

Schuman Paper  
n°796  
23<sup>th</sup> June 2025

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# Ukraine's Path to the EU: Reform, Resilience, and the Politics of Enlargement

[Ukraine's journey towards European Union membership](#) is a story of resilience, rapid progress, and evolving strategic alignment. Since the signing of the [EU-Ukraine Association Agreement](#) in 2014 and especially after the country was formally recognized as an EU candidate in 2022, Ukraine has undergone deep and multidimensional political, institutional, and social transformation. This policy paper examines how the EU has acted as a catalyst for Ukraine's internal reforms, how Ukrainian society has rallied around the idea of Europe, and the challenges that remain on the road to accession. Providing a comprehensive overview of the reform trajectory, the dynamics of public support, and the complex political and technocratic challenges that lie ahead, it offers valuable insights for Ukrainian and EU policymakers seeking to advance a shared future.

## THE EU AS A CATALYST FOR REFORMS IN UKRAINE: FROM ASSOCIATION TO CANDIDATE STATUS

The path to EU membership officially began for Ukraine in 2014 with the signing of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, and its partial application. Despite geopolitical pressure and internal instability, the Ukrainian government initiated progressive institutional and regulatory alignment with EU standards. On 1 November 2014, the political and sectoral parts of the Agreement were applied, followed by the Deep and

Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) provisions on 1 January 2016. [The full ratification process](#) was completed only on 1 September 2017. Despite this phased timeline, the provisional application enabled practical cooperation in critical areas such as political dialogue, justice reform, economic and sectoral integration, and foreign policy coordination.

Institutionally, the Ukrainian Cabinet of Ministers created the Government Office for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration in August 2014, which became the key coordination body for EU-related reforms. In 2016, in response to civil society pressure and external support from international donors, the post of Vice Prime Minister for European Integration was introduced to strengthen political leadership in reform implementation. This position ensured top-level supervision of legal approximation processes and helped resolve inter-ministerial conflicts.

Then the institutional architecture was further enhanced through the establishment of [50 strategic planning directorates](#) within ministries and agencies. These reforms, supported technically and financially by the EU, allowed for a more structured and sustainable approach to the implementation of the EU acquis, ensuring better coordination, communication with Brussels, and fulfilment of Ukraine's Association Agreement obligations.

Since 2014, the European Union has become a central driving force behind Ukraine's [domestic transformation](#). Particularly during the intensive reform period of 2015-2016, EU instruments, conditionalities, and political support helped trigger a wave of institutional and sectoral changes. Following the granting of candidate status in 2022 and amidst full-scale war, the EU has become not only a strategic partner, but a critical enabler of Ukraine's resilience, modernization, and reform continuity.

Between 2014 and 2021, Ukraine launched the establishment of anti-corruption institutions: the National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine, the National Agency on Corruption Prevention and the High Anti-Corruption Court (NABU, NACP, HACC), the reform of the civil service, decentralization, education and healthcare reform, and digitization of public services (notably via the "Diia" platform).

The reform of public procurement (ProZorro) and energy, including the creation of an independent regulator, the National Energy and Utilities Regulatory Commission (NEURC), were introduced in the context of implementing the Association Agreement. All of these changes were supported by the EU thanks to the twinning of technical assistance and the exchange of information (TAIEX), of budgetary assistance, and of reform monitoring missions.

Following the granting of candidate status in June 2022, and the launch of negotiations in June 2024 the momentum of the reforms has increased significantly. The European Commission outlined seven recommendations to launch accession negotiations. In response, Ukraine introduced a competitive selection process for the Constitutional Court, renewed the High Council of Justice and the High Commission for the Qualification of Judges, ensured institutional independence of National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine, appointed the head of the Specialized Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office (SAPO), adopted a new media law, and started the implementation of the anti-oligarch law.

At this stage, the EU has become not just a strategic partner but also a co-architect of reforms defining both content and sequencing.

The new logic of cooperation is based on conditionality: all key EU support mechanisms, including the [Ukraine Facility](#) are disbursed only upon the implementation of clearly defined reform benchmarks. This approach prevents reform imitation and strengthens Ukraine's accountability to both citizens and international partners. Without EU involvement, many of these reforms would likely have been delayed or diluted.

### UKRAINIAN SOCIETY AND THE EUROPEAN CHOICE: FROM HOPE TO STRATEGIC CONSENSUS

Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, public support for Ukraine's accession to the European Union has reached record highs and remained consistently strong. According to a series of nationwide surveys conducted by [the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology \(KIIS\)](#) in February, May, and September 2024, the share of Ukrainians ready to vote in favor of EU membership in a potential referendum ranged from 85% to 89%. This marks a significant increase compared to June 2021, when support stood at 52% according to a similar [KIIS survey](#). This trend highlights how EU membership has evolved from a political aspiration into a widely recognized strategic necessity.

This surge in public support has transformed European integration into a political imperative. As societal expectations rise, Ukrainian policymakers are under increasing pressure to demonstrate tangible progress toward EU accession. Regardless of the political landscape, future governments will be held accountable by voters for advancing the European path.

The significant increase in public support for EU membership, particularly in the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion, confirms that European integration

is no longer merely a political ambition - it is a deeply internalized national choice. This growing alignment between institutional reform and public endorsement strengthens Ukraine's negotiating position and highlights the EU's continued relevance as a transformational force.

The combination of clear public demand and sustained EU engagement creates a unique window of opportunity to advance Ukraine's accession agenda. Capitalizing on this moment will require continued political will, strategic communication with citizens, and a robust framework to deliver on reforms not just on paper, but in practice.

### CHALLENGES UKRAINE FACES ON ITS PATH TOWARDS THE EU

The EU integration process comprises two key dimensions: technocratic and political. The technocratic aspect involves adopting a vast amount of EU legislation, known as the *acquis communautaire*. The political aspect requires Ukraine to ensure unanimous support from all 27 EU Member States at all stages of negotiations. Both aspects represent a serious challenge for Ukraine.

From the technocratic perspective, Ukraine faces an unprecedented situation: it must implement complex European integration reforms while fighting a full-scale war for its survival as a state. No current EU member or candidate country has ever had to do this under such conditions.

Since the accession of Croatia's in 2013 the enlargement process has become a significantly a more demanding and complicated procedure. For instance, the countries neighbouring Ukraine which joined the EU in 2004–2007 were not formally required to implement reforms in such areas as rule of law and anti-corruption grouped under the "Fundamentals" chapter of the EU enlargement methodology. At that time, negotiation chapters 23 "Judiciary and Fundamental Rights" and 24 "Justice, freedom and security", that are now

central to the enlargement process, did not even exist. Croatia was the first candidate country required to comply with requirements of Chapter 23. Furthermore, interim benchmarks (essential milestones necessary for completion within Chapters 23 and 24) were introduced only in 2011, starting with Montenegro. The country did not meet these benchmarks until 2024.

The EU *acquis* include core [33 chapters of legislation](#), covering a wide range of public regulations, from the rule of law and foreign policy – to the use of pesticides in agriculture, and the processing of international parcels by customs together with VAT.

Implementing the EU *acquis* requires financial resources, human capacity, and strong political will. But during wartime, it is the country's survival that becomes the state's top priority. As of 2024, Ukraine's military spending [reached 39.2% of its GDP](#), with nearly all tax revenues directed toward defense and security. Therefore, Ukraine has limited financial resources for reforms, as well as for adaptation of businesses to the new regulations and requirements. Moreover, Ukraine has limited resources even for basic day-to-day operations. For example, in 2024, the state budget covered only 57% of the judiciary's financial requirements. The shortfall is particularly severe regarding court staff, leading to high turnover and staff departures.

Human resources are also severely limited, as Ukraine continues to lose professionals due to the war. The public sector is also losing skilled staff due to low salaries and underfunding.

A large number of well-educated women left the country at the beginning of the Russian invasion in 2022. By the second half of 2024, around [5.2 million Ukrainians](#) had fled the country, 44% of whom are adult women—mostly from major cities like Kyiv and Kharkiv, which were home to a significant portion of the country's educated workforce before the war.

At the same time, many men have been called up for military service. As a result, Ukraine is facing a growing labour shortage. According to the [European Business Association](#), 75% of member companies reported a lack of qualified workers, and 41% of companies say that up to 10% of their staff have been mobilized for military duty.

Political will is also under pressure, as a lot of traditional democratic tools are currently unavailable. Martial law makes it impossible to hold elections, or to bring a more reform-oriented government to power. Due to wartime conditions, influence of civil society and independent media is also significantly limited.

Not only public administration, but also the business sector is struggling to adapt to EU regulations. For example, while small and medium-sized farms generally acknowledge the importance of the [EU Green Deal](#)—recognizing climate change as a threat to their operations—practical implementation of the required monitoring and data collection systems is burdensome. This challenge is further exacerbated by limited access to financing due to the ongoing war. As a result, Ukrainian businesses will also require both time and resources to adapt effectively.

Unanimous EU voting issues represent another group of significant challenges. To advance in the EU accession process, Ukraine must secure unanimous support from all 27 member states at each interim stage. In total, the negotiation process may require over 70 votes. Maintaining consistent consensus is a serious challenge for several reasons:

- *Bilateral issues with neighboring countries.* Governments of a number of Ukraine's neighbouring countries have used the EU accession process to pursue their own national (or mere political) interests, often unrelated to EU policy. Ukraine was expected to open negotiations on the first cluster "Fundamentals" in spring 2025. However, to date this has not

happened due to Hungary's opposition. Other neighbours could also obstruct progress. For example, newly elected Polish President [Karol Nawrocki](#) has stated that he is against Ukraine's entry into the European Union. Notably, Ukraine is not the first candidate to face such challenges: North Macedonia has been blocked in its EU negotiations since 2005 over disputes with Greece and with Bulgaria, driven on politically motivated grounds, as with Ukraine).

- *The rise of Euroscepticism across Europe.* The growing influence of eurosceptic parties in various EU countries may shift the political climate around enlargement. This presents two major risks: more member states could oppose further enlargement, including Ukraine's accession, and the next European Commission may be less supportive of enlargement than the current one. If the trend of rising euroscepticism continues, it would be in Ukraine's interest to complete its accession process by 2030.

#### WHAT DOES UKRAINE EXPECT FROM THE CONTINUATION OF NEGOTIATIONS?

European integration is a civilizational choice for Ukraine—not just a geopolitical orientation. It is also a path towards the nation's survival. Ukrainian society expects real reforms and functional institutions. For Ukraine, the goal is not merely EU membership, but the transformation of its economy and the creation of a more just, effective, and people-centered state.

Enlargement remains one of the most powerful geopolitical tools. Each wave has strengthened the Union politically and economically, expanding the single market and advancing shared goals such as security and the green transition.

Enlargement is a two-way process—in which both sides stand to benefit. However, for Ukraine to meet the milestones required of a candidate

country, sustained EU support is essential, mainly by helping it to advance reforms and by strengthening institutions.

Despite serious internal challenges, Ukraine must continue implementing the EU acquis. Much of this responsibility lies with the public administration, making the latter's reform (PAR) a key priority. A PAR roadmap is already in place; the next critical step is its full and effective implementation. The EU can play a vital role by encouraging Ukrainian leadership to seize this opportunity for meaningful change and better governance.

Given Ukraine's heavy military spending, securing financial support is essential. All available mechanisms (including use of frozen Russian assets, financial grants, and international assistance programmes) are vital for sustaining the reform process. Exchange programs and training opportunities are highly valuable for strengthening the capacity of Ukraine's public service.

Supporting institutional reform will ultimately benefit the EU as well, by ensuring that a future member state upholds the rule of law and democratic values. Ukraine is a reliable partner for the EU in security policy and should be further integrated in the security policy and defense-industrial sector of the EU. Ukraine and the EU face shared security threats, particularly from Russian aggression. However, Ukraine offers a unique and valuable experience in confronting these challenges and developing military capabilities.

Deeper integration of Ukraine into the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy, along with its defense-industrial sector, aligns with the strategic interests of both sides. In this context, programs modeled on Denmark's financial support for Ukraine's defense industry could further strengthen this cooperation. Ukraine's defense sector could potentially make a significant contribution to the rearmament of EU member states in a highly efficient and cost-effective manner.

An alternative to the Autonomous Trade Measures (ATMs) should be identified as soon as possible. Introduced in 2022 to support Ukraine's economy amid Russian aggression, these measures have played a critical role in sustaining Ukraine's export-oriented sectors, which continue to face the same threats due to ongoing hostilities.

A [return to the DCFTA tariff quotas](#) would result in an estimated \$1.5 billion decline in Ukrainian exports to the EU—equivalent to 0.8% of Ukraine's GDP in 2024. The greatest losses are expected in Ukraine's agricultural sector, which has reoriented itself toward the EU market during the war years.

## THE REFORM OF THE ENLARGEMENT PROCESS

The next wave of EU enlargement will also require serious preparation. European Commission President [Ursula von der Leyen](#) has acknowledged that Treaty changes may be necessary to enable further enlargement. The EU's decision-making process has become overly complex, with some member states abusing their power of veto. Reforms to the Common Agricultural Policy could help address concerns related to Ukraine's agricultural sector, while changes to the EU's budget policy may offer solutions for financing increased security challenges.

However, reforming the [enlargement policy](#) must go hand in hand with simplification. The current requirement for more than 70 unanimous votes throughout the accession process makes EU membership nearly unattainable for candidate countries. The process should be streamlined: much of the negotiation work is technocratic and does not require unanimous approval—only the most critical steps, such as the opening and closing of negotiations, should involve all member states.

Ukraine's path toward EU membership is both a historic opportunity and an extraordinary challenge, made even more complex by the ongoing war. While the country has already made notable

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progress in aligning with EU *acquis*, for further progress Ukraine requires resources, institutional capacity and political will. The political challenges for EU accession are so strong that it is highly impossible to proceed with existing methodology without enlargement policy reform. Ukraine's accession holds mutual benefits: it promises transformative change for Ukrainian society and strengthens the EU's strategic capacity and global influence. Achieving this goal is ambitious—but well worth the effort.

Ukraine faces a narrow window of opportunity to become a member of the European Union. It will either join the EU and become a key contributor to its security or remain in the waiting room

for years. Time is a critical factor. Prolonged negotiations risk undermining internal reforms, accelerating the loss of public servants working under the strain of war, and potentially declining public support for European integration. Ukraine has already made its choice—now it is time for the EU to do the same.

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Publishing Director: Pascale JOANNIN  
ISSN 2402-614X

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