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- CONTAINMENT THROUGH ENLARGEMENT

UKRAINE – EUROPEAN UNION

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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>.

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

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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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CONTAINMENT THROUGH ENLARGEMENT: UKRAINE'S EU INTEGRATION AND THE FUTURE OF EUROPEAN SECURITY

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Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 highlighted the mistakes of post-Cold War Western policy towards Russia and other post-Soviet states, which contributed to an environment conducive to Russian aggression, and culminated in the largest armed conflict in Europe since World War II. This paper argues that the current geopolitical environment necessitates a return to a strategy of containment vis-à-vis Russia, with Ukraine's EU integration as one of its cornerstones. After considering the geostrategic reasons in favour of Ukraine's admission to the EU, the paper — drawing on battlefield dynamics analysis — examines how Ukraine's EU accession could proceed under wartime conditions.

Introduction

The large-scale escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian war on 24 February 2022 has led to a fundamental shift in the European Union's (EU) security perception. After decades of pursuing a "policy of compromise and accommodation towards Moscow" in the Eastern Neighbourhood, the EU, having realised the shortcomings of this approach, abandoned it and redefined its relationship with Russia by granting candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova shortly after Russia's full-scale invasion.¹

Enlargement — previously viewed as a technocratic process primarily driven by economic interests — is increasingly perceived as a geopolitical tool. This shift was reflected, most recently, in the conclusions of the European Council meeting of 18 December 2025, which define enlargement as a "geostrategic investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity".²

In this paper, I argue that the current geopolitical environment necessitates a return to a strategy of containment vis-à-vis Russia, with Ukraine's EU integration as one of its cornerstones.

1 S. Meister, *Russlands Krieg gegen die Ukraine: Neugestaltung der östlichen EU-Nachbarschaftspolitik* (Russia's War on Ukraine: Reshaping the EU's Eastern Neighborhood Policy), Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 18.01.2023, <https://www.boell.de/de/2023/01/18/russlands-krieg-gegen-die-ukraine-neugestaltung-der-oestlichen-eu-nachbarschaftspolitik>.


2 Conclusions — 18 December 2025, European Council, 18.12.2025, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/wqmkn04/en-20251218-european-council-conclusions.pdf>, p. 7.

The paper proceeds in five sections. The first discusses the mistakes of Western policy towards Russia and other post-Soviet states after the collapse of the Soviet Union that, I posit, contributed to an environment conducive to Russian aggression. The second section assesses the drivers behind Russia's aggressive behaviour towards Ukraine and other former Soviet states, while the third considers the geostrategic reasons supporting Ukraine's admission to the EU. The fourth section draws on battlefield dynamics analysis, and examines how Ukraine's EU accession could proceed under wartime conditions. The final section presents concluding remarks.

The Mistakes of Post-Cold War Policy

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the shortcomings in the policies of major Western powers vis-à-vis Russia have created an environment susceptible to Russian aggression. These states – motivated both by overly optimistic expectations regarding the prospects for a constructive, cooperative relationship with Russia and by concerns about the potential deterioration of Russian-Western relations that could lead to a new Cold War – failed to apply the same standards in assessing Russia's domestic and foreign policies as those applied to other post-Soviet states. The five Central Asian republics and Azerbaijan, for example, were held to more stringent standards regarding political reform than Russia, as autocratic tendencies in Russia's domestic politics, as well as its increasingly aggressive foreign policy, were often overlooked or excused.³ Meanwhile, Western policies towards other post-Soviet states were effectively subordinated to those towards Russia. As a result, "Russia was not

meaningfully encouraged or incentivised to find a place in the liberal international order and was insufficiently discouraged from pursuing regional aggression."⁴



Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the shortcomings in the policies of major Western powers vis-à-vis Russia have created an environment susceptible to Russian aggression

During the 1992 conflict in Moldova, in which Transnistria sought secession, Russia played a significant role in supporting separatist forces. In an attempt to exert economic pressure on Moldova, Russia cut off natural gas supplies to territories controlled by the legitimate Moldovan authorities during the conflict. The intervention of Russia's 14th Army on the side of the separatist forces under the pretext of 'self-defence' and 'the protection of civilians' helped shift the outcome of a key battle and, consequently, the course of the war, in favour of separatist forces.

Despite Moldova's appeals for more active diplomatic engagement, and Russia's role in the war, the United Nations and the United States – already preoccupied with developments in the former Yugoslavia – did not play an active role in conflict resolution. While the US, for example, expressed concern over the war and called on Russia to withdraw its troops from Moldova, it did not assume a more active role when Russia failed to comply, thereby allowing Russia to play a decisive part in the conflict-resolution

3 A. Vindman, *The Folly of Realism: How the West Deceived itself about Russia and Betrayed Ukraine*, Public Affairs: New York 2025, pp. 76-77.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 225.

process. The resulting ceasefire agreement ‘froze’ the conflict but failed to define the political future of the Transnistrian region.⁵ While the West had significant leverage over Russia at the time, given the latter’s need for Western support, it failed to utilise it. Western states, for instance, could have conditioned their support for Russia’s entry into international organisations or the provision of Western aid on Russia’s compliance with Western values in its domestic politics and international conduct, thereby potentially altering its behaviour.⁶

Although Western actors became involved in the conflict resolution process after the conflict had been ‘frozen’ (under the auspices of the OSCE since 1993, and the USA and the EU since 2005), Russia remained a central participant with a veto power over undesired initiatives.⁷ Arguably, the West’s response (or lack thereof) to the Transnistrian conflict “emboldened a later generation of Russian leaders to pursue wider strategic projects”, leading to the Russian attacks on Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014), and, ultimately, to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.⁸

Similar developments unfolded in Georgia, following its declaration of independence from the Soviet Union. Secessionist movements in Georgia’s South Ossetia and Abkhazia regions led to multiple wars in the early 1990s. Although “Russian intelligence and military officials – with varying degrees

of official knowledge and support – armed, advised, and at times even fought with these separatist movements”, the West nevertheless sanctioned Russia’s role as the main peacekeeping force on the ground in both regions, after ceasefire agreements had been reached.⁹ As Western states were reluctant to play a more active diplomatic role, exert pressure on Russia, or deploy their own peacekeeping forces in the post-Soviet sphere, both Moldova and Georgia remained in an asymmetric position vis-à-vis Russia, which Moscow was able to exploit. This Western policy, in turn, reinforced Russia’s beliefs about its right to play a prominent, if not exclusive, role in what it terms its ‘near abroad.’

Even though Russian peacekeeping forces in Georgia were not neutral, Western countries continued to renew their mandate annually, until the Russo-Georgian war in 2008, when these ‘peacekeeping’ forces effectively became invading forces. This war was arguably enabled by the West’s reluctance – despite Georgia’s appeals – to revise international peacekeeping formats and mandates, either by complementing or replacing Russian troops. As they sought to avoid ‘provoking’ Russia, the United States and other Western allies refused to supply modern weapons systems to Georgia prior to the war, and only provided training programmes that did not focus on territorial defence. Rather than preventing conflict, these decisions weakened Georgia’s defence

5 E. Baidaus, *An Unsettled Nation: Moldova in the Geopolitics of Russia, Romania and Ukraine*, ibidem-Verlag: Stuttgart 2023, pp. 256-261, 276-296.

6 A. Vindman, *The Folly of Realism: How the West Deceived itself about Russia and Betrayed Ukraine*, Public Affairs: New York 2025, pp. 76-77.

7 E. Baidaus, *An Unsettled Nation: Moldova in the Geopolitics of Russia, Romania and Ukraine*, ibidem-Verlag: Stuttgart 2023, pp. 297-303.

8 A. Clarkson, *Transnistria Was Ground Zero for Russia’s Neo-Imperial Ambitions*, *World Politics Review*, 24.01.2024, <https://bit.ly/4ocl5pG8>.

9 R. D. Asmus, *A Little War that Shook the World: Georgia, Russia and the Future of the West*, Palgrave Macmillan: New York 2010, p. 56.

capabilities, and arguably contributed to the outbreak of the war.¹⁰ Although Western states intended to respond to Russia's 2008 war against Georgia in a manner that would deter future aggression, they neither imposed economic sanctions on Russia nor condemned it outright, instead attributing blame to both sides for the outbreak of the war.

Even though the war damaged Russia's international reputation, it was soon followed by a Western policy of 'reset'. US efforts to 'reset' relations with Russia coincided with similar European initiatives, such as the EU-Russia Partnership for Modernisation, and Germany's so-called Meseberg process.¹¹ However, these initiatives ultimately failed, as they inadvertently strengthened Russia economically and militarily and further emboldened it, since Russia interpreted Western goodwill as a sign of weakness.¹²

These mistakes of post-Cold War Western policy vis-à-vis Russia and other post-Soviet states contributed to a growing sense of Russian impunity, and paved the way for Russia's 2014 attack on Ukraine. Additional enabling factors can be identified in post-Cold War Western policy towards Ukraine.

In 2004, the pro-Russian candidate Viktor Yanukovich was declared the victor following a fraudulent Ukrainian presidential election that was also marred by Russian interference, including an estimated \$300 million in contributions from Gazprom and other Russian sources to Yanukovich's campaign, as well as covert influence operations. This

development triggered what became known as the Orange Revolution — large-scale protests that successfully demanded the annulment and rerun of the fraud-marred second round of the election. The rerun was ultimately won by the pro-Western candidate Viktor Yushchenko.

This episode of Russian interference should have clearly demonstrated the nature and objectives of Russian foreign policy vis-à-vis Ukraine and the broader 'near abroad.' Had the appropriate conclusions been drawn, Western policy towards Russia and other former Soviet states could have been recalibrated, with the development of a strategy that might have broken with the prioritisation of relations with Russia, and the treatment of relations with other post-Soviet states as derivative of relations with Russia, and instead have centred on closer engagement with willing states on the post-Soviet periphery, with the aim of strengthening their sovereignty in the face of Russian ambitions. Such a strategy could have contributed to preventing subsequent instances of Russian aggression. However, while Ukraine received greater Western attention following the Orange Revolution, relations with Ukraine — as well as with other post-Soviet states — remained subordinate to relations with Russia.¹³

Even though the heads of state and governments of the NATO member states declared in the 2008 Summit Declaration in Bucharest that Ukraine and Georgia "will become members of NATO" one day, they refused to grant these countries

10 R. D. Asmus, *A Little War that Shook the World: Georgia, Russia and the Future of the West*, Palgrave Macmillan: New York 2010, pp. 64-66, 173.

11 N. Popescu, *Why attempts to reset relations with Russia fail*, European Council on Foreign Relations, 3.02.2021, <https://ecfr.eu/article/why-attempts-to-reset-relations-with-russia-always-fail/>.

12 E. Davlikanova, *The Road to Hell is Paved with Russian Resets*, Center for European Policy Analysis, 5.03.2025, <https://cepa.org/article/the-road-to-hell-is-paved-with-russian-resets/>.

13 A. Vindman, *The Folly of Realism: How the West Deceived itself about Russia and Betrayed Ukraine*, PublicAffairs: New York 2025, pp. 127-142.

Membership Action Plans (MAPs), mainly due to German objections driven by fears that doing so would alienate Russia and lead to a deterioration in Russian-Western relations.

Although Russia had opposed previous rounds of enlargement, it had backed down in the face of a unified alliance; granting MAPs to Ukraine and Georgia and thereby demonstrating NATO's unified commitment to these countries might have helped deter Russian aggression towards them. However, while member states made a political commitment to Ukraine and Georgia in Bucharest, and reaffirmed the possibility of their future accession to the alliance, this decision also revealed divisions within NATO, and may therefore have emboldened Russia rather than deterring it.¹⁴

In another example, had Western states established closer cooperation with Ukraine under the presidency of Viktor Yushchenko, and provided stronger financial and technical support for his reform efforts, the success of these reforms might have prevented his electoral defeat and the eventual election of Viktor Yanukovich as president in 2010.¹⁵ In that scenario, the significant deterioration in the capabilities of the Ukrainian armed forces during Yanukovich's presidency – occurring in the years preceding the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war in 2014 – might also have been avoided. While Ukraine's armed forces had already been

“enfeebled by decades of underinvestment and lack of reform” prior to Yanukovich's presidency, their size declined between 2010 and 2014 to approximately one-third of their 2010 level.¹⁶ As McFaul and Person argue, the asymmetric balance of power between Russia and Ukraine constituted a necessary condition for the outbreak of the war; as they conclude, a “more powerful Ukraine and a less powerful Russia would have made war less likely.”¹⁷

Although Viktor Yanukovich initially continued negotiations with the EU over an Association Agreement, which had begun under the presidency of Viktor Yushchenko, he ultimately withdrew from signing it under pressure from Russia. These developments triggered the outbreak of the Revolution of Dignity in late 2013, which in turn led to his ouster and flight to Russia in early 2014.

Even though Russia was expelled from the G8, and economic sanctions were imposed following the outbreak of the war, these measures were, to a large extent, symbolic, and had a limited impact on the Russian economy.¹⁸ While these sanctions contributed to halting the initial phase of the war, they may have been able to achieve this outcome only because they aggravated an already difficult economic situation. The Russian economy had already been slowing down prior to the outbreak of the war, and oil prices declined significantly in the second half of 2014.¹⁹ More importantly, the limited

14 R. D. Asmus, *A Little War that Shook the World: Georgia, Russia and the Future of the West*, Palgrave Macmillan: New York 2010, pp. 111-140.

15 A. Vindman, *Stop Tiptoeing Around Russia*, *Foreign Affairs*, 8.08.2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/stop-tiptoeing-around-russia>.

16 A. Vindman, *The Folly of Realism: How the West Deceived itself about Russia and Betrayed Ukraine*, PublicAffairs: New York 2025, p. 194.

17 M. McFaul, R. Person, *Why Putin Invaded Ukraine*, [in:] H. Brands (ed.), *War in Ukraine: Conflict, Strategy, and the Return of a Fractured World*, Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore 2024, p. 35.

18 P. A. G. van Bergeijk, *Sanctions against the Russian war on Ukraine could be made to work*, Centre for Economic Policy Research, 28.03.2022, <https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/sanctions-against-russian-war-ukraine-could-be-made-work>.

19 L. Freedman, *Ukraine and the Art of Strategy*, Oxford University Press: New York 2019, pp. 116-117.

scope of these sanctions contributed to Russia's sense of impunity, and paved the way for the substantial escalation of the war in 2022, by fostering an expectation that Western responses to a full-scale invasion would be, as Vladimir Gel'man puts it, as "weak and sluggish" as the West's reaction to the initial phase of the war in 2014-2015.²⁰

Although the EU increased its commitment to the countries of the Eastern Partnership, including Ukraine, following the outbreak of the war, it did not offer these countries the prospect of membership, thereby leaving them in a geopolitical grey zone as 'in-between lands' between Russia and the European Union.²¹ This half-hearted approach, in particular, constituted a significant contributing factor to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. As the American political scientist Hal Brands argues, the "crucial, collective failure of America and its allies" in deterring Russia's full-scale invasion "was their inability to make clear – or perhaps even to realise – how much Ukraine's survival mattered to them before a shocking invasion cast that survival into existential doubt."²²

Overall, the West's soft response to the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war in 2014 strengthened Russia's sense of impunity, and contributed to the belief that future acts of international aggression would not lead to more serious Western resistance and, thereby, to the emergence of a permissive environment for the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. But what drives Russia's aggressive behaviour towards Ukraine?

The Sources of Russian Conduct

The American political scientist John Mearsheimer posits that the primary driver of Russia's attack on Ukraine was the prospect of the further eastward enlargement of NATO to include Ukraine.²³ However, Ukraine was no closer to NATO membership in 2014 than it had been in 2008, when it was promised eventual membership at the Bucharest summit. Indeed, the Ukrainian parliament voted for the facilitation of the country's NATO membership nearly ten months after Russia's invasion of Crimea. Ukraine had still not come closer to NATO membership by the time of Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, either.²⁴

What ultimately seems to drive Russia's aggressive behaviour towards some of its neighbours is not the prospect of the 'expansion' of NATO to include them, but the spread of democracy. Russia has become increasingly hostile towards Georgia and Ukraine, as these states have undergone processes of democratisation following the Rose Revolution in 2003 in Georgia and, in Ukraine, initially following the Orange Revolution in 2004 and then again in the aftermath of the Revolution of Dignity in 2013. But why does Russia aim to contain and roll back the spread of democracy in the post-Soviet sphere, including through the use of military force?

In its international conduct, Russia seeks to restore its status as a great power, and promote a multipolar world order in which it exercises decisive influence over key global

20 V. Gel'man, *Russia's Gamble: The Domestic Origins of Russia's Attack on Ukraine*, Polity Press: Cambridge 2025, p. 137.

21 R. Youngs, *Europe's Eastern Crisis: The Geopolitics of Asymmetry*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2017, p. 215.

22 H. Brands, *The Ukraine War and Global Order*, [in:] H. Brands (ed.), *War in Ukraine: Conflict, Strategy, and the Return of a Fractured World*, Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore 2024, p. 5.

23 J. J. Mearsheimer, *Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault*, *Foreign Affairs*, 18.08.2014, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2014-08-18/why-ukraine-crisis-west-s-fault#>.

24 M. McFaul, R. Person, *Why Putin Invaded Ukraine*, [in:] H. Brands (ed.), *War in Ukraine: Conflict, Strategy, and the Return of a Fractured World*, Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore 2024, pp. 49-50.

events.²⁵ As part of these efforts, it seeks to establish an ‘exclusive sphere of influence’ across the post-Soviet space, within which it has the ability to interfere in the domestic politics of states and re-subjugate them without interference from other powers.²⁶ However, democratic breakthroughs in the post-Soviet sphere tend to lead to a process of moving away from Russia’s orbit and towards the West as democracy consolidates, leading Russia to increasingly lose its influence over these states.



Although the EU increased its commitment to the countries of the Eastern Partnership, including Ukraine, following the outbreak of the war, it did not offer these countries the prospect of membership, thereby leaving them in a geopolitical grey zone

Furthermore, successful examples of democratisation in post-Soviet states could demonstrate the possibility of freedom from Russian influence in the post-Soviet sphere and, by providing an example for the Russian people, even undermine the stability of the Putin regime.²⁷ As Victoria Nuland puts it, “Putin has always understood that a belt of increasingly democratic, prosperous states around Russia would pose a direct challenge

to his leadership model and risk re-infecting his own people with democratic aspirations.” Consequently, he “was never going to take a ‘live and let live’ approach to former Soviet lands and satellite states.”²⁸

Moreover, in the case of Ukraine, Putin likely not only uses the notion of the artificiality of the Ukrainian state and nation to justify the war, but has also personally internalised these beliefs. Furthermore, the regime’s reliance on Russia’s imperial traditions to justify the war and cultivate public support for it suggests the continued prevalence of imperialistic ideas among the Russian population.²⁹

However, allowing Russia to re-subjugate the states that it perceives to be in its sphere of influence would hardly result in stability. Even if the pleas of aspiring post-Soviet countries for Western alignment had been rejected, they would likely have continued to resist Russia’s efforts to draw them back into its sphere of influence, seeking whatever assistance they could obtain from the West, as these states have regarded Western alignment as “the key to independence, democracy, and affluence” and therefore more attractive than alignment with Russia.³⁰ Rejecting their European integration aspirations would merely render them more vulnerable to Russia’s malign interference — interference they would likely continue to resist.

25 N. Bugayova, F. W. Kagan, K. Stepanenko, Weakness is Lethal: Why Putin Invaded Ukraine and How the War Must End, Institute for the Study of War, 1.10.2023, <https://understandingwar.org/research/russia-ukraine/weakness-is-lethal-why-putin-invaded-ukraine-and-how-the-war-must-end/>.

26 R. Person, M. McFaul, What Putin Fears Most, *Journal of Democracy*, April 2022, 33(2), pp. 18-27, doi:10.1353/jod.2022.0015.

27 Ibid.

28 V. Nuland, Pinning down Putin, *Foreign Affairs*, 9.06.2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2020-06-09/pinning-down-putin>.

29 M. McFaul, R. Person, Why Putin Invaded Ukraine, [in:] H. Brands (ed.), *War in Ukraine: Conflict, Strategy, and the Return of a Fractured World*, Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore 2024, pp. 45-47, 50-51.


30 R. Kagan, The Price of Hegemony, *Foreign Affairs*, 6.04.2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-04-06/russia-ukraine-war-price-hegemony#>.

Returning to a system of spheres of influence in the international order would likely lead to a more dangerous and violent world. As great powers are often driven by “[i]deology and the quest for greatness”, rather than by insecurity, “[c]onceding a sphere of influence to a great-power challenger might not produce stability but simply give that challenger a better position from which to realize its ambitions.” Consequently, spheres of influence are rarely static; they tend to be constantly contested as “[r]ising states are continually tempted to renegotiate previous bargains once they have the power to do so.” Indeed, throughout history, settlements based on spheres of influence have often led to war, “from the Thirty Years’ Peace between Athens and Sparta to the Peace of Amiens between the United Kingdom and Napoleonic France.”³¹

The Importance of Ukraine

Having briefly reviewed the past mistakes of Western policy towards Russia, and the drivers of Russia’s aggressive foreign policy towards some of its neighbouring states, what might the outlines of a new, more effective approach to Russia look like? An important recognition in developing such an approach is that there is no long-term prospect for peace and security in Europe as long as the current Russian regime remains in power.³² Based on this, the best approach for the West at present seems to be a return to a strategy of containment, with Ukraine’s EU integration as one of its cornerstones.

Russia’s strategic objective in its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was to preclude the possibility of Ukraine’s integration into NATO or the EU and to bring it under Russian political control, by removing the democratically elected Ukrainian government and replacing it with a pro-Russian puppet regime. However, when the current phase of the war ends in some form or another, Russia may hold a chunk of Ukrainian territory, but the country is unlikely to be fully subjugated, and will likely become increasingly integrated into the European Union over time.³³ Indeed, the existence of a prosperous, democratic Ukraine, integrated into the EU and secure against future Russian aggression, would constitute a strategic defeat for Russia, even if some Ukrainian territories remain under temporary occupation.³⁴



Russia’s strategic objective in its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was to preclude the possibility of Ukraine’s integration into NATO or the EU and to bring it under Russian political control

Furthermore, by integrating the aspiring states of the post-Soviet sphere, the EU could cement the “consolidation of geopolitical pluralism within the former Soviet Union” and ensure the creation of “a felicitous environment for Russia to define itself purely as Russia.” In this regard, Ukraine’s

31 H. Brands, Don’t Let Great Powers Carve up the World, Foreign Affairs, 20.04.2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/responses/dont-let-great-powers-carve-world#>

32 J. Bolton, Putin Must Go: Now is the Time for Regime Change in Russia, 19FortyFive, 4.10.2022, <https://www.19fortyfive.com/2022/10/putin-must-go-now-is-the-time-for-regime-change-in-russia/>.

33 L. Freedman, Strategic Fanaticism: Vladimir Putin and Ukraine, [in:] H. Brands (ed.), War in Ukraine: Conflict, Strategy, and the Return of a Fractured World, Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore 2024, p. 57.


34 S. Besch, E. Ciaramella, Ukraine’s Accession Poses a Unique Conundrum for the EU, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 24.10.2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/10/ukraines-accession-poses-a-unique-conundrum-for-the-eu?lang=en>.

role is particularly important; as Zbigniew Brzezinski argues, “without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be an empire, but with Ukraine suborned and then subordinated, Russia automatically becomes an empire.”³⁵ Indeed, by integrating Ukraine, the EU could ensure “that Russia is not allowed to impose its sphere of influence and its vision of European security order” on the continent,³⁶ thereby contributing to the creation of a geopolitical environment conducive to a future post-Putin Russia’s eventual break with its imperial legacy.

It is, of course, unpredictable as to when and how Vladimir Putin’s rule will come to an end, and whether this will lead to Russia’s democratisation. Should Putin die in office, Russia will likely remain an autocracy. In the post-Cold War period, in 83 percent of cases in which leaders of personalised autocracies have died in office, the regime has endured. In those cases where the autocrat’s death did lead to regime collapse, the fallen system was replaced by another autocratic regime in every single case.³⁷

A coup removing Putin from power appears unlikely. The wealth and position of members of the Russian elite depend entirely on him, and Russia’s security services are controlled by his close and loyal allies. Popular protest thus appears to constitute the only pathway through which the fall of the Putin regime – or that of a post-Putin autocratic regime –

may be followed by democratisation.³⁸ However, the Prigozhin rebellion revealed that a “liberal, urban revolution” is less likely than “a highly militarised populist uprising driven [...] by Russian nationalists” in contemporary Russia.³⁹



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Ultimately, the chances of Russia’s post-Putin democratisation are slim. Overall, in the post-Cold War era, 92 percent of countries remained autocratic after the death in office or removal from power – whether by coup, civil war, or popular protests – of leaders in personalised regimes who had held power for at least 20 years.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, as Mark Galeotti highlights, the majority of the Russian elite “are pragmatic kleptocrats; they are happy to proclaim their devoted commitment to Mother Russia, but they want to be able to keep robbing her blind at the same time, and sending their money, and their families, and their mistresses to safety and comfort in the West.”⁴¹

35 Z. Brzezinski, The Premature Partnership, Foreign Affairs, 1.03.1994, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/1994-03-01/premature-partnership>

36 A. Osypchuk, K. Raik, The EU’s Geopolitical Enlargement – Ukraine’s Accession will Make the EU a Stronger Security Actor, JOINT Brief, November 2023, no. 30, <https://bit.ly/3Rjv76A>

37 A. Kendall-Taylor, E. Frantz, The Treacherous Path to a Better Russia, Foreign Affairs, 20.06.2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russian-federation/treacherous-path-better-russia>.

38 Ibid.

39 L. Fix, M. Kimmage, The Beginning of the End of Putin?, Foreign Affairs, 27.06.2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russian-federation/beginning-end-putin-prigozhin-rebellion>.

40 A. Kendall-Taylor, E. Frantz, The Treacherous Path to a Better Russia, Foreign Affairs, 20.06.2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russian-federation/treacherous-path-better-russia>.

41 M. Galeotti, We Need to Talk about Putin: How the West Gets him Wrong, Revised edition, Ebury Press: London 2025, p. 152.

In any case, a Ukraine firmly anchored in the West would underscore the futility of pursuing imperial ambitions, and could further incentivise a future, more pragmatic Russian leader to renounce such ambitions and seek some form of accommodation with the West. However, the EU has not previously admitted a state involved in an active armed conflict. Although approximately one-third of Cyprus's territory was under Turkish occupation at the time of its accession, active hostilities had not occurred in the country for three decades. The prospect of Ukraine's accession has thus introduced the unfamiliar possibility of integrating a state that is still engaged in an active war.

The Way Forward

This consideration is especially important as, notwithstanding the ongoing US-led negotiations, the war is unlikely to end soon. As Person points out, "bargaining models of war termination predict that peace negotiations are likely to fail", and, regardless of its eventual outcome, the war will be settled on the battlefield. The possibility of a negotiated settlement depends on the existence of a set of territorial and policy compromises acceptable to both sides. However, in light of the underlying reasons Russia gave for launching its invasion, the notion of a negotiated end to the war is hardly more than 'wishful thinking.'⁴² Under these

circumstances, Ukraine and its allies should plan to build a "viable, sovereign, and secure state under constant military pressure" as "an acceptable armistice may never formally arrive."⁴³

The demographic disparity between Russia and Ukraine would normally lead Ukraine to eventually lose a prolonged war of attrition against Russia, even with the timely provision of adequate Western military assistance.⁴⁴ However, due to the increasingly prominent role of UAVs on the battlefield, the area extending approximately 10-15 kilometres from the front line — often referred to as the 'kill zone' — has become a territory characterised by "drones, remote mines, precision artillery, and constant surveillance," in which it is "nearly impossible to manoeuvre without being detected and then immediately hit." In this environment, while the infiltration of small infantry units remains possible, exploiting such incursions has become virtually impossible.⁴⁵ As a result, the role of infantry in holding the front line has dramatically decreased. Indeed, Ukraine has "basically stripped the front line of soldiers in many places, and relied on the unmanned forces and very small units (a soldier or just a handful of soldiers)" to hold the line.⁴⁶

Under these conditions, it seems possible, by widening the 'kill zone', and denying Russia the ability to concentrate troops

42 R. Person, Why Ukraine Shouldn't Negotiate with Putin, *Journal of Democracy*, January 2025, 36(1), pp. 21-35, doi:10.1353/jod.2025.a947881.

43 A. Zagorodnyuk, Ukraine's New Theory of Victory Should be Strategic Neutralization, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 18.06.2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/06/ukraines-new-theory-of-victory-should-be-strategic-neutralization>.

44 D. Livermore, A Sobering Moment in the Ukraine War, Center for European Policy Analysis, 25.10.2024, <https://cepa.org/article/a-sobering-moment-in-the-ukraine-war/>.

45 A. Zagorodnyuk, The Only Security Guarantee Ukraine Can Trust, Foreign Affairs, 23.09.2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/only-security-guarantee-ukraine-can-trust#>.


46 P. P. O'Brien, The Fewer Soldiers on the Front Line the Better, Phillips's Newsletter [Substack], 23.12.2025, <https://phillipsobrien.substack.com/p/the-fewer-soldiers-on-the-front-line> access.

and equipment in its rear areas, to paralyse the capacity of Russian forces to generate momentum, and thereby render any future offensive operations strategically futile.⁴⁷ Over time, a situation characterised by “strengthened Ukrainian defences combined with the compounding costs of offensive operations for both sides could lead to a battlefield stalemate”, which, in turn, could eventually result in a freeze in the fighting “with only occasional flare-ups such as peppered the Donbas from 2014 to 2022,” along with the possible continuation of Russian air strikes.⁴⁸

Achieving this outcome requires continued, timely Western military assistance to Ukraine, prioritising air defence, unmanned systems, and long-range strike capabilities. As certain weapon systems necessary for the defence of Ukraine – such as the Patriot air defence system or ATACMS missiles – can only be procured from the United States, while others are not currently being produced in sufficient quantities in Europe, this will require continued cooperation between Ukraine, its European allies and the United States, to ensure Ukraine’s access to American equipment.⁴⁹

Some object to the fact that admitting Ukraine to the EU while it is still engaged in an active war would draw other EU member states into war with Russia. Article

42.7 of the Treaty of Lisbon establishes a mutual assistance obligation among EU member states. The provision stipulates that member states are required to assist a member state that has been attacked “by all the means in their power.” However, similarly to the mutual defence obligation under Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, this does not entail a binding requirement to deploy armed forces; rather, the nature of the assistance provided remains at the discretion of member state governments, and may range from diplomatic support to military intervention.⁵⁰



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That said, security assistance to Ukraine may, over time, extend to the deployment of military forces by certain willing EU member states. These forces would not be deployed along the line of contact; rather, they could be stationed in strategically significant cities, ports, and power plants, to deter Russian attacks.⁵¹ Alternatively, European training

47 A. Zagorodnyuk, The Only Security Guarantee Ukraine Can Trust, Foreign Affairs, 23.09.2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/only-security-guarantee-ukraine-can-trust#>.

48 R. Person, Why Ukraine Shouldn't Negotiate with Putin, *Journal of Democracy*, January 2025, 36(1), pp. 21-35, doi:10.1353/jod.2025.a947881.

49 A. Rácz, Why Europeans Paying for US Weapons for Ukraine is a Unique Opportunity, German Council on Foreign Relations, 22.07.2025, <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/why-europeans-paying-us-weapons-ukraine-unique-opportunity>.

50 G. Weber, Mutual Defence in the European Union? The Imperative of Article 42.7 in Case the United States Abandons European Defence, Centre for Security, Diplomacy and Strategy, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, 18.12.2024, <https://csds.vub.be/publication/mutual-defence-in-the-european-union-the-imperative-of-article-42-7-in-case-the-united-states-abandons-european-defence>.

51 J. Liboreiro, Everything we know so far about the 'Coalition of the Willing' for Ukraine, *Euronews*, 2.04.2025, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/04/02/everything-we-know-so-far-about-the-coalition-of-the-willing-for-ukraine>.


missions could be deployed to Western Ukraine. The use of European fighter aircraft to patrol the airspace over Western Ukraine is another option under discussion.⁵² This could be achieved by deploying 120 European fighter aircraft operating from European air bases outside Ukraine.⁵³

Another source of objection concerns temporarily occupied territories. In this regard, the case of Cyprus offers a potential model. Under this arrangement, while the European Union recognises the territorial integrity of Cyprus, and considers the entire territory of the state part of the EU, the application of EU law is suspended in areas not under the effective control of the constitutional government. Josep Borrell, the EU's former High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, has cited Cyprus as a potential model for Moldova's accession, given the issue posed by Transnistria. As the war in Ukraine will likely evolve into a frozen conflict, or at least decrease significantly in intensity over time, there appears to be no reason why this model could not be applied in Ukraine's case as well.⁵⁴

Conclusions

While the European Union has departed from its earlier, half-hearted approach to supporting the European aspirations of Ukraine and other post-Soviet states following Russia's full-scale invasion, significant obstacles to Ukraine's EU

integration remain. Although some emphasise the need to "send a political message" – as an EU diplomat was quoted while discussing proposals to accelerate the integration of candidate countries – many member states remain sceptical and insist on following the EU's established accession process.⁵⁵



While the European Union has departed from its earlier, half-hearted approach to supporting the European aspirations of Ukraine and other post-Soviet states following Russia's full-scale invasion, significant obstacles to Ukraine's EU integration remain

However, Ukraine's accession to the European Union constitutes an important instrument for shaping the future of European security. Indeed, it appears indispensable to achieving a more stable and secure Europe over the long term. Leaving Ukraine in a geopolitical grey zone between the EU and Russia would merely render it more vulnerable to Russian aggression, thereby increasing the risk of further instability in the future. At the same time, as this paper has demonstrated, many of the security-related concerns frequently raised in objection to Ukraine's accession – such

52 L. Brown, UK could scrap plans to send thousands of troops to Ukraine, *The Times*, 24.04.2025, <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/defence/article/britain-abandon-plans-troops-ukraine-russia-mtjrm2wzh>.

53 SkyShield: a practical security guarantee for Ukraine, Price of Freedom, <https://proof.org.ua/projects/sky-shield/>, 2026.

54 J. Kaiser, How Cyprus could offer a blueprint for Moldova's path to EU membership, *The Parliament*, 27.03.2024, <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/news/article/could-moldovas-path-to-eu-membership-follow-the-cyriot-blueprint>.

55 Z. Sheftalovich, 5 steps to get Ukraine into the EU in 2027, *Politico*, 10.02.2026, <https://www.politico.eu/article/5-steps-ukraine-eu-membership-2027/>.

as the risk of drawing the European Union into the war or the issue of temporarily occupied territories – are largely unfounded or addressable.⁵⁶

In any case, irrespective of the timeline for Ukraine’s eventual EU membership, its European allies should prepare for a protracted period of hostilities. In the absence of a significant technological breakthrough altering the overall battlefield dynamics, or a collapse of political will on either side – developments for which there is currently no indication –

the continuation of the conflict remains the most plausible scenario for the foreseeable future.

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⁵⁶ Other concerns raised in objection to Ukraine’s integration are not security-related and therefore fall outside the scope of this paper. These include the virtual unsustainability of the EU’s Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and Cohesion Policy in their current form, in the event of Ukraine’s accession. For a detailed discussion of these concerns and potential ways to address them, see, for example, S. Lehne, A Reluctant Magnet: Navigating the EU’s Absorption Capacity, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 21.09.2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/09/a-reluctant-magnet-navigating-the-eus-absorption-capacity>.

UKRAINE'S EUROPEAN INTEGRATION POLICY IN PROTECTING THE RIGHTS OF NATIONAL MINORITIES AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Dr Ihor Lossovskiy

*State Service of Ukraine for Ethnic Affairs and Freedom
of Conscience*

Ukraine continues to fulfil its European commitments in terms of the protection of national minorities, combating discrimination, racism and xenophobia, through active international engagement and systematic cooperation with EU institutions. Steps have been taken to systematically implement European standards concerning the rights of national minorities. Measures were implemented to advance the Roadmap on the Role of Law and the Action Plan on the Protection of Minorities, within the framework of negotiations between Ukraine and the European Commission.

The protection of Ukraine's national minorities is one of the priorities outlined in the negotiating framework for Ukraine's accession to the European Union. This issue is integral to the EU enlargement process. Ukraine adheres to these priorities and is improving its legislation concerning ethnic policy, in line with the recommendations of international institutions. In June 2022, following Ukraine's acquisition of EU candidate status, the European Commission provided the country with seven key recommendations to maintain its candidate status and commence accession negotiations. The seventh recommendation directly concerned issues relating to national minorities: "Completion of the reform of the legislative framework for

the protection of the rights of national minorities in accordance with the recommendations of the Council of Europe's European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission)"¹. As of September 2025, according to European Commissioner for Enlargement Marta Kos, Ukraine has completed its 'homework' on ensuring the rights of national minorities. This allows for the opening of the first cluster of negotiations ('Fundamentals') on EU accession. She positively noted the steps taken by the Ukrainian authorities, in particular the adoption of the Action Plan on the Protection of the Rights of Persons Belonging to National Minorities, and the incorporation of European standards into legislation.²

1 European Commission of the Council of Europe 'For Democracy through Law' (Venice Commission). <https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/events/>

2 European commissioner Kos on meeting with representatives of national minorities: no one expressed concerns about protection of rights, Interfax-Ukraine, 02.10.2025, <https://en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/1109235.html>

Legislative and Regulatory Activity

With the adoption in December 2022 of the new Law of Ukraine on National Minorities of Ukraine³, systematic work continued to improve ethnic policy, despite the challenges posed by the full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war.

Following the opinion of the Venice Commission of 12 June 2023, amendments were made to the Law of Ukraine 'On National Minorities (Communities) of Ukraine',⁴ with the aim of bringing provisions of the law in line with the 1950 European Convention on Human Rights, the 1995 Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, and the 1992 European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. On 21 September 2023, the Verkhovna Rada adopted the Law of Ukraine 'On Amendments to the Law of Ukraine "On National Minorities (Communities) of Ukraine" regarding certain issues of the realisation of the rights and freedoms of persons belonging to national minorities (communities) of Ukraine', which took into account the aforementioned recommendations of the Venice Commission.

The Venice Commission's new opinion of 9 October 2023⁵ noted positively that many of the previous recommendations had been taken into account. The Venice Commission commended the efforts of the Ukrainian authorities aimed at implementing the recommendations, and bringing the

provisions of the Law of Ukraine 'On National Minorities of Ukraine' in line with international standards. At the same time, it made recommendations to introduce further amendments to the laws 'On National Minorities (Communities) of Ukraine', 'On Ensuring the Functioning of the Ukrainian Language as the State Language', 'On Media' and 'On Education'. In accordance with these recommendations, the amendments were adopted on 8 December 2023⁶.

In December 2023, the Prime Minister of Ukraine, Denys Shmyhal, met the leaders of civil society organisations representing national minorities in Ukraine. Issues related to the interaction between executive authorities and the public, and the state of affairs regarding the protection of the rights of national minorities, were discussed.

On 27 December 2024, representatives of national minorities met the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Following the meeting, a number of specific proposals were submitted to the president regarding the improvement of the protection of the rights and interests of Ukraine's national minorities during the war. Implementation of these proposals by the relevant state authorities is currently ongoing. Presidential Decree No. 883/2024 was adopted on the introduction of a national holiday – the Day of Interethnic Harmony and Cultural Diversity, which is celebrated annually on 21 May.

3 The Law of Ukraine on National Minorities (Communities) of Ukraine. – December 2022. – [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-REF\(2023\)019-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-REF(2023)019-e)

4 CDL-AD(2023)021-e Ukraine – Opinion on the Law on National Minorities (Communities), adopted by the Venice Commission at its 135th Plenary Session (9-10 June 2023), [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD\(2023\)021-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD(2023)021-e)

5 CDL-AD(2023)028-e Ukraine – Follow-up opinion to the opinion on the law on national minorities (communities) (draft law #9610), adopted by the Venice Commission at its 136th Plenary Session (6-7 October 2023), [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD\(2023\)028-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD(2023)028-e)

6 Law on Amendments to Certain Laws of Ukraine to Take into Account the Expert Assessment of the Council of Europe on the Rights of National Minorities in Certain Areas, Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 10.12.2023. <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/3504-20#Text>

In 2023–2024, the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine adopted 11 subordinate regulatory legal acts concerning ethnic policy and the protection of the rights of national minorities, among them the Concept of the State Programme ‘Unity in Diversity’; ‘On the Approval of the Procedure for Determining the List of Settlements Traditionally Inhabited by Persons Belonging to National Minorities (Communities) of Ukraine’; ‘On the Approval of the List of Languages of National Minorities (Communities) and Indigenous Peoples of Ukraine that are at Risk of Extinction’; and ‘On the Approval of the Methodology for the Use of the Languages of National Minorities’.



In 2023–2024, over 40 consultations were held with civil society organisations representing national minorities and regional military administrations

Five orders of the State Service of Ukraine for Ethnic Affairs and Freedom of Conscience (DESS) were approved regarding the protection of the rights of national minorities. Eleven meetings of the Council of Public Associations of National Minorities of Ukraine, which has been operating since May 2024 under the DESS, were held.

The regulatory acts were drafted by the DESS in a transparent manner, involving extensive consultations with public associations of national communities and relevant state authorities.

Consultations with Public Associations of National Minorities

In 2023–2024, over 40 consultations were held with civil society organisations representing national minorities and regional military administrations, as well as four national seminars, which served

as a means of regular engagement with the regions, and ensuring the relevance of minority rights issues in the policy-making process. A significant number of similar consultations took place the following year as well.

In working with civil society organisations, the focus was on participation in the drafting of legislation covering the list of languages at risk of extinction, the identification of areas of compact settlement for minorities, etc. The initiative to establish Inter-Ethnic Harmony Day was put forward for discussion among representatives of national communities, as a response to the need for a symbolic gesture of solidarity in the context of collective resistance to Russian aggression. Other practical outcomes include the adoption of legislative acts that form the basis for policy implementation at the local level: a methodology for the use of minority languages in settlements, a list of languages at risk of extinction, procedures for identifying areas of traditional minority settlement, as well as guidelines on budgetary funding for measures in this field. A procedure for the establishment of National Minority Centres has been developed, providing for the creation of a new institutional platform, as well as the acts necessary for the functioning of the Council of Public Associations of National Minorities, etc.

A number of large-scale forums were held for the Greek, Polish, Romanian, Czech and Hungarian communities, as well as a nationwide forum on inter-ethnic policy, and the First Congress of the Indigenous Peoples of Ukraine, which created a space for public discussion of the positions of national communities on key areas of state ethnic policy. A broad, comprehensive approach enabled the gathering of a wide range of participants, including both community representatives and experts from state and non-state bodies.

In 2024, the procedure for selecting and approving the membership of the Council of Public Associations of National Minorities of Ukraine was implemented, and support was provided for its regular meetings. Six meetings of the Working Group on the Development of the Spelling of the Crimean Tatar Language were held; the draft text was finalised and revised, to take into account the proposals of the National Commission for the Development of the Crimean Tatar Language. The aforementioned spelling system, based on the Latin alphabet, was adopted by a decree of the Government of Ukraine.



A number of large-scale forums were held for the Greek, Polish, Romanian, Czech and Hungarian communities, as well as a nationwide forum on inter-ethnic policy, and the First Congress of the Indigenous Peoples of Ukraine

In 2025, a meeting of the DESS Expert Council was held to consider legislative initiatives in the field of languages under threat of extinction. A Working Group of Experts on the Revival and Development of these languages was established, and it held around ten meetings. In April 2026, the relevant Strategy for the Development of Endangered Languages of National Minorities in Ukraine, together with an operational plan for its implementation, was to be adopted by the government.

Reporting on Ukraine's Fulfilment of Its Commitments Regarding the Implementation of the Provisions of International Treaties

In April 2024, Ukraine's Fifth Periodic Report on the implementation of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages⁷ was submitted to the Council of Europe Secretariat.

The Sixth Periodic Report on the implementation of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM)⁸, covering the period from 2021 to the first quarter of 2024, was submitted to the Council of Europe's Advisory Committee in January 2025, as part of the Council of Europe's monitoring.

Work has begun on resuming the activities of four intergovernmental commissions; in particular, the membership of the Intergovernmental Ukrainian-German Commission on the German Minority Living in Ukraine has been renewed (2024), and the 12th meeting of this Commission was held in Berlin in October 2025. The new membership of the Ukrainian side of the Bilateral Ukrainian-Slovak Commission on National Minorities, Education and Culture has been approved (2025). This year, the issue of resuming the work of the Bilateral Ukrainian-Romanian Commission is being addressed.

International activities within the framework of the National Strategy for Ensuring the Rights of Roma until 2030 included participation in projects of the Council of Europe, the OSCE and UNESCO, as well as negotiations in Brussels. Participation in these forums focused on

7 European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, Council of Europe, 1950, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/compass/european-charter-for-regional-or-minority-languages>

8 Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, Council of Europe, 1995, <https://rm.coe.int/16800c10cf>

highlighting Ukraine's progress in fulfilling its obligations regarding the protection of minority rights, particularly those of the Roma, and on supporting institutional changes to implement EU standards. Since 2023, we have organised and participated in nearly 40 international and nationwide civil society events dedicated to Roma issues.


Activities Relating to European Integration

Presentations were prepared for bilateral meetings with the European Commission under Chapter 23 of the negotiation process on Ukraine's accession to the EU, 'Judiciary and Fundamental Rights'. Ukraine's officials participated in screening meetings with the European Commission delegation in September 2024, during which the issues of freedom of conscience, combating racism and xenophobia, non-discrimination, and safeguarding the rights of national minorities, including the Roma, were raised.

Reports were submitted on the compliance of national legislation with EU standards, implementation of the national cultural programme 'Unity in Diversity', participation in intergovernmental commissions, and the fulfilment of international obligations. In September 2024, the screening under Chapter 23 was completed in Brussels, and work began on the European Commission's recommendations to address certain gaps in Ukrainian legislation. A final report on the alignment of Ukrainian legislation with the EU acquis was prepared.

Following the completion of the screening, the Government of Ukraine launched consultations on the development of a roadmap for bringing Ukrainian legislation into line with EU legislation in the area of 'Rule of Law', in particular regarding freedom of conscience, freedom of religion, combating discrimination, combating hate speech, hate crime, Roma issues, and the rights of national minorities.

In 2024, the first rounds of consultations with the European Commission on the content of the roadmap took place, and the relevant comments were addressed. Following the European Commission's preliminary approval of the roadmap and its coordination with the relevant authorities, it was adopted at the national level in May, with subsequent approval by the European Commission and EU Member States.



Ukraine continues to ensure the fulfilment of its European integration commitments, in protecting the rights of national minorities (communities), combating discrimination, racism, xenophobia, hate speech and hate crimes through active international engagement

A separate annex to the roadmap is the Action Plan on the Protection of the Rights of National Minorities until 2027. The action plan, like the roadmap, is a strategic document within the framework of Ukraine's EU accession negotiations. The action plan takes into account the provisions of the EU Negotiating Framework (points 39 and 40) and the results of the screening of Ukrainian legislation under Chapter 23. It covers the following objectives: strengthening institutional capacity for the protection of the rights of national minorities; updating the legal framework for protection against discrimination and hate speech; developing a methodology for monitoring hate speech; ensuring inclusive representation of minorities in government; safeguarding linguistic and educational identity; and addressing the consequences of the war in regions with a significant minority presence.

Ukraine continues to ensure the fulfilment of its European integration commitments, in protecting the rights of national minorities

(communities), combating discrimination, racism, xenophobia, hate speech and hate crimes through active international engagement, participation in monitoring mechanisms, the preparation and defence of international reports, as well as systematic cooperation with the institutions of the European Union, the Council of Europe, the OSCE and the UN, in particular UNESCO and other partners.

During its visit to Ukraine in July 2025, the FCNM delegation held working meetings in Uzhhorod, Kontsove and Berehove with representatives of local authorities, civil society and national minorities, to assess the implementation of the FCNM provisions, discuss the implementation of previous Council of Europe recommendations, and address the current challenges arising from the Russian Federation's armed aggression against Ukraine.

In 2025, Ukraine successfully presented its report on the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination⁹ at the 115th session of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) in Geneva. Ukraine presented comprehensive information on legislative, institutional and practical measures aimed at combating discrimination, and highlighted the impact of the Russian-Ukrainian war on national minorities in Ukraine. The event demonstrated a high level of inter-agency coordination and cooperation, as well as Ukraine's ability to properly fulfil its international obligations, even under martial law.

Ukraine actively cooperated with other monitoring mechanisms of international human rights and security organisations, particularly in assessing the fulfilment of obligations to combat racism and intolerance. An important milestone in this cooperation was the monitoring visit by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI)¹⁰ in July 2025, as part of the Council of Europe's sixth monitoring cycle on the situation in Ukraine. The ECRI delegation held consultations with representatives of state authorities, law enforcement agencies, civil society organisations and national minorities in Kyiv and Zakarpattia Oblast.

Following earlier stages of engagement with the CLRD, ECRI and the FCNM, the DESS has acted as the coordinator and main contact institution between Ukraine and these international mechanisms since early 2025. Its participation in facilitating monitoring visits and meetings helped to ensure an open and constructive dialogue between Ukraine and European institutions, regarding the implementation of international standards for the protection of the rights of national minorities.

Ukraine's Participation in the Working Committees of International Organisations

In recent years, Ukrainian representatives have been actively involved in Council of Europe activities; in particular, over the past year, they participated in the 11th and 12th Plenary Sessions of the Steering Committee on Non-Discrimination, Diversity and Inclusion (CDADI) in Strasbourg, during which issues relating to the protection of linguistic diversity, non-discrimination, the integration of national minorities, the

9 International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. UN. 21.12.1965, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-convention-elimination-all-forms-racial>

10 The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), <https://www.coe.int/en/web/european-commission-against-racism-and-intolerance>

fight against hate speech, and intercultural inclusion in the context of contemporary international challenges were discussed.

Policy regarding the Roma national minority remained a significant component of European integration activities in 2025. Ukraine participated in the 11th and 12th Plenary Sessions of the ADI-ROM Committee of Experts on Roma and Travellers, whose work promotes and protects the rights of Roma and Travellers in Council of Europe member states, as well as equal opportunities, diversity and social integration through the fight against discrimination and Anti-Gypsyism. The committee supports the governments of member states in developing and implementing laws, policies, programmes and measures, to ensure the effective implementation of Council of Europe human rights standards, and their tangible benefits for Roma and Travellers. These activities are based on the strategic guidelines agreed by the Committee of Ministers and set out in the Council of Europe's Strategy on the Integration of Roma and Travellers.


Working meetings were also held with representatives of the Council of Europe to discuss current priorities for cooperation and the implementation of European standards, in particular regarding Ukraine's implementation of the Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and Ukraine's new ratification mechanism for the charter.

In parallel, cooperation took place with the institutions of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. Meetings were held with representatives of the PACE, during which issues of freedom of conscience, the protection of the rights of national minorities, and Ukraine's fulfilment of its international obligations in this area in the context of full-scale armed aggression were discussed.

In 2025, significant attention was paid to countering hate speech and hate crimes.

Ukraine took part in the first meeting of the leadership of the European Commission's High-Level Group on Combating Hate Speech and Hate Crime, marking an important step towards establishing systematic cooperation with the EU in this area, as Ukraine became the first non-EU country invited to participate in EU working committees.

A separate area of focus was cooperation with the Office of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM), particularly following his official visits to Ukraine in 2025 and 2026, as well as measures to deepen institutional cooperation. Ukraine continued to actively participate in the OSCE ODIHR's annual review events on the implementation of commitments in the organisation's humanitarian dimension.

 ***Determined efforts were made to implement the Roadmap on the Rule of Law, a comprehensive strategic document that defines a set of reforms within the framework of the negotiation process on Ukraine's EU membership***

In 2025, bilateral cooperation with EU Member States in protecting the rights of national minorities and freedom of religion continued. Dialogue with Romania aimed at raising issues related to the protection of the rights of national minorities, in line with European standards. Particular attention was paid to bilateral cooperation with Germany, which covered both the protection of the rights of persons of German origin, and the broader context of support for national minorities and Roma integration. The process of resuming the activities of the bilateral Ukrainian-Romanian, Ukrainian-Slovak and Ukrainian-Hungarian commissions for the protection of national minorities has begun.


Marta Koss, the European Commissioner for Enlargement, visited Ukraine in 2025, and spoke highly of Ukraine's progress towards EU membership, particularly regarding securing the rights of national minorities. This assessment became a key element in the overall assessment of Ukraine's progress in fulfilling its European integration commitments, amidst full-scale Russian aggression.

Implementation of the Roadmap on the Rule of Law and the Action Plan for the Protection of the Rights of Persons Belonging to National Minorities in Ukraine

Determined efforts were made to implement the Roadmap on the Rule of Law, a comprehensive strategic document that defines a set of reforms within the framework of the negotiation process on Ukraine's EU membership. This document is one of the key prerequisites for the opening of official negotiations on Ukraine's accession to the EU within Cluster 1 'Foundations of the EU Accession Process', which is the first to be opened and the last to be closed in the negotiation process. Its development and subsequent implementation demonstrate Ukraine's readiness to meet EU standards, strengthen trust among member states, and reinforce Ukraine's status as a reliable partner of the European Union. The following measures were implemented as part of the roadmap:

- the rights to freedom of thought, conscience and religion were safeguarded, as were the formulation and implementation of state policy in the field of religion and its effective functioning in accordance with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights;
- mechanisms for legal protection against racism, xenophobia and hate speech were established at the national level, in accordance with EU Council Framework Decision 2008/913/JHA;

- measures were taken to establish effective legal protection against discrimination through the professionalism of law enforcement personnel, and by raising awareness among members of the Roma national minority regarding improved access to education, employment, healthcare, social services and housing, in accordance with EU legislation;
- measures were implemented to ensure the protection of the rights of persons belonging to national minorities in Ukraine, in accordance with international human rights standards.

 ***in recent years Ukraine's activities in the field of fulfilling European integration commitments have been aimed at the systematic implementation of European standards in the field of the rights of national minorities and indigenous peoples***

At the same time, measures were implemented to fulfil the provisions of another strategic document, the Action Plan for the Protection of the Rights of Persons Belonging to National Minorities of Ukraine, approved by the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine on 14 May 2025. It is an important part of the negotiation process, and plays a key role in bringing Ukrainian legislation in line with European standards and ensuring equal rights for all national minorities (communities) in Ukraine. The plan is intended to serve as a reliable and effective instrument for the protection of national minorities (communities) in Ukraine, and will lay the foundations for meeting European standards. The action plan ensures the implementation of the provisions of the Roadmap on the Rule of Law.

In the recent two years Ukraine's main efforts have been focused on achieving the following objectives:

- strengthening the institutional capacity of public authorities in the field of protecting the rights of national minorities, and shaping state policy regarding national minorities and indigenous peoples (regional cooperation, monitoring, reporting, etc.);
- promoting the national and cultural diversity of our country through the media and public events;
- improving the legal framework to combat discrimination, intolerance and hate speech, and establishing a unified methodology for monitoring and assessing the spread of hate speech;
- creating the conditions to ensure the representation of national minorities in state bodies, so that their interests are taken into account in the decision-making process;
- guaranteeing the right of representatives of national minorities and indigenous peoples of Ukraine to education and linguistic identity;
- overcoming the consequences of the war, in particular ensuring equality and social justice in regions with a significant presence of national minorities and indigenous peoples affected by the Russian aggression.

Conclusions

Officials involved in the implementation of the Roadmap on the Rule of Law and the Action Plan on the Protection of the Rights of Persons Belonging to National Minorities of Ukraine actively participated

in bilateral meetings with international partners within the framework of the practical implementation of these documents; coordination meetings and broad discussions were held, with the participation of interested ministries and departments, and public organisations of national minorities of Ukraine.

Overall, it should be noted that in recent years Ukraine's activities in the field of fulfilling European integration commitments have been aimed at the systematic implementation of European standards in the field of the rights of national minorities and indigenous peoples, ensuring effective interaction with international monitoring bodies, and strengthening the trust of partners of relevant international organisations in Ukraine's policy in these areas, in the context of the ongoing Russian armed aggression against Ukraine.

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MUNICIPAL READINESS FOR EU CLIMATE ACTION IN WARTIME UKRAINE

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Ukraine's recovery and EU integration are unfolding amid conditions of war, placing Ukrainian municipalities at the centre of implementing climate and reconstruction policies. This article examines municipal readiness for EU-funded climate initiatives, drawing on evidence from the Horizon Europe-funded project Ukraine towards Carbon Neutrality. The analysis highlights how cities continue to advance climate strategies, develop project pipelines, and engage in international cooperation despite wartime constraints. While strategic alignment with European climate policy is progressing, limited municipal financing and uneven institutional capacity remain key barriers.

Context: War, Ukraine's Recovery and European Integration

Ukraine's European integration has entered an unprecedented phase, as the country simultaneously pursues EU accession while managing the large-scale wartime destruction following Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022¹. In this context, recovery is no longer limited to restoring damaged infrastructure but is increasingly framed as an opportunity to align Ukraine's development trajectory with European policy frameworks. It has therefore become closely linked to broader objectives such as climate transition, energy security, and sustainable urban development.

European institutions and international partners have repeatedly emphasised that Ukraine's recovery should follow a 'build back better' principle². This approach promotes the integration of climate-neutral development pathways, resilient infrastructure systems, and sustainable urban planning into reconstruction and recovery strategies. The European Green Deal and related climate governance frameworks are particularly influential in shaping these discussions³. For Ukraine, aligning its reconstruction efforts with these frameworks is not only an environmental priority but also a central component of institutional convergence with the European Union.

1 OECD, Consolidating Ukraine's Recovery Architecture. OECD Publishing, Paris, 2026

2 World Bank (2024). European Commission, United Nations, Ukraine Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment (RDNA3)

3 European Commission. The European Green Deal, 2019, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52019DC0640>

Implementing these objectives under conditions of war presents significant governance challenges. Municipalities are operating in an environment characterised by infrastructure damage, population displacement, disrupted supply chains, and recurring energy insecurity, resulting from attacks on critical infrastructure. Local governments must simultaneously address emergency response, maintain essential services, and plan for long-term recovery and development. This multi-layered governance context places Ukrainian cities at the centre of the country's wartime resilience and reconstruction processes. At the same time, the cities remain the primary level at which climate and sustainability policies are implemented. Municipal authorities are responsible for urban infrastructure, local transport systems, spatial planning, energy management in public buildings, and environmental services. The capacity of municipalities to design, finance, and implement climate-related initiatives is therefore critical for translating European policy objectives into concrete local action.

Despite wartime pressures, Ukrainian municipalities have continued to engage with international climate initiatives and European cooperation platforms. Many cities have adopted Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plans (SECAPs), joined the Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy, or developed Green City Action Plans, in partnership with international financial institutions⁴. Municipalities are also increasingly involved in European research and innovation initiatives focused on sustainable urban development and climate-neutral transformation. These developments reveal a central paradox

shaping governance under conditions of war: while municipalities face severe resource constraints and operational disruptions, the urgency of reconstruction has accelerated the need for institutional alignment with European policy frameworks and funding mechanisms. Local governments are therefore required to perform a dual function: managing immediate wartime challenges, while preparing for long-term integration into European governance structures.



European institutions and international partners have repeatedly emphasised that Ukraine's recovery should follow a 'build back better' principle

This article addresses this question, by drawing on evidence from the Horizon Europe-funded project 'Ukraine towards Carbon Neutrality' (U_CAN), a multi-partner EU initiative designed to connect Ukrainian municipalities with European climate policy frameworks, pilot actions, and adopt knowledge exchange platforms for climate-oriented recovery⁵ (U_CAN Project, 2024). The insights are based on structured assessments conducted across six Ukrainian cities: Ivano-Frankivsk, Khmelnytskyi, Kyiv, Lviv, Vinnytsia and Zhytomyr, representing diverse regional contexts and governance capacities. Rather than presenting a methodological framework, the article focuses on policy-relevant patterns related to strategic governance, financial capacity, and stakeholder engagement emerging from municipal-level evidence.

4 European Commission, Joint Research Centre, How to develop a Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plan (SECAP) – Guidebook. Covenant of Mayors, 2018

5 U_CAN Project, Ukraine towards Carbon Neutrality (U_CAN), Horizon Europe Project, 2024, <https://www.ucan-ukraine.eu/>

Capacity: The Strategic and Institutional Readiness of Ukrainian Cities

Ukrainian municipalities are increasingly aligning their development strategies with European climate governance frameworks, even under conditions of war⁶. Across the cities examined, the local authorities continue to formulate strategic plans, adopt sustainability initiatives, and engage in international climate programmes. This suggests that commitment to the climate transition is becoming embedded in municipal planning processes, despite operational disruptions caused by the ongoing conflict.

A common feature across these cities is the presence of formal strategic frameworks that integrate energy efficiency, environmental protection, and urban development objectives. Instruments such as Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plans, Green City Action Plans, and integrated urban development strategies provide municipalities with structured approaches to emissions reduction, infrastructure modernisation, and environmental resilience⁷. In several cases, these frameworks are complemented by sectoral plans addressing issues such as mobility, energy systems, and waste management. However, this strategic orientation must be understood within the realities of wartime governance. Since the full-scale invasion, municipal administrations have been operating under conditions involving infrastructure damage, energy disruptions, and an increased demand for essential services. The persistence of strategic planning under both the conditions of long-

term recovery and the planned European integration points to institutional resilience, but also highlights the challenge of translating plans into implementation⁸.



A common feature across these cities is the presence of formal strategic frameworks that integrate energy efficiency, environmental protection, and urban development objectives

The differences in institutional capacity across municipalities remain significant. In some cities, climate-related activities are supported by dedicated departments or specialised units responsible for environmental policy, energy management, or urban development. These structures facilitate coordination across sectors, enable the preparation of project proposals, and support the integration of climate objectives into broader planning processes. In other cases, responsibilities for climate action are distributed across smaller teams or embedded within general administrative structures. While this allows for some level of policy integration, it can limit the ability of municipalities to develop coherent, long-term programmes or manage complex, multi-sectoral initiatives. The gap between strategic commitment and administrative capacity, therefore, remains a defining feature of municipal readiness.

Another important dynamic is the role of international cooperation in shaping institutional development. Participation in

6 European Commission, 100 Climate-Neutral Cities by 2030 – by and for the Citizens, 2020,

7 Covenant of Mayors, Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plans Guidebook, 2023.

8 OECD, Rebuilding Ukraine by Reinforcing Regional and Municipal Governance. OECD Publishing, Paris, 2022, https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2022/12/rebuilding-ukraine-by-reinforcing-regional-and-municipal-governance_63099658.html

donor-supported projects and European initiatives has enabled municipalities to gain practical experience in project implementation, reporting, and compliance with international standards⁹. This also includes EU-funded initiatives such as the U_CAN project, which support municipal capacity building, pilot development, and knowledge exchange for climate-neutral urban transformation¹⁰. At the same time, wartime pressures continue to constrain institutional capacity. Administrative resources are frequently redirected towards emergency response, infrastructure repair, and support for internally displaced populations. This limits the ability of municipalities to fully operationalise their strategic frameworks, making implementation dependent on external partnerships and project-based interventions.

Constraints: Financing Climate Action under War Conditions

Financial capacity is a decisive factor shaping the ability of Ukrainian municipalities to participate in climate initiatives and implement EU-aligned development strategies under conditions of war.¹¹ While many cities demonstrate clear strategic commitment to climate transition, the availability of financial resources and access to international funding ultimately determine whether these ambitions can be fulfilled in practice. Across Ukrainian cities,

a consistent pattern is the growing reliance on international cooperation as a driver of climate-related investment. Municipalities have accumulated experience through engagement with European institutions, international financial organisations, and development programmes focused on energy efficiency, urban infrastructure, and environmental management^{12,13}. These collaborations have enabled cities to modernise public transport systems, retrofit public buildings, and implement waste management solutions. At the same time, they have contributed to strengthening administrative capacities in project preparation, financial management, and compliance with international funding requirements.



Participation in donor-supported projects and European initiatives has enabled municipalities to gain practical experience in project implementation

This experience represents an important enabling condition for Ukraine's European integration. Participation in European climate initiatives requires municipalities to demonstrate institutional reliability, co-financing capacity, and familiarity with complex procedural frameworks¹⁴.

9 European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Green Cities Programme Overview, 2022, <https://www.ebrdgreencities.com>

10 European Commission (EC) (CORDIS), U_CAN: Ukraine towards Carbon Neutrality (Grant agreement ID: 101148374). CORDIS – EU Research Results, 1.05.2024, <https://doi.org/10.3030/101148374>

11 European Union, *Regulation (EU) 2021/1119* establishing the European Climate Law, 2021, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2021/1119/oj>

12 European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Green Cities Programme Overview, 2022, <https://www.ebrdgreencities.com>


13 NEFCO, Sustainable Municipal Investments in Eastern Europe, Nordic Environment Finance Corporation, 2023, <https://www.nefco.int>

14 NetZeroCities, Comprehensive Indicator Framework for Climate-Neutral Cities, 2023, <https://netzerocities.eu>

The existing track record of Ukrainian cities suggests that many municipalities are increasingly capable of operating within these systems, positioning them to engage with European funding instruments linked to climate and reconstruction policies. However, the financial context of municipalities is fundamentally shaped by the prevailing wartime conditions. Local budgets are under sustained pressure, as cities prioritise emergency response, infrastructure repair, and social support for internally displaced populations¹⁵. These competing demands limit the fiscal space available for long-term climate investments, and reduce the ability of municipalities to allocate stable funding to sustainability initiatives.

As a result, a structural dependence on external financing has emerged. Climate-related projects are frequently implemented through grants, concessional loans, or technical assistance provided by international partners, with municipal budgets contributing only partial co-financing. While this model enables continued progress in climate action, despite domestic constraints, it also exposes vulnerabilities in local financial systems and limits the autonomy of municipalities in setting long-term investment priorities. This dependence is particularly visible in capital-intensive sectors such as energy efficiency, renewable energy deployment, and urban infrastructure modernisation¹⁶. Many municipalities have initiated projects in these areas, but their implementation remains closely tied to the availability of external funding. Without sustained access to international financing, scaling such initiatives would be significantly constrained.

Wartime conditions further complicate municipal financial planning. Damage to infrastructure, disruptions to local economic activity, and demographic shifts resulting from displacement have weakened local revenue bases in several cities. These dynamics create uncertainty for medium- and long-term budgeting, and reduce the capacity of municipalities to commit to multi-year investment programmes aligned with climate objectives. At the same time, municipalities are not passive recipients of external support. Cities actively seek partnerships, develop project proposals, and integrate climate priorities into broader reconstruction strategies. This proactive engagement reflects a growing recognition that access to European funding mechanisms will be central to enabling climate-oriented recovery and advancing institutional alignment with European policy frameworks.



Climate-related projects are frequently implemented through grants, concessional loans, or technical assistance provided by international partners, with municipal budgets contributing only partial co-financing

A key policy implication emerging from this dynamic is the existence of a financing paradox under the current conditions of war. Ukrainian municipalities are increasingly aligned with European climate objectives and possess growing experience in international project implementation, yet their ability to act is constrained by

15 World Bank, European Commission, United Nations, Ukraine Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment (RDNA3), 2024


16 IEA, Energy Policy Review: Ukraine, International Energy Agency 2022, <https://www.iea.org/reports/ukraine-energy-profile>

limited domestic financial capacity. Bridging this gap will require not only expanded access to European funding instruments but also targeted support for municipal co-financing mechanisms, project preparation capacities, and longer-term financial stability. Strengthening these financial foundations will be critical for ensuring that Ukrainian cities can move beyond project-based interventions towards sustained, programmatic implementation of climate policies. In this sense, municipal finance is not only a technical constraint but a central component of Ukraine's broader pathway toward climate-oriented reconstruction and European integration.

Practice: Governance and Stakeholder Engagement

Effective climate governance at the municipal level depends not only on strategic planning and financial capacity but also on the ability of local institutions to engage citizens, civil society, and knowledge actors in decision-making processes. Participatory governance is a core principle of European climate policy frameworks, particularly in areas related to sustainable urban development, co-production of solutions, and public legitimacy¹⁷. For Ukrainian municipalities operating under conditions of war, the development of inclusive governance structures represents both a challenge and a strategic requirement for European integration.

Across Ukrainian cities, mechanisms for public participation are present but uneven in their level of institutionalisation. Some municipalities have established digital platforms that enable residents



Across Ukrainian cities, mechanisms for public participation are present but uneven in their level of institutionalisation

to submit electronic petitions, participate in consultations, or engage in participatory budgeting processes. These tools create accessible entry points for citizen involvement and allow local authorities to incorporate public feedback into development priorities and environmental policies. Beyond digital participation, collaboration with civil society organisations, universities, and local stakeholders plays an important role in shaping climate-related initiatives¹⁸. In several cities, these actors contribute to awareness campaigns, pilot projects, and knowledge exchange processes. Such cooperation supports the development of locally grounded solutions and enhances the technical and social legitimacy of climate interventions. However, stakeholder engagement often remains project-based rather than structurally embedded within municipal governance systems. In many cases, participation is limited to consultations linked to specific initiatives, while long-term, institutionalised mechanisms for co-creation are less developed. Civil society actors may be active contributors, but their involvement is not always formalised within planning or decision-making frameworks. This results in fragmented participation practices, and limits the continuity of stakeholder engagement in climate governance.

17 European Commission, 100 Climate-Neutral Cities by 2030 – by and for the Citizens, 2020

18 OECD, Strengthening Climate Resilience: Guidance for Governments and Development Co-operation. OECD Publishing, Paris, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1787/4b08b7be-en>

Wartime conditions further reshape local governance dynamics. Municipal administrations are required to prioritise emergency response, infrastructure repair, and social support, reducing the administrative capacity available for participatory planning. At the same time, public attention is often directed towards immediate security and humanitarian concerns, which can constrain engagement in long-term policy discussions. These conditions create a governance environment in which participation becomes more difficult to organise systematically, even where institutional willingness exists. At the same time, the persistence of engagement initiatives across several cities indicates that municipalities continue to recognise the importance of maintaining dialogue with local communities. Educational programmes, environmental campaigns, and targeted stakeholder consultations remain part of municipal practice, contributing to sustained awareness and incremental participation in climate-related issues, despite the wartime disruptions.

From a policy perspective, stakeholder engagement is not only a procedural element but a critical condition for effective and legitimate climate-oriented reconstruction¹⁹. As Ukrainian cities increasingly access European funding and implement EU-aligned policies, transparent decision-making and inclusive governance structures will be essential for ensuring accountability, public acceptance, and the long-term sustainability of interventions. A key implication emerging from this analysis is that Ukraine's municipal climate governance is developing under conditions where institutional capacity and civic

participation are both constrained yet simultaneously evolving. Strengthening participatory mechanisms, formalising the role of civil society and knowledge actors, and integrating engagement into core planning processes will be necessary to move from project-based consultation towards systemic co-governance. In this context, stakeholder engagement becomes closely linked to Ukraine's broader European integration trajectory. Aligning with European climate policy is not limited to adopting strategies or accessing funding but also involves embedding participatory governance practices that support democratic resilience. Expanding and institutionalising these practices will therefore be central to strengthening municipal readiness for climate action, and ensuring that reconstruction processes remain socially grounded, transparent, and aligned with European governance standards.

Conclusion: Bridging Readiness and Implementation

Municipalities are emerging as central actors in Ukraine's European integration and reconstruction under conditions of war²⁰. While national reforms frame the accession process, the implementation of climate and sustainability policies ultimately depends on the capacity of cities to translate European frameworks into operational urban strategies. This positions local governments at the core of aligning reconstruction with long-term climate-neutral development. Ukrainian cities demonstrate a growing degree of strategic alignment with European climate governance. The adoption of sustainability strategies, energy action

19 United Nations Development Programme, Local Governance and Climate Action, <https://www.undp.org/asia-pacific/social-innovation-platforms/local-governance-climate-action>

20 European Commission, Ukraine 2023 Report, 2023, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/ukraine-report-2023_en

plans, and integrated development frameworks indicates that municipalities are increasingly embedding climate objectives within local planning systems. The continuation of these processes under wartime conditions reflects institutional resilience and a sustained commitment to European-oriented development pathways.

At the same time, a clear implementation gap persists. Institutional capacity remains uneven across municipalities, with differences in administrative structures and technical expertise shaping the ability to coordinate and deliver climate initiatives. Financial constraints further limit implementation. Wartime pressures on municipal budgets, combined with infrastructure damage and shifting expenditure priorities, reinforce reliance on external funding and project-based interventions rather than stable, long-term investment frameworks²¹. Governance dynamics add an additional layer of complexity. While mechanisms for stakeholder engagement are present, they are not consistently institutionalised and are often shaped by the constraints of wartime administration. Municipalities must balance participatory planning with urgent crisis response, limiting the depth and continuity of civic engagement in climate policy processes.

Taken together, these dynamics point to a defining feature of Ukraine's municipal climate governance under the present conditions of war: strategic alignment with European frameworks is advancing, but implementation capacity remains constrained. This gap is not only technical

but structural, shaped by institutional, financial, and governance limitations. From a policy perspective, bridging this gap will require targeted support at the municipal level. Strengthening administrative capacity, improving access to European funding instruments, and institutionalising participatory governance mechanisms will be critical for translating strategic commitments into sustained climate action. In this context, municipalities should be understood not merely as implementers but as key partners in shaping climate-oriented reconstruction.

As Ukraine advances towards deeper integration with the European Union, the effectiveness of this process will depend in part on the readiness of its cities. Supporting municipal capacity under conditions of war is therefore not only a reconstruction priority but a strategic component of Ukraine's broader European integration trajectory.

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21 World Bank. European Commission, United Nations, Ukraine Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment (RDNA3), 2024

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