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Political EU Membership as a Bridge Out of the Geostrategic Grey Zone

How Berlin and Kyiv Can Guide Ukraine's Successful Accession to the EU

Executive Summary

Ukraine is not a typical case of EU enlargement. Though a recipient of transition assistance, it is also a partner of the EU in the fields of security, innovation, and resources. Its resilience, armed forces, defence industry, energy and infrastructure policies, and reforms are already closely intertwined with pan-European interests. This creates a conflict of objectives: On the one hand, the EU wants to forge a reliable bond with Ukraine for geopolitical reasons. On the other hand, it must not frame Ukraine's accession as a 'special deal' that dilutes standards, weakens the Single Market or the community based on the rule of law, provokes political backlash in Member States, or undermines European unity.

The solution lies in a special status: 'associate' – or, better yet, 'political membership' – as a preliminary stage to full membership. Rather than a substitute for full membership, it is a hard and fast bridge towards it – more than candidate status but less than full membership. Security and defence, reconstruction and renewal, reforms and investment would be bundled; Ukraine's already felt sense of being part of the European family would be acknowledged; and established accession criteria would be upheld.

This special status should take five points into account:

- **First**, Ukraine should be involved at an early stage and in a meaningful way in EU foreign, security, and defence gatherings.
- **Second**, policy areas relevant to accession should be backstopped by a European recovery and investment framework.
- **Third**, the EU should swiftly enable Ukraine to participate more fully in areas such as energy, digitalization, transport infrastructure, and industrial and research cooperation.
- **Fourth**, Ukraine should be granted full observer status in Council bodies and in the European Parliament.
- **Fifth**, a flexible ‘rule of law and governance pact’ should strengthen the judiciary, public administration reforms, and institutional capacity.

For Germany, this presents a key challenge in terms of its EU policy: Berlin can flesh out the concept of ‘associate membership’ outlined in the coalition agreement, gauge Ukrainian expectations, and convey to sceptical EU Member States and their publics that a reform-oriented Ukraine which is integrated into EU security policy is in the European interest.

Germany’s policies towards Ukraine and the EU should be based on three priorities:

1. Work with Kyiv to agree on a political framework for membership and ensure it is palatable in the EU. Develop a roadmap by the end of 2026 for ‘associate’ or ‘political’ membership starting on 1 January 2027.
2. Hold an intergovernmental conference with Ukraine as soon as possible and formally open at least the ‘Fundamentals’, ‘Internal Market’, and ‘External Relations’ clusters, including foreign, security, and defence policy. Full membership would remain conditional, but formal steps should be taken to secure it by 2035.
3. Offer a confidential EU-Ukraine track 1.5 reform dialogue.

1 | Learning from underestimating oneself

New EU accessions have always been accompanied by anxieties. Before the ‘Big Bang’ enlargement of 2004, it was claimed that the new Member States – with their low standards and wages – would put pressure on the Single Market, strain the rules, and siphon off funds. For example, Poland was considered too large and too agrarian, and Estonia too poor and post-Soviet. The newcomers would take, but not give.

Fortunately, the warnings at that time did not lead to inaction. The fact is that, rather than destroying the EU, its new Member States transformed it politically, economically, and strategically – and, in many ways, have made it stronger.¹ Estonia, for example, is now a front-runner in digital modernization. What’s more, political crises are by no means confined to the eastern part of the EU, and as long as democratic competition remains intact, they can be resolved.

Ukraine is a special case of enlargement

The EU should not limit the questions of Ukraine’s belonging within the EU to a traditional accession process. Ukraine would be the largest country geographically to ever be considered for EU membership,² and it is in an exposed location given its shared border with the Russian Federation, with its imperial-minded leader in the Kremlin. There is already an enormous need for reconstruction and a comprehensive programme of reforms, against a backdrop of a weak demographic outlook. At the same time, Ukraine has a strong agricultural sector, resources of global significance, the most battle-hardened army in Europe, and the most innovative defence industry.

- 1 The eastward enlargement has anchored successful transformation processes within institutions: In the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI) assessments, the countries that joined in 2004 are generally ranked among the top performers in terms of democracy, market economy, and governance – despite subsequent setbacks in Hungary and, at times, in Poland and Slovakia. Cf. Sikk (2026: 4–6).
- 2 At around 1.7 times the size of Germany, Ukraine would likely rank among the five largest EU Member States in terms of population.

Berlin and Kyiv can resolve this conflict of objectives between speed and soundness

In geopolitical terms, there is every reason to securely bind Ukraine to the EU as swiftly as possible. However, in institutional and legal terms, full membership by 2030 is not realistically feasible – at least not if the EU intends to adhere to the Copenhagen Criteria and safeguard its own ability to act. At the same time, a protracted accession process carries the risk of creating a grey zone, which is not a sound basis for strengthening a free, reform-oriented, and pluralistic Ukraine.

The solution does not lie in yet another label for ‘gradual’ or ‘sectoral integration’ in the form of early access to the Single Market³ or full membership with safeguard clauses.⁴ Although most contain useful elements, none of the approaches resolves the conflict of political objectives on its own.

Political membership as a binding preliminary stage to full membership

An initiative launched by German Chancellor Friedrich Merz on 18 May of this year may help to resolve the issue (Bundeskanzler 2026). The concept of ‘associate membership’ is already included in the coalition agreement of the Federal Government that took office in May 2025 (CDU, CSU, and SPD 2025: 139f., lines 4461–4467). The Chancellor’s letter to the leaders of the European Council, the European Commission, and the Council of the EU outlines the basic idea: Ukraine’s regular participation (without voting rights)

- 3 There is hardly any version of EU integration or a staged accession process that is not already under discussion. A new variant is ‘reverse(d) enlargement’.
- 4 At the presentation of the 2025 Enlargement Package on 4 November 2025, EU Enlargement Commissioner Marta Kos said (European Commission 2025b): ‘To ensure that positive dynamics on the rule of law, democracy, and fundamental rights are maintained, the Commission considers the future accession treaties will need to contain stronger safeguards.’ She reiterated the call during the Structured Dialogue with the European Parliament on 20 April 2026, saying (European Commission 2026): ‘Future Accession Treaties will need to include safeguards that are credible, effective, and capable of being applied if serious shortcomings arise after accession.’

in meetings of the European Council and the Council of the European Union; an 'Associate Commissioner' without portfolio; 'Associate Members of the European Parliament' without voting rights; and an 'Associate Judge' at the Court of Justice of the European Union, formally in the role of an 'Assistant Rapporteur'.

The aim is to make Ukraine's affiliation with the Union politically binding without compromising the institutional and legal requirements for full membership. And the purpose of this is to signal to Ukrainian society that the prospect of EU membership is a real possibility for their country. Limited participation would be granted at the institutional level. Full rights and obligations would remain tied to traditional criteria.

Furthermore, in accordance with Article 42(7) of the Treaty on European Union, Ukraine would receive the backing of the other Member States (via the obligation of mutual assistance) once it fully participates in the Common Foreign and Security Policy. On this, there is already broad agreement.

The concept should not be presented or understood as partial membership. Berlin has no intention of continuing the ambivalent EU neighbourhood policy pursued up to 2022 – but neither does it wish to meet President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's highest expectations at any cost.

The term 'associate' membership is rather unfortunate. It calls to mind the Association Agreement that has been in force between Ukraine and the EU since 2014 as well as the priority of an associate EU membership formulated all the way back in 2001 by then-Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma. As a result, the political progress represented by the proposal is sometimes underestimated in Ukraine. Instead, it would be more sensible to talk about 'political membership'.

While structural reforms are a long and arduous process, geopolitical risks demand swift answers

The key advantage of this special status is that the preliminary stage towards full membership would not mean 'waiting and seeing' for either Ukraine or the EU.⁵ In addition, full membership would continue to take shape institutionally and legally, with a focus on a realistic and achievable target year (e.g. 2035). This would create a greater sense of being on an equal footing – with benefits for the candidate exposed to Russian attacks without giving it preferential treatment over other candidates. Political membership for Ukraine must not be presented as a special path that undermines the reform efforts of South-Eastern European candidates or unilaterally ties up limited enlargement capacity in Brussels. Eventually, it should form part of a renewed enlargement architecture that enables all candidates to achieve interim gains.

At present, President Zelenskyy remains committed to swift and full EU membership (Flynn 2026).⁶ In doing so, he overlooks the fact that political support for this approach within the EU is, at best, volatile. However, EU citizens must be brought on board; a Union in which centrist political parties are increasingly losing their majorities is of no benefit to either Ukraine or Europe. For this reason, it would be sensible for Ukrainians to weigh the political sentiments in the Member States against their own understandable preferences – especially in light of the 'super election year' of 2027, which will see nationally significant elections in France, Spain, Italy, and Poland.

5 For Kyiv, this means consistently implementing reforms and thereby avoiding the many years of accession limbo faced by South-Eastern European candidates; for the EU, it means embarking on its [own internal reforms](#), which are [long overdue](#), though not the focus of this analysis.

6 Cf. also President of Ukraine (2026). While he does not explicitly mention 'associate membership', he articulates the same political approach, saying: 'There can be no complete European project without Ukraine, and Ukraine's place in the European Union must also be complete – full and equal. It is important to open the clusters. It is important to make meaningful progress in the negotiations.'

2 | The EU and its Member States have already considered Ukraine a security partner for a long time

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Brussels has been emphasising that EU enlargement is a geostrategic investment in peace, security, and stability. The formulation is correct – but it will remain incomplete as long as there is not any follow-up on the institutional level. Special status can help to achieve this by formally recognizing the integration that has de facto been taking place for some time now in terms of security policy. After all, Ukraine is the security actor from which all of Europe is benefiting. Ukrainian forces are tying up Russian resources. Ukraine's experience – such as in drone development, air defence, cyber defence, and resilience and logistics in times of crisis – is fundamental to the defence of Europe's military and society as a whole. In Ukraine, innovation is progressing at a pace that other European procurement structures have not yet been able to match. European companies – and countries – are cooperating with the Ukrainian defence industry.⁷

Ukraine is already part of the European order and not on its periphery

Until now, the EU has paid little attention to the security of EU candidate countries, as the normal procedure was for them to join NATO first. This path is closed to Ukraine for the foreseeable future – even if some have changed their minds about it.⁸

For a long time, Ukraine's EU membership was rejected in similarly sweeping terms – with reference to Article 42(7) of the Treaty on European Union and the obligation of mutual assistance set out therein. By 2026 at the latest, there was growing public debate about which EU Member State would assume which

defence responsibilities in the event of an emergency.⁹ Within the EU, simulation exercises involving high-profile figures are being held to test the triggering of the mutual-defence-clause obligation, such as the one on 4 May of this year involving the national ambassadors of the Political and Security Committee to the Council of the EU ([Barigazzi 2026](#)).

Finally, the German proposal of 18 May of this year explicitly refers to the protection of Ukraine under the EU's mutual assistance clause, subject to the EU's adoption of an appropriate Common Foreign and Security Policy.¹⁰ In Chapter 31 of the *acquis* (On Foreign, Security, and Defence Policy), the Commission has certified that Ukraine has made 'good progress' and reached a 'good level of preparation' for accession ([European Commission 2025a: 21](#)). Due to the blockade imposed by Hungary under Viktor Orbán, accession negotiations have to date only been conducted on an unofficial basis ([Danish Presidency 2025](#)). Cluster 6, which (in addition to Chapter 31) also covers Chapter 30 (External Relations), is therefore particularly well suited to the forthcoming 'alignment' with the already existing reality (*i.e. for official negotiations*). In this respect, Chancellor Merz's initiative is in line with President Zelenskyy's desire to formally move the thematic negotiation clusters forward.

When it comes to weighing up the risks, it is hard to understand why one would become increasingly intertwined regarding security issues and reliant on Ukrainian capabilities while keeping the same partner at arm's length in institutional terms. If EU Member States are making use of Ukrainian data, innovation, and deter-

7 For example, Denmark and Ukraine have agreed that Ukrainian defence companies will manufacture in Denmark, and Denmark is supporting the joint industry with €67 million ([Ministry of Defence of Denmark 2025](#)).

8 For one example well worth reading, see an interview with Henry Kissinger shortly before his death ([The Economist 2023](#)).

9 For example, on 13 February 2026, Chancellor Merz said at the Munich Security Conference ([Bundesregierung 2026](#)): 'As a reminder and also for those who are not aware of it, in Article 42 of the Treaty on European Union, we undertake to aid and assist one another in the case of armed aggression in Europe. We now need to spell out how we are going to organise this at [the] European level – not as a substitute for NATO, but rather as a strong, self-sustaining pillar within the Alliance.'

10 The letter from Chancellor Merz to the representatives of the European institutions regarding Ukraine's proposed special status ([Bundeskanzler 2026: 3](#)) mentions "[f]ull alignment with the Common Foreign and Security Policy by Ukraine and a political commitment by the Member States to apply Article 42 para. 7 of the Treaty on European Union also regarding Ukraine in order to create a substantial security guarantee."

rence, it is in their own interest to establish a political and legal framework within which this cooperation can take the form of a robust security and defence partnership rather than merely being ad hoc. The special status in question would provide this framework quickly. This would minimise risks rather than increase them in addition to anchoring further developments.

3 | Reconstruction needs a framework, too

The second line of argumentation is economic. The EU will have to help fund Ukraine's reconstruction, as it has a vital interest in having stability and prosperity in its neighbourhood. For this reason, it is already investing in Ukraine, as demonstrated by the [Ukraine Facility](#) and the [Ukraine Plan](#), as well as through bilateral aid, loans, guarantees, and investment instruments.

The special status of 'political membership' could serve as a framework to safeguard EU investment in reconstruction. It would bundle reforms, reconstruction, and EU integration into a single political package – but without requiring Ukraine to already be fully ready for accession. Nevertheless, it would be acknowledged that the EU has long been invested in Ukraine's future – and that this future must be back-stopped on an institutional level.

Against this backdrop, the current German proposals for regular institutional interlinking are logical; they enhance the political standing of the EU's Ukrainian partners and enable them to gauge political sentiment first-hand while also having them shoulder greater responsibility. Equally important is Ukraine's visibility at the 'EU table' for the Ukrainian people – especially if Ukraine were to hold a referendum on painful compromises aimed at ending the war.¹¹

11 In a survey conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS 2026: [Graph 5](#)), 61% of Ukrainians stated their willingness to vote in a referendum in favour of a peace treaty that includes EU membership by 2027, territorial compromises, reliable security guarantees, and an economic reconstruction plan. This contrasts with previous surveys, in which support for a peace treaty that does not mention EU membership, among other things, was lower.

It will be more expensive if the EU does not reliably bind Ukraine to itself

'Political membership' could help to attract investment because it would provide political backing and planning certainty in the Member States. Furthermore, reconstruction without a credible prospect of EU membership is riskier. Private investors are more cautious when the political environment is uncertain, and public funds can trickle away if the pressure for reform eases.

That is precisely what the argument to sceptical Member States should be based on. The cost question should not be: 'How much will Ukraine's accession cost us?' Instead, it should be: 'How much will it cost us to fund Ukraine without forging reliable ties with it?' The costs of a geopolitical grey zone are harder to quantify than the expenditures for reconstruction and modernization. But the costs are real: the ongoing burden of military expenditures, investment risks, reform fatigue, political disillusionment, and Russian opportunities for influence (see e.g. [Bjørntvedt et al. 2025](#)).

4 | None of the known expansion models will tip the scales (on its own)¹²

'Political membership' would help to resolve the conflict of objectives surrounding Ukraine's accession, namely, the trade-off between speed and soundness. This is what sets the proposal apart from other approaches to EU expansion. Even the 'reverse enlargement' concept, recently devised under pressure and based on the principle of 'membership first, reforms later', fails to provide an answer to the question of how reforms or political majorities would subsequently be reliably secured within the Union.

12 The table in Annex 1 provides an overview of enlargement models and stages.

Sectoral and gradual integration, on the other hand, are useful,¹³ but neither sufficient nor novel – and they pose challenges when they clash with the particular interests of nation states. Ukraine can and should participate earlier in programmes, energy and digital markets, transport networks, and selected areas of the Single Market. However, the closer it moves towards the Single Market, the more the same criteria of a free market economy and the rule of law should apply: in Ukraine, the courts must be reliable, public authorities and administrations must be independent, competition rules must be fair, and the fight against corruption must be guaranteed. Sectoral and gradual integration are therefore not a convenient way out of accession conditionality.¹⁴

Furthermore, conditionality is not a panacea, even though it is now better coordinated between the IMF and EU instruments in Ukraine. If it is too fragmented, it not only makes the implementation of reforms more difficult, but also shifts the focus towards an (excessively) high level of regulatory density and formal compliance rather than overall impact and institutional effectiveness (*formal outputs over systemic outcomes*). In some cases, excessive conditionality can lead to basic requirements being overlooked. However, the appearance of formally correct individual steps obscures the fact that overarching goals and requirements remain unmet. The prime example of this is the Ukrainian customs service.¹⁵

Overall, the problem is not that there are too few options for Ukraine's deeper integration into Europe. However, none of these various approaches can make

up for a lack of political will – neither when it comes to Ukrainian decision-makers pushing through and implementing reforms, nor among EU Member States, which must reach an agreement by the end of the accession process at the latest.

5 | What the special status of 'political' membership can achieve

The German initiative should now serve as a catalyst for setting out the binding preliminary steps in detail. The special status – whatever it is ultimately called – should be credible, feasible, and palatable to the citizens of EU Member States who are less enthusiastic about enlargement: more than candidate status, less than full membership, and clearly geared towards accession.

The 'staged accession' model, in particular, provides guidance in this regard. It was initially designed to address the stalled enlargement process for the EU candidate countries in South-Eastern Europe and was further developed in 2023 as 'Template 2.0' (Mihajlović et al. 2023): Candidate countries should not wait until the end of the accession process to move closer to the EU, but should do so through clear stages linked to measurable progress on reforms, with greater institutional involvement and financial support.

In early 2026, under pressure from US-led 'peace diplomacy', this idea was taken a step further for Ukraine, with a view to its accession to the EU on 1 January 2027. This prompted Blockmans and Emerson – the architects of staged accession – to propose a two-stage approach: first, grant Ukraine the initial status of a 'Nominated Member State' with extensive functional participation in EU policies and EU funding, but without full voting rights and without a commissioner; and, second, grant it full membership following the conclusion of accession negotiations, the accession treaty, and ratification (Blockmans and Emerson 2026).

13 The current German initiative states (Bundeskanzler 2026: 4f): 'Gradual integration could be established by building blocs which could be the basis for full application of the respective policy areas and then be accompanied by increased support in the process of implementing the acquis.'

14 Cf. Letta (2024: 140): The rule of law is essential not only for accession but also for full participation in the Single Market; see also p. 13 regarding substantial pre-accession participation in the Single Market.

15 Conditionality can highlight successes, but at the same time obscure the bigger picture: measurable progress in legislative alignment, digitalization, and procedures is offset by susceptibility to corruption, weak enforcement of reforms, and, consequently, continued losses of state revenue. Cf. European Commission (2025a: 86f.).

In the case of ‘associate’ or ‘political’ membership, it is the basic idea rather than the specific terminology that is important, namely, to make membership politically binding without compromising the legal and institutional requirements for full membership.

Five factors should be taken into account when defining ‘political membership’:

First, Ukraine and the EU, along with its Member States, are already benefiting from **cooperation on security and defence policy**. Kyiv should therefore participate *regularly* in European foreign, security, and defence policy gatherings whenever issues related to its security, EU policy towards Russia, EU sanctions, defence industries, cyber defence, or military mobility are concerned. In this regard, the EU can and should de facto offer more than just observer status, such as a documented consultative vote without a right of veto, guaranteed speaking rights, joint situation assessments, and participation in procurement and defence programmes. In areas where the EU benefits from Ukraine’s capabilities, Ukraine should play a role in shaping European policy. As part of the official accession process, Cluster 6 (together with the Fundamentals and Internal Market clusters) should be opened.

Second, the **reconstruction process** should be embedded in the ‘political membership’. The successor to the **Ukraine Facility**, designed to run until the end of 2027, should be more than just a financial instrument supporting reconstruction and accession readiness.¹⁶ Building on experience to date, a European recovery and investment framework could bundle public funds, private investment, government investment guarantees, technical assistance, local capacities, and reforms. Priority should be given to areas that simultaneously strengthen security, economic strength, and accession readiness: energy, transport infrastructure, critical infrastructure, public administration, SMEs,

16 Funding for the accession preparations is currently being channelled through the new ‘Global Europe Instrument’ within the 2028–2035 MFF, and a ‘Ukraine Reserve’ of €100 billion is also being planned for reconstruction and pre-accession assistance.

digitalization, raw materials (including critical ones), and industrial modernization. It is not realistic to include Ukraine in the EU’s 2027–2034 Multiyear Financial Framework (MFF); but the best possible foundations should be laid now for the 2035–2042 MFF.

Third, the EU should offer **participation** to Ukraine in areas where the latter can deliver rapid benefits. Building on roaming and SEPA payments, these should include: deeper energy integration, customs and transport streamlining, transport infrastructure, digital services, selected industrial chains, strategic raw materials, and research programmes. Future-oriented fields, in particular, should play a role. In contrast, agriculture and cohesion policy will require transition periods and frank discussions about the costs (**Emerson 2023**).¹⁷ Rather than being an argument against Ukrainian membership, this is one in favour of political realism.

Fourth, Ukraine would benefit from both **regular visibility and institutional integration** in addition to shouldering political responsibility. Observer status in the European Parliament and in Council gatherings is more than just a symbolic gesture. The EU should consistently apply the well-known and straightforward rule that no strategic policy on Ukraine should be formulated without Ukrainian involvement. In this way, these engagements would give Ukrainian politicians a first-hand understanding of priorities, procedures, and political scope within the EU.

Fifth, ‘political membership’ should **focus on strengthening the rule of law**. Bringing about lasting change in this area is Ukraine’s Achilles’ heel.¹⁸ However, the spread of Magdeburg Law as far as eastern Ukraine is also an important point of reference in the collective

17 It has rarely been the case that EU accession has entailed the immediate and full application of all rights and benefits; transitional arrangements (e.g. regarding direct agricultural payments) have served to cushion the fiscal, economic, or political costs of adjustment.

18 Ukrainian experts have concluded that the implementation of the 10-point plan to strengthen the rule of law and combat corruption – agreed by Ukrainian ‘Minister for European Affairs’ Taras Kachka and EU Enlargement Commissioner Marta Kos in December 2025 – remains rudimentary (**New Europe Center 2026**).

consciousness of Ukrainian society and a testament to its deep-rooted cultural ties with Europe (GIZ and U-LEAD With Europe 2024). A ‘rule of law and governance pact’ would complement the EU’s enlargement reports by allowing for flexibility and enabling swift feedback.¹⁹ While the EU system would continue to provide benchmarks and detailed progress reports, the pact would involve reform-oriented elements from Ukraine as well as international expert advice. It could help to counteract polarization within the reform landscape by bringing together anti-corruption stakeholders, the administration, the judiciary, parliament, civil society, and the professional community in a solution-oriented, joint reform process.

6 | A roadmap for 2027 – How Germany can win over other EU Member States

By 2027, Ukraine should no longer be merely a candidate. Instead, it should have a voice in selected EU areas, play a visible role in key European policy fields, and be embedded in security and reconstruction structures – all while still being under clear pressure to reform. That would not be second-class membership. Rather, it would be the bridge out of the grey zone.

By the time of the European Council meeting in December 2026, Berlin should – together with a group of like-minded EU Member States – put forward a proposal that defines ‘political membership’ more clearly as a preliminary stage to full membership. In addition to Ukraine, this could also apply to Moldova at some point in the future – without sidelining the candidate countries in South-Eastern Europe.²⁰

19 One could draw parallels with the G7 Ambassadors’ Support Group for Ukraine, which has existed since 2015 and has supported reforms through coordinated advising and discreet coordination, while also voicing public criticism when there has been a risk of backsliding. This combination – of closely monitoring the implementation of reforms and responding more swiftly to backsliding than the formal accession process allows – continues to be valuable.

20 Montenegro and Albania can proceed along the standard accession route, and their success would demonstrate that the traditional accession process still works.

The proposal should not be presented as a German initiative, but rather as a European risk management approach in which Berlin will shoulder a crucial amount of joint responsibility. The challenge will be to incorporate the various concerns into a single proposal.

France is likely to ask, above all, whether enlargement without EU reform will undermine the Union’s ability to act. This concern is justified, and Paris faces a presidential election in 2027. At the same time, it must also be acknowledged that too little has been achieved within the Union since President Macron spoke of Europe’s ‘conceptual and strategic awakening’ to an audience of Central and Eastern Europeans in 2023.²¹ France could be won over by ‘political membership’ because it (once again) opens up a window of opportunity for institutional reforms without leaving Ukraine in political limbo.

In addition to costs, the Netherlands will likely be looking at the rule of law and the integrity of the Single Market. Berlin could introduce monitoring mechanisms and transitional rules, for which a Dutch-inspired approach appears promising. Under this approach, relevant national line ministries would systematically assess where Ukrainian integration creates opportunities, where alignment costs arise, and what risks are involved.²²

Poland and Romania are among the countries whose security would particularly benefit from Ukraine’s membership in the EU. At the same time, they are the ones who feel the friction most acutely – with agriculture, transport, historical disputes, and border infrastructure. Economic plans could help to cushion the costs of adjustment. In addition to the reforms in cohesion policy, it is important not to lose sight of the economic benefits of enlargement and reconstruction.²³

21 Élysée (2023): ‘Some told you then that you were missing opportunities to keep quiet – but I believe we sometimes missed opportunities to listen,’ said Emmanuel Macron in a speech aimed at bridging the divide between the ‘old’ and ‘new’ members of the EU.

22 Cf. recommendations in van Hees, Hollander, and Neumann (2025: 43f.).

23 Cf. e.g. Confederation of Swedish Enterprise (2025) on the impact of enlargement on the GDP of the EU-27.

For the Baltic and Nordic member states, the security argument carries the most weight. Berlin could cooperate with them within the framework of a security partnership. This coalition could serve as a prime example of the benefits of systematically integrating Ukraine into European defence planning, procurement, and cyber resilience.

The upcoming EU Council presidencies of Ireland, Lithuania, and Greece could also contribute to the success of such a 'political membership' – Ireland, with its positive story of transformation through EU membership; Lithuania, with its own enlargement and security experiences; and Greece, with its southern European perspective on connectivity and the Black Sea region.

Representing a special case are the obstructors who may come out of hiding now that the situation in Hungary has changed. Not every veto can be resolved through communication. Issues that pose genuine problems (e.g. budgetary ones) should be addressed. But when they are merely used as a pretext, the EU needs political pressure and creative approaches. The recent practice of pressing ahead with 26, 25, or 24 Member States shows that a desire for unanimity must not be allowed to become an invitation to thwart European interests.

By the end of 2026, the EU and all 27 Member States – regardless of any disagreements over specific chapters – should be technically prepared to politically activate Ukraine's 'political membership' while pushing ahead in parallel with the traditional accession negotiations.

7 | Three priorities for resolving the conflict between speed and soundness

'Political membership' would create a framework for an integration that has already been underway for some time now. In terms of security and economic policy, Ukraine is already part of Europe. The EU should not pass up this opportunity to swiftly put the necessary framework in place. For this to succeed, Germany's policies towards Ukraine and the EU should be based on three priorities:

First: Agree with Kyiv and within the EU on a political framework for belonging and develop, by the end of 2026, a roadmap for Ukraine's 'political membership' effective 1 January 2027. On the basis of the five elements outlined above for integrating security, reform, and reconstruction policies, the EU should frame Ukraine's accession as part of a pan-European risk management strategy and take into account the interests of other candidate countries. Berlin can work with Kyiv and a group of willing Member States to clarify the stages, rights, obligations, transitional clauses, and lines of communication. The window of opportunity following the Hungarian election and ahead of the 'super election year' of 2027 should be seized.

Second: Hold an intergovernmental conference with Ukraine as soon as possible and open at least the EU acquis clusters on 'Fundamentals', 'Internal Market', and 'External Relations'. Full EU membership would remain conditional, subject to the established criteria, but the formal process should be advanced with 2035 as the target year for accession.

Third: Offer a confidential track 1.5 reform dialogue. At the same time, representatives from Ukraine and EU Member States could meet regularly in a confidential setting to address shortcomings in the implementation of the rule of law, the separation of powers, administrative reform, and the fight against corruption – with the goal being to make conditionality more politically effective, faster, and more practical.

This analysis builds on the following previous publications:

- **EU-Beitritt im Eilverfahren – Sonderweg auf der Suche nach Frieden?** (Kosmehl 2026): On the frontloading initiative and the question of possible EU accession in 2027 in the context of peace negotiations.
- **Charting Ukraine’s EU path: Engaging with Member States** (Kosmehl, Schlegel, and Stewart 2026): On the significance of national dynamics within Member States, including agriculture, the rule of law, public support, veto risks, and tailored communication with France, Germany, Poland, the Netherlands, Romania, Greece, and Ireland.
- **Bridging security and political governance in Ukraine-EU relations: How to calibrate European integration and security cooperation** (Kazdobina et al. 2024): On Ukraine’s integration into security and defence policy; on the significance of the EU acquis chapters on external relations as well as foreign, security, and defence policy; and on Ukraine’s role in European deterrence.
- **Multiple missions in the midst of war: Integrating Ukraine’s recovery and EU accession** (Bergmann et al. 2024): On the links between reconstruction, the Ukraine Facility, the Ukraine Plan, and EU integration.
- **Outlier or not? The Ukrainian economy’s preparedness for EU accession** (Grievesson et al. 2023): On the issue of Ukraine’s eligibility for accession, which – apart from the exceptional circumstances of the war – is not fundamentally different from the earlier accessions of Romania and Poland.
- **Ukraine’s economic reconstruction: Addressing territorial inequalities, consolidating regional policy and reaping the benefits of EU integration** (Kochnev et al. 2023): On territorial inequalities and issues relating to regional and local politics, in conjunction with the benefits of EU integration.

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Annex | Selected approaches to reforming the EU enlargement process

Approach or model*	Under discussion since	Working principle
Gradual integration (also <i>Sectoral integration</i>)	2018	The candidate country is integrated into selected policy areas, particularly the Single Market, without voting rights. Accession negotiations take place in parallel (see e.g. Mirel 2018).
	2019	French Non-Paper (Élysée 2019)
	2022/2023	The European Council speaks out in favour of this, without specifying how the approach is to be implemented. European Council (2022 : para. 16; 2023 , para. 21)
	2025	Lehne, Nechev, and Grievesson (2025)
Staged accession	2021	The accession process is structured as follows: the more accession criteria a candidate meets, the more financial support it receives, and the greater its rights to have a say and vote are. The aim is to establish a predictable, performance-based process, with full membership as the ultimate goal. Esp. Emerson et al. (2021)
	2023	Refines the ‘fundamentals first’ approach under the reformed enlargement methodology and sets out minimum elements for a new enlargement policy: through two pre-accession stages, candidates would receive stronger incentives for challenging reforms in the form of gradual institutional participation and additional financial support. Mihajlović et al. (2023)
Status as a Nominated Member State	2026	Political ties even before full membership is ratified. Blockmans and Emerson (2026)
Accelerated accession (Fast track)	2025	Speeding up the traditional accession process. Morina (2025)
Associate membership (a new type of accession association; also Status as an Associate Member State)	2025	Set out in the coalition agreement for the 21st legislative period of Germany’s Federal Government, signed on 5 May 2025. (2025)
	2026	For Ukraine: A preliminary stage towards full membership with observer status in the EU institutions, gradual integration, and a security and defence partnership. Lippert, von Ondarza, and Seebass (2026)
	Current 18.5.2026	The integration of Ukraine into the EU’s policies and structures as a political solution that links the country directly to the EU at an institutional level; in parallel, accession negotiations and gradual integration, with a view to full membership. (Bundeskanzler 2026)
Reverse(d) enlargement (Partial EU-Membership)	2026	The candidate country joins the EU in name only without having met the Copenhagen Criteria; as it meets more of the accession criteria, it is granted increasing rights to participate in decision-making and voting as well as more financial support. Domaradzki and Oleksy (2026)

* Cited works usually refer to the earliest publications on the concept. Derivations, such as the concept of phased accession from the concept of gradual integration, are not included in the timeline, as it is solely meant to provide general guidance.

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