



February 2024

THE FUTURE OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION OF UKRAINE

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Summary

What are the potential paths for Ukraine to gain EU membership? A policy brief emphasizes the concept of 'staged integration', which allows Ukraine to progressively acquire the benefits of membership, in line with necessary reforms and standards. Russia's aggression towards Ukraine complicates its aspirations to join both the EU and NATO. Obtaining membership in these institutions is challenging, requiring consent from all member states. For Ukraine, this process could be more complicated than joining NATO, considering the extensive impacts on the EU.

Key points

- Critical factors influencing Eastern European integration are mainly EU's own reform support, establishing a clear plan and realistic expectations for the process and financial support for Ukraine.
- The inclusion of a country as large as Ukraine would significantly alter the EU's financial distributions and key policies.
- The role of countries from the former Soviet bloc as mediators and models, and the need for a clear timeline for EU expansion were also emphasized.

As part of the conference entitled *The Future of European Integration of Ukraine*, the European Liberal Forum, European think tank and political foundation of the Liberal family, focused on the topic of future of Ukraine and its possible paths to the EU. This brief is based on the conclusions and proceedings of this conference.

Russia's aggression of Ukraine has accelerated the country's effort to join both the EU and NATO, adding further complexity to the topic. However, membership in both these institutions – in addition to carrying out a series of reforms and aligning with the required standards – requires the consent of all member states. Due to the wide spectrum of far-reaching impacts on the entire Union, the path to the EU and the course of the entire process may be much more complicated for Ukraine than admission to NATO.

Besides Ukraine's readiness, necessary EU internal reforms – in institutions, policies, and finances – are crucial for enlargement. Expansion by a country the size of Ukraine would fundamentally change the distribution of funds from the EU budget and the functioning of key EU policies, incl. agricultural and cohesive. In the context of the future functioning of the enlarged EU, a proposal to replace unanimous decision-making with qualified majority decision-making, e.g., about taxation or foreign policy, is also mentioned by some parties, which can be particularly problematic for smaller member states, which have a more complicated path to the blocking minority.

As part of the discussion on ensuring the so-called "absorption capacity" of the EU and strengthening the credibility of the enlargement process, the question of institutional reform of the EU is also mentioned, which could lead, for example, in the direction of two-speed EU integration¹, where the core group would create a fiscal union and the outer group would include new members states and states that do not prefer deeper integration. However, such a move could also mean a split in the Union, a loosening of relations between the two groups, and a feeling of second-class status for some states without a common currency, among which the Czech Republic currently ranks.

The discussants agreed on 5 important factors that will fundamentally influence the form of further European integration towards the East.

The first proposed solution to the already complex position of Ukraine is the so-called staged integration (more Alesina 2022: 7-13). This means gradually and slowly gaining the various benefits of EU membership. This approach allows Ukraine to meet the necessary reforms and standards step by step, even in the unusual situation of having to lead a huge burden of military operations in the east and south of the country. However, such a model presupposes the agreement of all member states on this solution, which ultimately may not be simple at all.

Another widely discussed issue was support for the EU's own reform. EU officials and national leaders recognize the need for internal reforms, especially in the decision-making process, to facilitate enlargement and the inclusion of new and important members. So that the EU can absorb Ukraine or other states with open accession talks or candidate status in the coming years. The steps are quite straightforward: establish a clear plan, begin preparations early and define the final goal for the EU enlargement. This is a step that will bring order within the Union itself and use the experience of the

¹ Two-speed EU integration means a concept where EU member states integrate at different levels and speeds, allowing some countries to advance faster in certain areas while others opt-out or proceed more slowly. This approach accommodates the diverse interests and capabilities of different EU countries.

largest enlargement in 2004, which, despite criticism and initial skepticism, showed that the EU can successfully integrate states with a non-capitalist past (for example, the Czech Republic). The expansion by 10 new members in 2004 was based on the revision of the previous European policies summarized in the Agenda 2000 document, which mainly reformed the agricultural and EU cohesion policy. Given that the agenda was based on the recommendations of the European Commission initiated in 1998, it is high time to formulate a similarly visionary and similarly fundamental reform - if we want to catch up with EU enlargement at the beginning of the 2030s.

This includes realistic expectations of the entire process. Beyond the high-flying speeches and high expectations, we need to have an honest dialogue both within the Union and with Ukraine itself to ensure realistic goals and plans. Realism and caution during the enlargement of the EU to include the states of the former Soviet bloc has always been a major factor. The visit of European Commissioner Věra Jourová to Kyiv on November 27th, 2023, was aimed at discussing the fight against corruption. This is symptomatic, as a large part of the concerns about the fate of Ukraine's integration stand and fall with confidence in the Kyiv regime, that it can maintain the direction of the reformers within the set legislative framework. In this regard, the EU states – and especially those from the former Soviet bloc – should provide good examples and consultations to Kyiv. These states can serve as both mediators and model.

Financial support for Ukraine is also related to this. Ukraine is in a very complex military, political and economic situation, which no acceding country to the EU has had to deal with in the history of enlargement. The Republic of Cyprus was the only country to join the EU in 2004 with a territory under foreign military occupation. But the security reality in Cyprus during the accession negotiations with the EU certainly did not resemble the fierce fighting in eastern Ukraine that we know today. Let us also bear in mind that the cancellation of Ukraine's association agreement with the EU *defacto* led to Euromaidan and the emergence of a war in eastern Ukraine in 2014. Financial support to Ukraine must compensate to some extent for this extraordinary situation, support its economic resilience and help in the integration process. The funds are thus used to ensure the process of bringing Ukraine closer to the EU and its own reforms even before its own entry into the EU.

The last important circumstance is the synchronization of the individual necessary steps. The first step is an agreement on whether and when the EU should expand. During his presidency of the European Commission in 2014, Jean-Claude Juncker made it clear that "*there will be no further enlargement in the next five years.*" A similar definition of what should happen and when will have to happen should appear after the next European elections in 2024. The Czech Republic should play an active role, i.e., insist on a clear timetable for further expansion. A viable approach seems to set a fixed and more distant date during the next budget period. A time-ambitious plan, but it is realistic enough for states that participate in the common market, have accepted obligations arising from the climate agenda or receive funds from EU funds. This will create a target date that can act as a motivation for the candidate countries as well as a motivation for the EU itself to make the necessary reforms so that enlargement can take place.

Recommendations:

- **Support for Staged Integration of Ukraine:** Governments should endorse the concept of staged integration for Ukraine, allowing for a gradual and systematic acquisition of EU membership benefits. This approach accommodates Ukraine's unique challenges, including its need to implement reforms and standards while managing military operations. It requires a consensus among all member states to support this gradual integration process.
- **Advocacy for EU's Internal Reforms:** National governments should recognize and support the need for significant internal reforms within the EU, especially in decision-making processes. These reforms are essential to facilitate the enlargement process and to enable the inclusion of new members like Ukraine. Establishing clear plans and beginning early preparations will help streamline the expansion process and ensure that the EU is ready to integrate new members effectively.
- **Financial Support and Assistance to Ukraine:** Given Ukraine's complex military, political, and economic situation, which is unique among acceding countries to the EU, governments should provide substantial financial support. This support is crucial not only for Ukraine's economic resilience but also for aiding its integration process. The funding would help Ukraine bridge the gap between its current state and the requirements for EU membership.

References

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Published by the European Liberal Forum in cooperation with the Institute for Politics and Society. Co-funded by the European Parliament. The views expressed herein are those of the author(s) alone. These views do not necessarily reflect those of the European Parliament and/or the European Liberal Forum.

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