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- EUROPEAN INTEGRATION
- REFORMS AND RECOVERY
- CONTAINMENT THROUGH ENLARGEMENT

UKRAINE – EUROPEAN UNION

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ENLARGEMENT UNDER FIRE: HOW UKRAINE'S CANDIDACY IS REWIRING EU INTEGRATION AND INTERNAL REFORM

Akim Kalatur
Euro Prospects

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has turned European Union enlargement from a slow technocratic process into a central instrument of European security. This article argues that Ukraine's candidacy is pushing the union beyond the classic linear accession model towards a staged integration process, in which security cooperation, sectoral economic access, reconstruction support and governance conditionality advance in parallel. In turn, this shift is forcing the European Union to confront internal constraints in rule-of-law enforcement, decision-making, budgetary redistribution and differentiated integration. Ukraine is therefore not only adapting to the union. It is reshaping how the latter understands enlargement, preparedness and reform.

From Enlargement Fatigue to Geopolitical Enlargement

Today, the European Union, as a supranational institution, ranks as the second-largest economy in the world. The level of life for an average person and human development performance are ranked, according to Eurostat, among the highest in the world.¹ This 'European project' originated from the ashes of WWII with one primary goal — the prevention of another great war; as the last one left the continent devastated. The accession of new members was not only based on economic benefits, but also on political ones. Consequently, as the union grew bigger, political decisions started

to outweigh the technicalities, fostering the growth of the current bureaucratic machine. The European Union started to be seen as slow and overburdened with bureaucracy.

The Western Balkans countries were held back in a long limbo of accession, and Ukraine was then offered a wide-ranging association agreement without any credible path to actual membership. However, the Russian invasion broke that pattern and hurried forward the process. Ukraine submitted an application for membership in February 2022, was granted candidate status in June 2022, and officially began accession talks in June 2024. The screening process was finished by September 2025.²


1 European Commission, Quality of Life Indicators — Measuring Quality of Life, Eurostat Statistics Explained, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Quality_of_life_indicators_-_measuring_quality_of_life.

2 European Commission, Ukraine, European Commission — Enlargement Portal, 2025, <https://ec.europa.eu>.

The speed of the process was historically unprecedented and politically revealing. The ongoing war transformed membership into a strategic tool of order, deterrence, and continental consolidation, which is the reason why enlargement was revived, rather than because the old technocratic reasoning had suddenly become more effective. This is why one may argue that Ukrainian candidacy is rewriting the basic standards of EU membership in two interconnected ways. First, it transforms the enlargement process itself. Forms of ‘integration before accession,’ such as sectoral market liberalisation, security cooperation, financial conditionality, and political inclusion, are being added to the conventional accession process based on gradual conformity with the *acquis*. Second, it transforms the EU internally into a war-damaged state, which is in a deep humanitarian crisis, as well as one which is strategically exposed, and this cannot be accepted as the norm unless the EU substantially reforms itself.

Ukrainian membership prospects intensify the debate over rule-of-law safeguards, budgetary redistribution, decision-making reform and differentiated integration. In this sense, Ukraine is not merely a candidate adapting to the European Union; it is a catalyst forcing the union to adapt to enlargement as a security strategy. EU enlargement was suffering from fatigue syndrome, and its paradigm was under strain. The Copenhagen framework remained formally intact, but its practice had become inconsistent, highly politically motivated and increasingly lethargic. Kochenov and Basheska show that the

enlargement law, despite being formally flexible, has been increasingly politicised in the application process, producing delay without reliably delivering the expected transformation in candidate states.³ The case of the Western Balkans countries serves as the clearest example of this. Although the EU declared membership to be the ultimate goal, in reality it normalised protracted pre-accession conditionality, selective vetoes, and stalled discussions. Darvas et al. similarly argue that the credibility of the accession promise is decisive for reform incentives, and that arbitrary blockages undermine the very transformative effect that enlargement is supposed to generate.⁴



Ukrainian membership prospects intensify the debate over rule-of-law safeguards, budgetary redistribution, decision-making reform and differentiated integration

This is also supported by Scicluna’s study of the post-2022 debate: the war significantly raised the prominence of expansion, yet that discursive rebirth still encounters procedural obstacles carried over from the pre-war era.⁵

The war changed the framing of the policy. It strengthened broader European frameworks such as the European Political Community, alongside closer ties with

3 D.V. Kochenov, E. Basheska, Ukraine and the EU Enlargement: What is the Law and Which is the Way Forward?, *European Journal of Risk Regulation*, 2025, <https://bit.ly/4u7nMLv>.

4 Z. Darvas, M. Dabrowski, H. Grabbe, L. Léry Moffat, A. Sapir, G. Zachmann, The impact on the European Union of Ukraine’s potential future accession, *Bruegel Report 02/24*, 2024, <https://bit.ly/4x1sLjH>.

5 N. Scicluna, Framing enlargement after the Russian invasion of Ukraine: between geopolitical drivers and procedural roadblocks, *Journal of European Public Policy*, Volume 32, 2025, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13501763.2025.2557432>.

NATO, the Council of Europe and the United Kingdom.⁶ The union's response to the Russian invasion was not a pure aid and sanctions imposition; it was the relaunch of the enlargement policy as a geopolitical instrument. For example, Ukraine applied for EU candidacy six days after the start of the invasion, signalling a political transformation of the policy itself. Further, the EU's strategic redefinition was accelerated by wartime conditions: although the union is not a traditional state actor and must exercise power through relationships, institutions, and layered forms of order rather than traditional territorial dominance, enlargement and deeper integration are increasingly seen as tools of geopolitical power.⁷ In the official documents, the shift is unmistakable. In its 2024 enlargement statement, the commission emphasises that enlargement must prepare both the candidates and the union itself, while simultaneously portraying accession as a catalyst for "security, peace, stability, and prosperity".⁸ The other EU institution involved shows the same official-language logic. The Council of the European Union internal agenda states that reforms in values, policies, budget and governance must advance in parallel with enlargement, so that both sides are ready at the moment of accession.⁹

Ukraine and the Transformation of the Accession Model

This very point makes the Ukrainian case different from the classic integration model. The old sequence assumed that legal approximation came first and full political and strategic incorporation came afterwards. The war has made that order increasingly untenable. According to Darvas et al., Ukraine's admission process will inevitably coincide with the rebuilding of the war-torn country, and EU membership will serve as a framework for organising reconstruction rather than as the ultimate reward following normalisation.¹⁰ From a reconstruction perspective, the same can be said, as preparation for accession cannot be separated from rebuilding the Ukrainian state, because post-war reconstruction, legislative harmonisation and institution-building must proceed together if Ukraine is to emerge resilient and governable.¹¹ This can be supported by reference to the commission's documents, as the official Ukrainian page demonstrates this useful combination of tracks: the accession screening process was finished a month before the updated DCFTA came into effect in October 2025.¹² Enlargement therefore ceases to be a linear path from outside to inside; it becomes a layered process of progressive incorporation. In academic

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- 6 F. Fabbrini, The Impact of the War in Ukraine on the Enlargement of the European Union: 'Securing the Blessings of Liberty' and its Challenges, *International and Comparative Law Quarterly*, 2025, <https://bit.ly/4fzyPx>.
 - 7 V. Anghel, Why the EU is a Geopolitical Power: Wartime Enlargement, Integration, and Reform, *Journal of European Public Policy* 32(12), 2025, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13501763.2025.2558974>.
 - 8 European Commission, Communication on EU Enlargement Policy (COM(2024) 690 final), European Commission, 30.10.2024, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52024DC0690>
 - 9 Council of the European Union, Internal reforms of the EU, Consilium, 27.06.2025, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/internal-reforms-of-the-eu/>.
 - 10 Z. Darvas, M. Dabrowski, H. Grabbe, L. Léry Moffat, A. Sapir, G. Zachmann, Ukraine's path to European Union membership and its long-term implications, Bruegel Policy Brief 05/24, 2024, <https://bit.ly/3PTBoMu>.
 - 11 M.-G. Ciot, Reconstruction and Preparation for Ukraine's Accession to the EU, S. Nate (ed.), *Ukraine's Journey to Recovery, Reform and Post-War Reconstruction*, 2024, https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-031-66434-2_11.
 - 12 European Commission, Ukraine, "European Commission – Enlargement Portal", 2025, <https://ec.europa.eu>.

terms, such a concept lies within the idea of differentiated integration. Ruskowski defines differentiated integration as a system in which not all states integrate at the same pace or in the same policy areas, allowing flexibility in response to different preferences, capabilities and priorities.¹³



The old sequence assumed that legal approximation came first and full political and strategic incorporation came afterwards. The war has made that order increasingly untenable

This, indeed, fits the Ukrainian case well. The commission now speaks openly of gradual integration into the single market before accession, while the Ukraine Facility and the Western Balkans Growth Plan are built around reform-for-benefit sequencing rather than waiting for final membership before facilitating material gains.¹⁴ It can truly be described as a phased or staged integration — reforms are rewarded with concrete participation in EU policies, which may accelerate legal alignment but also increase the risk of countries being trapped in an indefinite halfway house.¹⁵ Such intervention in the acceleration of accession can be a danger, as gradual integration

can sustain momentum, but if it becomes a substitute for full membership, it may reproduce the same strategic ambiguity that weakened the EU in the first place.¹⁶

There is another reveal that can be associated with Ukrainian integration, as this type of integration is not only economic but increasingly security-centred. Matlak and Sus argue that wartime accession exposes a structural blind spot in the enlargement method: it still treats security as largely external to accession, even though Ukraine's case shows that enlargement and a security policy are now inseparable.¹⁷ Through updated benchmarks, improved collaboration between DG NEAR, DG DEFIS, the EEAS, and the council, and a strategic discussion on security guarantees connected to Article 42.7 TEU, they point to integrating security into the methodology. From a defence-planning perspective, Gressel and Popescu arrive at a similar conclusion. They believe that because Chapter 31 of the *acquis* evaluates declaratory foreign-policy alignment rather than actual defence interoperability, intelligence collaboration, or military resilience, it barely scratches the surface. Therefore, the proposition arises of either expanding the enlargement methodology with defence-focused assessment or creating defence cooperation roadmaps parallel to accession, especially for countries that are not guaranteed NATO membership.¹⁸ In the same direction,

- 13 Ruskowski, Janusz. "Źródła zróżnicowanej integracji Unii Europejskiej" / "Sources of differentiated EU integration." *Przegląd Europejski – European Studies Quarterly*, 2024, <https://przegladeuropejski.com.pl/api/files/view/2717127.pdf>
- 14 European Commission, Communication on EU Enlargement Policy (COM(2024) 690 final), European Commission, 30.10.2024, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52024DC0690>
- 15 Z. Darvas, M. Dabrowski, H. Grabbe, L. Léry Moffat, A. Sapir, G. Zachmann, The impact on the European Union of Ukraine's potential future accession, Bruegel Report 02/24, 2024, <https://bit.ly/4x1sLjH>
- 16 E. Morina, Accelerate the accessions: Why faster is better in EU enlargement policy, ECFR, 18.12.2025, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/accelerate-the-accessions-why-faster-is-better-in-eu-enlargement-policy/>.
- 17 M. Matlak, M. Sus, Bridging the Gap for Wartime EU Accession, Security/policy brief, 2024, <https://www.epc.eu/publication/Security-and-Eastern-Enlargement-Bridging-the-Gap-for-Wartime-EU-Acce/>.
- 18 G. Gressel, N. Popescu, Strength in members: How to rally EU enlargement for defence, ECFR, 2.04.2025, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/strength-in-members-how-to-rally-eu-enlargement-for-defence/>.

Ukraine is strongly linked to Europe's defence, and that defence integration can no longer be treated as marginal to the union's future design.¹⁹



the EU-Ukraine joint security commitments signed in June 2024 explicitly connect security, defence support, reform, humanitarian assistance, reconstruction, and the accession process

From the practical side, the EU already reflects such emerging logic, even if incompletely. The 2024 commission report states that while Ukraine is committed to reforms in the security, defence, and intelligence sectors as part of its EU path, the EU-Ukraine joint security commitments signed in June 2024 explicitly connect security, defence support, reform, humanitarian assistance, reconstruction, and the accession process.²⁰ Taking it one step further, the last report states the following: it describes the Ukraine Facility as not simply macro-financial support, but as the main instrument for recovery, reconstruction, modernisation and accession-related reforms, with Pillar III specifically financing accession-related technical assistance, including

the Ukraine2EU programme launched in January 2025.²¹ This is where the innovation is hidden away – meaning that accession is no longer merely monitored by annual reports and negotiation chapters; it is now materially embedded in reconstruction finance, administrative reform and wartime resilience.

Ukraine as a Catalyst for EU Internal Reform

From the economic side, this is both an opportunity and a pressure situation. Prior to the Russian full-scale invasion, Ukraine's economic ties to the EU were already strong, and since 2022, these ties have only grown stronger. Many advantages and shocks caused by accession will be absorbed before formal membership eventuates, through trade, services, mobility, energy, and reconstruction investment.²² Scholars like Darvas and others argue that integration by stages into a single market, as well as other aspects, brings benefits from the very beginning to both sides, and strengthens reform incentives inside Ukraine.²³ Official documents on enlargement use the same language of 'gradual integration' and explicitly link the Ukraine Plan and trade measures leading to pre-accession convergence.²⁴ Economically, the partnership is already at least partially frontloaded.

19 S. Blockmans, Roadmap Towards a Common Defence for Europe. Analysing Eight Governance Models, Charge Research Platform Volt / Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS), 2025, <https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/roadmap-towards-a-common-defence-for-europe/>.

20 European Commission, Communication on EU Enlargement Policy (COM(2024) 690 final), European Commission, 30.10.2024, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52024DC0690>.

21 European Commission, Ukraine 2025 Report, SWD(2025) 759 final, European Commission, 30.10.2025, <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2132152.html>.

22 T. Akhvediani, V. Movchan, The Impact of Ukraine's Accession on the EU's Economy: The Value Added of Ukraine, ICDS / CEPS policy paper, 22.02.2024, <https://icds.ee/en/the-impact-of-ukraines-accession-on-the-eus-economy-the-value-added-of-ukraine/>.


23 Z. Darvas, M. Dabrowski, H. Grabbe, L. Léry Moffat, A. Sapir, G. Zachmann, The impact on the European Union of Ukraine's potential future accession, Bruegel Report 02/24, 2024, <https://bit.ly/4x1sLjH>

24 European Commission, Communication on EU Enlargement Policy (COM(2024) 690 final), European Commission, 2024, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/2024-communication-eu-enlargement-policy_en

Yet this frontloading is precisely what rebounds onto the EU's internal reform agenda. Integration with wartime partners is possible when the union reforms itself to remain governable, legitimate and fiscally sustainable. The same veto power of each member state, as has been shown, can be used in malign and/or sabotaged ambitions, as has happened with Hungary. Hence, such power can be uncontrollably destructive for a bigger union. The council's current roadmap states this openly: internal reform is necessary across values, policies, budget, and governance to prepare for an enlarged union.²⁵ Costa et al. strengthen the argument by claiming that the EU's structures and decision-making processes were never intended for such a sizable and politically diverse membership, rendering it unprepared to accept new members under the current arrangements.²⁶ All of this is visibly absent in the Ukrainian case: stronger rule-of-law enforcement, movement beyond the current need for unanimity, and the formalisation of differentiated integration. One must remember that all of this does not just constitute abstract constitutional preferences in a vacuum; they are the institutional preconditions for making geopolitical enlargement work.

Rule-of-law conditionality sits at the heart of this debate. War has transformed it into a politically central issue. While emphasising that democratic institutions do continue to function under martial law, the commission's 2024 and 2025 Ukraine Reports also frequently highlight the

necessity for bolstering legislative oversight, impact assessment, electoral preparation, decentralisation, anti-corruption capacity, and administrative coordination for the accession process.²⁷



Integration with wartime partners is possible when the union reforms itself to remain governable, legitimate and fiscally sustainable

At some stage, the EU should include Ukraine in its broader rule-of-law toolbox, even before accession, and it should develop clearer post-accession enforcement instruments, including the suspension of voting rights and funds if benchmarks are violated.²⁸ From the legal point of view, one may be more critical of the old system, as pre-accession conditionality has often delayed accession without reliably guaranteeing the rule of law, which is why a less politicised and more predictable application of Article 49 TEU is needed.²⁹ Yet one has to understand that standards should not be lowered in the case of Ukraine. It is in fact the opposite: because enlargement is now geopolitical, rule-of-law safeguards must become more credible, more enforceable and less hostage to arbitrary politics.

25 Council of the European Union, Internal reforms of the EU, Consilium, 27.06.2025, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/internal-reforms-of-the-eu/>.

26 O. Costa, G. Marti, K. Caunes, A Roadmap for Enlarging and Reforming the European Union: Taking the Report of the 'Group of Twelve' Seriously, *European Law Journal*, 2025, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/eulj.12540>.

27 European Commission, Ukraine 2025 Report, SWD(2025) 759 final, European Commission: Brussels 2025.

28 Z. Darvas, M. Dabrowski, H. Grabbe, L. Léry Moffat, A. Sapir, G. Zachmann, Ukraine's path to European Union membership and its long-term implications, Bruegel Policy Brief 05/24, 2024, <https://bit.ly/3PTBoMu>.

29 D.V. Kochenov, E. Basheska, Ukraine and the EU Enlargement: What is the Law and Which is the Way Forward?, *European Journal of Risk Regulation*, 2025, <https://bit.ly/4u7nMLv>.

Budgetary reform can have significant internal consequences. Emerson's early estimate suggested that, under a static application of the existing rules, Ukraine as a member could receive roughly EUR 18–19 billion net from the EU budget annually, increasing GNI-based contributions by around 10 percent, but he also insisted that control valves and transition arrangements would significantly shape real outcomes.³⁰ Subsequent research, however, expanded the picture. According to the Bruegel report, Ukraine would become a significant recipient of agricultural and cohesion funding under the current MFF rules, but the net cost for current members would remain manageable relative to EU GDP, especially when broader growth, trade, and tax effects are taken into account.³¹ As was discovered in the EP study, it would not be an automatic boosting of cohesion policy, yet there would be a substantial effect on redistribution, particularly through agriculture and the 'statistical effect' on current beneficiaries; transitional arrangements, revised capping rules and serious pre-accession support would therefore be essential.³⁹ This means that Ukrainian candidacy is forcing the union to reopen questions that had long been politically frozen: these include CAP allocation, cohesion logic, the MFF, reconstruction finance and the relationship between pre-accession assistance and full membership.

The study shows that the next Multiannual Financial Framework will not comprise a

simple finance enlargement; it will signal whether the union's commitment to enlargement is credible. The crucial concern in the 'gradual integration' scenario is how to continue providing rebuilding funds and significant pre-admission support if accession does not occur until 2034.³² This is directly connected to the official position of the council, announcing that internal reform and enlargement must proceed together, not sequentially.³³ Here, therefore, the Ukraine situation is a functional mechanism which shows that union enlargement cannot be just rhetorical and fiscally vague at the same time. It must be decided what level of solidarity, redistribution and institutional adaptation the EU is actually prepared to sustain.

Layered Integration and the Strategic Future of the European Union

Jan Zielonka helps to explain why this transformation does not necessarily point towards a uniform federal end-state. He contended in his earlier work on EU policy towards Eastern Europe that the union's eastern engagement frequently lacked a cohesive grand plan and was motivated more by a combination of external shocks and internal goals than by a single, distinct design.³⁴ In his foundation book, 'Europe as Empire', he proposes that the enlarged EU increasingly resembles a neo-medieval empire, with a polycentric polity with overlapping authorities, fuzzy borders, multiple identities and differentiated

30 D.V. Kochenov, E. Basheska, Ukraine and the EU Enlargement: What is the Law and Which is the Way Forward?, *European Journal of Risk Regulation*, 2025, <https://bit.ly/4u7nMLv>.

31 M. Emerson, The Potential Impact of Ukrainian Accession on the EU's Budget – and the Importance of Control Valves, ICDS policy paper, <https://icds.ee/en/the-potential-impact-of-ukrainian-accession-on-the-eus-budget-and-the-importance-of-control-valves/>, 2023.

32 Z. Darvas, M. Dabrowski, H. Grabbe, L. Léry Moffat, A. Sapir, G. Zachmann, The impact on the European Union of Ukraine's potential future accession, Bruegel Report 02/24, 2024, <https://bit.ly/4x1sLjH>

33 European Parliament, Budgetary Support Unit; E. Rubio, C. Alcidi, R. Hansum, T. Akhvediani, I. Begg, J. Lindner, B. Couteau, Adapting the EU budget to make it fit for the purpose of future enlargements, 2025.

34 Council of the European Union, Internal reforms of the EU, Consilium, 27.06.2025, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/internal-reforms-of-the-eu/>.

forms of inclusion, rather than resembling a Westphalian super-state.³⁵ Such an idea is strictly relevant today, as Ukraine's candidacy is not pushing the EU towards a simple inside/outside dichotomy. A model of sectoral engagement, blurring boundaries, concentric incorporation, and strategic inclusion based on several levels of integration is being reinforced. However, Zielonka cautioned that if multilayered complexity surpasses political voice, such an arrangement poses threats to democracy, accountability, and legitimacy.³⁶ Such a warning matters, as staged accession



At some stage, the EU should include Ukraine in its broader rule-of-law toolbox, even before accession, and it should develop clearer post-accession enforcement instruments

is more flexible, yet bringing with it a need for stronger political accountability if it is not to become procedurally opaque and socially brittle.

Thus, the European Political Community (EPC) matters, while, obviously, it cannot be a substitute for actual enlargement. Toygür and Maillard present the EPC as a continent-wide platform born of war, useful precisely because it offers strategic dialogue on an equal footing among EU and

non-EU European states, and keeps security at the top of the agenda.³⁷ According to Fabbrini³⁸, the EPC is one part of a larger framework of international cooperation that supports but does not replace EU accession. In the Ukrainian case, the EPC demonstrates the union's turn towards layered political incorporation: states can be drawn into strategic coordination before formal membership; however, this obviously has a limit. With no concrete horizon, such platforms risk reproducing the ambiguity that characterised pre-war neighbourhood policy. Therefore, it is appropriate to think of the EPC as one layer in the larger process of progressive integration rather than as an alternative to accession. Moreover, Öhlén stresses that future enlargement has gained momentum because of insecurity, but that the decisive issue remains whether the EU truly wants enlargement and is ready to sustain it with patience and institutional adaptation.³⁹ Others stress that the Union is once again facing the classic widening versus deepening conundrum, following Brexit and during a time of war, but this time under more strategic pressure and with a wider range of candidates than in 2004.⁴⁰⁴⁷ Their conclusion is not that widening must wait until deepening is complete, but that the two must be managed together. Ukraine's candidacy makes that interdependence impossible to ignore.

35 J. Zielonka, *Paradoxes of European Foreign Policy: Policies Without Strategy: the EU's Record in Eastern Europe*, Yearbook of Polish European Studies, 1998.

36 J. Zielonka, *Europe as Empire: The Nature of the Enlarged European Union*, 2007.

37 I. Toygür, S. Maillard, *The European Political Community: Navigating the Path to Consolidation*, GPC Policy Brief, June 2024

38 F. Fabbrini, *The Impact of the War in Ukraine on the Enlargement of the European Union: 'Securing the Blessings of Liberty' and its Challenges*, *International and Comparative Law Quarterly*, 2025, <https://bit.ly/4fizyPx>.

39 M. Öhlén, *Future EU Enlargements — Opportunities and Dilemmas*, Ekman, Lundqvist, Michalski, Oxelheim (eds.), *The Depth and Size of the European Union in a Time of War*, 2025.

40 P. Ekman, B. Lundqvist, A. Michalski, L. Oxelheim (eds.), *The Depth and Size of the European Union in a Time of War*, 2025.

Policy Implications

Three key policy recommendations can be put forward.

First, the European Union should continue gradual integration; however, only as a bridge to accession, not as a substantive measure. Because otherwise, Ukraine can be trapped in a more sophisticated version of neighbourhood limbo, even comparable to its pre-war stance.



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Secondly, the next phase of the enlargement policy should clearly connect the strands of defence-industry integration, institutional reforms, resilience and civil preparedness. The current model still sees security as external to accession.

Thirdly, the union must be reformed in parallel, not afterwards. The council is correct that enlargement and internal changes need to happen simultaneously. Decision-making, budget redesign, rule-of-law conditionality, and the restrained

use of differentiated integration should be priorities. Otherwise, rather than strengthening the union, Ukraine's entry will exacerbate already-existing obstacles. So, Ukraine's candidacy is changing the EU in ways that go beyond a narrow understanding of enlargement policy. It is pushing the union away from a slow, linear and largely technocratic model of accession and towards a more strategic, staged and differentiated model of integration. At the same time, it is forcing the EU to confront long-postponed questions about its own governability, credibility and budgetary priorities. The main takeaway is obvious. Enlargement cannot function as a straightforward extension of the previous approach during a time of war. Early advantages, more robust security measures, stricter rule-of-law protections, and significant internal EU reform are all necessary. As a result, Ukraine is not merely testing the union's capacity to grow. It is evaluating the union's ability to turn enlargement into a credible security strategy, without undermining its own institutional underpinnings.

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