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UKRAINE'S EU ACCESSION IN WARTIME: PHASED INTEGRATION, SECURITY IMPLICATIONS, AND EU READINESS

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Russia's full-scale invasion has turned Ukraine's EU accession into a test case for enlargement under wartime conditions. This article argues that Ukraine is shifting its accession towards a gradual model, in which sectoral integration – including in security and defence – advances alongside reforms rather than following full stabilisation. It shows how instruments such as the European Peace Facility, EUMAM Ukraine, and joint procurement enable this shift, highlighting the need for targeted EU governance reforms to keep enlargement feasible and sustainable.

Introduction

Ukraine's EU accession does not fit neatly within the established logic of enlargement. Kyiv formally applied for EU membership on 28 February 2022, only four days after Russia launched its full-scale invasion of the country. Scholars and policymakers alike have highlighted the fact that no previous candidate country has pursued EU accession while simultaneously fighting a large-scale war, which is threatening its territorial integrity and statehood.¹ In this sense, Ukraine represents a unique case.

Rethinking Enlargement: Towards Gradual Integration

The EU accession process is grounded in the Copenhagen criteria, adopted by the European Council in 1993 in response to the expected enlargement to incorporate Central and Eastern European countries after the Cold War.² These criteria require candidate countries to demonstrate that they possess "stable institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for minorities".³ Derived from the Copenhagen criteria is the expectation that candidate

- 1 R. Petrov, Bumpy Road of Ukraine towards the EU Membership in Time of War: 'Accession through War' v 'Gradual Integration'. *European Papers – a Journal on Law and Integration*, 2023 8 (3): 1057–65. <https://doi.org/10.15166/2499-8249/701>; Z. Darvas, M. Dabrowski, H. Grabbe, L. Léry Moffat, A. Sapir, and G. Zachmann. Ukraine's Path to European Union Membership and its Long-Term Implications. *Bruegel* 05 (24), 2024, <https://bit.ly/3PTBoMu>; A. Duff, How to Fast-Track Ukraine's Membership of the European Union, *European Policy Centre*, 2025, <https://www.epc.eu/publication/-/Ukraines-membership-EU-6230b8/>.
- 2 T. Marktle, The Power of the Copenhagen Criteria, *Croatian Yearbook of European Law and Policy* 2 (2), 2006, <https://doi.org/10.3935/cyelp.02.2006.23>; A. Duff, How Ukraine Should Join the European Union. *Verfassungsblog*, 2026, <https://verfassungsblog.de/how-ukraine-should-join-the-european-union/>.
- 3 European Council, Conclusions of the Presidency: Copenhagen European Council, 1993, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/21225/72921.pdf>.

countries demonstrate the maintenance of stable political institutions, full territorial control, a functioning market economy, and the capacity to implement the EU acquis. The conventional enlargement model can thus be broadly understood as a sequence of stabilisation, reform, and eventual accession.



Ukraine is currently in a situation where martial law is in force, part of its territory is occupied, state resources are directed towards the war effort, and full implementation of EU law across the whole territory is impossible

Ukraine's case challenges this logic. Ukraine is currently in a situation where martial law is in force, part of its territory is occupied, state resources are directed towards the war effort, and full implementation of EU law across the whole territory is impossible. Since 28 February, 2022, when Kyiv formally applied for EU membership, Ukraine has continued to advance reforms and align with significant elements of the EU acquis, despite operating under martial law and facing ongoing military aggression. This trajectory suggests a different dynamic, in which institutional adaptation advances in parallel with the pursuit of stabilisation, rather than following it.

Although Ukraine's accession process has unfolded under extraordinary geopolitical circumstances, no formally distinct accession procedure has been adopted for it to join. From a legal and institutional perspective, the country remains subject to the same enlargement framework that governs other candidate states, namely the revised enlargement methodology (REM), originally developed for the Western Balkans, and introduced by the European Commission in 2020 to "reinvigorate the accession processes" by making it "more credible, predictable, dynamic and subject to stronger political steering".⁴ This framework organises negotiations around six thematic clusters: fundamentals; an internal market; competitiveness and inclusive growth; a green agenda and sustainable connectivity; resources, agriculture and cohesion; and external relations.⁵ In Ukraine's case, the methodology was operationalised through the EU-Ukraine Negotiating Framework,⁶ which defines the procedural structure for accession negotiations and the benchmarks governing progress across clusters and chapters. Nonetheless, some observers note that the framework largely reproduces existing enlargement procedures without substantial reform, while its complex benchmark system and reliance on unanimous Council decisions at multiple stages may complicate the negotiation process.⁷

4 European Commission, Revised Enlargement Methodology: Questions and Answers, Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood. 5.02.2020, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/revised-enlargement-methodology-questions-and-answers-2020-02-05_en.

5 European Commission. Enhancing the Accession Process: A Credible EU Perspective for the Western Balkans, Communication from the Commission. COM (2020) 57 final, 2020, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0057>

6 Council of the European Union, General EU Position: Ministerial Meeting Opening the Intergovernmental Conference on the Accession of Ukraine to the European Union (Luxembourg, 25.06.2024), 2024, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/hzmfw1ji/public-ad00009en24.pdf>.

7 M. Emerson and S. Blockmans, EU Adopts Negotiating 'Frameworks' for Ukraine and Moldova: The Starting Gun for the Accession Process. Stockholm Center for Eastern European Studies, 2024. <https://bit.ly/4o2HtTv>; A. Duff, How Ukraine Should Join the European Union, *Verfassungsblog*, 2026. <https://verfassungsblog.de/how-ukraine-should-join-the-european-union/>.

At the same time, the accession process triggered by Ukraine's application has unfolded with unprecedented speed by the standards of EU enlargement.⁸ Within a matter of months, the European Council granted Ukraine candidate status in June 2022, and in December 2023, decided to open accession negotiations, conditional upon Ukraine's continued progress on reforms. These negotiations were formally launched at the first Intergovernmental Conference in June 2024.⁹ As a result, while the formal rules of accession remain unchanged, the political context surrounding Ukraine's application has contributed to an unusually accelerated pace of decision-making and a heightened level of political attention compared to previous cases of enlargement.

The tension between a formally unchanged enlargement methodology and the exceptional political and security context of Ukraine's accession has revived interest in more flexible approaches to integration. One such approach is gradual or progressive integration, which allows candidate countries to enjoy the main benefits of EU membership before the accession process is formally completed. In practice, this approach would enable nationals and companies from candidate states to progressively access elements of the EU internal market and participate in selected

EU policies, while reforms and accession negotiations are continuing.¹⁰ Elements of this approach are already visible in the case of Ukrainian. For example, the application of the EU Temporary Protection Directive following Russia's full-scale invasion granted Ukrainian citizens access to certain rights and freedoms within the Union, illustrating how elements of EU integration can extend beyond formal membership.¹¹



The tension between a formally unchanged enlargement methodology and the exceptional political and security context of Ukraine's accession has revived interest in more flexible approaches to integration

While much of the literature on progressive or phased integration focuses primarily on economic and regulatory dimensions – such as transport, the digital single market, energy cooperation, health, and education¹² – considerably less attention has been paid to the potential application of gradual integration in the spheres of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).

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- 8 R. Petrov, Bumpy Road of Ukraine towards the EU Membership in Time of War: 'Accession through War' v 'Gradual Integration. *European Papers – a Journal on Law and Integration*, 2023 8 (3): 1057–65. <https://doi.org/10.15166/2499-8249/701>; A. Duff, How to Fast-Track Ukraine's Membership of the European Union. *European Policy Centre*, 2025, <https://www.epc.eu/publication/-Ukraines-membership-EU-6230b8/>.
 - 9 Council of the European Union, General EU Position: Ministerial Meeting Opening the Intergovernmental Conference on the Accession of Ukraine to the European Union (Luxembourg, 25.06.2024), 2024, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/hzmfw1ji/public-ad00009en24.pdf>.
 - 10 J. Juzova, Gradual Integration Process: Towards Restoring Effectiveness and Credibility of EU Enlargement, *Ceeol.com. EUROPEUM – Institut pro evropskou politiku*, 2023, <https://www.ceeol.com/search/gray-literature-detail?id=1349917>; A. Pozhar, and A. Panteleimonenko. Prospects and Problems of Ukraine's European Integration, *Economy and Society*, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.32782/2524-0072/2024-65-43>.
 - 11 R. Petrov, Bumpy Road of Ukraine towards the EU Membership in Time of War: 'Accession through War' v 'Gradual Integration. *European Papers – a Journal on Law and Integration*, 2023 8 (3): 1057–65. <https://doi.org/10.15166/2499-8249/701>;
 - 12 Z. Darvas, M. Dabrowski, H. Grabbe, etc., Ukraine's Path to European Union Membership and its Long-Term Implications. *Bruegel* 05 (24), 2024, <https://bit.ly/3PTBoMu>

Security and Defence Integration: Ukraine and the Transformation of the CFSP/CDSP

After more than four years of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, the CFSP has emerged as a double-edged sword, revealing both notable advancements and persistent structural vulnerabilities. On the one hand, originally conceived in the post-Cold War context of relative stability, the CFSP has struggled to fully adapt to the demands of a high-intensity geopolitical crisis. Long-standing challenges — including intergovernmental decision-making, limited political cohesion among member states, and reluctance to cede sovereignty in foreign policy — have constrained the EU's ability to act as a unified geopolitical actor.¹³



Amid Russia's full-scale invasion, the EPF has become one of the central financial instruments underpinning EU military support to Ukraine

Nonetheless, the war has demonstrated the CFSP's capacity for adaptation under pressure. The EU has significantly increased its political, financial, and military support to Ukraine, showing its potential as a security actor. In response to the challenges, the EU has introduced a range of measures aimed at strengthening its foreign and defence policy toolkit, including the expanded use of the

European Peace Facility (EPF), the launch of the EU Military Assistance Mission in support of Ukraine (EUMAM Ukraine), and initiatives to enhance joint procurement and defence cooperation.

The European Peace Facility

Although the European Peace Facility was established in March 2021 as an instrument capable of financing military assistance, including the supply of lethal equipment, it was only in response to Russia's full-scale invasion that the EU, for the first time, activated this possibility. On 28 February 2022, the Council adopted Decision (CFSP) 2022/338, authorising the provision of lethal weapons to Ukraine¹⁴, marking a decisive shift in the Union's security role from a predominantly 'security-guaranteeing' position to one of 'security-providing' and 'more actorness'. As an off-budget instrument, necessitated by the prohibition on financing military activities through the EU budget under Article 41(2) TEU¹⁵, the EPF was designed to strengthen the Union's capacity to prevent conflicts, enhance international security, and provide military assistance to partners, under the CFSP. It replaced earlier instruments such as the Athena Mechanism and the African Peace Facility, the latter being both geographically limited and not designed to finance lethal equipment.¹⁶

Amid Russia's full-scale invasion, the EPF has become one of the central financial instruments underpinning EU military

13 D. Genini, How the War in Ukraine has Transformed the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. *Yearbook of European Law*, April, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1093/yel/yeaf003>.

14 Council of the European Union. Council Decision (CFSP) 2022/338 of 28 February 2022 on an assistance measure under the European Peace Facility for the supply to the Ukrainian Armed Forces of military equipment, and platforms, designed to deliver lethal force., 2022, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32022D0338>

15 European Union. *Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union*, Article 41(2), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:12012M/TXT>

16 O. Rybak, *The European Peace Facility and EU Military Assistance to Ukraine in the Context of Russia's War*. Unpublished course paper, Leiden University, the Netherlands, 2024.

support to Ukraine, with over €11 billion committed to date.¹⁷ It also covers the common costs of the EU Military Assistance Mission in support of Ukraine (EUMAM Ukraine), linking financial and operational dimensions of EU support. The establishment of a €5 billion Ukraine Assistance Fund (UAF) within the EPF aimed to enhance the predictability of assistance and incentivise joint procurement within the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB).¹⁸ Apart from direct allocations, the EPF has also been used to channel additional resources, including revenues from immobilised Russian assets – amounting to approximately €3.4 billion – as well as voluntary contributions from partners such as Norway, which has provided NOK 250 million (approximately €22 million)¹⁹, reflecting the instrument’s growing flexibility and external dimension.

Beyond its transformative role, the EPF also reveals the structural limitations of the CFSP. First, its financial expansion has been shaped by political compromise, falling short of earlier proposals for a multiannual €20 billion facility, and remaining significantly below comparable external support packages. Secondly, decision-making remains subject to unanimity, allowing member states to abstain from participation – as illustrated by Hungary’s repeated use of constructive abstention – thereby weakening the coherence of EU action. Last but not least, the EPF’s institutional design further limits its transformative potential:

as an off-budget instrument with a global scope, it enhances operational flexibility, yet its use remains largely ad hoc and crisis-driven rather than indicative of a fully institutionalised shift in EU defence policy.²⁰

The European Union Military Assistance Mission in Support of Ukraine (EUMAM Ukraine)

The European Union Military Assistance Mission in support of Ukraine (EUMAM Ukraine) has emerged as a central operational instrument of the EU’s military support, thus transforming the union into one of the largest providers of training for Ukrainian forces. Launched in November 2022 under the CSDP, the mission aims to enhance the operational capabilities of the Ukrainian Armed Forces through coordinated training efforts across member states. Since its inception, EUMAM Ukraine has trained over 86,800 Ukrainian soldiers²¹ – more than five times its initial target of 15,000 – and now operates across 26 member states under the coordination of the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC).²²

In addition to this impressive scale, the mission represents an important innovation in EU security policy. It combines training with financial support provided through the European Peace Facility, amounting to approximately €610 million to date,²³ and introduces a flexible and scalable ‘train and equip’ model. This approach has also

17 European Council, European Peace Facility, 2026, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/european-peace-facility/>.

18 D. Genini, How the War in Ukraine has Transformed the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy. *Yearbook of European Law*, April, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1093/yel/yeaf003>.

19 European Council, EU Military Support for Ukraine, Consilium, 2026. <https://bit.ly/4xnL8j5>.

20 D. Genini, How the War in Ukraine has Transformed the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy. *Yearbook of European Law*, April, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1093/yel/yeaf003>.

21 European Council. 2026. “EU Military Support for Ukraine.” Consilium. 2026. <https://bit.ly/4xnL8j5>.

22 European External Action Service, The Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC), EEAS, 2025, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/military-planning-and-conduct-capability-mpcc_en.

23 European Council. EU Military Support for Ukraine, Consilium, 2026, <https://bit.ly/4xnL8j5>.

facilitated coordination with international partners, including NATO, and allied training initiatives, thereby reinforcing transatlantic cooperation.²⁴

In turn, European armed forces stand to benefit from Ukraine's unique first-hand experience in conducting high-intensity, conventional warfare on its own territory,²⁵ such as the use of unmanned systems, missile and air defence capabilities.²⁶ In this sense, the establishment of such training mechanisms represents a further step towards strengthening the EU's role as a more autonomous and capable security actor.

Despite its operational success, EUMAM Ukraine remains embedded within the intergovernmental framework of the CSDP, relying on unanimous decision-making and ad hoc coordination, which limits its potential as a fully institutionalised instrument of EU defence policy.²⁷

Industrial Integration: Defence Procurement and Cooperation

As EU support for Ukraine has evolved beyond financial assistance and training, a third dimension has emerged in the form of defence-industry and procurement integration. This shift reflects a broader transformation from short-term military support towards the gradual incorporation

of Ukraine into the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB).²⁸ At the centre of this process is a set of recently developed instruments that aim to align production, procurement, and capability development between the EU and Ukraine.



Despite its operational success, EUMAM Ukraine remains embedded within the intergovernmental framework of the CSDP, relying on unanimous decision-making and ad hoc coordination

The Security Action for Europe (SAFE) mechanism, adopted in 2025, represents a significant step in this direction. By providing up to €150 billion in loans for defence-related investments, SAFE enables member states to increase defence spending through joint procurement.²⁹ While access to these loans is limited to EU member states, the mechanism is designed to include third-country partners, therefore allowing Ukrainian companies to participate. This creates a pathway for Ukraine's defence industry to integrate into European supply chains and contribute directly to jointly financed production.³⁰ The practical relevance of this framework is already visible, as 15 out of 19 national SAFE

24 D. Genini, How the War in Ukraine has Transformed the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy, *Yearbook of European Law*, April, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1093/yel/yeaf003>.

25 S. Ostanina, The EU Military Assistance Mission for Ukraine – a Peace Actor who Teaches to Fight, *Jacques Delors Centre*, 2023, <https://www.delorscentre.eu/en/publications/the-eu-military-assistance-mission-for-ukraine>.

26 H. Maksak, How to Bridge the EU's and Ukraine's Defence Industries: Mechanisms and Directions, *Future Europe*, no. 1: 52–59, 2025, <https://prismua.org/en/256743312-2/>

27 D. Genini, How the War in Ukraine has Transformed the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy, *Yearbook of European Law*, April, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1093/yel/yeaf003>.

28 European Commission, EDIP: Forging Europe's Defence. Defence Industry and Space, 2026, https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/eu-defence-industry/edip-forging-europes-defence_en.

29 European Council, EU Military Support for Ukraine, Consilium, 2026, <https://bit.ly/4xnL8j5>.

30 H. Maksak, How to Bridge the EU's and Ukraine's Defence Industries: Mechanisms and Directions, *Future Europe*, no. 1: 52–59, 2025, <https://prismua.org/en/256743312-2/>

plans submitted by member states in 2025 included projects involving Ukraine.³¹

In parallel, the European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP), adopted in December 2025, seeks to strengthen defence-industry cooperation, by promoting joint procurement and improving coordination across member states. A key innovation is the dedicated Ukraine Support Instrument, which incentivises cooperative procurement with Ukraine, supports the expansion of its defence manufacturing capacities, and permits Ukrainian companies to take part in jointly financed projects. With a financial envelope of €300 million, it provides a targeted mechanism for linking Ukraine's defence industry to EU-level initiatives.³² More broadly, EDIP reflects a shift towards institutionalising defence-industry cooperation beyond ad hoc arrangements.³³



A key innovation is the dedicated Ukraine Support Instrument, which incentivises cooperative procurement with Ukraine, supports the expansion of its defence manufacturing capacities, and permits Ukrainian companies to take part in jointly financed projects

Complementing these instruments, the European Defence Fund (EDF) – traditionally focused on defence research and innovation – has also been opened up to Ukraine. In December 2025, the council adopted new rules, allowing Ukraine to be associated with the EDF, thereby creating

opportunities for Ukrainian entities to participate in EU-funded collaborative research and development projects.³⁴ While more limited in scope compared to instruments such as SAFE or EDIP, EDF participation represents an important step towards integrating Ukraine into the early stages of defence capability development, including research, innovation, and technological design.

Gradual Integration into CFSP/ CSDP: Progress and Constraints

Taken together, the developments discussed above point to the emergence of a form of gradual or phased integration of Ukraine into the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). Instead of following the traditional logic, whereby full membership precedes participation, Ukraine is already being integrated across multiple layers of the EU's security architecture.

- At the financial level, the European Peace Facility has enabled Ukraine to access EU-funded military assistance, including lethal equipment, marking an unprecedented extension of CFSP instruments to a non-member state.
- At the operational level, EUMAM Ukraine has integrated Ukrainian forces into EU-led training structures, creating sustained interaction between national armed forces and EU coordination mechanisms.
- At the industrial level, emerging procurement and defence-industry initiatives – including SAFE, EDIP,

31 European Council, EU Military Support for Ukraine, Consilium, 2026, <https://bit.ly/4xnL8j5>.


32 European Commission, EDIP. Forging Europe's Defence. Defence Industry and Space, 2026, https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/eu-defence-industry/edip-forging-europes-defence_en.

33 H. Maksak, How to Bridge the EU's and Ukraine's Defence Industries: Mechanisms and Directions. *Future Europe*, no. 1: 52–59, 2025, <https://prismua.org/en/256743312-2/>

34 European Council, EU Military Support for Ukraine, Consilium, 2026, <https://bit.ly/4xnL8j5>.

and EDF – are beginning to embed Ukraine within European supply chains, joint production, and capability development frameworks.

At the same time, these developments have exposed persistent structural weaknesses within the CFSP, highlighting the gap between the EU's geopolitical ambitions and its institutional and operational capacity to deliver on them: (1) Decision-making remains constrained by the need for unanimity, which has shaped key instruments such as the European Peace Facility and the Ukraine Assistance Fund, leading to delays, political bargaining, and, at times, diluted outcomes; (2) Accountability also remains limited: core CFSP instruments – including the EPF and EUMAM Ukraine – are largely governed through intergovernmental procedures, with only a marginal role for the European Parliament and restricted judicial oversight by the Court of Justice of the EU, raising concerns regarding democratic scrutiny and transparency; (3) Operationally, while missions such as EUMAM Ukraine demonstrate the EU's growing role, they continue to rely on member states' contributions and coordination with NATO, reflecting the absence of permanent EU command structures, standing forces, and fully autonomous capabilities; (4) Finally, financial and industrial initiatives – including EPF, SAFE, and EDIP – despite their unprecedented scale, remain fragmented across instruments and largely dependent on national implementation, limiting overall coherence.³⁵ These constraints extend beyond the CFSP itself and raise broader questions about the union's readiness to accommodate new members in an evolving geopolitical context.



financial and industrial initiatives – including EPF, SAFE, and EDIP – despite their unprecedented scale, remain fragmented across instruments and largely dependent on national implementation, limiting overall coherence

Against this backdrop, the question of Ukraine's integration must also be considered in the overall context of EU enlargement. A widely accepted assumption underlying European integration has been that the union does well to share its security and prosperity with its neighbours. In practice, however, enlargement is a complex political and institutional process. The accession of any new member state – particularly a large one such as Ukraine – inevitably alters the balance within the union. It reshapes the EU's external borders and international profile, intensifies internal economic competition, has implications for the union's budgetary distribution, may revive historical or ethnic tensions, while also placing additional pressure on the institutional functioning of the union and raising questions about necessary constitutional and institutional reforms. For these reasons, moves towards enlargement cannot be approached lightly: decisions about the future size and composition of the union are closely linked to the EU's so-called 'absorption capacity'.³⁶

Policy Implications and the Future of Enlargement


Ukraine's accession is not only a test case for enlargement under conditions

35 D. Genini, How the War in Ukraine has Transformed the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. *Yearbook of European Law*, April, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1093/yel/yeaf003>.

36 A. Duff, How Ukraine Should Join the European Union, *Verfassungsblog*, 2026, <https://verfassungsblog.de/how-ukraine-should-join-the-european-union/>.

of war, but also a catalyst for rethinking the union's broader integration logic. The traditional sequencing embedded in the Copenhagen criteria, where stabilisation precedes integration, appears increasingly misaligned with current geopolitical realities. In the Ukrainian case, integration has advanced in parallel with the ongoing conflict, demonstrating the viability of a more flexible, staged approach. At the same time, the credibility of the enlargement policy also depends on the consistent application of core democratic standards within the union itself. Candidate countries are subject to systematic monitoring by the European Commission throughout the accession process, while existing member states are not exposed to an equivalent form of continuous scrutiny. Episodes of democratic backsliding within the union have demonstrated the limitations of the current framework.³⁷ A reconsideration of how the Copenhagen criteria are interpreted and applied could therefore serve two purposes: adapting the enlargement logic to contemporary geopolitical realities; and establishing clearer mechanisms to ensure that existing member states continue to comply with the union's foundational democratic standards.³⁸

The reform of the enlargement methodology adopted in 2020 sought both to "reinvigorate the accession process" and to "strengthen political steering by member states".³⁹ In practice, however, the increased role of the council in setting benchmarks



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and monitoring progress has also expanded opportunities for individual member states to delay or obstruct negotiations, for reasons that may be only indirectly related to enlargement policy. At the procedural level, reform of the enlargement methodology is necessary, both to reduce political bottlenecks and enhance the credibility of the accession process. Expanding the use of qualified majority voting instead of the continued reliance on unanimity – particularly for intermediate procedural steps such as the opening and closing of negotiation chapters – would increase predictability and reduce the scope for politicisation. Complementary measures, such as simplifying the benchmarking system and strengthening the European Commission's role in monitoring progress, would further improve transparency and consistency.⁴⁰ It can be achieved by relying more systematically on the European Commission's existing monitoring tools, particularly the annual Enlargement Package assessments, which already evaluate candidates' alignment with the EU

37 A. Holesch and A. Kyriazi, Democratic Backsliding in the European Union: The Role of the Hungarian-Polish Coalition, *East European Politics* 38 (1): 1–20, 2021, <https://repositori.upf.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/80fded9a-b077-4448-bb53-6c2a793fd286/content>; A. Feeney, Shaking the Foundations: Democratic Backsliding within the European Union, *The Riga Conference 2025*. https://archive2.rigaconference.lv/uploads/files_content/file_217.pdf.

38 A. Duff, How Ukraine Should Join the European Union, *Verfassungsblog*, 2026, <https://verfassungsblog.de/how-ukraine-should-join-the-european-union/>.

39 European Commission, Revised Enlargement Methodology: Questions and Answers. Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood. 5.02.2020, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/revised-enlargement-methodology-questions-and-answers-2020-02-05_en.

40 A. Duff, How to Fast-Track Ukraine's Membership of the European Union, *European Policy Centre*, 2025. <https://www.epc.eu/publication/-Ukraines-membership-EU-6230b8/>.

acquis, and could provide a clearer basis for defining opening and closing benchmarks.⁴¹

Additionally, the Ukrainian case underscores the importance of institutionalising gradual or phased integration as a core component of EU enlargement policy. Rather than deferring participation until full membership is achieved, the union should formalise pathways for candidate countries to progressively integrate into key policy areas, including the internal market, EU programmes, and, critically, security and defence cooperation. Such an approach would allow candidates to access tangible benefits earlier in the accession process, while strengthening alignment with EU standards, and enhancing resilience in strategically sensitive sectors. In this context, some scholars have proposed more innovative approaches to Ukraine's accession, including the possibility of probationary membership, whereby Ukraine could formally join the union while completing certain reform commitments during a post-accession transition period.⁴² Yet such proposals remain controversial, as they risk creating differentiated or second-tier forms of EU membership. By contrast, many Ukrainian analysts favour a model of gradual integration prior to formal accession, based on deeper participation in selected EU frameworks, while negotiations are still ongoing.⁴³ Importantly, the EU has previously relied on transitional arrangements in earlier enlargement rounds, whereby certain policy areas – such as the free movement

of labour or agricultural markets – were subject to temporary restrictions following accession, in order to manage economic and political adjustments.⁴⁴ In this sense, a model of phased integration would not



Ukraine's integration should be viewed not as a one-sided process of adaptation, but as a mutually reinforcing dynamic that enhances both Ukraine's resilience and the EU's strategic capacity

represent a departure from EU practice, but rather its adaptation to the exceptional conditions under which Ukraine's accession is unfolding.

In the field of security and defence, the experience of Ukraine points to the need for a more capable and coherent CFSP. As demonstrated by the use of the European Peace Facility, EUMAM Ukraine, and emerging defence-industry initiatives, the EU has already moved towards a more operational and security-providing role. However, to sustain this shift, structural adjustments are required. First, the EU should progressively reduce its reliance on unanimity in CFSP decision-making – particularly for technical and implementation-related measures – by expanding the use of qualified majority voting or passerelle clauses. This would enhance speed, predictability, and resilience against possible political blockages. Second,

41 M. Emerson and S. Blockmans, EU Adopts Negotiating 'Frameworks' for Ukraine and Moldova: The Starting Gun for the Accession Process, *Stockholm Center for Eastern European Studies*, 2024, <https://bit.ly/4o2HtTv>.

42 A. Duff, How Ukraine Should Join the European Union, *Verfassungsblog*, 2026, <https://verfassungsblog.de/how-ukraine-should-join-the-european-union/>

43 R. Petrov, Bumpy Road of Ukraine towards the EU Membership in Time of War: 'Accession through War' v 'Gradual Integration', *European Papers – a Journal on Law and Integration*, 2023, 8 (3): 1057–65. <https://doi.org/10.15166/2499-8249/701>; A. Pozhar and A. Panteleimonenko, Prospects and Problems of Ukraine's European Integration, *Economics and Society*, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.32782/2524-0072/2024-65-43>.

44 M. Emerson and S. Blockmans, EU Adopts Negotiating 'Frameworks' for Ukraine and Moldova: The Starting Gun for the Accession Process, *Stockholm Center for Eastern European Studies*, 2024, <https://bit.ly/4o2HtTv>.

stronger institutional and budgetary mechanisms for common defence action are necessary. This includes reinforcing EU-level financial instruments, moving towards a more stable and multiannual funding framework for military assistance, and gradually integrating off-budget tools such as the European Peace Facility into a more transparent and accountable system. Third, the EU should consolidate existing defence industry, and procurement instruments into a more coherent framework that would enable the systematic integration of Ukraine.⁴⁵ Currently, financial, operational, and industrial instruments – including the European Peace Facility, EUMAM Ukraine, SAFE, EDIP, and EDF – operate in parallel, often with overlapping objectives but limited coordination. Bringing these instruments into closer alignment – for instance, by linking financial assistance, operational missions, joint procurement schemes, and industry participation under a more unified strategic framework – would allow the EU to engage more consistently across all stages of defence cooperation. In this sense, Ukraine’s integration should be viewed not as a one-sided process of adaptation, but as a mutually reinforcing dynamic that enhances both Ukraine’s resilience and the EU’s strategic capacity.

Conclusion

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine has not only accelerated the country’s accession trajectory but also revitalised broader debates on the future of EU enlargement under conditions of geopolitical crisis. At the same time, it has acted as a catalyst for the evolution of the Common Foreign and Security Policy and the Common Security

and Defence Policy, prompting the union to expand its instruments, deepen cooperation, and assume a more pronounced role as a security actor. Yet this transformation remains incomplete. Much of the current underlying architecture continues to rely on intergovernmental arrangements, overlapping instruments, and political consensus, leaving the effectiveness of EU action contingent on member states’ willingness. Ukraine’s accession underscores not only the need for greater coherence across existing mechanisms but also the importance of institutionalising more flexible integration pathways to support effective security policy and the sustainability of enlargement. The measures discussed in this article would enable the EU to move from ad hoc wartime adaptation towards a more structured, resilient, and strategically coherent model of integration, capable of sustaining enlargement under conditions of prolonged geopolitical confrontation. Ultimately, the trajectory of the EU as a security actor and a driver of enlargement will not be determined by institutional innovation alone, but by political choice.

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45 D. Genini, How the War in Ukraine has Transformed the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy. *Yearbook of European Law*, April, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1093/yel/yeaf003>.

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