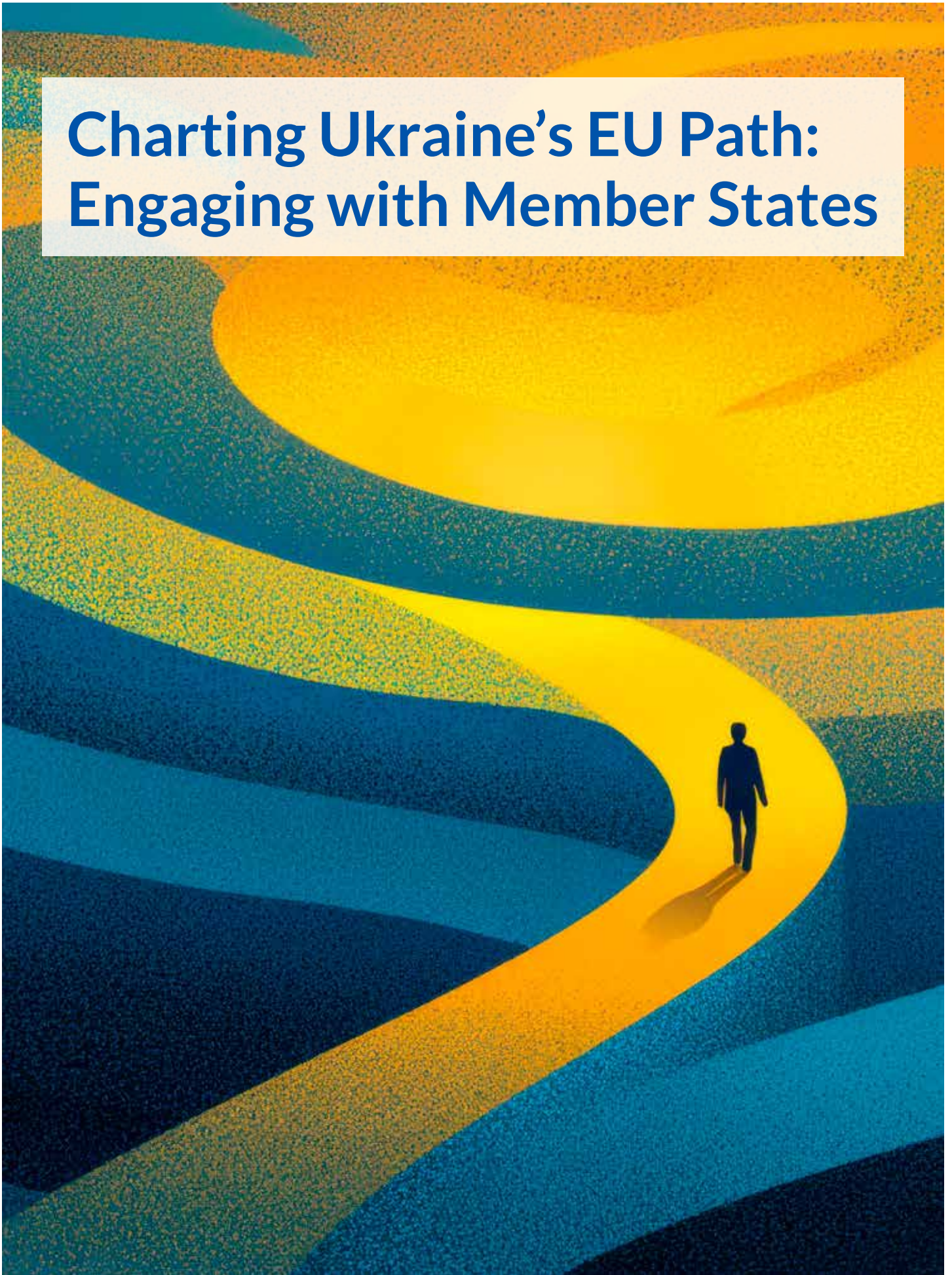


# Charting Ukraine's EU Path: Engaging with Member States



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# Charting Ukraine's EU Path: Engaging with Member States







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# Executive summary – Charting Ukraine's EU Path: Engaging with Member States

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## Political Leadership and Ukraine's EU Accession: Challenges and Policy Options

Ukraine's progress in accession negotiations depends on consensus in the European Council and the shared political will of Member States. Currently, Hungary is blocking Ukraine's advancement, but any other Member State could do the same in the future. This underscores the need for a systematic assessment of Member States' attitudes to enlargement in general, and their views on Ukraine's accession in particular.

To deliver security and prosperity for both Ukraine and the EU, involved actors should be guided by three principles:

- 1. Achieve clarity on goals and costs:** Address concerns and reservations with evidence in order to sustain long-term support, shifting public sentiment and rebuilding trust where needed.
- 2. Foster alliances:** Identify cooperation that can leverage national strengths to advance the common European good, especially where national-level interests risk hindering Ukraine's accession.
- 3. Regain agency:** Contribute to an environment in which Member States and Ukraine find common ground, but do not shy away from addressing a lack of solidarity or abuse of veto power.

In this way, the enlargement process would strengthen both Ukraine and the European Union, pay off in the long term and substantiate the argument that Ukraine's membership is an investment in Europe's peace, security, and prosperity.

# Part I

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## 1 | Introduction – Why Engage the Member States?

With Russia's maximalist war and geopolitical rivalry, enlargement has returned to the top of the EU's agenda – and Ukraine has become its flagship. When the European Council granted Ukraine and Moldova candidate status in June 2022, Russia's full-scale invasion was four months old.<sup>1</sup>

The European Commission is the driving force behind this new widening wave after the “big bang” enlargement of 2004, when with Poland, Slovakia and Hungary three of Ukraine's direct neighbours joined the Union.<sup>2</sup> It steers the screening process (the analytical examination of where a candidate country stands in relation to the EU acquis), issues annual progress reports,<sup>3</sup> and deploys pre-accession assistance in line with the revised enlargement methodology (2020) built around six thematic clusters, subject to conditionality. The Commission is also a major pillar of Ukraine's economic survival as it supports Ukraine financially through the dedicated Ukraine Facility.

At the same time, the EU remains a union of states, and Brussels must define itself amid their national interests. While the Council of the European Union decides by qualified majority voting (QMV) in most

areas – including trade, internal market, and agricultural policy – unanimity governs key questions of foreign policy and enlargement as well as treaty change and institutional reform. Launching or concluding accession negotiations remains bound by consensus in the European Council, requiring the shared political will of the heads of state or government.<sup>4</sup>

Seeking to safeguard the EU's agency, some Member States and the European Commission aim to reform decision-making by extending QMV to the enlargement process. In March 2024, the Commission proposed exploring its use for intermediate stages of accession, while maintaining the unanimity requirement only for the closure of clusters and for the final accession decision ([European Commission, 20 March 2024a](#)).

European Council President António Costa floated the idea of amending current institutional practice to allow for QMV on technical steps in the accession process “to circumvent country vetoes” ([EUnews, 29 September 2025](#)). The debate on streamlining the process – limiting the need for consensus and European Council approval to the start and end of negotiations – has regained momentum. Legal scholars largely agree that unanimity at every interim step of enlargement is not prescribed by EU

1 Georgia received candidate status in December 2023 conditional on reforms. By 2024, however, its accession process had stalled, following (Russian) elite capture and democratic backsliding.

2 And after Romania and Bulgaria joined in 2007 and Croatia in 2013.

3 The latest round has been released on 4 November 2025, cf. [European Commission 2025a](#).

4 The decision adopted by the Member States on 18–19 December 2025 for the EU to lend Ukraine €90 billion over the next two years, interest-free and only to be paid back in case of Russian reparations, constitutes a form of “enhanced co-operation” (Article 20 TEU). While this decision is also based on unanimity, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic agreed to it in return for an opt-out from potential liability. Cf. [European Council 2025a](#), EUCO 24/25 18 Dec. 2025, I 3.

law.<sup>5</sup> It remains, however, undisputed that all the Member States must give their consent to the final decision on accession.

Thus, even a simplified procedure would not remove the unanimity requirement. While the debated adjustments would create time and space for Ukraine's reforms and deeper European integration, their limitations underscore the need for a systematic assessment of Member States' positions on enlargement — both their overall attitudes and their views on individual candidates. Nor did the Danish Council Presidency question this requirement, when, on 11–12 December 2025, it launched a so-called “frontloading process” in the course of an informal meeting of Ministers for European Affairs held in Lviv, under which work on the Fundamentals (1), Internal Market (2) and External Relations (6) clusters continues in the aim to prepare further and progress quickly once “the required unanimity” is achieved. The approach is expressed to be continued by the coming EU Council Presidencies ([Danish Presidency Council of the European Union, 12 December 2025](#)).

— *A clear assessment of the main challenges to Member State acceptance of Ukraine's accession is essential for determining which instruments can effectively and gradually lower the barriers to progress.*

Domestic politics matter — often decisively. Governments in the Member States face large-scale transformations, difficult reforms and demanding electorates. This is even more important because Russia's war against Ukraine has morphed from a foreign-policy challenge into an internal security issue. The EU has formally condemned and sanctioned Russia's hybrid threats and cooperates in countering them, but the Member States bear primary responsibility.

<sup>5</sup> [Article 49 TEU](#) governing accession provides for unanimity in decision-making but remains vague on the details of the overall accession process.

A clear assessment of the main challenges to Member State acceptance of Ukraine's accession is essential for determining which instruments can effectively and gradually lower the barriers to progress.

Recent dynamics emerge from an examination of debates in seven Member States: France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, the Netherlands, Poland, and Romania — capturing variation in size and geography and, importantly, including Ireland and Greece, which will hold upcoming EU Council presidencies as of the second half of 2026 as part of the Ireland-Lithuania-Greece presidency trio. France and Poland will hold major national elections in 2027 (presidential and parliamentary) — after parliamentary elections in Hungary in April 2026.

Moreover, eupinions, the Bertelsmann Stiftung's independent platform for European public opinion, explored how national public attitudes shape the political room for manoeuvre on Ukraine's EU membership (eupinions 2025, [Public Attitudes and Member-State Dynamics in Ukraine's EU Accession Process](#)). Data collected between March 2022 and September 2025 in dialogue with “Charting Ukraine's EU Path” shows clear signs of public fatigue towards Ukraine. On the other hand, majorities continue to affirm a shared European identity and the need for collective defence — conditions that provide governments with a valuable foundation for further action.

## 2 | Ukraine as a Particular Challenge for the EU

Compared with other candidate countries, Ukraine faces distinct challenges — above all Russia's ongoing war, but also Ukraine's size in both geographic and demographic terms. In addition, some of Ukraine's strengths, particularly in agriculture and potentially in industry, make it a formidable player. At the same time, weaknesses persist, notably entrenched corruption rooted in decades of governance practices shaped under Soviet rule.



Conflicting interests between Ukraine and EU Member States put Ukraine's accession at risk. Recent history has shown that governments in Hungary or Slovakia are willing to use their veto power to suit their own domestic or foreign policy agendas during the process. This would hold both Ukraine and the rest of the Union hostage in their pursuit of the geostrategic objective of enlargement.<sup>6</sup>

## Economic competition and the special place of agriculture

Some EU Member States that are currently net recipients of EU funds fear that Ukraine's accession could turn them into net contributors. How the financial balance in an enlarged Union would shift depends on several unpredictable factors, including the outcome of the war, the EU budget at the time of Ukraine's accession, and other countries joining alongside Ukraine. An estimate by Carlo Bastasin ([Brookings, 2023](#)) suggests that if Ukraine is part of a new wave of accessions, several current net recipients in Central and Eastern Europe would become net contributors. An estimate by Michael Emerson ([CEPS, 2023](#)) focusing solely on Ukraine's accession, however, finds that all Member States that have joined since 2004 would remain substantial net recipients of EU funds. While calculating the costs of enlargement is complex and prone to confusion or even outright misinformation, in earlier waves of enlargement the extension of markets has generated substantial economic benefits for all members.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps the greatest source of economic uncertainty surrounding Ukraine's accession is agriculture. Integrating an agricultural powerhouse like Ukraine into the EU would strengthen Europe's food security and

benefit consumers. But Ukraine's integration would also create challenges for EU farmers and the support system they are reluctant to forego. Since resolving these challenges is not part of the "Fundamentals" (cluster 1), Kyiv and Brussels could use the time before accession to address the thorniest agricultural issues. They should manage expectations among Ukrainian and EU farmers and define the phases through which Ukraine will gain access to European markets as well as the extent to which Ukraine will receive agricultural subsidies.

The EU's budget under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), though shrinking since the 1980s, still accounts for a quarter of all EU spending ([European Parliament, 2025](#)). If Ukraine joins, tying payments to cultivated land area — as they are now — would become unrealistic. With approximately 32.7 million hectares of farmland, Ukraine would expand the EU's agricultural land by nearly a fifth ([Eurostat, 2022](#)). The average Ukrainian farm is almost 14 times the size of a typical EU farm ([Nivievskyi, 2024](#)). A calculation drafted by the EU Council's general secretariat and leaked to the press in 2023 suggested that extending the CAP to Ukraine would lead to a 20 per cent cut in subsidies for current Member States ([Euractiv, 6 October 2023](#)).

In the short term, fears of an influx of cheaper Ukrainian crops will remain the main concern for Member States. The largest CAP beneficiaries — France, Spain, and Germany — are likely to worry about losing part of their subsidies to a large new competitor ([Nivievskyi et al, 2025](#)). CAP funds are expected to shrink by as much as 30 per cent in the 2028–2034 multiannual framework, as spending on other priorities rises ([Euractiv, 16 July 2025](#)).

Ukraine's agricultural sector includes a wide range of producers, from small, family-run subsistence farms to vast agribusinesses. Extending subsidies to all of them at current levels would be politically unfeasible. Spreading the onset of CAP benefits to Ukraine over a long transition period, as practised in earlier enlargements, could soften the impact on the EU's budget

6 For an overview of past and present disputes in the context of enlargement see [Blockmans and Berisha 2025](#).

7 For example, between 2007–2013 the EU-15 Member States retrieved around 80 per cent of their cohesion fund payments to the Visegrad four countries in economic benefits from the enlargement, while those neighbouring the new Visegrad members benefited substantially more: Bartkiewicz et. al. (ND) [How do EU-15 Member States Benefit from the Cohesion Policy in the V4?](#)

(CEPS, 2023). That would also add much-needed time for reform. Much of Ukraine's countryside has been devastated by war and depopulation and suffers from underdeveloped infrastructure, yet farms use highly industrialised farming methods. These conditions are hard to square with the EU's ambitious quality and sustainability goals.<sup>8</sup>

For these reasons, experts and politicians in Brussels largely agree that Ukraine's accession should serve as a catalyst to reform the CAP ([Tony Blair Institute, 19 June 2024](#)). The real challenge will be persuading EU farmers to go along. They are well organised and wield outsized political sway in many EU capitals.

In Ukraine, the largest agricultural producers, which are generally profitable, may be happy just with market access, and the biggest earners will run up against existing caps in agricultural subsidies anyway ([EUobserver, 16 May 2025](#)). However, the many small agricultural producers, who are less mechanised and employ the bulk of agricultural workers, form a large block of voters. For their sake, Kyiv is likely to adopt a tough negotiating stance on agricultural issues, as farming plays a far more significant role in Ukraine's economy than in most EU countries.<sup>9</sup>

Recognising the importance of this sector, the EU temporarily waived duties and quotas on Ukrainian agricultural imports in June 2022. Farmers in Poland, Slovakia and Hungary protested, fearing they would be crowded out by cheaper Ukrainian produce. Ukrainian agricultural goods often arrived by lorry across these borders, raising the likelihood that some of them would leak into domestic markets instead

8 For example, in its 2024 progress report, the European Commission assessed Ukraine to be "in early stage of preparation" in agriculture and rural development and "moderately prepared" in food safety, veterinary and phytosanitary policy. ([European Commission 2024b](#)).

9 Some 14 per cent of Ukraine's workers are involved in agricultural production, which is more than seven times the share of farming jobs in the EU. European Parliament Briefing, Román A.A. "[Ukrainian Agriculture from Russian invasion to EU integration](#)", April 2024. Agricultural exports grew to nearly 60 per cent of Ukraine's overall exports during the war, making the sector by far the most important earner of foreign income. Ministry of Agrarian Policy and Food of Ukraine, "Vitalii Koval: Ukrainian agriproduct exports reached USD 2.1 billion in March", 9 April 2025.

of being exported to global ones ([EuroNews, 19 April 2023](#)). Protests and blockades also took place in Romania (Reuters, [07 April 2023](#)) but were less common than in Poland and Hungary, and by autumn 2023 a bilateral agreement focused on making more transit capacity available, by sea, on the Danube and by rail. This made it more likely that Ukrainian grain would reach overseas markets rather than undercut domestic prices.

As Ukraine pushed the Russian Black Sea fleet away from its ports in late 2023 and developed new shipping routes along the Romanian and Bulgarian coasts, unprofitable road transport to Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary became less significant. Brussels reinstated a quota regime in June 2025, after making concessions to farmers' demands from Warsaw and Paris during the final extension of the waiver ([European Union Access2Markets, 23 July 2025](#)).

*The real challenge will be persuading EU farmers to go along. They are well organised and wield outsized political sway in many EU capitals.*

While Ukraine negotiates accession, EU investment could help transform the Ukrainian agricultural sector from one that primarily exports raw commodities to one that processes food domestically and exports foodstuffs to the EU with a higher added value. With additional investment in transport infrastructure and storage facilities, Ukraine's European partners could help redirect Ukrainian food exports to regions where they would expose European crops to less competition and meet the greatest demand — particularly food-insecure regions in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East ([Kyiv Independent, 23 May 2025](#)).

## Rule of law and corruption risks

A lack of trust in Kyiv's political elite and their commitment to upholding the rule of law has long been among the concerns raised by EU Member States regarding Ukraine's accession.

*The rule of law's paramount position extends to the functioning of the Single Market.*

When in July 2025 Ukraine's presidential administration, backed by a parliamentary majority, first curtailed and then (largely) reinstated the independence of the country's anti-corruption institutions, it drew widespread attention. The attempt to subordinate two respected anti-corruption bodies to the unreformed Office of the Prosecutor General – itself dependent on the presidential administration – ultimately failed because of internal and external pressure. However, it reinforced two contrasting narratives: one portraying Ukraine as a country of entrenched corruption, where political leaders protect an inner circle of personal acquaintances; the other highlighting how recently established independent institutions continue to make steady progress in tackling corruption ([EUACI, 14 October 2025](#); [Transparency International, Corruption Perceptions Index Score Changes 2014–2024](#)).

Rule of law is a fundamental element of accession conditionality.<sup>10</sup> When taking the sovereign decision to join the EU, Member States are expected to respect, apply, and enforce the Union's values and law, i.e. the jointly adopted legal framework. The reliable and uniform application of EU law across Member States is the very foundation of the bloc as a legal order.

As a community of law, the EU entrusts the implementation of its decisions to the executive and judicial authorities of the Member States. The rule of law's paramount position extends to the functioning of the Single Market.<sup>11</sup> The success of the Union's future enlargement and deeper integration will depend on the quality, integrity, and independence of the judiciary and law

<sup>10</sup> The European Council's meeting note on Ukraine in relation to the €90 bn loan agreed upon to avoid a default by Kyiv in the first half of 2026 also reflects the expectation that Ukraine will continue to uphold the rule of law, although this is not framed as a condition ([European Council 2025b, EUCO 26/25, 18 December 2025](#), 8b).

<sup>11</sup> Former Italian prime minister Letta, in his capacity as Special Advisor to the President of the European Commission, underlined that "the respect for the rule of law stands as a vital pillar for the functionality and integrity of the Single Market" as "the bedrock upon which mutual trust is built (...)" ([Letta, 2024](#))

enforcement institutions in new Member States – grounded in a genuine separation of powers.

In Ukraine, reports that politicians have repeatedly come under investigation only to be spared further action have undermined trust and cast doubt on Kyiv's readiness for the accession process. Predictably, war and reconstruction have exacerbated rule-of-law challenges.<sup>12</sup> Both create new opportunities for corruption, as speed takes priority over thoroughness in emergency situations and transparency suffers.<sup>13</sup>

An illicit enrichment scheme in the energy sector, involving the diversion of at least USD 100 million from infrastructure critical to Ukraine's resilience against Russian attacks, represents the latest and most significant case in point. It reached its provisional peak with the dismissal of the President's chief-of-staff. Earlier corruption cases, some involving former military governors, are pending before the High Anti-Corruption Court (HACC), following investigations by Ukrainian journalists and proceedings initiated by the National Anti-corruption Bureau (NABU) and the Special Anti-corruption Prosecutor (SAP).

*The recent exposure of corruption shows how vulnerable Ukraine's reform architecture remains to political interference but also reveals the anti-corruption institutions' resilience. Their impact will remain limited, however, unless judicial and prosecutorial reforms follow.*

This is why the Ukrainian leadership's attempt in July 2025 to curtail the independence of precisely those anti-corruption institutions that successfully pursue high-level corruption carries political implications for Member States' readiness to engage in accession negotiations. These begin (and would end) with cluster 1, which encompasses the chapters most relevant to the rule of law that form the "Fundamentals" of the accession process. Opening them requires unanimity.

<sup>12</sup> Drago Kos, [War and Corruption in Ukraine](#), 16 June 2022.

<sup>13</sup> 71 per cent of Ukrainians believe that corruption has increased during the full-scale invasion ([Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 3 October. 2025](#)).

The recent exposure of corruption shows how vulnerable Ukraine's reform architecture remains to political interference but also reveals the anti-corruption institutions' resilience. Their impact will remain limited, however, unless judicial and prosecutorial reforms follow.<sup>14</sup>

*Ukraine's accession process could gradually compel Ukraine's political elites to uphold the rule of law, democratic governance, and institutional independence.*

EU capitals such as The Hague and Berlin translate their legitimate rule-of-law concerns into technical assistance projects involving independent Ukrainian experts. Others, however, instrumentalise Ukraine's internal power struggles as a pretext to keep Kyiv at arm's length – Hungary being only the most visible case. There are also Member States, such as the Baltic countries, that are both concerned *and* convinced that opening cluster 1 is the most effective way to defend and advance rule-of-law and anti-corruption reforms in Ukraine.

In line with the EU-approved negotiating framework, roadmaps on the rule-of-law, on democratic institutions and on public administration represent milestones. These strategic documents attest to the sustained efforts of Ukraine's civil society and international partners, cooperating with Ukrainian institutions. They outline key reform commitments, such as the vetting of judges or creating an independent administrative judiciary.

Moreover, the European Commission and Ukraine agreed priorities in a 10-Point-Plan, following the informal meeting of Ministers for European Affairs held in Lviv on 11 December 2025 ([European Commission 2025c, Joint Statement Marta Kos and Taras Kachka](#)). A similar approach has already proven effective twice: in connection with the visa liberalisation action plan and with the procedure of

the Seven Recommendations as the condition for officially launching accession negotiations.

Defining measures is only one component of achieving results. Successful transformation requires both clear measures and effective structural implementation. The technical dimension of accession has its role in building independent institutions, but it should be embedded in a broader political framework. Purely legal or technical work risks becoming a constant race between regulation and circumvention. Political will and capacities in Ukraine and strategic guidance by Ukraine's political partners are key to sustainable change.

Traditionally, the EU has been following a more restrained approach towards pressuring Ukraine than the USA, and more recently the Trump administration's neglect of democratic reform has taken its toll in Kyiv. In the absence of US pressure, some of Ukraine's political actors have been tempted to weaken independent oversight.

Ukraine's accession process<sup>15</sup> could gradually compel Ukraine's political elites to uphold the rule of law, democratic governance, and institutional independence, while also freeing up energy among reformers, as the war and post-war reconstruction continue to pose challenges.

The Southern European Enlargement, which brought Greece, Spain, and Portugal into the European Communities, may serve as a valuable reminder of a successful democratic transformation. The Communities' willingness at the time to anchor fragile democracies through membership proved instrumental in consolidating their transitions.<sup>16</sup>

The accession process must not endanger the rule of law; rather, it can enhance the effectiveness of fighting corruption, which largely transcends borders, as the scandal in November 2025 illustrated ([Süddeutsche Zeitung, 12 November 2025](#)).

<sup>14</sup> Miriam Kosmehl, Antikorruption, Rechtsstaatsförderung. Handbuch für Forschung und Praxis, Kohlhammer, 2022, pp. 237–244.

<sup>15</sup> Officially inaugurated at the 1st Intergovernmental Conference in Luxembourg on 26 June 2024.

<sup>16</sup> Wilfried Loth, Europas Einigung. Eine unvollendete Geschichte, Campus 2nd Edition 2020, pp. 237–238.

Despite the war, thousands of Ukrainians took to the streets to defend independent institutions. Their civic engagement illustrates a deep societal commitment to the rule of law and the fight against corruption – a solid foundation for confidence in Ukraine’s continued evolution as a liberal democracy. Once again, Ukrainians have affirmed their choice of a system in which the executive is held accountable by the people.

— *Ukrainians’ conviction that their future lies within the EU has become a core element of national identity. Yet it remains insufficiently recognised across all Member States that this is neither self-evident nor guaranteed to last – even though it is a genuine asset for the Union and for those Member States committed to the principles of liberal democracy.*

This civic agency constitutes an essential pillar of Ukraine’s structural transformation, which the technical measures under the accession process are designed to support. One of the EU’s core principles is that a nation adopts EU values and laws of its own free will. Civic and political awareness among the population of a candidate country should thus be taken into account when addressing rule-of-law challenges of a nation in transition. The consistently high levels of support among Ukrainians for EU accession reflect this dynamic: They anchor Ukraine’s transition within the Union’s political and legal framework – one to which a large majority of Ukrainians feel they belong.

Ukrainians’ conviction that their future lies within the EU has become a core element of national identity. Yet it remains insufficiently recognised across all Member States that this is neither self-evident nor guaranteed to last – even though it is a genuine asset for the Union and for those Member States committed to the principles of liberal democracy.

## Tensions rooted in history

All of Ukraine’s EU neighbours trace their history to predecessor states whose territories overlapped with modern Ukraine. These historical ties can foster connections, but also cause friction over memory politics. Poland provides the clearest example, with grievances over mutual atrocities on both sides. President (and historian) Karol Nawrocki stated that “important civilisational issues for Poland” must be resolved before Ukraine can join the EU ([Notes from Poland, 9 June 2025](#)). He was referring to atrocities known in Poland as the Volhynia massacres of 1943–1945, during which Ukrainian nationalist forces killed about 100,000 Poles and other non-Ukrainians in the then German-occupied regions of Volhynia and Eastern Galicia.

Poland and Ukraine resumed exhumations at burial sites in these regions in February 2025 ([Euronews, 8 February 2025](#)), after Ukraine had suspended them in 2017 in retaliation for local authorities in eastern Poland dismantling a monument to the Ukrainian Insurgent Army ([Interfaks, 31 August 2019](#)). Although the resumption of exhumations is an encouraging sign, coming to terms with the past through expert collaboration will likely remain a slow process and vulnerable to political instrumentalisation.

— *All of Ukraine’s EU neighbours trace their history to predecessor states whose territories overlapped with modern Ukraine. These historical ties can foster connections, but also cause friction over memory politics.*

Ukraine’s ethnic minorities — including Hungarians, Romanians, Bulgarians, Slovaks, and Poles — bear witness to a history of shifting borders. Minority rights have been a prominent issue since Ukraine launched its EU membership bid. Since Petro Poroshenko’s tenure, Kyiv has tried to balance satisfying neighbouring governments’ expectations with promoting the Ukrainian language, long suppressed under Russian dominance.



— *Hungary's focus on minority rights increasingly appeared to be a pretext, especially after leaders from Ukraine's Hungarian minority urged Orbán in late 2023 to stop obstructing Ukraine's EU bid on their behalf.*

An education law adopted in 2017 required all secondary schools to teach in Ukrainian, so as to ensure that ethnic minority pupils became proficient in the state language ([Sasse, 2 October 2017](#)). This angered Hungary and Romania, both warning that Ukraine's EU progress could be jeopardised. Ukraine changed the provisions in December 2023, limiting the Ukrainian-language requirement to subjects central to national identity — such as history, Ukrainian literature, and national defence ([OSW, 13 December 2023](#)). This appeared to clear the way for the European Council to vote on opening accession negotiations a few days later, although Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán notably abstained. In January 2025 Ukraine, together with the EU and the Council of Europe, adopted an action plan to harmonise Ukrainian legislation with European standards in the field of anti-discrimination ([Council of Europe Office in Ukraine, 4 February 2025](#)).

Still, Budapest blocked the opening of the “fundamentals” cluster in February 2025, claiming the changes remained insufficient. In November 2025 Ukraine sent Hungary a new draft law for comment before presenting it to the Verkhovna Rada. It addressed five out of eleven of Budapest's demands regarding the Hungarian minority ([Kyiv Independent, 6 November 2025](#)). However, Hungary's focus on minority rights increasingly appeared to be a pretext, especially after leaders from Ukraine's Hungarian minority urged Orbán in late 2023 to stop obstructing Ukraine's EU bid on their behalf ([Ukrainska Pravda, 11 December 2023](#)).

Kyiv has not only failed to satisfy Budapest and Bucharest but has also faced criticism from the European Commission for Democracy Through Law (Venice Commission). Since 2017, Ukraine's language laws have drawn disapproval for making a difficult-to-justify distinction between EU official languages like

Hungarian or Romanian — which enjoy greater rights — and minority languages with no official status in the EU, such as Russian or indigenous languages like Crimean Tatar ([Venice Commission, June 2023](#)). Because this criticism primarily concerns the limited language rights of Russian speakers, it is likely to remain muted while Russia's aggression continues. That gives Kyiv time to debate which status the Russian language should have in a post-war Ukraine, considering that Russia wages its war under the pretext of liberating an oppressed Russian-speaking minority.

## Weight in EU decision-making

For most foreign and security policy decisions, and when deciding on European Commission proposals, the Council of the European Union uses qualified majority voting: a double majority of 55 per cent of Member States representing at least 65 per cent of the EU population must vote in favour. Predicting how Ukraine's accession would affect this system is difficult. Ukraine's last census dates to 2001, long before war and displacement changed the very foundations of Ukrainian demography. Ukraine would add between 34 and 38 million people to the EU — a relatively large population, but one that will almost certainly shrink. The scale and pace of this decline will depend on how and when the war ends ([Tverdostup, 2023](#)).

If Ukraine joined the EU without any other candidate state, at a conservative estimate, the Union's population would rise from about 450 million to 485 million. Under the double-majority rule in the Council, thresholds would shift as follows:

- Member-State threshold: from 15 of 27 to 16 of 28
- Population threshold: from ≈292 million to ≈315 million
- Blocking minority (35%) would rise from ≈157 million to ≈170 million

Politically, Ukraine's entry would shift influence eastward. For instance, a Poland and Ukraine bloc (~73 million people) would rival France's demographic weight, strengthening Central and Eastern European positions in EU policymaking. In addition, Ukraine's accession would change the composition of blocking minorities in the Council, as the population thresholds required for a blocking minority would increase.

### Art. 42 (7) TEU – The EU's mutual assistance clause

The Ukrainian President has regularly argued that Ukraine's EU accession is a means of enhancing security – presenting it as a security guarantee, combined with a strong Ukrainian army, agreements with NATO, and sanctions against Russia. In some EU Member States, however, the prevailing view is that the Union should not admit Ukraine so long as it is at war with Russia (the German Chancellor is only the most powerful head of state to have said so, [Deutsche Bundesregierung, 18 July 2025](#)), because they see themselves as currently unable to defend Ukraine without reliable US support. Given that the accession process is inherently long-term, these considerations are, however, no impediment to proceeding with the accession negotiations. On the contrary, the EU should lose no time in strengthening NATO's European pillar and back up Article 42(7) TEU with more security clout. Any other approach would risk weakening the EU's credibility and undermining the effectiveness of its enlargement policy. In its Granada Declaration ([Council of the European Union, 6 October 2023](#)) the European Council framed enlargement as a “geostrategic investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity”, a formulation that has since become embedded across EU and Member State documentation and speeches.

## 3 | Synthesis from the Case Studies

Member States' concerns fall into the broad categories of stability of the Union, security, Ukrainian competition for their domestic economies as well as quarrels over history and minority rights.

### Primary challenges

*An overarching concern is the complexity of assessing the consequences of Ukraine's integration and explaining to Member State electorates what Ukrainian membership would mean for them financially, in terms of security and for their country's political weight in the EU.*

The EU's most powerful Member States, Germany and France, as well as other net contributors such as the Netherlands, are primarily concerned with the stability of the Union as a whole. They therefore stress the delicate balance between deepening and widening the Union, and, when in doubt, err in favour of deepening before widening, giving high priority to a candidate's sound finances and rule of law. While these countries understand the security benefits that a victorious Ukraine would bring, they are also wary of the risks of admitting a country at war to a union with a mutual defence clause.

An overarching concern is the complexity of assessing the consequences of Ukraine's integration and explaining to Member State electorates what Ukrainian membership would mean for them financially, in terms of security and for their country's political weight in the EU. This complexity opens up wide possibilities for disinformation and political instrumentalisation across the bloc. It is thus essential to provide EU citizens with reliable and easily comprehensible information about the implications of Ukraine's accession, since many feel poorly informed, and those with more accurate information are more likely to support enlargement.

Typically, Ukrainian competition for farmers is a topic that lends itself to campaigns from the right, while competition on the labour market is more of an issue for the left. But in countries with large agricultural sectors, no political faction can afford to dismiss farmers' concerns. In Poland, notably, both left- and right-leaning parties have expressed concern for the domestic farming sector. Although competition is a deep-seated fear even further afield, geographic proximity invites more visible friction, such as road-blocks for grain trucks, whereas countries like the Netherlands also worry about competition but have more ground to stress the potential of collaboration.

### Specific challenges

The Member States bordering Ukraine demonstrated overwhelming solidarity with Ukraine when Russia invaded, but large numbers of refugees, direct competition in agricultural markets and unresolved conflicts over minority rights provide fertile ground for populist narratives.

Populist agendas get balanced out by pragmatic counterweights in countries like Poland or Romania, which, at least under their current governments, see Ukraine's survival and eventual EU membership as an important pillar of their own security. In neighbouring countries that view appeasing Russia as their safest option, as do Hungary and Slovakia, the threat of blocking Ukraine's EU accession is a sure-fire way to score political points at home. That strategy can and eventually will attract imitators along with Russian meddling. Romania, for instance, only narrowly avoided a pro-Russian government and only after re-running a highly controversial 2024 election.

### New sources of friction

The role of Ukrainian refugees in a Member State can be both a catalyst for support, as seems to be the case in Ireland, and a source of friction, as in Poland, where the populist right has enmeshed social benefits for Ukrainian refugees with agricultural compe-

tition. Ukrainian refugees will often compete with EU citizens for resources. Politicians in host countries should separate social assistance for refugees from support for Ukraine's EU accession and highlight the positive effects both can have.

While concerns about the rule of law and conditionality have deep historical roots, the dilemma between the need for profound and comprehensive rule-of-law reforms and the geopolitical urgency to advance Ukraine's accession has deepened since Russia's 2022 full-scale-invasion. At the same time, it is worth noting that EU Member States frequently cited in relation to rule-of-law challenges, Romania and Bulgaria, have made significant progress – a development that would have been far less likely without EU integration and the prospect of membership.

### Geography as a factor of consistency

A Member State's geography often determines its most enduring policies. For instance, Poland's concept that its own democracy would be best protected if its eastern neighbours, Ukraine, Belarus and Lithuania would democratise has been a stable consensus since Poland itself became a democracy.

For Greece, on the other hand, security in the eastern Mediterranean will remain a priority and the country will weigh it against a shift of security-related funds towards Ukraine. Athens also stands to profit more from an integration of the Western Balkan candidate countries on its own doorstep than from channelling increasing resources towards integrating Ukraine. Similarly, Romania, with its close historical and linguistic ties to Moldova, is not likely to change its priorities on integrating that country even if Ukraine should fall behind. This raises the question of how the EU can divide the tasks of integrating candidate states in such a way that not all Member States focus on all candidates' problems, but that positive pressure for candidate countries and strong support in Member States builds on historically rooted and geographically grounded ties.

## 4 | The Evolution of Ukraine's Communication with EU Member States\*

Drafted in a bomb shelter and submitted on the fifth day of Russia's full-scale invasion, Ukraine's application for EU membership was a bold statement. The country had made its choice, and it was about more than political preference or economic stability – it was about securing Ukraine's future. This marked the start of an effective communications campaign that helped Ukraine advance quickly through several stages of the accession process, also revitalizing the EU's enlargement policy in general.

*European integration has become integral to wartime diplomacy, alongside cooperation on sanctions, military aid and financial support.*

Since 2022, Ukraine has made remarkable progress towards EU membership. Despite Russia's full-scale invasion, Ukraine has met the key requirements for opening accession negotiations at record speed. Over time, Ukraine's relations with the EU have evolved through several phases, shaping its communication strategy. While the country has never adopted an official document with a tailored communication approach vis-à-vis each Member State, the messaging was clearly adjusted to specific concerns. It was especially visible at the stage of receiving candidate status. At later stages, the main communication efforts were focused on Brussels, while with the opening of the negotiation clusters the core work will once again have to shift to national capitals.

At the same time, some guiding principles have defined Kyiv's strategy.

Firstly, Ukraine applied for EU membership at the outset of the invasion, viewing integration as a key guarantee of national security. Consequently, European integration has become integral to wartime diplomacy, alongside cooperation on sanctions, military aid and financial support.

\* Section 4 was contributed by Olha Chyzhova and Hennadiy Maksak.

Secondly, advancing towards EU membership remains a top priority for Ukraine's president and government. Engaging at the highest political level strengthens communication and coordination with European institutions.

Thirdly, civil society advocacy campaigns played a significant role in supporting a one-voice policy and promoting Ukraine's bid for EU membership, with varying degrees of coordination with the government.

In line with EU rules, Ukraine has implemented numerous technical processes that require alignment with specific EU standards and the use of appropriate diplomatic instruments. Each stage has produced both successful outcomes and valuable lessons.

### Candidate status: one voice to convince them all (February – June 2022)

At the initial stage, Ukraine focused on external communication with EU Member States and technical engagement with European institutions. In May and June 2022, four special envoys visited 19 EU Member States to garner support for Ukraine's candidacy ([Ukrainian Prism, 2022](#)). Two deputy prime ministers, the deputy head of the Presidential Office, and the deputy foreign minister coordinated visits to hesitant EU Member States: Austria, Bulgaria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Italy, Ireland, France, Germany, Greece, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Sweden, Spain and Portugal. The list of "sceptics" was very diverse, as were the arguments for each. Additionally, a schedule was arranged for outreach at all levels, from state leaders to desk officers.

At the same time, in May 2022, the Ukrainian government launched a communications campaign entitled "Embrace Ukraine: Strengthen the Union", to communicate Ukraine's path to obtaining candidate status ([Government of Ukraine, 29 May 2022a](#)). It unified approaches within a single brand and formulated clear messages for a public campaign targeting European societies ([Dzerkalo Tyzhnya, 28 May 2022](#)).

Street demonstrations were held in the run-up to the July 2022 European Council in support of granting Ukraine EU candidate status in a number of European capitals and major cities, including Milan, Vienna, Brussels, Berlin, Paris, Prague, and Warsaw.

Another successful strategy during this period involved addressing concerns regarding the EU aspirations of the Western Balkans. Some EU members, particularly Germany, Slovenia, Austria and Hungary, were concerned that granting Ukraine candidate status ahead of Bosnia and Herzegovina or before starting talks with Albania and North Macedonia might damage the EU's credibility. To address these concerns, Ukraine engaged with the leaders of Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia, who then publicly endorsed Ukraine's candidacy ([European Pravda, 15 June 2022](#)).

### Delivering on the European Commission's Seven Recommendations (June 2022 – November 2023)

On 23 June 2022, the European Council took the historic step of recognising Ukraine's European perspective and granting it candidate status, on condition that it makes progress on Seven Recommendations proposed by the European Commission. Just a week after the decision, the President, the Chairman of the Verkhovna Rada and the Prime Minister of Ukraine signed a Joint Statement which declared the resumption of the dynamic integration process to become an EU member within the shortest possible term ([President of Ukraine, 1 July 2022](#)). In line with this document, the Ukrainian government adopted a comprehensive approach to establishing close ties with each of the 27 Member States and communicating its successes on the way. At least four times a year, Deputy Prime Minister Olga Stefanishina held meetings with the ambassadors of the EU Member States, with more frequent interactions at staff level ([Government of Ukraine, 14 December 2022b](#)).

To ensure constant and detailed communication with partners, the government team also proposed de-

tailed periodic reviews of the steps taken. These documents not only highlighted successes but also explained where and why Ukrainian institutions were experiencing difficulties with implementation. They also presented the next steps that Ukraine was planning to implement. Thanks to its compact size, structured presentation and regularity, this information channel became highly effective for reaching EU capitals. The documents were distributed to Member States' embassies and the EU Delegation in Kyiv and were discussed during regular meetings.

– *The Ukrainian government adopted a comprehensive approach to establishing close ties with each of the 27 Member States and communicating its successes on the way.*

At this stage, Ukraine was invited to participate in relevant EU Council meetings. Deputy Prime Minister for European Integration Stefanishyna took part in the General Affairs Council meeting in July 2022. This communication channel has become a regular addition to the channels already in place between Kyiv and EU capitals.

To provide arguments to the Member States, Ukraine became the first country to launch a self-screening process of Ukrainian national legislation before the official start of the EU's assessment ([Government of Ukraine, 2 February 2023](#)).

### Opening accession negotiations: taming Orbán? (November 2023 – June 2024)

In November 2023, as part of its enlargement package, the European Commission recommended opening negotiations on Ukraine's accession to the EU. It became clear that all of Kyiv's communication efforts would have to focus on a single individual: Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who had repeatedly threatened to block the decision.

Ahead of the December 2023 European Council meeting, Kyiv mobilised all available channels to influence Hungary. On the one hand, all heads of Member



States were contacted by President Zelensky or at the foreign ministers' level with a request to be vocal and to defend the decision to open negotiations. On the other hand, Ukrainian diplomats separately reached out to those Member States that presumably had any leverage over Hungary. Efforts continued until the very last moment. In a move that drew much public attention, French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, and European Council President Charles Michel met Viktor Orbán for breakfast before the start of the Summit.

Simultaneously, Kyiv worked to address Budapest's concerns regarding minority rights. Deputy Prime Minister Olga Stefanishyna and Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba presented Hungary with Ukraine's new law on national minorities. EU ambassadors to Ukraine were invited to the Transcarpathian region, home to Ukraine's Hungarian minority, to observe the situation firsthand ([Ukrainian Prism, 2024](#)).

This comprehensive approach and teamwork enabled a tactical success: although Orbán did not support the decision, he left the room during the vote on opening membership negotiations and refrained from using his veto power. The Council of the EU had to enter a similar compromise with Orbán in June 2024 when it approved the negotiating framework for Ukraine and Moldova. At the level of permanent representatives, Hungary lifted its veto after receiving assurances that its demands would be included in the negotiating framework. Ukraine was keen to hold the intergovernmental conference marking the start of accession negotiations before the Hungarian Presidency in the second half of 2024.

### 26+1: Accession in stalemate (July 2024 – onward)

With no political decisions expected during the Hungarian EU Presidency in the second half of 2024, Ukraine shifted focus to technical preparations for opening negotiation clusters. At the same time, the final divide in communication approaches became clearer. Kyiv needed two strategies: one appealing to

reasoning and arguments for 26 Member States, and another just for Hungary, downplaying emotions and political motivations.

Outreach to Member States concentrated on practical issues, with questions addressed through bilateral consultations and multilateral formal and informal forums. Regional formats, such as the Nordic-Baltic Eight plus Ukraine, and Weimar plus Ukraine, proved effective to garner high-level political support for integration. Leaders of the states of both initiatives periodically have issued joint statements in support of Ukraine, including Ukraine's European integration. Additionally, a specific group of high-level advisors from the Nordic-Baltic Eight (NB8) regional cooperation was formed in 2024 to provide Ukraine with expertise on EU accession, including reforms and adapting legislation to EU standards.

— *Kyiv needed two strategies: one appealing to reasoning and arguments for 26 Member States, and another just for Hungary, downplaying emotions and political motivations.*

New Deputy Prime Minister Taras Kachka participated alongside EU ministers at the General Affairs Council and, for the first time, took part in the EU Council's Working Party on Enlargement and Countries Negotiating Accession to the Union (COELA), presenting Ukraine's progress in strengthening the rule of law and tackling corruption. The screening process was completed at record speed.

By the 2025 EU Summer Summit, 26 leaders (all except Orbán) had unanimously agreed that Ukraine was ready to begin negotiations. This decision was reaffirmed in October, despite some internal setbacks in Ukraine's anti-corruption institutions in July.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> For more information on these developments and on the consequences of the attempt by the Ukrainian Parliament and the Presidential Office to limit the independence of Ukraine's anti-corruption institutions see "Ukrainian parliament supported the return of NABU and SAP independence" ([ZMINA, 31 July 2025](#)).

The strong momentum to make genuine progress and open clusters during the Polish and Danish Presidencies in 2025 has been slipping away. It seems that the view in Brussels and other European capitals has consolidated that Hungary will not alter its stance before its April 2026 elections. Ukrainian diplomats admit that they have stopped trying to convince Orbán. Partners and institutions are continuing to work on scenarios to bypass the veto, but these possibilities are becoming increasingly limited and look more like symbolic support than a credible accession process.

— *Once negotiation clusters open, Kyiv will need a new communication framework to address Member States' specific concerns at the bilateral level.*

## The way forward

In the long term, Ukraine has no choice but to sustain the intensity and momentum of its communications on EU integration, while simultaneously defending against Russia's aggression. The strong impetus from Ukraine's bold and creative campaigns in 2022 that once revitalized the EU's enlargement agenda is beginning to wane. However, it is vital to maintain focus and adapt strategy to current realities.

Once negotiation clusters open, Kyiv will need a new communication framework to address Member States' specific concerns at the bilateral level. Hungary is unlikely to be the only country to use Ukraine's accession for domestic leverage. Ukrainian diplomats involved in the process admit that they already monitor internal developments in Member States to anticipate and mitigate potential challenges.

This approach can serve as a foundation for developing a new strategy built on two main pillars: engaging in detailed and structured discussions on the technical aspects of the negotiation process with the European Commission, and addressing the interests and sensitivities of individual Member States.

Ukraine has shown that while communication strategy is important on the integration track, it can only be effective if the country delivers on its reform com-

mitments. At the same time, it is a two-way street: the stages mentioned above clearly demonstrate that incentives from the EU side and concrete objectives, such as the Commission's Seven Recommendations, prompt Kyiv to mobilise institutions, manifest strong political will, and deliver rapid results. However, when the goal becomes distant or ambiguous, reforms begin to stall or even come to a complete halt. Therefore, while symbolic gestures of EU support are welcome, real motivation will come from tangible steps: opening negotiation clusters and providing a clear set of requirements in the negotiating positions. Otherwise, no communication strategy will be sufficient to move the process forward.

— *Ukraine has shown that while communication strategy is important on the integration track, it can only be effective if the country delivers on its reform commitments.*

## 5 | Looking ahead: How to Address Existing Obstacles and Prevent the Emergence of New Ones

### Expectations about the development of the various challenges

Based on the information in the case studies, it seems that developments in the rule-of-law sphere and the economic impact of Ukraine's accession will stay on the agenda and could potentially constitute major obstacles to Ukraine's entry into the EU.

These concerns are widespread across Member States and likely to persist. The attention given by the media of many Member States to recurring corruption scandals in Ukraine keeps the rule of law on the agenda and reinforces associations between Ukraine and the problem of corruption. Furthermore, as the accession process progresses, concerns about previous rule-of-law deficits in the run-up to EU entry (e.g. in Romania and Bulgaria) or backsliding in this area post-accession (e.g. in Poland and Hungary) will probably gain traction.

— *If the situation regarding corruption does not clearly improve, there will be even less impetus for Member States to support Ukraine financially and thereby take risks for their own economies.*

In the economic area, the deterioration of various Member States' economies will tend to heighten fears that Ukraine's accession could create additional problems for these countries. The view of Ukraine as an economic burden rather than an asset may become more widespread, at the latest during the discussion of the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework for the period 2035–2041. In addition, the significant financial outflows to Ukraine since the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022 may be increasingly invoked to point out how much support has already been given to Kyiv. These arguments will not only be made by political parties that categorically oppose Ukraine's accession, but presumably also by those that prioritise domestic socioeconomic development over foreign policy concerns. There is also the possibility for an intersection of rule-of-law-related and economic issues, since if the situation regarding corruption does not clearly improve, there will be even less impetus for Member States to support Ukraine financially and thereby take risks for their own economies.

— *... the agricultural sector, which is still functioning in Ukraine despite the war, seems certain to continue as a point of contention for numerous Member States.*

The fears about economic competition coming from Ukraine will depend on the resources with which Ukraine emerges from the phase of Russian military aggression. If the country is able to reconstruct various sectors relatively quickly, the possibility of economic competition will be higher than if it is left largely devastated. In the latter case, however, concerns would shift to the idea of Ukraine as an economic burden on the Union. On the other hand, business actors in many Member States are interested in participating in reconstruction processes and thereby creating economic opportunities for themselves as well as for Ukraine. In any case, the agricultural sector, which is still functioning in Ukraine despite the

war, seems certain to continue as a point of contention for numerous Member States. Even if Ukraine's agricultural potential makes an overall positive contribution to both the EU's competitiveness and its food security, it will be a challenge to convince the Member States to take an overarching view of this topic rather than a national one.

Another area of concern, Ukraine's weight in EU decision-making procedures, will become more concrete over time, as Ukraine's accession approaches and Kyiv and its partners gather the data required to clarify the country's demographic situation. Since this question is closely linked to the need for internal EU reform, it can easily trigger extended discussions on how to alter decision-making processes within the EU that will prolong Ukraine's accession path.

— *If Ukraine emerges from the war as a sovereign, democratic country, then its military capabilities and extensive wartime experience will be viewed as an asset to the EU, especially since the vast majority of Member States see Russia as a serious military threat.*

The concerns connected with the EU's mutual defence clause (Article 42(7) TEU) are likely to grow or diminish according to the outcome of Russia's war against Ukraine. It appears highly unlikely that Ukraine will enter the EU while still in the midst of military hostilities, and with its de facto borders after the war still unknown. If Ukraine emerges from the war as a sovereign, democratic country, then its military capabilities and extensive wartime experience will be viewed as an asset to the EU, especially since the vast majority of Member States see Russia as a serious military threat.

The remaining fields of concern among Member States are more specific and are often confined to one or two EU countries with particular issues in their relations with Ukraine, such as questions related to the treatment of history or policy towards ethnic minorities. These problems should not be minimised since they can lead to blockages in the accession process. This has become more than evident in the case of Hungary's

opposition to opening negotiations on Cluster 1 with Ukraine, during which even representatives of the Hungarian minority in Ukraine have clearly urged Budapest to remove its veto. The Hungarian case also indicates that a specific issue such as the treatment of minorities can be used by a Member State as a pretext for refusing to advance along the accession track. Thus, simply dealing with the issue at face value may not be sufficient to remove the blockade. In other cases, like the more accession-friendly Romania, treating a seemingly minor issue as unimportant could supply the political parties that oppose Ukraine's EU membership with the arguments they need to create significant obstacles to accession.

### Possible instruments for addressing these challenges

Given these reflections, a dual approach would seem necessary to address 1) all Member States with regard to certain issues (especially rule-of-law questions and economic concerns) and 2) specific countries when it comes to particular historical or minority-related problems. In addition, it could be helpful to think about sequencing, as some issues are more pressing currently, while others may become more acute as accession approaches.

*Concerning Ukraine's weight in EU decision-making, here the onus would seem to be on Brussels and the Member States to address internal EU reform issues in a timely fashion.*

Regarding the rule of law, the situation has recently become more problematic because recurring corruption scandals have raised the level of attention paid to this sphere in numerous Member States. Clearly the most advantageous approach is for Ukraine to tackle these issues effectively. However, since this is a difficult task in a wartime context and a political and economic system where corruption is deeply entrenched, these measures could be accompanied by a communication strategy that: 1) clearly conveys progress made in the fight against corruption, 2) explains why the problem is complex and difficult to resolve quickly,

and 3) embeds the discussion of corruption in the context of other successful Ukrainian reforms of previous years, in order to make clear that Ukraine is indeed capable of addressing problematic areas convincingly.

In the economic realm, Ukraine faces a dilemma. If it fails to develop successfully, Kyiv heightens fears in EU Member States that the country will become a burden to the EU. But if it is successful, it raises concerns that Ukraine will become a significant economic competitor with current Member States in various sectors (especially agriculture). It appears more important to try to ensure economic growth and then deal with the concerns about economic competition, since this is not only better for Ukraine itself but also improves its overall image as a country deserving accession. In fact, the Copenhagen criteria require Ukraine to become a viable economic actor capable of handling intra-EU competitive pressures. The focus on competition also allows for creative thinking about various transitional arrangements that would permit Ukraine to enter the EU while reassuring other Member States that competition will only be felt gradually so they will have time to adapt accordingly.

Concerning Ukraine's weight in EU decision-making, here the onus would seem to be on Brussels and the Member States to address internal EU reform issues in a timely fashion. Although there is much discussion about internal reform and enlargement occurring in parallel, to date the debates on the former do not appear to have taken off. After the initial impetus provided by the Franco-German report on EU institutional reform ([Sailing on High Seas, 18 September 2023](#)), the discussion seems to have been relegated to certain technocratic niches and to have lost momentum. The European Commission has promised to publish a communication on EU reforms, but it has been repeatedly postponed, demonstrating the sensitivity of the issues involved.<sup>18</sup> The relatively rapid accession of certain countries that would be easier to

<sup>18</sup> In its [Conclusions](#) of 18–19 December 2025, the European Council reiterates in point 23 that the Commission should not lose sight of its ongoing policy reviews, so that this internal work advances in parallel to reforms in aspiring members (European Council 2025a, EUCO 24/25 V 23).

integrate than Ukraine, such as Montenegro or Albania, could potentially rejuvenate the internal reform process.

On the mutual defence clause, the EU and its Member States need to assist Ukraine even more intensively to ensure that it exits the war as a sovereign and democratic nation. In that case communication could focus on the assets Ukraine brings to the table in the field of security and defence. As Ukraine is already becoming integrated into this sector both on the EU level (via the Security and Action for Europe [SAFE] mechanism to promote common defence procurement) and in numerous Member States (through joint ventures or other forms of defence-related cooperation), conveying more information about these processes and the benefits Ukraine provides through them can help to reassure Member States on this score.

— *An early warning mechanism in Ukrainian embassies in EU Member States could spot emerging concerns and begin to address them before they reach a dangerous threshold.*

The remaining issues are more Member State-specific and need to be treated as such. As Ukraine is the party wishing to join the club, it would appear incumbent on Kyiv to identify these problems and devise targeted ways to reach a compromise with the Member State in question. Where the concerns of the Member State do not seem legitimate or serve as a proxy for other issues, Ukraine should call this to the attention of other Member States early on and present its arguments concisely and convincingly. This can help supportive countries to build coalitions to pressure their counterparts in the problematic Member State to change their behaviour. As the case of Hungary demonstrates, however, this approach does not always generate the desired results.

Finally, in order to become aware of new potential obstacles to accession as they arise, it could make sense to establish an early warning mechanism in Ukrainian embassies in EU Member States. As they are on the ground and have a good sense of the mood and the discussions in the country where they are lo-

cated, they can spot emerging concerns and begin to address them before they reach a dangerous threshold. Regular meetings of the ambassadors and/or relevant staff to compare notes on such issues in the Member States could help to identify trends and limit possible spill-over of concerns from one Member State into another.



## Specific recommendations for the EU, the Member States and Ukraine

### All actors:

- 1 | Prepare for a long “marathon” of domestic expectation management during Ukraine’s accession process, especially once it shifts from solidarity and momentum to demanding reforms.
- 2 | Fund data collection and provide more information on the implications of Ukraine’s accession for the EU and the Member State in question. Use formats that are easily accessible and comprehensible.
- 3 | Make available evidence that previous enlargements have benefitted both the EU and the Member State in question.
- 4 | Convey information about a) Ukraine’s progress in fighting corruption; b) the significant hurdles to overcome in achieving systemic change in a country in transition; c) Ukraine’s reform successes in other areas, to demonstrate its capacity to reform.
- 5 | Counter disinformation in ways that reach those audiences most prone to receive and believe it.

### European Union:

- 1 | Pursue possibilities for gradual accession, while communicating unambiguously that it is not an alternative to, but a pathway towards membership.
- 2 | Convey clear and positive messages about Ukraine’s contributions to European security and defence.
- 3 | Convey clear and positive messages on the benefits which economic competition from Ukraine would bring to EU consumers.
- 4 | Continue to pursue ways to streamline the accession process and consider mechanisms to curb abuse of veto power in enlargement decisions.
- 5 | Push for more momentum on EU reform, working with key Member States on how to move the process forward.

## Member States:

- 1 | Use appropriate moments in national timelines to underline the benefits of Ukraine's accession in the security, technological, energy and resource fields and explain how potential adjustment costs will be addressed.
- 2 | Strengthen communication that links Ukraine's EU path to Europe's collective security, democratic stability, and long-term strategic interests. Communicate the alternative costs of leaving a vulnerable grey zone under malign influence.
- 3 | Inform populations about existing defence cooperation with Ukraine and the resulting security benefits for citizens. Provide tailored explanations of how Russian aggression threatens Europe as a whole and individual Member States in particular.
- 4 | Build on positive examples like the Dutch inter-governmental dialogue to create spaces to discuss issues of concern with Ukrainian counterparts on a bilateral level.
- 5 | Ensure high-level political engagement in the accession process to complement technical scrutiny, thereby strengthening the EU's authority on conditionality by visibly supporting rule-of-law reforms and separation of powers in Ukraine.
- 6 | Encourage proactive leadership by constructive Member States to apply political leverage on Kyiv to reform, rather than relying predominantly on Ukraine's civil society.
- 7 | Coordinate with other Member States so that a division of labour emerges in which different EU capitals become "specialists" for specific accession obstacles, on which they share advice with other capitals.
- 8 | Recognise that Ukraine's integration into the Single Market, on its own, will not reduce the reform pressures on Kyiv; rather, it will require strong political incentives and financial support, just like the accession process.

## Ukraine:

- 1 | Institutionalise "safe spaces" involving Ukrainian experts and civil society to address reform back-sliding or bottlenecks early.
- 2 | Embrace the structured involvement of independent foreign experts, e.g. in judicial selection bodies or state-enterprise supervisory boards, institutionalising clear mandates and sunset clauses to address sovereignty concerns while benefiting from international expertise and impartiality.
- 3 | Create an early warning mechanism by establishing a discussion format across embassies in the Member States to determine which issues constitute potential obstacles to accession and how they can be addressed.
- 4 | Act swiftly to engage with Member States so that bilateral issues do not spill over into the accession process.
- 5 | Proactively submit suggestions for transition arrangements regarding Ukraine's participation in the EU's Common Agricultural Policy.

## Part II – Expert Contributions on Selected EU Member States

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The authors invited independent experts from academia and think tanks to consider the same five questions and provide concise responses to three of them as well as to the outlook policy question at the end.

- 1 | What are the key political, economic, or societal factors shaping your country's position on Ukraine's EU accession? (Please highlight domestic debates, stakeholder interests, or electoral dynamics if relevant.)
- 2 | How does your government publicly frame its stance on Ukraine's accession—both at home and in Brussels? (Consider whether messaging emphasizes solidarity, conditionality, geopolitical priorities, or institutional concerns.)
- 3 | What are the main concerns, reservations, or points of friction within your country's political landscape regarding Ukraine's accession? (This may include enlargement fatigue, rule-of-law concerns, security risks, or budgetary implications.)
- 4 | What concrete steps—bilateral, regional, or within EU institutions—has your country taken to support, guide, or influence Ukraine's accession process? (Include technical support, political statements, parliamentary actions, etc.)
- 5 | In your view, what would need to change — within Ukraine, within the EU and in the member state you describe — for your country to adopt a more affirmative and strategic stance on Ukraine's accession?

The contributions reflect the personal opinions of the authors and are presented in alphabetical order by Member State.

Each contribution discusses the key factors influencing the respective country's position (1) and its government's stance (2). The experts on Greece and Ireland opted to focus on question (4), concerning concrete steps of support, rather than on question (3) about main concerns, whereas the contribution on the Netherlands incorporates aspects of both.

## I. FRANCE – Laure Delcour, Sorbonne Nouvelle University (Paris 3)

**1 |** Over the past thirty years, **political, economic and societal factors** have combined to explain France's wariness on enlargement. French political elites have traditionally regarded new enlargements as detrimental to the building of a powerful, sovereign, and independent EU – France's long-standing priority. While political elites' negative perceptions about enlargement have started changing since 2022 (see question 2), Ukraine's accession is acceptable only to the extent that it does not harm EU unity and key principles and instead contributes to strengthening the Union.

Societal perceptions remain predominantly cautious. Of all EU Member States, French citizens are currently the most reluctant vis-à-vis future accessions: 43% in favour and 38% opposed as per the last Eurobarometer ([Special Eurobarometer 564, Feb. – March 2025](#)). Despite widespread support for Ukraine in fighting against Russia, data about Ukraine's accession is to a large extent similar: 48% are somewhat or very much in favour of Ukraine's accession, while 44% are somewhat or very opposed. The key reasons behind the reluctance to enlarge include concerns about uncontrolled migration, organised crime and corruption, dumping and unfair competition, negative consequences on employment, costs for EU taxpayers as well as greater economic and social disparities within the EU.

In line with societal perceptions, economic factors reflect French stakeholders' anxiety about a loss of competitiveness. Current debates focus on the consequences of Ukraine's accession on the Common Agricultural Policy. The size and competitiveness of Ukraine's agriculture are a major source of concern for French sectoral interests (farmers, producers, agricultural trade unions). A recent report by the Ministry of Agriculture ([Ministère de l'Agriculture, July 2024](#)) recommended that the French authorities prepare a clear strategy to defend French interests during the Multi-annual Financial Framework/enlargement negotiations, taking into account also the structural funds.

France's political instability is likely to have a medium to strong impact on the country's stance in the forthcoming months. In the absence of a clear majority at the National Assembly, the current government will need to take into account the (negative) views of parties on the far left and especially far right of the political spectrum in order to stay in power.

**2 |** While the **French authorities' position** on Ukraine's accession has significantly shifted since 2022, there is no substantial difference in how it is framed at home and in Brussels.

The initially cautious reaction to Ukraine's application was framed in institutional terms. The French wariness reflected a long-standing prioritisation of deepening EU integration over widening, which was presented as a source of weakness for the European Union. While endorsing Ukraine's application, President Macron ([Speech at the closing ceremony of the Conference on the Future of Europe, 9 May 2022](#)) warned that the accession process "would in reality take several years, and most likely several decades (...) unless we decide to lower the standards of this accession and therefore completely rethink the unity of our Europe". Such circumspection translated into Macron's proposal to create the European Political Community, an organisation with a broader scope than the EU, which would enable political and security cooperation "without weakening the closeness built inside the EU".

The authorities' stance started changing in 2023, as Russia was growingly perceived as a threat to the whole continent. Support for Ukraine's accession, which became stronger and more explicit, was thus increasingly framed in security terms, as a condition for Europe's future stability in the face of Russia's aggression ([Laurence Boone, Secretary of State for European Affairs at the General Affairs Council, 12 December 2023](#)). Institutional concerns did not vanish, though. The French authorities framed the imperative to enlarge as being tightly interwoven with EU institutional reform, which is regarded as a prerequisite to new accessions. As mentioned by President Macron in June 2023: "for us, the question is not

whether we should enlarge – we answered that question a year ago – nor when we should enlarge – for me, as swiftly as possible – but rather how we should do it” ([Élysée, Globsec Summit in Bratislava, 1 June 2023](#)).

**3 |** Far-left parties (La France Insoumise – LFI, Communist Party – PCF) and far-right parties (Rassemblement National, Reconquête) all voice **concerns** related to the costs of Ukraine’s accession for France. Their rhetoric reflects fear of social dumping and labour market distortions (LFI, PCF), market disruption and CAP distortion (far-right), as well as massive fiscal consequences. Proponents of Ukraine’s accession emphasise that key EU policies need to be reformed prior to enlargement and that costs will be managed gradually through differentiated integration.

Geopolitical implications of Ukraine’s accession are another point of friction. Renaissance, the Socialist Party (PS), Place publique and Europe Écologie – Les Verts (EELV – Greens) all frame Ukraine’s prospective EU membership as an investment in Europe’s long-term stability. In contrast, the Rassemblement National and other far-right parties (Reconquête) argue that Ukraine’s accession would risk drawing Europe into a direct geopolitical confrontation with Russia, as the latter’s isolation is considered counter-productive.

Finally, the debate over Ukraine’s accession is fraught with political tensions over the nature of European integration. For proponents of enlargement (primarily PS and Place publique), Ukraine’s accession is both a political and a moral necessity, because Ukraine shares EU values and rightly belongs in the EU family, regarded primarily as a community of principles. Far-right parties advocate for a “Europe of Nations” with a shared cultural heritage, viewing Ukraine as belonging to a frontier zone between Europe and Eurasia.

## 5 | Policy question – The way forward

In **Ukraine**, reforms related to the fundamentals (democracy, the rule of law and good governance) would need to be prioritised, monitored and effectively implemented.

The EU would need to:

- Move forward with key reforms on the decision-making process and key policies (CAP, structural funds);
- Effectively take into account France’s economic and social concerns, including in the decisions on the next Multiannual Financial Framework;
- Consistently implement political conditionality vis-à-vis Ukraine and other candidate countries.

In **France**, citizens would need to be better informed about EU enlargement, its implications as well as the candidate countries. About 75% of French citizens consider that they are not properly informed and the lack of clear and specific information is a major source of scepticism ([Special Eurobarometer 564, Feb.–March 2025](#))





## II. GERMANY – Miriam Kosmehl, Bertelsmann Stiftung

**1 |** To understand the **political, economic, and societal factors** that shape Germany's position, it is important to recall that Berlin's foreign policy toward Ukraine has long been influenced by its relations with Russia and concerns that including Ukraine in the EU would overstretch the Union. Strategic missteps across the political spectrum solidified into a general enlargement fatigue. The main victim of this policy was Ukraine. Berlin held on to an "utopia of interdependence" with Russia (Scianna, 2024, p. 566), even though Moscow had long shown no interest in transformation, at most accepting "trade without change" (ibid. pp. 253–256). The foreign policy of Chancellor Schröder's 1998–2005 SPD–Green coalition was primarily foreign economic policy, oriented eastward with Russia as *primus inter pares* (ibid. p. 251). Germany's priority remained keeping Moscow engaged through diplomacy approaches and dialogue formats. Its policy lacked a clear framework of guiding principles<sup>19</sup> (Bierling, 2014, p. 153). Despite early critical EU voices for a clear offer to Ukraine, President Yushchenko's post-Orange Revolution visits to Berlin in 2005 and 2007 found little resonance. Germany urged caution and greater consideration of Russia's interests until Russia's full-scale invasion exposed the EU's Eastern Partnership policy as untenable.

Visions such as Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer's call for a "transition from a confederation of states to a fully parliamentary European federation" (Speech at Berlin's Humboldt University, May 2000) were without prospects for implementation. The German EU Enlargement Commissioner Günter Verheugen considered the accession of the Central and South-eastern European nations "the political task of my life, of my generation", and set 2005 as the target year to complete those memberships, but declared that "accession [of Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova] is either not on the agenda for a long time or

not at all" (Knaus, 2025, pp. 94, 108). With the failure of the EU Constitutional Treaty in 2005, and the rule-of-law weaknesses and corruption scandals accompanying Romania and Bulgaria's accessions in 2007, warnings about the EU's overstretch dominated.

**2 |** The **German Government's position** remained consistent throughout Angela Merkel's 2005–2021 tenure insofar as diplomacy was never underpinned by hard-power considerations. Ahead of the 2015 Riga Eastern Partnership Summit, the Chancellor stressed before the Bundestag that the Eastern Partnership was "not an instrument of the EU's enlargement policy" and warned of "false expectations" ([Deutsche Bundesregierung, 21 May 2015](#)). This position only changed in the 2021–2025 "traffic light" government coalition after Russia's full-scale invasion – and largely in going along with the EU-driven initiative. Chancellor Olaf Scholz expressed himself most clearly at the presentation of the Charlemagne Prize to President Zelensky in Aachen in May 2023, assuring Ukraine "our full support on its path toward the European Union" ([Deutsche Bundesregierung, Olaf Scholz, 16 May 2023](#)).

The coalition under Chancellor Friedrich Merz presents enlargement as a "powerful driver of transformation" and invokes the notion of "geopolitical necessity" ([Coalition Agreement 2025](#), p. 139, 4455). It pursues a "step-by-step integration approach for candidates that do not yet meet all accession requirements but are implementing reforms with determination – without compromising on the criteria or the integrity of the Single Market" (p. 139, 4461–4463). Regarding Ukraine, the Chancellor let slip in a press conference that he does not expect it joining during the EU's upcoming seven-year budget 2028–34: its membership would "probably not have any immediate impact on the European Union's medium-term financial perspective" ([Deutsche Bundesregierung, 18 July 2025](#)). Without explicitly mentioning the EU's mutual defence clause, Merz does not envisage accession during war either: "As long as Ukraine is under attack and in a state of war, accession to the EU will, of course, hardly be possible" (ibid). On the "widening vs. deepening" ambivalence, the coalition agree-

<sup>19</sup> In the original German: „einen ordnungspolitischen Rahmen, der Deutschland über den Tag hinaus hätte leiten können“.

ment states: “EU enlargement and the Union’s capacity to absorb new members must go hand in hand. That is why, at the latest with the next round of enlargement, we will need internal consolidation and reform of the EU to strengthen it institutionally” (p. 138, 4405). A 2023 CDU/CSU faction motion calls for offering Ukraine accession into the Single Market as an interim step if it meets the accession criteria before the EU is ready to accept new members ([Deutscher Bundestag, Entschliessungsantrag der CDU/CSU Fraktion, 12 December 2023](#), point 10).

**3 | Economic and institutional concerns** dominate across parties. The German economy’s declining competitiveness and rising distributional conflicts are increasingly polarising society, while Germany’s financial support for Ukraine has become a controversial topic in public debate. Alongside the “Alternative for Germany” (AfD), which continues to give priority to good relations with Russia, only the left-leaning Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (BSW) clearly opposes accession talks with Ukraine. They call for an enlargement moratorium overall, because of “financially irresponsible burdens for EU citizens” ([Deutscher Bundestag, Antrag BSW, 5 June 2024](#)).

**Corruption and rule-of-law concerns** are raised selectively, but are also substantiated concerns, as government-funded projects focusing on the rule of law and good governance illustrate. While cooperation with the “big bang” EU members has mostly developed to mutual advantage – across governmental, economic, and societal domains, and not least in the realm of security – the **security issue** is still dominated by concerns vis-à-vis Russia (see question 1). Since 2014, efforts to support Ukraine’s defence are constrained by fears of escalation.

Added to this is the illusion, held by some, that the political West provoked the war and/or that Russian aggression can be reduced to Ukraine. Both feed into the narrative that Germany’s supposedly mutually beneficial interdependence with Russia in energy and trade could be restored alongside peace, if Ukraine was kept in a looser cooperation format. Russia is the natural partner of extremist and/or nationalist rep-

resentatives in the Bundestag and state parliaments where AfD and BSW have gained traction.<sup>20</sup> Members of both parties are prone to undermining constructive, problem-solving politics.

Support for Ukraine’s EU accession in Germany remains below the EU average, with 47% of Germans in support compared with 52% on average across the EU ([Special Eurobarometer 564](#)).

## 5 | Policy question – The way forward

German historian Karl Schlögel recently captured the gravity of the geopolitical crossroads when he observed that Ukrainians are teaching Europeans what lies ahead “if they do not finally prepare for the moment of truth” ([Schlögel, 19 October 2025](#)). For the **German government** to explain its commitment to Ukraine to its own citizens is more than a continuous task of acknowledging Ukrainians’ contributions to Europe’s security. Berlin needs to make clear that a grey zone of geopolitical ambiguity is not a viable option in the face of Russia’s ambitions and that integrating Ukraine into the Union serves mutual interests. Germans need to consider Ukraine’s deeper European integration as a valuable component of political solutions to transformative challenges – both broadly in geopolitical terms and concretely in specific policy areas related to the green transition. Rationally assessed costs and benefits should guide debates with stakeholders. Pursuing EU accession as a credible political signal vis-à-vis Kyiv would reinforce democratic resilience **in Ukraine** – and, in doing so, lower political resistance **in Germany**. For those who withstand Russia’s aggression, the prospect of accession carries significance in three dimensions: societal, because they can place trust in the future; strategical and economic, because Ukraine and its partners are already aligning institutional and procedural reforms with the goal of EU membership.

<sup>20</sup> At the national level, AfD is the second-strongest political party after the Christian Democrats, holding 20.8% of the vote in the [2025 federal elections](#). It is currently represented in 14 of the 16 state parliaments. In two federal states with elections in 2026, AfD is the frontrunner in opinion polls and BSW is predicted to surpass the electoral threshold: [Sachsen-Anhalt](#) – AfD 39% and BSW 6%; [Mecklenburg-Vorpommern](#) – AfD 38% and BSW 7%.

Ukraine's political leadership needs to uphold the country's reform achievements and demonstrate the determination to advance them – particularly in judicial reform – while maintaining a genuine commitment to multi-level governance and the separation of powers. Headlines about high-level attempts to reverse recognised results risk obscuring Ukraine's progress and potential. The EU, supported by the **Member States**, needs to sustain a credible framework of conditionality.

Regarding EU reform, Germany should assume leadership in selected key areas and coordinate with those states willing to take the lead in others. This would strengthen its credibility as a nation that has itself benefited considerably from EU membership. In practical terms, this should translate into a sustained drive for internal reforms, both institutional and policy-oriented.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Germany has actively contributed to the Franco-German expert group on EU institutional reform, whose final report (September 2023) outlined proposals to make the Union more enlargement-ready. It also participates in the "Friends of Qualified Majority Voting" initiative, launched in 2023 together with Slovenia and other Member States, to expand the use of QMV in EU foreign and security policy decision-making.

### III. GREECE – Panagiota Manoli, ELIAMEP (Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy)

**1 |** While various **political, economic and societal factors** shape Greece's position, Ukraine's European perspective is not a core political issue within Greece itself. Greece's political elite supports Ukraine's European perspective but insists on strict conditions for accession, and is "against a fast-track process" ([Eu-ractiv, 27 May 2022](#)) while prioritizing the Western Balkans' EU integration. Although Greek society is among the least enthusiastic in the EU about Ukraine's EU accession ([Special Eurobarometer 564, 2025](#)), the social sentiment has not driven the government's policy. Ukraine's accession has been framed in European norms and moral values and supported by the Greek government as a geopolitical imperative in the context of defending established European security principles and architecture. There is an increasing realisation that Ukraine's and EU's geopolitical needs call for Ukraine's further integration into EU structures.

As accession is not imminent, Athens has been supportive of proposals for gradual/phased integration with no set timetables. Greece has historically perceived the EU enlargement policy as an enabling framework for the advancement of its national preferences ([Internationale Politik Quarterly, 28 September 2023](#)). In the case of Ukraine's accession per se, there are no vital direct national foreign policy interests to serve, but its gradual integration into the EU strengthens European security principles (which constitute the fundamentals of Greece's own security) and sets limits on the influence of any revisionist powers in Europe, while in the long run it is expected to forge further CFSP/CSDP and enhance EU's military capabilities ([Ekirikas, 12 June 2025](#)), strongly supported by Athens. On the other hand, the emergence of a strong eastern flank at the expense of the southern one within the EU raises concerns for Athens, which prioritises threats emanating from the Eastern Mediterranean/SEE.

Economic and institutional considerations do not drive Greece's policy or people's concerns about Ukraine's membership. The implications of Ukraine's accession for the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the EU's regional policy have played no particular role, so far, in the public debate or shaping Greece's policy preferences ([Agrotypos, 23 January 2025](#)). However, in upcoming enlargement negotiations, Greece is anticipated to strongly advocate for maintaining unanimity in the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), bargain on the regional policy funds, and leverage discussions on EU governance reforms to advance its national security interests and ensure it remains in the inner circle of the integration process.

**2 |** The [accession of Ukraine](#) to the EU has not been a priority for [Athens](#). Until the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Athens had kept a low profile on Ukraine's European aspirations, following, on the one hand, a Moscow-first stance, and, on the other hand, clearly prioritizing enlargement with Western Balkan countries. Since then, there has been a U-turn in Greek policy on embracing Ukraine's accession to the EU when "conditions are met".

Greece's government has publicly framed the integration of Ukraine into the EU as a moral imperative (and a value-driven EU foreign policy) and a strategic choice framed in solidarity and geopolitical priorities but insists on a step-by-step process that respects existing EU legal and procedural frameworks, opposing an accelerated path. On several occasions it has framed Ukraine's accession as support for Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, based on the values of democracy and rule of law. Greece's position publicly balances its geopolitical alignment with Ukraine against concerns about potential strain on EU institutions and the need for orderly, criteria-based enlargement (e.g. [Prime Minister of the Hellenic Republic Athens Summit Declaration, 21 August 2023](#)).

Greece is not among those EU Member States that see the reform of EU institutions and decision-making procedures as a condition for the advancement of

EU enlargement with Ukraine. Ukraine's place in the EU is also publicly framed by Athens in the context of long-standing historical and cultural bilateral ties ([Insider, 15 February 2024](#)), as citizens of Greek origin lived for centuries along the coasts of the Black Sea and Azov Sea.

**4 |** [Greece's concrete steps of support for Ukraine's EU accession](#) encompass political declarations advocating for enlargement and concrete actions aimed at bolstering Ukraine's resilience, independence, and reform efforts. Athens has expressed diplomatic support in international venues and engaged in EU security cooperation agreements to uphold Ukraine's sovereignty. Upon Greece's initiative and in a 'pace-setting' effort, a high-level summit on EU enlargement was organized in Athens in August 2023 (see question 2) bringing together the leaders of EU institutions, four EU Member States (Greece, Croatia, Bulgaria, and Romania) with their counterparts from the candidate countries to discuss the prospects of EU enlargement policy.

Beyond direct enlargement-linked initiatives, the Greek government has put forward proposals prioritising i) energy connectivity, linking Ukraine's resilience to that of the EU and ii) economic restructuring of Ukraine expected to have a profound impact on its accession path, including preservation of cultural heritage, especially in Odesa ([RBC-Ukraine, 22 August 2023](#)). Within this context, Athens has promoted a vertical axis of connectivity, linking Alexandroupolis with Odesa, that encompasses transportation, rail, electricity, and natural gas pipelines ([Transport Corridors, 8 September 2025](#)). An energy agreement on an LNG supply route was signed during President Zelensky's visit to Athens on 16 November 2025.

Along the same lines, Athens organised a Conference on the Reconstruction of Ukraine ([Embassy of Ukraine to the Hellenic Republic, 14 February 2024](#)) in cooperation with the European Investment Bank on key sectors, including construction, transport/logistics, energy, IT. At the bilateral level, a Greek-Ukrainian Business Forum was co-organized by the Greek Foreign Ministry, Enterprise Greece, and

Ukrainian and international business chambers in Kyiv in June 2025 ([Protothema, 2 June 2025](#)). At the bilateral security level, beyond providing military assistance to Kyiv, in October 2024, Greece signed a Bilateral Security Cooperation Agreement with Ukraine (not yet ratified), becoming the 21st EU member state to do so, following the G7's Joint Declaration on long-term security support for Ukraine ([Ekathimerini, 17 October 2024](#)). The agreement supports Ukraine's European path.

## 5 | Policy question – The way forward

**Within Ukraine:** Ukraine should continue its steady progress on the pre-accession reforms (rule of law), including the protection of minorities; enhancement of bilateral cooperation on connectivity and on regional/foreign policy issues.

**Within Greece:** Greece should devise a strategy on how to balance between defending unanimity in important policy areas while moving on with the expansion of the EU.

**Within the EU:** A concise plan on Ukraine's phased integration as an intermediate stage should be brought forward. The reform of the EU's procedures should halt further politicisation of enlargement by Member States, but at the same time ensure that the concerns of Member States are appropriately fed into the decision-making process and that the EU employs effective mechanisms in support of its Member States against external conventional and hybrid threats.

## IV. IRELAND – Donnacha Ó Beacháin, Dublin City University

**1 and 2 | Ireland's position** on Ukraine's EU accession is shaped by a combination of political commitment to EU enlargement, historic experiences of EU integration, and solidarity with Ukraine. These factors combine to make Ireland one of Ukraine's most active supporters within the EU accession process.

Ireland is a strong proponent of EU enlargement and regards it as a tool for consolidating peace, security, and prosperity in Europe. Irish officials, e.g. the Prime Minister ([Eurojournalist\(e\), 9 June 2022](#)), have explicitly committed to supporting Ukraine's EU path, including during Ireland's EU presidency from July–December 2026.

The **Irish government** often links support for Ukraine's accession to Ireland's own modern transformation, arguing that EU membership brought prosperity and democratic consolidation, and that Ukraine deserves the same opportunity. **Irish public opinion** strongly supports the EU and is generally sympathetic to Ukraine, with broad societal backing for continued assistance and enlargement as a matter of European solidarity ([EU Representation in Ireland, 23 May 2024](#)). Ireland and Ukraine have a historic base for solidarity and mutual interest as former colonies situated on the border of their respective invaders. Irish interest in Ukraine had peaked before – in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea and war in the Donbas – but then it subsided, as in most of Europe ([Forum for Ukrainian Studies, 1 June 2023](#)).<sup>22</sup>

Both in domestic discourse and at Brussels-level negotiations, the Irish government publicly frames its stance on Ukraine's EU accession as an unwavering commitment rooted in principles of solidarity, European transformation, and democratic values. State-

22 For a more historical perspective Donnacha Ó Beacháin, "The Irishman of Russia: Ukrainian Anti-Imperial Struggles and Engagement with Ireland", [History Ireland, Vol. 31, No. 6 \(2023\)](#); D. Ó Beacháin, "Intersections of modern Irish and Ukrainian History" in Stephen Velychenko et al (eds.) *Ireland and Ukraine: Studies in Comparative Imperial and National History* (Columbia University Press, 2023) pp. 73–101.



ments in the Irish parliament (*Oireachtas*) and government speeches describe Ireland's support as both moral (standing with a country defending its sovereignty and democracy) and practical (recognising Ukraine's reform efforts and its European aspirations, even in the face of war). Concerns about the depth or sustainability of reforms are only raised in isolated cases.

The government regularly highlights the welcome given to Ukrainian refugees (now approximately 2% of Ireland's population) and frames this as an act of solidarity aligned with its backing of Ukraine's European choice. Irish support is also positioned within a broader narrative of defending fundamental rights and democratic values, asserting that every European nation should have the opportunity for EU membership if criteria are met.

In Brussels and international fora, Irish ministers publicly call for maintaining enlargement momentum. Irish statements maintain that EU membership for Ukraine enhance long-term European peace and stability, with only a few political voices raising concern over Ukraine's reform progress (e.g. [Michael MacNamara MEP](#)). Ireland has stressed that Ukraine needs comprehensive security guarantees and that EU membership is an integral part of that. The *Taoiseach* (Prime Minister) has also emphasised that Russia cannot have a veto on Ukraine's path towards EU membership. Ireland reaffirms its commitment through funding Ukraine's reconstruction via the European Investment Bank and supporting reforms required for EU membership.

#### 4 | Ireland has undertaken **concrete steps to support Ukraine's accession process**:

- Political Support and Bilateral Agreements:** In September 2024, Ireland signed an Agreement on Support for Ukraine and on Cooperation in Kyiv ([President of Ukraine, 4 September 2024](#)), reaffirming a commitment to long-term political, security, and financial assistance for Ukraine. During President Zelensky's state visit (1–2 December 2025), he signed the 2030 Roadmap on
  - the Ireland–Ukraine Partnership, an agreement to strengthen bilateral relations, including in areas such as cyber resilience, educational cooperation, and culture ([Government of Ireland, joint Press Conference, 2 December 2025a](#)). At the same summit, Taoiseach Micheál Martin said that Ireland believed membership of the EU is “one of the most important guarantees of Ukraine's future security”. Stressing that Ukraine “belongs in the EU”, the Taoiseach said that Ireland would continue to work as much as it could to advance negotiations of Ukraine's membership, including when holding the EU Council Presidency in 2026 ([Government of Ireland, 2 December 2025c](#)).
- Technical Assistance:** Irish officials have undertaken diplomatic missions to Kyiv, offering expertise based on Ireland's experience of EU accession and reform, and have discussed sharing practical lessons from Ireland's own EU transformation with Ukrainian institutions.
- Non-lethal Military and Humanitarian Aid:** Ireland has contributed approximately €250 million in non-lethal military support to Ukraine, channelled through the European Peace Facility and direct bilateral channels, and accelerated support for priority needs like demining. Ireland has also allocated significant funding to humanitarian programmes for Ukraine. Given Ireland's traditional policy of military neutrality, it has not supplied Ukraine with lethal military support. However, Russia has maintained that Ireland is not neutral in relation to the war in Ukraine, claiming that Dublin has adopted an “openly Russophobic and pro-Ukrainian position” and has provided “assistance to the Kyiv regime, including military aid” ([Embassy of the Russian Federation in Ireland, 4 September 2025](#)).
- Support for Reconstruction:** Ireland contributed to the EU for Ukraine Fund (EIB), backing Ukraine's recovery and linking financial support directly to Ukraine's long-term stabilisation and EU reform efforts. In December 2025 President Zelensky participated in the inaugural meeting of

the Ireland–Ukraine Economic Forum in Dublin designed to further strengthen economic ties on a government–to–government, business–to–business and people–to–people basis. The Irish foreign minister, Helen McEntee, emphasised the role of the new forum in the recovery and reconstruction of Ukraine’s economy and “supporting Ukraine as it prepares for accession to the European Union” ([Government of Ireland, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2 December 2025b](#)).

#### Regional/EU Institutional Actions:

- **Advocacy in EU Institutions:** Ireland actively supports Ukraine’s accession in the European Council, European Parliament, and Council of the EU, advocating for enlargement momentum.
- **Parliamentary Diplomacy:** Senior Irish parliamentarians and government representatives regularly meet with Ukrainian counterparts and advocate Ukraine’s case at EU forums and in inter-parliamentary groups.
- **Policy Shaping:** Ireland has lobbied for a robust, merit-based approach that recognises Ukraine’s reform progress while pushing back against “enlargement fatigue” or unwarranted procedural delays. The Irish Government has consistently commended the reforms undertaken in Ukraine as part of its EU accession process. It has also emphasised that the principal obstacle to Ukraine’s membership is not Kyiv’s capacity to implement reforms, but rather Hungary’s persistent opposition to its accession ([Dáil Éireann Debate on Ukraine War, 21 October 2025](#)).
- **Funding and Economic Programmes:** Ireland supported emergency assistance schemes such as a €1.2 billion state aid programme to stabilize EU economies impacted by the war, and backs continued macro-financial assistance to Ukraine.

#### Political Statements/Actions:

- **High-level Political Statements:** The Taoiseach (PM) and Tánaiste (deputy PM) have made strong public statements, in Ireland and Brussels, championing Ukraine’s EU aspirations and citing Ireland’s own EU experience as a model.
- **Parliamentary Support:** The Irish parliament has adopted supportive resolutions and issued joint statements with the Ukrainian government, affirming shared values and commitment to democratic reforms necessary for EU accession.

### 5 | Policy question – The way forward

**Within Ukraine,** further progress on the EU’s core accession criteria – particularly continued anti-corruption efforts, judicial independence, and governance reforms – would reassure Irish policymakers and help build an even stronger cross-party and public consensus in Ireland for a proactive stance.

**Within the EU,** agreement on long-term budget reforms and safeguards for sensitive sectors (especially agriculture, cohesion funds) would enable Irish officials to counter potential domestic unease over the economic consequences of Ukrainian accession.

**Within Ireland,** movement towards a more clearly defined, collectively understood role for the state’s ever-evolving policy of military neutrality – allowing proactive engagement in EU security initiatives while preserving core non-alignment principles – could underpin a more assertive leadership role in the enlargement debate. Proactive government engagement with public and sectoral interest groups (notably farmers and trade unions) to address concerns over budget distribution, CAP reform, and migration could make a bolder stance politically sustainable.

Finally, **Ireland’s 2026 EU Council Presidency** presents a strategic opportunity; clearer domestic endorsement for robust action could embolden Irish leaders to champion Ukraine’s cause with renewed authority and innovative proposals in Brussels.

## V. THE NETHERLANDS – Julia Soldatiuk-Westerveld, Clingendael Institute for International Relations

**1 |** The Netherlands maintains an engaged yet cautious stance regarding Ukraine’s path toward European Union membership. While it offers substantial support to Ukraine, this backing is moderated by domestic politics and fiscal restraint. Two reservations guide Dutch thinking: first, that Ukraine’s economy must be strong enough to avoid long-term reliance on EU structural funding or distorting market competition; and second, that its voting power within EU institutions should not substantially diminish Dutch influence or financial interests.

Domestic politics, marked by Euroscepticism, fiscal caution, and anti-immigration sentiment, limit unreserved support for enlargement. Still, the Netherlands stands out as the first EU Member State to guide Ukraine in meeting the Copenhagen criteria ([Government of the Netherlands joint communiqué with Ukraine, 12 April 2025](#)), combining constructive engagement in Brussels with cautious, guarded rhetoric at home.

### **2 | A new wind in The Hague with D66’s election victory**

The previous coalition agreement between PVV, VVD, BBB, and NSC<sup>23</sup> emphasized that “the preservation of national sovereignty is paramount,” committing the Netherlands to a “highly critical” stance on enlargement and rejecting flexibility on the Copenhagen criteria ([Coalition agreement, 16 May 2024](#)). This marked a departure from the Rutte IV coalition, which described the Netherlands as “strict, fair and engaged” ([Coalition agreement, 15 December 2021](#)). This harder line reflected domestic anti-immigration

<sup>23</sup> PVV, VVD, BBB, and NSC are the major Dutch political parties. The abbreviations stand for: PVV – *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (“Party for Freedom”), a radical right-wing party; VVD – *Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie* (“People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy”), a conservative-liberal party; BBB – *BoerBurgerBeweging* (“Farmer–Citizen Movement”), a socially conservative right-wing party; NSC – *Nieuw Sociaal Contract* (“New Social Contract”), a centre-right party.

sentiment and a narrative depicting the EU as fiscally burdensome to Dutch taxpayers, reinforcing scepticism toward enlargement and constraining support for Ukraine’s EU membership.

The October 2025 Dutch elections may reshape this outlook. D66,<sup>24</sup> the winning party, supports “swift accession for Ukraine” as part of a broader geopolitical vision for the EU, emphasizing the need for internal EU reforms before enlargement (D66, [Election programme 2025–2030](#)). In contrast, the PVV, the second-largest party, continues to oppose any further enlargement (PVV, [Election programme 2025–2029](#)). With PVV unlikely to join the next coalition, the new government might adopt a somewhat more moderate stance toward Ukraine’s EU accession.

### **3 | Shifting public opinion and economic concerns**

Public attitudes toward Ukraine’s EU accession, once deeply sceptical, as reflected in the 2016 referendum rejecting the EU–Ukraine Association Agreement<sup>25</sup>, have softened considerably since Russia’s 2022 invasion. 65% of Dutch citizens now support Ukraine’s EU accession ([Special Eurobarometer 564, Feb.–March 2025](#)). This shift provides the government with greater political space for constructive engagement, provided that Ukraine’s reforms remain credible and conditionality is preserved.

As a net contributor and member of the “Frugal Four”, the Netherlands evaluates enlargement primarily through its fiscal implications ([Euronews, 3 June 2025](#)). Ukraine’s size, substantial agricultural sector, and lower income levels raise concerns that accession could increase Dutch contributions to the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and cohesion

<sup>24</sup> D66 stands for *Democraten 66* (“Democrats 66”), a progressive social-liberal political party in the Netherlands, founded in 1966.

<sup>25</sup> In this consultative referendum, 61% of Dutch voters rejected the agreement, with turnout just above the required threshold. Although the government ratified it with added declarations on sovereignty and security, the vote highlighted significant Euroscepticism and skepticism toward Ukraine in Dutch society. Unlike in France, such Dutch referenda are non-binding and cannot by themselves block government approval of an accession decision in the Council.

funds, while intensifying competition for domestic farmers. Estimates that Ukraine's inclusion in the 2021–2027 Multiannual Financial Framework could add about €85 billion in CAP payments and €32 billion in cohesion funds ([Bruegel, 7 March 2024](#)) sustain Dutch caution.

Dutch farming associations, including LTO Nederland, generally support Ukraine's eventual accession but call for safeguards and phased access to the CAP to avoid market disruption and unfair competition ([LTO, 14 April 2025](#)). Although the agricultural relationship may seem competitive, it has evolved into a structured partnership. During the Second Ukraine–Netherlands Agricultural Dialogue in Lviv in April 2025, both sides discussed the expected effects of Ukraine's EU integration on European agriculture, including possible pressures on Dutch producers. The joint statement highlighted the need to manage sensitive product categories while emphasizing that the two sectors can be mutually complementary rather than purely competitive ([UANLAD, Joint Statement 2<sup>nd</sup> Ukraine The Netherlands Agricultural Dialogue, 11 April 2025](#)).

Regarding the Netherlands' official position, the Dutch government presents Ukraine's EU path as part of Europe's collective response to Russian aggression, underlining strong political, military, and financial support. At the same time, ministers emphasise **domestically** that enlargement must remain strictly conditional on measurable progress in the rule of law, governance, and anti-corruption reforms and should not burden Dutch taxpayers. Former Prime Minister Rutte's remark that “offering EU membership will not help Ukraine now” ([NL Times, 5 October 2023](#)) encapsulates the long-standing belief that geopolitical urgency cannot replace conditionality. Nonetheless, The Hague has encouraged intensified cooperation with Ukraine and other candidates, helping them meet EU standards through targeted reforms.

In Brussels and Ukraine, the Netherlands positions itself as a constructive but principled supporter of Ukraine's accession. Dutch representatives consistently argue for a merit-driven process while backing

practical measures to prepare Ukraine for membership. The annual Netherlands–Ukraine Intergovernmental Conference, launched in Lviv ([Government of the Netherlands, Joint communiqué with Ukraine, 12 April 2025](#)), and the Ukraine–Netherlands Agricultural Dialogue (first held in 2024), illustrate this technical engagement aimed at aligning Ukrainian institutions and sectors with EU norms. These efforts highlight a pragmatic side of Dutch diplomacy that contrasts with the more cautious domestic rhetoric.

Despite these initiatives, national debate continues to revolve around concerns over migration, sovereignty, and financial strain, often overshadowing the Netherlands' constructive engagement at the EU level. Foreign Minister Caspar Veldkamp reiterated in 2024 that while “Ukraine is doing its utmost, the Netherlands remains strict and critical when it comes to EU enlargement” ([Hart van Nederland, 14 April 2025](#)). Similarly, Rutte dismissed 2030 as a realistic target for Ukrainian membership, insisting that “the question is not when countries are ready, but whether they are ready” ([NOS, 5 October 2023](#)). Most recently, Prime Minister Dick Schoof rejected EU chief António Costa's proposal to replace unanimity with qualified majority voting for opening negotiation chapters, reaffirming The Hague's insistence on full membership state control over enlargement decisions ([NL Times, 1 October 2025](#)).

While scepticism related to the EU's internal readiness persist, the government acknowledges the economic and strategic benefits of successful enlargement, citing the prosperity of Central European states as evidence. Ultimately, the Dutch position remains consistent: firm political and financial support for Ukraine, coupled with unwavering conditionality and fiscal prudence, a duality that defines The Hague's voice both at home and in Brussels.

## 5 | Policy question – The way forward

First, **Ukraine** must demonstrate sustained progress on rule of law, transparency, and economic resilience to ensure it can join the single market without imposing fiscal burdens.

Second, the EU, in turn, must reform its budgetary and decision-making systems to make enlargement financially sustainable and politically credible.

Finally, if **Dutch leadership** were to articulate a clearer strategic narrative linking Ukraine's accession to national interests – such as security, trade diversification, and the preservation of a rules-based international order – this framing could turn cautious pragmatism into more proactive engagement, strengthening the Netherlands' influence in shaping the EU's next phase of enlargement.



## VI. POLAND – Iwona Reichardt, New Eastern Europe

**1 |** Since the early 1990s, Poland's foreign policy toward its eastern neighbours has followed the ULB (Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus) concept developed by émigré intellectuals from the Paris-based *Kultura* journal. Its core assumption was that free and democratic Ukraine, Lithuania, and Belarus are vital to Poland's security. Although banned in communist Poland, *Kultura*'s ideas influenced the democratic opposition and later shaped independent Poland's eastern policy. After the Soviet Union's collapse, Warsaw built relations with the new states in line with this doctrine. Over time, all major democratic parties, both left and right, accepted the ULB approach, forming a durable, elite-driven foreign policy consensus. Public resistance was minimal, with the main exception of nationalist "Volhynia circles," who opposed pro-Ukrainian policies due to the war-time atrocities committed by Ukrainian nationalists against ethnic Poles.

**2 |** Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the **Polish government**, supported by the Polish society, quickly responded to the needs of both the Ukrainian state and its citizens fleeing the aggression. At that time, political divisions gave way to a rare moment of national solidarity. According to estimates by the Council for Cooperation with Ukraine, a body established in 2024 by Prime Minister Donald Tusk to oversee Poland's role in Ukraine's reconstruction, in 2022 to 2023 Poland spent €25 billion (3.83% of GDP) supporting Ukraine ([Rada do spraw Współpracy z Ukrainą, Polish Support to Ukraine 2022–2023](#)). Opinion polls initially showed overwhelming public backing ([CBOS, 2022](#)) in early March 2022, 94% of respondents supported Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees. The first large decline appeared in spring 2023, when support fell from 83% in March to 73% in April, largely due to tensions over Ukrainian grain imports after the EU lifted customs duties. Farmers' protests at the border, widely covered by the media, further shaped sentiment. Ahead of the October 2023 elections, both the ruling Law and Justice and the oppo-



sition Civic Platform avoided confronting protesters, wary of losing voters. Their silence allowed far-right and agrarian movements to capitalise on unrest, popularising anti-Ukrainian slogans such as “Stop the Ukrainisation of Poland.” This contributed to deteriorating relations between the two capitals and lowered trust in Poland’s intentions among the Ukrainian elite.

Just as Germany once championed Poland’s accession, Poland has promoted Ukraine’s EU membership as a strategic investment in Europe’s stability. Since 2004, Warsaw has positioned itself as Ukraine’s principal advocate within the EU, supporting its gradual integration through the 2014 Association Agreement, the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area, visa liberalisation, and the granting of candidate status in 2022. Ahead of its 2025 EU Council presidency, Poland viewed Ukraine’s plans to open several negotiation clusters as overly ambitious but still aimed to launch the first by June 2025. The process was halted by Hungary.

**3 |** 2025 Eurobarometer results show that Polish views on Ukraine’s EU membership now mirror the EU average: EU: 52% in favour, 41% opposed; Poland: 51% support, 42% against ([Special Eurobarometer 564, Feb. – March 2025](#)). Although Poles remain broadly positive toward enlargement, support for Ukraine’s accession has weakened. An IBRIS poll from mid-2025 showed support falling to 35%, with 42% opposed ([Polsatnews, 27 June 2025](#)), down from 94% support in 2022. This suggests that, while the government continues to advocate for Ukraine’s European path, societal enthusiasm has faded.

Several factors explain this shift. Economic fatigue has been central: rising living costs, inflation, and limited access to social services have made Poles less supportive of large-scale aid. Unresolved historical disputes, especially the differing interpretations of Ukrainian atrocities against ethnic Poles in World War II and the Polish revenge after the war, have also eroded the earlier sense of shared purpose. Finally, the normalisation of the war and declining moral

urgency have enabled nationalist and populist forces to redefine the Ukrainian question in domestic rather than geopolitical terms.

As a result, both the government and the newly elected President, Karol Nawrocki – though representing opposing political camps – are now aligning in framing Poland’s stance on Ukraine’s EU integration around conditionality. In his January 2025 speech in the Polish parliament, still as presidential candidate, Nawrocki emphasised that while Poland would continue to support Ukraine against Russian aggression, all future cooperation “must be based on the principle of reciprocity” and guided “solely by the interests of Poland and Poles” ([Polska Agencja Prasowa, 16 Jan. 2025](#)). The president also played a decisive role in shaping limits on the child-benefit scheme for Ukrainian refugees. In August 2025, he vetoed a bill extending benefits without restrictions, and a month later parliament passed a law conditioning the child benefit on documented employment. Officially justified as promoting self-reliance and integration, the measure reflected public pressure to reduce what was increasingly portrayed as excessive welfare support.

## **5 | Policy question – The way forward**

To sustain its credibility as Ukraine’s key advocate in the EU, **Poland** should pursue a strategy that combines strategic communication, domestic reassurance, and regional coordination. The government needs to strengthen its narrative by framing Ukraine’s accession as a long-term investment in Poland’s security while clearly communicating its economic and political benefits. Domestically, it should mitigate public fatigue through targeted support for groups most affected by refugee presence. Sustaining trust also requires historical reconciliation initiatives to depoliticise memory issues. Finally, Warsaw should reinforce coalition-building within the EU – working closely with the Baltic, Nordic, and Central European states, as well as Germany and France – to maintain unity on enlargement and counter attempts to block Ukraine’s accession.

## VII. ROMANIA – Valentin Naumescu, Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca<sup>26</sup>

1 | Four factors are key in shaping Romania's position: two positive (geopolitical and security), one ambivalent (economic), and one negative (historical):

- **Geopolitical.** Romania and Ukraine signed a bilateral strategic partnership in 2023. As the EU member state having the longest border (614 km) with Ukraine, Romania, itself at the EU's geopolitical periphery and NATO's eastern flank, would welcome any possible enlargement to the East, through which it may have friendly and secured EU neighbours.
- **Security.** Although the EU is not a security provider *stricto sensu*, Romania's security would be considered consolidated with Ukraine's EU accession ([President of Romania, 2025](#)). Romania will continue to support Ukraine's accession to both the EU and NATO. Ukraine works as a "shield" for the Republic of Moldova and the entire Eastern Flank. Romania is ready to contribute to Ukraine's future post-war security guarantees.<sup>27</sup>
- **Economic.** The benefits of Ukraine's reconstruction for the entire region, investments and new business opportunities for Romanian companies, are seen in contrast to fears of losing own competitiveness and EU funds. A Bruegel Report ([Bruegel, 2024](#)) estimating cuts of €136 bn following Ukraine's EU accession (applying 2021–27 MFF allocation rules, of which €85 bn would come from the Common Agriculture Policy and €32 bn from Cohesion Funds) has been widely cited in the media. Not only EU redistribution to Ukraine but also cheaper Ukrainian products and services are feared to affect the competitiveness of own businesses, especially in agriculture and industrial manufacturing.

<sup>26</sup> Valentin Naumescu contributed to this paper before being appointed Advisor to President Nicușor Dan for European Affairs on 1 October 2025, effective as of 1 November 2025.

<sup>27</sup> Romania and Ukraine adopted a [bilateral Agreement on security cooperation](#) in 2024.

- **Historical.** The historical factor is rather a negative one, even with post-Soviet Ukraine. An arbitration in The Hague over the delimitation of the continental shelf of the Black Sea (Exclusive Economic Zone) concluded in 2009 and partly resolved the problems, after more than 50 years of disagreements. Some territories in southwestern Ukraine, which belonged to the Romanian Kingdom and were occupied by the USSR, are present in the Romanian culture and national historical consciousness. Romanian-speaking communities there have accused Ukrainian authorities of nationalism.

2 | **Political statements at the highest level** (President, Prime Minister), but also Romanian society have clearly demonstrated political, humanitarian, economic, and military support for Ukraine. Romania's total financial effort to aid Ukraine is estimated at €1.5 bn, equivalent to 0.6% of GDP ([Gongoroi, September 2025](#)). A trilateral format between Romania, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine, established in 2022 at Romania's initiative, held several ministerial meetings in the fields of energy, defence, foreign affairs, and EU integration. It can be assumed that, beyond the emotional impact of the war, the post-war performances of the government in Kyiv will be assessed objectively by European and national authorities. Bucharest still has no objections against Ukraine's EU accession, but future European Commission enlargement reports will be important.

From Bucharest's perspective, the European integration of the Republic of Moldova is a strategic priority. The smaller country is considered to have better chances to complete accession negotiations within the next three years and sign the Accession Treaty by 2029, during the current European Commission's term. The scenario of decoupling the Republic of Moldova from Ukraine, as noted by Commissioner Kos ([EUobserver, 27 May 2025](#)), finds support and is based on the view that European integration is merit-based with candidates ultimately assessed individually.

It is expected that after the war the assessment of Ukraine's reforms and progress will become more neutral and objective, both in Brussels and in Bucharest. A "shortcut" to accession is unimaginable. It remains too early to predict when and how Ukraine's EU candidacy will conclude, or what form of special arrangements may emerge. All political and institutional options remain on the table, but Ukraine's European course is considered irreversible.

**3 |** Polls show that at the time of writing AUR, Romania's nationalist, far-right, and anti-EU opposition party, has around 40% support, making it the most popular party, though without allies to form a governing majority. It has repeatedly opposed support for Ukraine, advocating instead a so-called Romanian "neutrality" or "pacifist stance". While not explicitly pro-Russian (it belongs to the ECR group in the European Parliament), the party echoes Kremlin narratives about the war and a "hostile Ukraine". AUR and other far-right extremists argue that Romania gains nothing from backing Ukraine militarily or supporting its EU accession, citing economic factors, security considerations ("Romania is upsetting Russia and becoming a target"), and historical reasons.

A poll from May 2025 shows that 62% of Romanians believe providing military aid to Ukraine prolongs the war, 53% see Romania's military support as a provocation to Russia and a risk of war, and 45% think Ukraine should cede territory in exchange for peace, while an equal share opposes territorial compromise with Russia ([Libertatea, 15 May 2025](#)). These findings suggest that Ukraine-sceptic attitudes extend beyond AUR's electorate, with roughly half of Romanian society sharing populist perceptions that Romania "pays", "risks", or "loses" something by supporting a just or sustainable peace or Ukraine's EU accession. As the concrete implications of Ukraine's eventual full integration into the EU become clearer – especially in agriculture and industrial manufacturing – the proportion of opponents could rise further.

## 5 | Policy question – The way forward

### Within Ukraine:

- **Steps for improved treatment of the Romanian community in southwestern Ukraine**, including access to education in Romanian, recognition of Romanian churches, and preservation of cultural identity. As a relatively new state, Ukraine still shows caution toward ethnic minorities.
- **Enhanced Ukrainian public diplomacy in Romania after the war.**
- **A symbolic cultural gesture toward Romania**, as an act of friendship and trust, could strengthen mutual understanding and therefore might lead political elites as well as society to adopt a robust affirmative stance on Ukraine's accession. A personal proposal by the author is renaming the *Iury Fedkovici University of Chernivtsi* as Fedkovici-Hurmuzachi University (following the successful multicultural model of Babeş-Bolyai University Cluj-Napoca, Transylvania, Romania, and the Romanian scholar and politician Eudoxiu Hurmuzachi being in the 1870s an active supporter of establishing the University of Chernivtsi). This project could also be proposed as a European university.

### Within the EU:

- **Communicate clearly the economic benefits of Ukraine's EU accession** for citizens of EU Member States neighbouring Ukraine especially, using accessible, evidence-based messages.
- **Launch a financial compensation initiative for Eastern and Central European Member States** to offset direct losses for farmers, transporters, manufacturers, and small producers affected by Ukraine's accession. The absence of such measures has been exploited by far-right nationalist leaders such as George Simion ([Reuters, 9 May 2025](#)).

- Introduce an **EU Economic Plan for Ukraine's Neighbouring Member States**, which could have a strong political impact ahead of national elections in Hungary (2026), Poland (2027), and Romania (2028). If nationalist, far-right, and anti-Ukrainian parties continue to rise, they could significantly weaken support for Ukraine's EU accession.

**Within Romania**, pro-EU parties, politicians and authorities should try to show in a more convincing way that they support Ukraine and Ukrainians not only because Ukraine fights against Russian invasion. The clear and strong anti-Putin feelings of the majority of Romanians should be associated with specific, empathic and friendly pro-Ukrainian messages. Common Romanian-Ukrainian events, exchanges and projects would bring a valuable contribution in the medium and long-term.

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