the same political outcome: a growing inclination to build identity around self-reliance and distrust of partners, at the expense of reforms and integration, which require time, compromise and patience. This inclination can be described as a policy of self-sufficiency or sovereignism – regardless of the actual capacity to put its assumptions into practice. It may, though need not, be inspired from outside. It is enough that it finds actors ready to articulate it, and circumstances in which it sounds louder than the arguments for integration. It is precisely in this tension, and not in individual decisions of Brussels, that the susceptibility to narratives that may serve the interests of the Kremlin lies.

The narrative of Ukraine as a “second Israel” is not merely an invention of commentators. It already appeared in 2022 in statements by Volodymyr Zelensky [9], and in the Western debate on security guarantees for Ukraine it returned as a model of long-term arming of the country, intensive enough to deter another Russian aggression [10]. Anders Fogh Rasmussen’s Kyiv Security Compact concept contained similar logic [11]. Today Ukraine has behind it a series of strikes deep inside Russian territory, a developed drone and missile industry, and a growing confidence in communication. Its own military capabilities are becoming a source of national pride, and combat experience an asset in its export offer. Ukraine has shown the world that it has not only the will to survive but also concrete cards in hand.

Pride also has a symbolic dimension. In July, Kyrylo Budanov, Head of the Office of the President, said at the ceremonies at the Kyiv Pechersk Lavra that Ukrainians are a people chosen by God and will therefore endure [12]. In conditions of a devastating war that has lasted several years, such words mobilise and build morale, but in narrative terms they may have consequences after the war has ended as well, reinforcing a register of exceptionalism and self-sufficiency.

Analysts describe this situation more cautiously. In an analysis from early 2024, the Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW) noted that the Israeli model was not taken seriously: the strategy of arming Ukraine, shaped at the time by Washington and Berlin, assumed deliveries that would allow the Ukrainian war effort to be sustained at roughly its existing level, without a significant increase in its scale and quality, and thus without the capacity to deter Russia that this model was aiming at [13]. Data from April 2026 show that, despite growing production capacity, the Ukrainian defence industry is unable to meet the army’s needs on its own, because funds are

lacking and companies rely almost entirely on foreign components [14]. This was underlined on 11 April by the Head of the Office of the President, Kyrylo Budanov, who said that the component base, including in drones, is not Ukrainian. Production carried out jointly with partners in Europe is financed by those states and serves today mainly the needs of Ukraine itself [14]. Kyiv treats these capabilities as an asset in talks on integration with Western military and political structures [14]. There are, moreover, further differences from Israel: Ukraine has no nuclear weapons, is not isolated in its region, and Israel itself bases its position on close relations with a great power.

This gap between self-narrative and data matters more than a factual correction. The more firmly the belief in its own self-sufficiency takes root in Ukrainian public debate, the easier it is to reach a false but emotionally coherent conclusion: that relying on allies is a matter of choice, not necessity, and that delays in European integration can be compensated for by building alternative, independent paths.

The force of both narratives may be increased by the way the war ends. The Weimar analogy, and its geographically closer Hungarian variant from the interwar period of revisionism after the Treaty of Trianon, explains well the mechanics of the myth of betrayal: the belief that a country did not lose on the battlefield but was betrayed by its allies or its own elites is one of the most enduring narrative patterns in twentieth-century European politics. Poles know it from their own history, in which Yalta remains a symbol of betrayal by Western allies. If the end of the war in Ukraine is perceived as a defeat or an unfinished victory, and Ukrainians count the sacrifices they have borne, the risk grows that this assessment will take hold, and with it the need to identify those to blame, internal and external, as well as resentment. It may form a basis for sentiments that are not only anti-Russian but also, as may seem counterintuitive, anti-European.

New Actors: Anti-Kremlin in Words, Aligned with the Kremlin in Effect

A type of political actor is emerging that – as analysts describe – may gain strength over time: openly and often sincerely anti-Kremlin, sometimes a veteran or someone with a military background. At the same time, its rhetoric – criticism of the West as unreliable, emphasis on self-reliance over alliances, suspicion of EU institutions and of foreign-funded non-governmental organisations – objectively weakens Ukraine’s Western anchor, without being pro-Russian in any traditional sense of the word [15, 16].

The first concrete manifestations of this tendency are already visible, though still marginal. In Kyiv one can come across billboards of a politician without real electoral backing, bearing the slogans “independence from Moscow and from Brussels” and “friendship with the EU yes, membership no” [17]. Their mere presence, regardless of the level of support for their author, serves as a probe of public moods. The most striking, though not the only, example remains the trajectory of Oleksii Arestovych, a former adviser to the head of the presidential administration and a military blogger. In May 2022, according to a survey by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS), 65 per cent of Ukrainians liked him, the second-highest result after Volodymyr

Zelensky [18]. He built his popularity, among other things, around the idea of reclaiming the legacy of Kyivan Rus' from Russia and a vision of Ukraine as a power combining Cossack heritage with technological ambitions. After leaving the country, he began calling for negotiations with Russia, softening his tone towards the Kremlin while sharpening his criticism of the authorities in Kyiv, and announced his own presidential ambitions [18]. The Kyiv-based Center for Countering Disinformation at the National Security and Defense Council (CCD), in a report prepared in June 2026 jointly with the European External Action Service (EEAS), lists his channel, alongside those of Diana Panchenko and Anatolii Sharii, among those that regularly appear in the environment for disseminating anti-European and anti-Ukrainian narratives. The report notes that such individuals present these messages as alternative analysis or domestic criticism, lending them personal credibility in the eyes of audiences distrustful of openly Russian sources [16]. It classifies them among actors that cannot be directly linked to Russian funding, while at the same time cautioning that the line between actors linked to that state and those aligned with it is analytical, not absolute [16]. The motives for such activity cannot be assessed, so this does not settle whether we are dealing with an agent of influence. It illustrates, however, how such a function can be performed even without outside steering: all that is needed is the right moment, the right audience and a suitably chosen set of grievances.

This distinction is crucial. The thesis about new political actors aligned with the Kremlin's interest is not about funding or inspiration from Moscow, and with regard to the actors described no such evidence has been presented. It is rather a structural thesis: the erosion of Ukraine's Western anchor does not today require a pro-Russian actor in the traditional sense. It is enough to have one who, even out of declaratively patriotic motives, often authentically anti-Kremlin, convincingly answers the question of why self-reliance and distrust of allies are supposedly a more rational choice than further, laborious integration. Combined with genuine, but also externally amplified, feelings of disappointment, frustration and rejection by other Europeans, this may create a favourable environment for the pursuit of the Russian agenda in Ukraine – without using the word "Russia".

Why Aid Does Not Protect Against Disappointment

The starting point is a simple observation from social psychology: the sense of grievance is rarely proportionate to the real scale of aid received. It is rather proportionate to the gap between expectations and what has been received, and to how well that fact has been communicated. What counts is not so much the size of the aid as how palpable it is at a given moment. That palpability, however, has a short memory. Trust in a particular state or institution, once strained by a current event, is not automatically protected by earlier goodwill, however large. Aid given earlier, even if exceptional compared with other countries, does not work as a permanent reserve to draw on at a worse moment, but as a balance reset to zero by each subsequent disappointment.

Anton Hrushetskyi, Executive Director of KIIS, described this mechanism in April 2025: Ukrainians' attitude towards a given state is closely correlated with the sense of what support it provides and with the statements coming from its political leaders, and at the core of attitudes

towards partners lie emotions, not calculation. The “here and now” can change even the historical component, because historical grievances return when a state’s current actions run against Ukraine’s interests [19]. He also warned that if Europe does not show determination, it will not make Ukrainians pro-Russian, but will significantly strengthen Eurosceptic tendencies, and that, given a low electoral threshold, anti-Western slogans may be an attractive niche for some politicians [19]. KIIS had already indicated in a release from surveys of February and March 2025 that, in the absence of sufficient progress in accession to the EU, frustration and anti-Western sentiment may develop [20].

Russian Cognitive Warfare

The scale of Russian influence operations, referred to in EU terminology by the acronym FIMI (Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference), says little about what they actually change in recipients’ minds. Since 2022, KIIS has been studying perceptions of Western policy towards Ukraine as one of the key narratives from the standpoint of information security, because, as it assesses, it is above all Russia that tries to impose on Ukrainians the belief that the West is tired and pressing for concessions [21]. In a poll from December 2025, among people who regard Europe as an unreliable ally, 27 per cent were ready to accept the Russian peace plan, compared with 13 per cent among those who continue to believe that Europe wants a just peace for Ukraine. In both groups, most rejected the Russian version of peace [22]. Hrushetskyi assesses that undermining faith in allies’ support is one of the directions of Russian propaganda and that it may have negative consequences, because it makes society more demoralised and susceptible to any peace at all [22]. In June 2026 he described this mechanism as a path from momentary emotions through deep outrage and a sense of betrayal to a loss of confidence, adding that he understands and often shares Ukrainians’ indignation at some decisions of Western partners [21].

Kharkiv-based sociologist Artem Lytovchenko points out that assessments of European aid in KIIS surveys changed markedly over the course of a year. The share of positive ones fell from 64 per cent in May 2025 to 55 in December, while the share of sceptics rose to 33–36 per cent. Trust in the EU as an institution was considerably more stable over this period, although distrust grew at the expense of the undecided [23]. These changes, he writes, can be read in two ways: an optimist will see in them critical thinking, a pessimist the instability of views dependent on external influence, and thus susceptibility to manipulation. The author does not side with either interpretation. He stresses that it is not known what those who changed their minds were reacting to, and that without knowing the causes the percentages say little. He adds that if the changes are a simple reaction to media reports, they can hardly be expected to be lasting [23].

From the above data an important distinction follows: assessments of current aid are a more fluid segment, dependent on circumstances, whereas trust in the EU as an institution is more durable. The question of how far this fluidity results from reactions to real events and how far from the shaping of perceptions remains open. Nevertheless, it should still be seen as a space of risk of manipulation and external influence.

This mechanism is also visible in relations with particular allies. The EEAS and CCD report describes how messages aimed at Ukrainians may later be reworked for audiences in EU states, while statements from European debates are selectively brought back into the Ukrainian information space to create the impression that the Union has lost confidence in Kyiv [16]. In Ukrainian–Polish relations, two signals from the summer of 2026 show different addresses of the same logic. At the end of June, the CCD recorded a wave of distorted historical narratives and provocative statements, designed for both audiences, with the aim of severing the partnership between Kyiv and Warsaw, one of the key elements of support for Ukraine in the war [24]. Nine days later, the Ukrainian Center for Strategic Communications (Spravdi) described an operation aimed primarily at a Western reader: about seventy publications from 2 July, in English and other languages, portrayed Poland as a state that had walked into a diplomatic trap of its own making by helping Ukraine, and Ukraine as an ungrateful ally [25]. What links them is the aim: to set Ukraine and Poland against each other.

The scale of activity in the Ukrainian information space is described by the report mentioned above. Between January 2025 and May 2026, the CCD monitored 244 thousand publications with 1.39 billion views around the topic of EU accession, and within this set more than 2,600 sources showed signs of inauthentic behaviour: synchronised dissemination, coordinated reactions to events and artificial amplification [16]. The report assesses that Russian operations rely less and less on individual fabrications and more and more on building a manipulative information environment: the point is to flood the recipient with contradictory messages, undermine trust in official sources and create the impression that reluctance towards European integration is widespread and natural [16]. The main risk for Ukrainian audiences lies, according to the CCD, not in a sudden collapse of support for the European course but in an accumulation of doubts in particular groups: those weary of war, the economically vulnerable, and those who get information mainly from Telegram and short videos [16]. The CCD also points to a second risk: the normalisation of anti-European interpretations in domestic political debate. When local actors reproduce Russian frames without indicating their source, those frames become more resilient and harder to expose [16].

Conclusions

Neither of the two opening scenes is in itself a threat. The Carpathian Integration Initiative is a genuine attempt to take the initiative in the region, embedded in EU instruments, while the question of associate-state status for Canada concerns a country that has never aspired to full membership and cannot be treated as a precedent for Ukraine. The problem may rather be the tension that both events reveal: Ukraine wants to be treated as a subject, yet remains a candidate for which Brussels has already considered intermediate formulas. Kyiv rejected one of them in May, but its presence in the debate shows that the question of the timetable and conditions of full membership remains open.

The scale of the phenomenon is limited today: almost half of Ukrainians trust Europe and about half as many distrust it, and even among those who regard it as an unreliable ally, most reject the Russian peace plan. A mechanism combining pride with resentment, anti-Kremlin actors de

facto pursuing an agenda aligned with the Kremlin's, and Russian disinformation that reinforces these divisions without creating them from scratch is nevertheless neither an extreme nor an improbable scenario. On the contrary – it is a natural direction for a society going through what Ukraine is going through today, and for that very reason it requires conscious counteraction, not mere observation.

This counteraction must work on both levels at once. A credible, up-to-date counter-narrative is needed: it is the quality and emotional resonance of communication, not the sheer scale of aid, that decides whether disappointment finds a political outlet. But a counter-narrative without lasting, institutional anchoring in European structures treats only the symptoms. It is real membership, not another successful communications campaign, that removes the very space in which a state of chronic drift could persist and be exploited by Russia.

From a Polish perspective, a very bad scenario is for Ukraine to remain in a grey zone between the Union and Russia. Ukraine will not be a second Israel: its defence industry depends on foreign components and financing, and a state that lacks the strength to be self-sufficient in conditions of war and reconstruction, and also lacks a full anchor in Western structures, remains open to the mechanism described: to narratives of betrayal and of being undervalued, to politicians who will exploit them, and to Russian information operations that reinforce these moods. For Poland, this would mean a politically unstable neighbour, susceptible to attempts to set Kyiv against Warsaw, traces of which are already visible today. Ukraine's European integration is a security imperative for the Union itself as well. It is therefore in Poland's interest to support its real, institutional accession, and not intermediate solutions.

Notes

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