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- CONTAINMENT THROUGH ENLARGEMENT

UKRAINE – EUROPEAN UNION

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THE IMPERFECT ACCESSION: ROMANIA AND BULGARIA AS PRECEDENTS FOR UKRAINE'S EARLY ENTRY

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The accession of Romania and Bulgaria to the EU in 2007 was driven by geopolitical priorities that took precedence over a strictly merit-based process. In a similar vein, Ukraine and Moldova were granted candidate status in 2022 amidst the ongoing Russian aggression, a threat which made the euro-integration process less predictable. This situation highlights the challenging gap between merit-based enlargement and purely political considerations. The experiences of Romania and Bulgaria provide a relevant precedent, illustrating that political priorities can at times outweigh strict adherence to merit in the EU accession process.

Introduction

The European Union has never admitted a member state at war or begun accession talks with a country under martial law, parliamentary restrictions, or territorial contestation by a nuclear-armed neighbour. Ukraine's accession path is therefore unprecedented, yet Brussels continues to use its standard enlargement tools: benchmarks, screening reports, chapter negotiations, conditionality, and a merit-based approach. This mismatch between extraordinary circumstances and routine procedures is not just administrative; it is a significant vulnerability that Ukrainian decision-makers have been slow to address.

The standard accession process was designed for peacetime states, with stable institutions and legislatures able to harmonise 27,000 legislative acts¹. Ukraine is attempting this amid armed conflict, with its public administration strained by military mobilisation and mass displacement. The Brussels legislators and some officials in Kyiv maintain that rules must always apply, that exemptions undermine credibility, and that Ukraine requires genuine reform rather than any attempt at premature entry². While institutional reform is important in itself, this article argues that the EU has already established a model for exceptions in response to geopolitical demands.

1 European Commission, Ukraine Enlargement Package 2025, 4.11.2025. According to Ukrainian officials, implementing EU legislation involves harmonising over 27,000 acts. See also: Raiffeisen Bank International, Ukraine's Path to EU Accession, 2025, <https://www.rbinternational.com/en/raiffeisen/blog/market-trends/ukraines-path-to-eu-accession.html>

2 EU ambassadors reportedly reject fast-track Ukraine accession plan, Kyiv Independent, 6.03.2026, <https://kyivindependent.com/eu-reject-fast-track-ukraine-accession/>

Romania and Bulgaria's 2007 accession was a deliberate political choice to admit countries whose reform process was incomplete. To manage this, Brussels created the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM), which operated for sixteen years and showed that post-entry conditionality can serve to replace pre-entry perfection. Ukrainian decision-makers should use this precedent as a template in all future negotiations.


This article proceeds in four stages: it first explains how waiting time harms candidates, using the Western Balkan countries as an example of this. It then analyses the Romanian and Bulgarian cases, draws lessons from the CVM for the case of Ukraine, and examines the procedure of candidate status, to highlight the risks of prolonged candidacy. The conclusion offers practical advice for Ukraine's leaders in dealing with Brussels.

The Non-neutral Waiting Room

Discussions on Ukraine's EU accession often present it as a difficult but straightforward process in four steps: reform, open chapters, close chapters, and join. This perspective overlooks the political costs which candidates incur during a prolonged or indefinite waiting phase. The Western Balkans countries' experience illustrates these risks eloquently. At the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit, the EU promised eventual membership to Albania, Montenegro, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Serbia³. As of 2026, none of them have joined.

Only Montenegro, once a frontrunner, has conducted negotiations since 2012, without final success.

An extended candidacy not only delays benefits but also actually causes harm. Democratic backsliding has affected countries committed to EU accession: Serbia is now rated as 'partly free', by Freedom House, threatened by Vučić's increasing executive power⁴. Bosnia faces an ongoing existential crisis, and Montenegro's progress remains slow and uncertain, even if this country is considered as a frontrunner for membership in the region⁵. Some scholars refer to these as 'stabilitocracies', in which governments use the language of the EU to bolster legitimacy, while consolidating their own power⁶.



Romania and Bulgaria's 2007 accession was a deliberate political choice to admit countries whose reform process was incomplete

Despite the mechanism itself being straightforward — candidate governments bear the costs of reform without receiving membership benefits such as free movement of citizens, funding, decision-making rights, or EU security guarantees — indefinite timelines increase frustration and strengthen anti-EU sentiment in candidate countries' societies, as patience declines.

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- 3 European Council, The Thessaloniki Agenda for the Western Balkans: Moving towards European Integration, Thessaloniki, 21 June 2003
 - 4 Freedom House, Nations in Transit 2019; Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, What has Stopped EU Enlargement in the Western Balkans?, June 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2022/06/what-has-stopped-eu-enlargement-in-the-western-balkans>
 - 5 European Commission, Accession negotiations with Montenegro began in 2012. As of March 2026, Montenegro has closed approximately half its negotiating chapters and is anticipated to complete negotiations between 2027 and 2028. DGAP, Europe's Next Enlargement, Policy Brief No. 6, March 2026, <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/europes-next-enlargement>
 - 6 Clingendael Institute, The EU as a Promoter of Democracy or 'Stabilitocracy' in the Western Balkans?, 2022, <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2022/the-eu-as-a-promoter-of-democracy-or-stabilitocracy/>


At the same time, Ukraine's pro-European stance is still strong, and crystallised, if not shaped, by Russian aggression. However, public support is not unlimited, as the experience of the Western Balkans countries demonstrates. And assuming that it will persist indefinitely, especially in a time of war, is risky. Ukrainian leaders should convey this message to Brussels.

Politics versus Perfection: Romania and Bulgaria

On 1 January 2007, Romania and Bulgaria joined the European Union. Both countries acknowledged and documented their own deficiencies. The European Commission confirmed that, at the time of accession, both still faced significant challenges over judicial reform and anti-corruption legislation, with Bulgaria also needing to address the problem of organised crime⁷. These issues were well-known before accession.

To address them, the commission established the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM) on the day both countries joined^{8 9}. The CVM set benchmarks for judicial independence and anti-corruption measures, with an additional benchmark on organised crime for Bulgaria. The commission monitored progress through regular reports, and maintained an independent review after accession.

The CVM lasted for sixteen years. The EU determined that Bulgaria met its benchmarks in October 2019, and Romania in November 2022. Both fulfilled all commitments by June 2023, leading the commission to close the mechanism in September 2023¹⁰. Both countries remained outside the Schengen area for sixteen years due to unresolved entry issues¹¹.



An extended candidacy not only delays benefits but also actually causes harm. Democratic backsliding has affected countries committed to EU accession

The EU applied the CVM so as to anchor Southeast Europe within its institutional framework, honour commitments made at the 2002 Copenhagen Council, prevent geopolitical drift, and maintain enlargement credibility. Geopolitical considerations outweighed the risks of admitting nations which had incomplete reform processes. Brussels acknowledged and managed these challenges rather than simply ignoring them.

Several scholars have argued that the CVM was imperfect as a monitoring tool, functioning mainly as an assessment

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- 7 European Commission, Cooperation and Verification Mechanism for Bulgaria and Romania, <https://bit.ly/4e0Gy14>
 - 8 Commission Decision 2006/928/EC of 13 December 2006 establishing a mechanism for cooperation and verification of progress in Romania to address specific benchmarks in the areas of judicial reform and the fight against corruption, OJ L 354, 14.12.2006, pp. 56–57, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32006D0928>
 - 9 Commission Decision 2006/929/EC of 13 December 2006 establishing a mechanism for cooperation and verification of progress in Bulgaria to address specific benchmarks in the areas of judicial reform and the fight against corruption and organised crime, OJ L 354, 14.12.2006, pp. 58–60, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32006D0929>
 - 10 European Commission Press Release, Rule of Law: Commission Formally Closes the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism for Bulgaria and Romania, 15.09.2023, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/pt/ip_23_4456
 - 11 Z. Darvas, M. Dabrowski, H. Grabbe et al., Ukraine's Path to European Union Membership and its Long-Term Implications, Bruegel Policy Brief 05/2024, March 2024, p. 6.

instrument and neglecting the ‘cooperation’ aspect of post-accession relations. Its selective focus also left some governance challenges unaddressed¹². However, this criticism reinforces the main argument: if the CVM was imperfect, yet both Romania and Bulgaria achieved sufficient progress to close all benchmarks within sixteen years, the mechanism demonstrates that post-entry conditionality can be effective when carefully designed and consistently enforced.


For Ukraine, this is a highly relevant precedent. The EU has shown it can create post-accession monitoring frameworks tailored to national conditions, and has demonstrated political will to make necessary accession decisions despite technical gaps. However, this precedent has not yet been applied to Ukraine, and Ukrainian decision-makers have not explicitly advocated for it.

The CVM Experience for Ukraine

The Romanian and Bulgarian experience offers three key lessons directly relevant to Ukraine’s accession strategy.

The first lesson is that Brussels has shown a willingness to prioritise strategic interests over perfect compliance in cases where eastern enlargement is seen as geopolitically necessary. The 2007 decision was made with full awareness of Romania’s and Bulgaria’s deficiencies, based on the assessment that strategic priorities outweighed institutional risks.

The second lesson is that post-entry mechanisms can replace pre-entry conditionality and may, in some cases, even be more effective¹³. While EU policy assumes that pre-entry conditionality leads to the most durable reforms, the Bulgarian and Romanian experience suggests otherwise. Once inside the union, member states face new compliance incentives, such as infringement procedures, the Rule of Law Cycle, and reputational pressures within a democratic community. Membership creates lock-in effects that mere candidacy cannot¹⁴. A well-designed Ukrainian post-accession monitoring framework could leverage these conditions more effectively than the current pre-entry process, which is hindered by wartime conditions and the lack of a credible accession timeline.



While EU policy assumes that pre-entry conditionality leads to the most durable reforms, the Bulgarian and Romanian experience suggests otherwise

The third lesson is that the costs of imperfect accession, though real, are manageable, and far less severe than those of indefinite candidacy. The sixteen-year CVM period involved reputational and institutional costs, but both Romania and Bulgaria are now full EU members, integrated into the single market, benefiting from structural funds, and participating in EU decision-making.

12 G. Dimitrov, K. Haralampiev, S. Stoychev, L. Toneva-Metodieva, *The Cooperation and Verification Mechanism: Shared Political Irresponsibility*, Sofia: St. Kliment Ohridski University Press, 2013; see also European Parliament Research Service, *Cooperation and Verification Mechanism with Regard to Bulgaria and Romania*, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2014_2019/documents/cont/dv/eprs_request_on_cvm/_eprs_request_on_cvm_en.pdf

13 U. Sedelmeier, *Is Europeanisation through Conditionality Sustainable? Lock-in of Institutional Change after EU Accession*, *West European Politics*, Vol. 35, No. 1, 2012, pp. 20–38.

14 A. Spendzharova, M.A. Vachudova, *Catching Up? Consolidating Liberal Democracy in Bulgaria and Romania after EU Accession*, *West European Politics*, Vol. 35, No. 1, 2012, pp. 39–58.

In contrast, the Western Balkans countries, which were promised membership in 2003, are still negotiating and undergoing reform in 2026, while their democratic institutions gradually erode under the indefinite status of their candidacy. The Romanian and Bulgarian models had high costs to pay, but the Western Balkan model has been catastrophic.

While the Western Balkans situation illustrates the risks of indefinite candidacy, Moldova provides a current example relevant to Ukraine. Moldova received EU candidate status alongside Ukraine in June 2022, and began accession negotiations in June 2024¹⁵. Technically, Moldova has made significant progress: implementing judicial reform, advancing anti-corruption measures, synchronising its electricity grid with that of Europe, and securing its first negotiation cluster¹⁶. The pro-European Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) retained power in the September 2025 elections, renewing its mandate on an explicit EU membership platform¹⁷.

Despite this progress, the political environment remains difficult. The October 2024 constitutional referendum, to enshrine EU accession as a national goal, passed with only 50.3 percent, reflecting not opposition to Europe, but economic

frustration from bearing reform costs without the accompanying membership benefits¹⁸. Analysts found a significant group of 'dissatisfied pro-EU voters' who became more Eurosceptic due to the socioeconomic crisis caused by the reforms, voting for alternative parties or against the referendum, despite nominal support for EU integration¹⁹.

Conclusions

This article presents two strategic demands for Ukrainian officials to advance in Brussels and in bilateral negotiations with key member states. These are not requests for special treatment, but arguments based on established EU precedent, applied to a case of exceptional strategic urgency.

First, the analysis in the journal *Foreign Policy* from March 2026 notes a growing debate in Brussels about an 'accession-in-waiting' model. Under this model, an accession treaty would be negotiated and signed, with full legal membership following ratification, while Ukraine's path to membership would be politically anchored and effectively irreversible²⁰.

This approach mirrors the logic behind the Romanian and Bulgarian accession. Ukrainian officials should actively participate

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- 15 Accession of Moldova to the European Union, Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Accession_of_Moldova_to_the_European_Union; European Commission, Ukraine's Path Towards EU Accession, https://commission.europa.eu/topics/eu-solidarity-ukraine/ukraines-path-towards-eu-accession_en
 - 16 European Parliament, Moldova: Challenges and Progress Towards EU Membership, 13.06.2025, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/topics/en/article/20250606STO28765/moldova-challenges-and-progress-towards-eu-membership>
 - 17 *New Union Post*, For Moldova's Pro-EU Ruling Party, the Challenge Begins Now, 30.09.2025, <https://newunionpost.eu/2025/09/30/moldova-pas-interview-eu-accession/>
 - 18 Istituto Affari Internazionali, Moldova's EU Accession Prospects after the Elections, 2025, <https://www.iai.it/en/publications/c41/moldovas-eu-accession-prospects-after-elections>. The referendum result was 50.3% in favour, with 749,719 votes supporting the constitutional amendment.
 - 19 A. Holesch, I. Martí et al., The Role of External Interference in the Politicisation of EU Integration: Russian Influence and the 2024 Referendum in Moldova, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 2026, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/07036337.2026.2616341>
 - 20 S. Gardner, Ukraine's EU Membership Candidacy Needs a Fresh Start, *Foreign Policy*, 17.03.2026, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2026/03/17/ukraine-eu-membership-war-economy-europe-candidate-russia/>

in shaping this debate, rather than waiting for Brussels to decide. A defined, credible accession timeline would help lock in reforms and signal irreversibility to both domestic and external audiences, which the current open-ended candidacy does not achieve.

The second demand is for a Ukrainian post-accession monitoring framework to be negotiated now, explicitly modelled on the CVM, as a condition of early political membership. Kyiv should accept this strategic concession, as it reframes the request from a free pass to membership to structured accountability within the EU framework.

A Ukrainian CVM, negotiated in advance with benchmarks tailored to national circumstances (such as those pertaining to rule of law, anti-corruption measures, judicial independence, and media pluralism), would provide Brussels with the necessary monitoring tools to manage the gap between Ukraine's current readiness and full compliance. It would also offer Ukrainian reformers a credible external anchor for domestic reform efforts, replicating a key function of the original CVM relating to Bulgaria in 2007; despite acknowledged institutional deficiencies, it was reflecting a judgment that the strategic priority of anchoring southeastern Europe in the democratic order outweighed the risks of admitting states that had not completed all their reforms. Both countries are now

full EU members, and the CVM, for all its acknowledged imperfections, produced sufficient institutional progress for the process to be formally closed in 2023.



The second demand is for a Ukrainian post-accession monitoring framework to be negotiated now, explicitly modelled on the CVM, as a condition of early political membership

The argument in the case of Ukraine, that it is necessary to wait indefinitely in a candidacy queue while completing every benchmark in sequence, under conditions for which that sequence was not designed, represents a failure of strategic imagination in the current geopolitical context.

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