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Ukraine's EU accession brings added value and serves historical justice

Now that Ukraine's EU accession process has begun, it is critical to discuss the broader historical significance of EU enlargement as well as some very practical benefits that Ukraine's membership will bring to Europe^[1].

The European Council's decision on 14 December 2023 to open EU accession talks with Ukraine was a watershed moment. What follows is a steady but predictable path of 35 rounds of negotiations on the accession agreement chapters. Our minimum plan for the first half of 2024 is to complete the legislation screening, agree on the negotiations framework, and hold the first intergovernmental conference to kick off the first round of actual talks.

We are realists who understand that the negotiation process will require a lot of work—and some compromise, particularly with our neighbours—but Ukraine has demonstrated in the last two years that there is nothing impossible for it when it comes to pursuing the goal of EU membership.

Furthermore, it was Ukraine that took the EU out of its enlargement coma. I recall how, even two years ago, the term "enlargement" was taboo in Brussels and many other capitals. The Western Balkan aspirants have been stuck in limbo for years, partially due to their own lack of progress but also due to the unwillingness of the EU to expand its influence.

During that time, the Ukrainian government struggled to include terms like "European perspective" in various Ukraine-EU summit communiqués. Such was the fear of enlargement among our European colleagues.

24 February 2022 changed everything. With Russia launching the largest war of aggression in Europe since WWII, it became clear that grey zones and inaction were no longer an option. It was a sink or swim moment for both Ukraine and the rest of Europe. That was when Ukraine submitted its application to become an EU member and our European allies reciprocated this ambition first by granting Ukraine EU candidate status in June 2022 and then launching EU accession negotiations in December 2023.

It is fair to say that nothing was easy along this path. Even a few days before the June and December decisions, the outcome was not certain. Sceptics continued to reject the need for both steps. But, with the help of our friends and supporters, we were able to persuade them—or at least make them abstain in one particular case—that this is the way forward.

It is also worth noting that Ukraine has properly and thoroughly completed all of the steps outlined by the European Commission to ensure critical decisions.

I believe this outstanding achievement deserves recognition. Ukraine made history by being the first country to go from applying for membership to beginning accession talks in less than two years. This is nearly twice as fast as the previous record-holder, Estonia, which took three years to complete the task (1995-1998). Hungary

^[1] This text was originally published in the 'Schuman Report on Europe, the State of the Union 2024', Editions Marie B., April 2024, 236 p.

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required four years, Latvia and Lithuania five years, and Cyprus eight years. Needless to say, none of these countries had to fight a total war while implementing their reforms.

To some extent, the war has stimulated brave domestic reforms. When President Zelenskyy pressed members of parliament or the government to pass this or that critical decision, they could not say no because the state's very survival was at stake. Most importantly, these reforms are critical for Ukraine, and we did not implement them solely for the purpose of EU membership.

The President has shown remarkable mettle in galvanizing not only the world's attention but also Ukraine's own domestic forces on the path of reform and fight against corruption. Thus, the EU Commission issued a positive and merit-based assessment in November 2023, acknowledging progress and approving the start of accession talks with Ukraine.

As with many other developments over the past two years, what happens in Ukraine is not only about itself. Our country's struggle for freedom and unity has awakened the sleeping EU giant. Nobody could have predicted that the European Union would take such decisive action in the face of Russian aggression. Many historic and unprecedented decisions were made regarding sanctions and military aid to Ukraine, but most importantly, the EU rediscovered its global ambition and role.

Ukraine acted as a true European integration locomotive for Moldova, Georgia, and the Western Balkan countries, as well as a catalyst for the historic process of the European Union expanding to Europe's natural political borders.

When the EU expands from Lisbon to Kyiv, it will not only be strategically complete, but it will also strengthen European unity and freedom in the long run. I am confident that this will result in a number of unexpected and positive outcomes for the continent and the world. For example, democratic processes in Belarus will be accelerated. A number of South

Caucasian and Central Asian countries may prefer closer cooperation with Europe to Russia or China. South-Asian nations, particularly ASEAN countries, will find it increasingly profitable to expand cooperation with Ukraine as an EU member.

Most importantly, the Russian imperial project will come to an end, as will the Kremlin's sick dreams of conquering or destabilizing Europe. Given years of intoxication with Putin's genocidal propaganda, it may be a stretch to claim that Ukraine's EU membership will serve as a democratization factor for Russian society, but such an effect cannot be ruled out.

In more practical terms, as a member, Ukraine will significantly strengthen the EU's defence capacity, advance its foreign policy, and add value to the common market, resulting in increased security and prosperity for all Europeans. As a digital superpower, Ukraine will accelerate the digitalization of public services and government throughout the EU.

Ukraine is also a significant source of renewable energy, with a vast capacity for producing hydrogen, green steel, solar, and wind energy. Ukraine's Bessarabia region has some of Europe's strongest and most stable winds.

Ukraine also has significant strategic resources, such as lithium, which is essential for producing electric vehicles and appliances. All of this will contribute significantly to the European Green Deal.

As a large consumer market, Ukraine will offer European businesses an opportunity to benefit directly from a country with a population of over 40 million joining the Common Market. European small and medium-sized businesses will also greatly benefit from Ukraine's future recovery.

The total cost of repairing Ukrainian infrastructure damaged or destroyed by Russian aggression has already surpassed \$150 billion. As a comparison, the entire post-WWII Marshall Plan for Europe cost \$165 billion (according to the 2023 exchange rate). The scale and significance of Ukraine's historic reconstruction

project create equally historic and significant opportunities for European businesses, particularly construction companies. The recovery process will undoubtedly be an important part of Ukraine's EU accession and reform in general.

While there are numerous practical and mutual benefits, Ukraine's entry into the EU will also serve a much larger historical justice. A European Union based on Europe's natural political borders will realize Robert Schuman and Jean Monnet's vision of a united and peaceful Europe.

In Ukraine's own historical context, this will end centuries of struggle to break free from Russian influence and return to Europe, where we have always belonged historically, politically, and culturally. Ukraine has always been and will remain a European nation. It is just that Moscow has taken us away from our European cradle, attempting to crush our identity and dissolve the Ukrainian nation within the Russian imperial melting pot.

Only with Ukraine as an integral part will the EU be able to transform the European continent into a single

and powerful political entity with true global standing and influence. There is no other way in the world of growing China-U.S. competition. With Ukraine as a member, the EU will be a self-sufficient global player and a stabilizing force in an increasingly bipolar world. Most importantly, Europe will continue to be a bastion of peace and prosperity, a place of cooperation rather than military conflict.

I am confident that this is exactly what the EU's founding fathers envisioned. We owe it to past and future generations of Europeans to make their dreams a reality. Finally, we in Ukraine are all too familiar with the horrors of war. This means that we understand the value of peace, probably better than any other European nation. We will do everything in our power to ensure that Europeans will continue to benefit from a continent of freedom, unity, cooperation, and peace after Russian aggression is defeated and just peace is restored to Ukraine. In the end, it's all about people.

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