

# DECODING ENLARGEMENT PERSPECTIVES:

VOICES OF CENTRAL EUROPEAN COUNTRIES  
ON EU ENLARGEMENT

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Enlargement is currently a peripheral topic for all CEE countries and does not dominate the national political debate. The issue is expected to get more and more politicised as the accession process progresses, thus requiring Ukrainian stakeholders to start preparing the ground for negotiations on the expected issues now.



The member states that joined the EU during the 'Big Bang' enlargement of 2004, often perceived as having entered the Union for predominantly political reasons, now adopt a demanding stance toward candidate countries, emphasizing the full implementation of EU accession requirements.



Agriculture and access to cohesion funds are the most sensitive areas in Ukraine's EU accession process. The CEE countries, largely dependent on the EU financial support under CAP and cohesion policy, fear losing their net beneficiaries statuses.

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# INTRODUCTION

The question of the European Union (EU) enlargement has become one of the most critical and complex issues in contemporary European geopolitics. As the Union considers integrating new members – particularly Ukraine, Moldova, and the countries of the Western Balkans – the perspectives of Central and Eastern European (CEE) states play a pivotal role in shaping the trajectory of this process. The nations in focus – Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia – offer a blend of historical experience, strategic interests, and domestic political dynamics that inform their attitudes toward enlargement and the associated need for EU reform.

This paper is grounded in findings from the extensive research project, “Decoding Enlargement Perspectives: Voices of Central European Countries on EU Enlargement.” The project emerges at a time when enthusiasm for enlargement is balanced by concerns about the transformative impact on EU institutions, shifts in power dynamics, debates over the rule of law, and unresolved bilateral conflicts. Drawing on 25 interviews with politicians, diplomats, journalists, and analysts from the five CEE countries, alongside thorough desk research, the study explores the diverse and sometimes ambivalent views toward EU enlargement in the region.

The study offers a two-tiered analysis: a generalized examination of the overall regional position on enlargement, and detailed country-specific case studies that dissect the arguments, both for and against, in each national context. This approach highlights not only the commonalities but also the nuanced differences that shape each country’s stance. By investigating the political landscape, identifying key proponents and opponents, and analyzing the drivers and obstacles of enlargement, the research provides a comprehensive understanding of how CEE countries navigate this crucial issue. In addition to offering insights into the attitudes of CEE countries, the study provides recommendations for Ukrainian stakeholders on how to best work with its CEE partners.

## REGIONAL STATUS-QUO

For Central and Eastern European countries, EU enlargement carries a complex blend of shared experience, pragmatic benefit, and latent political tension. These nations, having joined the EU relatively recently, understand the challenges of the accession

process intimately. Their own paths to membership were marked by rigorous reforms, societal transformations, and the need to balance national interests with European expectations. This historical experience makes them more empathetic toward the aspirations of candidate countries like Ukraine, Moldova, and those in the Western Balkans.

Despite this shared understanding, the topic of enlargement remains on the periphery of public and political debate. Immediate domestic priorities as well as the ongoing Russian war in Ukraine, dominate the attention of policymakers and citizens alike. Furthermore, enlargement is often seen as a long-term technical, bureaucratic process that lacks the immediacy to capture public interest. For many, the benefits and challenges of admitting new member states seem abstract, especially when compared to pressing domestic issues. This lack of urgency means that enlargement debates rarely break through to mainstream discourse unless specific controversies arise.

Yet, beneath the surface, there is a recognition that the issue cannot be sidelined indefinitely. As the technical phases of accession advance, the political stakes will rise sharply. History shows that enlargement issues tend to gain traction toward the endgame, when the question shifts from how to negotiate accession chapters to when to finalize them. In this context, the process could rapidly transform from a technical exercise into a deeply political issue, especially if there are unresolved bilateral issues between the EU member and the candidate country. Once politicized, the issue could polarize societies, complicate negotiations, and even threaten to derail progress. It is worth being prepared for when it happens.

At the same time, it is already evident that CEE countries share a pragmatic awareness of the potential benefits of the EU enlargement: it represents an opportunity to stimulate economic growth, particularly in border regions that have long struggled with developmental disparities. Take Slovakia as an example: its western regions thrive due to proximity to Austria and the Czech Republic, while its eastern regions, bordering Ukraine, face economic stagnation. The same pattern holds true for other countries in the region. EU enlargement could transform these marginalized areas, echoing the success stories of previous expansions. German-Polish, Austrian-Czech, and Austrian-Slovak border regions all benefited enormously

when EU borders shifted from barriers to gateways. Access to new markets is another widely discussed benefit, and while priority areas of cooperation differ for each country, the general recognition of the macroeconomic benefits for the region holds across all capitals. Accession of the new members is expected to open new opportunities for national businesses, many of which are already involved in the candidate countries. Development of infrastructure is also prominently featured in the expert discussions: Romania and Bulgaria see a lot of potential for the Black Sea region if Ukraine were to join, while Hungary puts a lot of emphasis on the energy cooperation potential with the Western Balkan countries.

In addition to economic considerations, security remains a fundamental concern for CEE countries. Positioned on NATO's Eastern Flank, nations like Poland, Romania, and Slovakia see EU enlargement as a way to bolster regional stability. The war in Ukraine has served as a stark reminder of the fragility of peace and the real threat posed by an aggressive neighbour. The war has reshaped security priorities across Europe, but its impact is particularly profound for CEE nations, which share borders with either Russia or countries directly affected by Russian aggression. For some CEE countries, the prospect of Ukraine joining the EU is tied to the hope that integrating Ukraine into European structures will create a more secure and predictable neighbourhood. At the same time, conflicting views exist and may become more prominent as the accession process goes on. The experts pointed out that leaders like Hungarian Victor Orbán and Slovak Robert Fico can treat accession of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia – all countries that don't have control over parts of their territories due to Russian imperialism – as "importing conflict" to the EU that will further undermine the security situation. Despite the weakness of such an argument, it can be a very effective tool for influencing the populations of CEE countries by playing on their fears of being dragged into a military conflict.

At present, a cautious consensus exists among CEE countries: enlargement is welcome, but only if candidate nations meet the established criteria. This scepticism partly stems from concerns that enlargement may be driven more by geopolitical imperatives than by the genuine readiness of candidate nations. In the case of Ukraine, specifically, some political leaders and segments of the public believe that its accelerated pathway toward membership is primarily a strategic move to counterbalance Russia's influence rather than a recognition of Ukraine's institutional and economic preparedness.

## OVERARCHING REGIONAL CONCERNS

The potential accession of Ukraine, Moldova, and the Western Balkan countries into the EU brings a range of overarching concerns for Central and Eastern European countries. The core challenges revolve around the allocation of EU funds – particularly the **Cohesion Policy**

and the **Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)** – and the implications for economic sectors like agriculture. Currently, around 43% of the EU budget supports agricultural policy, while approximately 35% is allocated to cohesion funding, which provides resources to less-developed regions to promote growth, infrastructure, and economic development.

CEE countries have benefited significantly from the EU's Cohesion Policy. In countries like Slovakia, where all regions outside the capital Bratislava are eligible for these funds, this financial support has been crucial for regional development. These funds are allocated over a seven-year budget cycle, allowing governments to plan long-term projects and investments. However, the potential enlargement raises a significant issue: if new member states like Ukraine and Western Balkan countries become eligible for Cohesion Policy funds, the overall share available for existing recipients will shrink unless the EU budget increases or gets restructured. Given Ukraine's size and developmental needs, its accession would drastically expand the pool of eligible regions, creating a zero-sum scenario where current member states might receive less funding or even lose funding altogether. This raises a politically sensitive question of national economic interest, as well as political stability, for national leaders and regional representatives: Why should our regions lose out?

An even more contentious issue lies in the agricultural sector. The EU's Common Agricultural Policy provides substantial subsidies to farmers across the Union, but these subsidies come with strict regulations regarding quality standards, environmental practices, and labor conditions. Farmers in CEE countries already face challenges meeting these requirements, and the potential inclusion of Ukraine – a major agricultural producer – heightens these concerns. Ukrainian agricultural products are cheaper due to lower production standards, less stringent regulations, and lower labor costs. This creates a competitive imbalance for EU farmers, who are bound by higher costs to meet EU regulations. For countries like Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary, where agriculture plays a significant role in the economy, the influx of cheaper Ukrainian products could undermine local markets and lead to protests, similar to those already seen during the temporary opening of EU markets to Ukrainian goods.

## TRANSFORMATION OF THE EU

CEE states' concern leads us to a larger issue that will undoubtedly be tied to the accession process of any country: how shall the European Union change to include Ukraine, Moldova, and the Western Balkans? And most importantly, how do we get there without any country sidelining the process?

Enlargement cannot be a one-sided process: as candidate countries work to meet EU standards, the EU must also adapt its structures to accommodate new members. For

CEE countries this issue is complicated. These countries officially support enlargement, but when it comes to EU reform, their positions are marked by hesitation, a fear of losing influence, and a reluctance to offer concrete ideas for change.

The general stance in the CEE region is that enlargement and reform are not mutually exclusive. Enlargement can move forward without a full-scale transformation of the EU's institutions. CEE capitals are sceptical about the need to revise its core treaties – the Treaty on the European Union (TEU) and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU). The revision would most likely make the enlargement process much longer, as it requires convening a European Convention and securing agreement from all member states, a process that could take up to seven or eight years. The experience of negotiating the Lisbon Treaty – which took nearly a decade – illustrates how complex and politically fraught this path can be. In the current political climate, with leaders like Viktor Orbán who could block changes, the risks are high. A treaty revision could become a battleground for national interests, delaying both reform and enlargement. Instead, CEE countries favor a more pragmatic approach: making incremental changes within the existing treaties.

While this view is logical and generally more favourable towards candidate countries, it does not answer questions about CEE's position on the practical challenges of integrating new members under the current system. The above-mentioned issue of funding, for example, clearly requires the revision of the budgetary structure of the Union but so far, CEE states are reluctant to engage in open discussions about changing how funds are distributed. This reluctance comes from a straightforward calculation: any major reform of EU funding could mean receiving less, which would be politically unpopular. Financial redistribution is not a technical issue but a deeply political one, tied to national interests, economic stability, and public perception. The current system works in their favor, and they see little to gain from changing it.

It is not only the budget that will need to be adjusted – an institutional reform is also underway, complicating the discussions even further. When it comes to the European Commission, currently each member state appoints one commissioner, ensuring that all countries have a voice in the EU's executive body. In a Union with 30 or more members, this structure could become unwieldy, leading some to suggest a rotating system where not all countries are represented at the same time. For CEE countries, this idea is not particularly appealing (but also not fully rejected). They view having a dedicated commissioner as a guarantee that their interests are considered. Reducing the number of commissioners would be seen as a loss of influence, reinforcing the perception that smaller or newer members are being sidelined. While these countries are not actively in opposition, they prefer to keep the current system, even if it becomes less efficient in a larger Union.

The Council of the EU presents a similar challenge. Decisions in the Council are made using Qualified Majority Voting (QMV), which requires the support of 55% of member states representing 65% of the EU's population. In an enlarged Union, maintaining these thresholds could make it harder to pass decisions, potentially leading to deadlock. To address this, some have proposed lowering the population threshold to 60% to make decision-making smoother. CEE countries are sceptical of such changes. The current QMV system gives smaller and medium-sized states some protection against being overruled by larger countries. Lowering the threshold could weaken this safeguard, making it easier for bigger nations like Germany and France to push through decisions. CEE countries are especially concerned about maintaining the rules around blocking minorities, which currently require at least four countries representing 35% of the EU's population. They fear that changing these rules could limit their ability to protect their interests.

An ambivalent position of Central-Eastern European states on the reform of the EU puts their support of enlargement in question. What is obvious is that this ambivalence will allow for a degree of political flexibility. When enlargement aligns with their interests, CEE countries can promote it enthusiastically. But when enlargement raises uncomfortable questions about funding, representation, or national influence, they can pivot to insist that reforms must come first. This dual approach creates uncertainty about their commitment to enlargement, making it difficult to predict how they will act when faced with concrete proposals. Without a clear and proactive vision for how the EU should adapt to new members, however, CEE countries risk appearing as reluctant partners rather than champions of a stronger, more united Europe. Their unwillingness to confront the challenges of reform may stall the very enlargement they claim to support, leaving the process mired in ambiguity and political inertia.

The next sections of this study will explore the positions of each Central and Eastern European country on EU enlargement, focusing on the reasoning behind their stances and where they might be headed in the future. By understanding these perspectives, stakeholders in candidate countries will be better prepared to approach their European partners and engage in constructive discussions about joining the Union. This insight can help ensure that conversations are more informed, strategic, and aligned with the realities of the enlargement process.

# BULGARIA'S PERCEPTION OF THE ENLARGEMENT OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

## GENERAL STANCE ON THE EU ENLARGEMENT PROCESS

Bulgaria joined the EU on 1 January 2007, alongside Romania. Its path to EU accession was laborious and long, encountering slow economic transformations of the 1990s, reforming the state agencies and institutions, fighting corruption, internal opposition, lack of political will, and other constraints<sup>1</sup>. It was the combination of the shared goal of the United Democratic Forces and Bulgarian Socialist Party at the beginning of the 1990s to join the EU, assist NATO in the Yugoslav wars, and the support of the Tony Blair government in the UK that allowed Bulgaria to kickstart its accession. After joining, Bulgaria was in a place to start working towards helping their neighbors in the Western Balkans to join the Union too<sup>2</sup>.

Nowadays, Bulgaria continues to encounter difficulties in this 'good neighbourship' endeavor, both internally (initial veto and, after its lift, general aversion to the North Macedonian accession<sup>3</sup>; popularity growth of Eurosceptic parties)<sup>4</sup> and externally (unreformed EU accession mechanisms and lack of political will in Brussels to push it). The country's population and government do not see the issue of enlargement as their top priority, still mostly focusing on the internal issues and disputes, like those around joining the Schengen area and changing state currency to Euro, as well as dealing with the political crisis that has chained the country in endless elections in the past three to four years.

It is reasonable to assume that as Bulgaria makes progress toward finalizing its Schengen and Eurozone integration goals, and once the current political crisis subsides, Sofia will shift its focus to other priorities, including supporting

the Western Balkans in their path toward EU integration. Ideally, Moldova and Ukraine will also become key priorities in due course. The central question regarding Bulgaria's role in the EU enlargement process is when it will emerge from its political stagnation. Bulgaria is prepared to support and assist other candidate countries in their accession efforts – provided it is given the opportunity to regain its footing.

## BULGARIA'S PARLIAMENT AND POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

Understanding the contemporary party divisions is vitally important when it comes to the analysis of Bulgaria's position on enlargement. The political landscape of the country is teasingly diverse, and the key political players are divided into what we identified as three main groups: Euroatlantists, Russophiles, and National-populists. On paper, a majority of the presented parties support EU enlargement. De-facto, however, the answer is not as simple as that.

- Amidst the ranks of the **Euroatlantic** parties, the parties that support further NATO and the EU integration, this year we saw the success of the "good-old three": DPS, PP-DB, and GERB-SDS<sup>5</sup>. In the last election, we also witnessed the success of a new party APS, which was a part of DPS but seceded due to the leadership conflict.
- Among the **Russophile** parties, by which we mean the parties that seek not to deepen the relationship with the EU and/or NATO and look towards possibly leaving the European Union in favor of alternative Russia-backed organizations,<sup>6 7 8 9</sup> we encounter two main players: "Revival" and BSP. Among the two, "Revival" is more vocal on the anti-EU and NATO ideas, while BSP

1 Bechev D. Bulgaria's Path to EU Membership – and Beyond. In: Katsikas S, ed. Bulgaria and Europe: Shifting Identities. Anthem Press; 2010:113-128.

2 ibid.

3 <https://www.dw.com/en/bulgaria-lawmakers-agree-to-lift-block-on-north-macedonia-eu-talks/a-62249425>

4 Despite what looks to be a victory of the Euroatlantic parties (DPS, PP-DB, GERB-SDS) during the October elections, "Revival", by far the largest proponent of Euroscepticism in Bulgarian parliament, still gained a lot of support and more voters comparatively with the June elections.

5 DPS – Movement for Rights and Freedoms; PP-DB – We Continue the Change-Democratic Bulgaria; GERB-SDS – GERB-Union of Democratic Forces.

6 <https://www.dw.com/bg/dlboko-nemoravno-ne-iskat-es-no-haresvat-oblagite-mu/a-68854339>.

7 <https://bit.ly/4gJHGwt>

8 <https://vazrazhdane.bg/делегация-на-възраждане-ще-присъс/>

9 <https://bit.ly/3EzQZKU>



is more discrete in public, yet speaks up “behind closed doors”<sup>10</sup>; BSP made normalization of relations with Russia as well as revocation of sanctions against Moscow part of its election promise<sup>11 12</sup>.

- There are also the **National-populist** parties, the parties that have mostly nationalistic and populist agendas and usually don’t stay in the parliament for long. On the list of such parties are ITN and the new party MECh.
- A **big outlier** is APS: some say that it is likely to follow the footsteps of DPS in its policies and political orientation, but it is too early to be conclusive. There is a big question mark over what the party will do during its time in the parliament first.

Below, we will look at the perception of Enlargement in all three groups.

### Euroatlantic Parties

GERB-SDS forms the biggest party coalition thus far, represented in the parliament with 69 out of 240 seats. Party GERB, the bigger of the two in the coalition, is often labeled as conservative, and is undeniably an old guard of Bulgarian politics, having been in power or otherwise holding most of the seats since 2009<sup>13 14</sup>. During that time, the party stayed on the course of deeper European and NATO integration of Bulgaria. Yet, on the topic of North Macedonia, it was GERB that played a key role in vetoing the Republic’s negotiations in 2020<sup>15</sup>.

In general, the party is considered to be supportive of other states joining the EU. It is worth mentioning, however, that the party itself didn’t put EU enlargement into its program for the elections, and the issue is currently not actively discussed.<sup>16 17</sup> The thing we know for sure is that as with all pro-enlargement parties in Bulgaria, the support of GERB is conditional on the candidate country fulfilling all the demands of the accession process. Party’s representative to the European Parliament Andrey Kovatchev said that in the near future, a good country-candidate example will be needed to boost the process of enlargement for the rest.<sup>18</sup>

The experts we interviewed expect GERB-SDS to be demanding certain concessions from North Macedonia in the future to be kept on track for EU accession. As one of our commentators put it:

” [...] On a declarative level, they are pro-European and pro-enlargement. They support the enlargement as an instrument of European foreign policy and Bulgarian foreign policy. And perhaps they will be in favor when it comes to questions like Ukraine, Georgia, etc. They are the ones, however, that created that memorandum with the Republic of North Macedonia and that have seized our support for the continuation of the negotiations because of a number of issues in the bilateral relationship with them. So it will be always tricky and it will depend on the specific context. If so, the Republic of North Macedonia will have to earn the support of GERB through major concessions.

After the June 2024 European Parliament elections, all the members of the GERB-SDS coalition joined the European People’s Party Group (EPP) parliamentary group, which signals their support for the course of the EPP and the current President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, on the issue of enlargement, among others.<sup>19</sup> Just as GERB-SDS, EPP believes that enlargement should continue and countries should be accepted to the Union as long as they adhere to the Copenhagen criteria<sup>20</sup>.

**PP-DB coalition**, is now the second-biggest party coalition in the parliament, having taken 37 out of 240 seats after the October elections. The coalition is formed out of multiple smaller political forces, the biggest of which is PP and DB, and is often labelled as liberal in its ideological orientation. The time of its exaltation coincided in time with the GERB veto against North Macedonia: PP-DB was a vocal supporter of lifting the veto, which eventually happened in 2022 during Kiril Petkov’s<sup>21</sup> government.<sup>22</sup>

Same as with GERB-SDS, PP-DB didn’t make the issue of EU enlargement part of its program, neither during the June elections nor in October<sup>23 24</sup>. Experts, however, agree that the party will support the EU accession of any nation, be it North Macedonia, Serbia, or Ukraine, but only if the accession demands are met and all criteria fulfilled. One of the experts commented on the party:

” Of course, you have the strong supporters of any European discourse, which is PP-DB. They will always be in favour of enlargement, no matter which region we are concerned about.

<sup>10</sup> <https://duma.bg/?go=news&p=detail&nodeId=125274>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/bsp-rusija-bilbord/33166755.html>

<sup>12</sup> [https://bsp.bg/predizborni\\_prioriteti/vynshna\\_politika.html](https://bsp.bg/predizborni_prioriteti/vynshna_politika.html)

<sup>13</sup> <https://openparliament.net/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.strazha.bg/parl-groups/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://wiiw.ac.at/the-eu-should-act-resolutely-after-the-bulgarian-veto-n-476.html>

<sup>16</sup> <https://bit.ly/4jJPrOI>

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> <https://openparliament.net/2024/06/05/искат-ли-българските-партии-ес-да-се-па/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://results.elections.europa.eu/bg/nachionalni-rezultati/balgariya/2024-2029/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.eppgroup.eu/what-we-do/outside-eu/enlargement-countries>

<sup>21</sup> He is currently one of the heads of PP-DB and served as the country’s Prime Minister between 2021 and 2022

<sup>22</sup> <https://bit.ly/3EzR9CO>

<sup>23</sup> <https://bit.ly/4jJPrOI>

<sup>24</sup> [https://ppdb.bg/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/2024october\\_ppdb\\_final.pdf](https://ppdb.bg/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/2024october_ppdb_final.pdf)

After the June 2024 Euro parliament elections, PP-DB won 3 seats in the European Parliament. All the members of the PP part of the coalition (2 representatives) joined the Renew Europe (RE) parliamentary group, while the member of DB joined the European People's Party Group. Similar to EPP, Renew Europe supports the accession of the new countries into the Union if they carry out all the necessary reforms. Unlike EPP, however, they openly speak of the Enlargement fatigue and the need for change and reform to overcome it<sup>25 26</sup>. A position that resonates with the reformist spirit of the PP-DB coalition.

A party with a middle ground is **DPS**, historically a 'tie-breaker' between the Euroatlantic forces of Bulgaria. The party secured 30 out of 240 seats in the last election and is often called "the party of ethnic Turks". One of the well-known members of the EU parliament from DPS, Ilhan Kyuchyuk, has been a vocal proponent of the discussion on EU enlargement. His party has been generally pro-enlargement over the years<sup>27 28</sup>. Moreover, during the North Macedonian veto debacle, they supported PP-DB in lifting the veto<sup>29</sup>.

After the June 2024 European Parliament elections, all members of the DPS party joined the Renew Europe parliamentary group. As was mentioned in the example of Ilhan Kyuchyuk, the party is in support of further enlargement and changes within its process, making a perfect match within the European Parliament for DPS.

When mentioning **APS**, who have acquired 19 out of 240 seats, in the parliament, we suggest putting them on the same line as DPS in terms of general beliefs and opinions on the EU enlargement, at least for now. It is still too early to categorize them with confidence, but considering the majority of the party is composed of previous DPS MPs, they are likely to follow the same path as DPS in the past.

### Russophile Parties

"**Revival**", as of the last elections, is the largest openly pro-Russian party in the parliament, holding 35 parliamentary seats out of 240. It is also, by far, the party with the most straightforward position, for it seeks to fully revise Bulgaria's standing in world politics and perform what could be described as a political U-turn. Their program is built around Bulgaria leaving the EU and NATO, preventing the government from changing currency to Euro, lifting sanctions on Russia, and stopping any support for Ukraine.

Obviously, EU enlargement is no priority for this party. One of the party's representatives in the European Parliament, Petar Volgin, openly called against accepting North Macedonia and Ukraine into the EU, also calling Bulgaria an "imprisoned nation" and stating that Europe must be "freed" from the European Union<sup>30</sup>.

After the June 2024 European Parliament elections, all members of the "Revival" party joined the Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN) parliamentary group. Just like the rest of the political parties that form ESN (especially the German AFD party), this parliamentary group's interests don't include enlarging the Union, as all parties are quite Eurosceptic.

**BSP**, a party established on the ashes of the Bulgarian Communist Party, is a slightly more complicated case. Originally, BSP was one of the nation's political forces that pushed for Bulgaria to join the EU. Nowadays, however, with its new left parties coalition and 20 out of 240 parliament seats, the party is taking a different stance. Although on paper they are in support of the accession of Moldova, Ukraine, and the Western Balkans (if they follow the procedures), interviewed experts caution that the party will not be a guaranteed ally on this matter:

“ [...] The Bulgarian Socialist Party, which is a combination of a pro-Russian stance and a sense of nostalgia for the former communist regime, has a very strong nationalistic narrative as well, as an attempt to seem more modern, liberal, and European. Torn between Euroscepticism, pro-Russian influence, and nationalistic view, their position on enlargement will be hard to predict.

Another expert also mentioned the electorate of the party could be the reason behind such a stance on enlargement:

“ [...] I think their voters are also unlikely to support the Socialist Party if they support the accession of Ukraine.[...]

After the June 2024 Euro parliament elections, all members of the BSP party joined the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) parliamentary group. The case of BSP joining S&D is peculiar in that S&D is vocally in favor of enlargement<sup>31</sup> and accepting Ukraine into the EU. Nonetheless, the motivation of the political force to join S&D is more likely based on shared socialist ideas, rather than anything else.

<sup>25</sup> <https://reneweurope-cor.eu/euwesternbalkans/>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.reneweuropiegroupp.eu/news/2024-06-25/renew-europe-is-fully-committed-to-ukraine-and-republic-of-moldovas-future-in-the-european-family>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/news/article/eu-enlargement-must-happen-in-tandem-with-eu-reform>

<sup>28</sup> <https://bit.ly/4jJPrOI>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.strazha.bg/sessions/2022-06-24/votes/>

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu/newsroom/promoting-freedom-democracy-and-prosperity-our-continent-sds-welcome-new-eu-enlargement>

### National-populist Parties

The **MECh** party will be disregarded in our report, as it is a party that seemingly doesn't have a feasible program<sup>32</sup> or substantial influence (12/240 seats) and is unlikely to stay in the parliament for long.

At the same time, the **ITN** party proved to be very resilient, as they entered the parliament with 18 out of 240 seats following the last election. Guided by TV showman Slavi Trifonov, the party seeks to revise the Green Deal, ban "LGBT propaganda", prevent immigrants from entering the country, and put an end to "silent EU directives implementation". Needless to say, EU enlargement is not a priority for them<sup>33</sup>.

The Party's only representative in the European Parliament, Ivaylo Vulchev, also didn't say much on the matter of enlargement, only commenting that Bulgaria should closely follow the North Macedonian negotiations process. After the June 2024 European Parliament elections, Ivaylo Vulchev of the ITN party joined the European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR) parliamentary group. Just like ITN, ECR is against "wokeism" and "environmental extremism"<sup>34</sup>, but they do also support the enlargement<sup>35</sup>. It is not unlikely that ITN will support this motion as well, but caution is advised as they are still a populist party whose stance can change in a moment.

### RECENT EVENTS INFLUENCING THE PERCEPTION OF ENLARGEMENT

Within 2024, Bulgarian politicians have made multiple statements and actions that can help us better understand their stance on enlargement 'in practice'. Yet, it is relevant to note that the actions of the politicians and political groups on the matter of enlargement are highly dependent on the nation in question. For instance, while they might be supportive of enlargement in general or enlargement into the Western Balkans, an MP from GERB-SDS might speak against North Macedonian candidacy specifically, while an MP from BSP might be opposed to the Republic of Moldova or Ukraine's accession in particular<sup>36</sup>.

Exempli gratia, among the recent events that reaffirm our assessment of Bulgaria's position towards the Balkans, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine joining the European Union, is a scandal surrounding the visit of the president of North Macedonia to Sofia. The visit's purpose was to

improve the tense relations between the two nations, but the opposite has happened. The Bulgarian side forgot to put the North Macedonian flag in the picture, which was perceived as offensive by the latter<sup>37</sup>. The scandal has rekindled the fire of political hatred for one another in both countries. Further exacerbating the issue, the office of the Bulgarian president didn't back down nor apologize for this major faux pas, simply stating that "it was an unofficial visit, thus diplomatic protocol is not restrictive"<sup>38</sup>. As of now, the situation seems to have stabilized, but progress toward reconciliation (which was the main topic of the visit in the first place) has been deferred.

On the more positive side were recent meetings of Ivan Kondov, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bulgaria, in New York in September 2024 during the 79th UN General Assembly session. He had an opportunity to speak with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, Andrii Sybiha, and promised support to Ukraine in its fight against Russian aggression by consolidating the sanctions and helping Ukraine stabilize its energy sector. A few days later minister Kondov also had a meeting with his counterparts from Romania, Greece, and Croatia, where they spoke about the expansion of the EU and pledged support for Ukraine, stating that "Ukraine's future is in the European Union".

Prime Minister Dimitar Glavchev's visit to Dubrovnik in October for the Ukraine South-East Europe Summit can also be considered another good sign for the EU enlargement. During that summit, a pledge was made by the Prime Minister that Bulgaria shall continue supporting Ukraine for as long as it is needed and strongly supports Ukraine's territorial sovereignty and independence. Moreover, the Prime Minister also mentioned that EU enlargement should remain at the forefront of the EU agenda, for "EU enlargement is a cornerstone for peace and prosperity among the peoples of Europe." He also added: "I hope that Ukraine will maintain its dynamics of European integration", as well as that his position is strictly following the position of the Bulgarian Parliament.

Among the key political figures in Bulgaria who are likely to oppose the Enlargement is the Bulgarian President, Rumen Radev. Over the last 3 years, he has been actively opposing sending military support to Ukraine and even tried to veto one of the military packages<sup>39</sup>. Moreover, he decided not to attend the NATO 2024 Washington Summit in part due to his position on Ukraine<sup>40</sup>. It is well-known among the people and politicians of Bulgaria that he is generally holding pro-Russian sentiment and would never be likely to support Ukraine's EU accession<sup>41</sup>.

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.ppmech.bg>

<sup>33</sup> <https://bit.ly/4jJPrOI>

<sup>34</sup> <https://ecrgroup.eu/priorities>

<sup>35</sup> [https://ecrgroup.eu/article/enlargement\\_policy\\_key\\_for\\_stability\\_and\\_prosperity](https://ecrgroup.eu/article/enlargement_policy_key_for_stability_and_prosperity)

<sup>36</sup> From our own observations, more often than not, Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova come 'in package' within Bulgarian politics, thus if you are against Ukraine joining, you will also be against Moldova's accession and vice versa. Otherwise, there is not much talk within Bulgaria specifically about Moldova's accession, separate from Ukraine's case.

<sup>37</sup> <https://novini.bg/sviat/balkani/866446>

<sup>38</sup> <https://novini.bg/bylgariya/politika/866718>

<sup>39</sup> <https://kyivindependent.com/bulgarian-president-vetoes-agreement-on-armored-vehicles-for-ukraine/>

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.rferl.org/a/nato-bulgaria-rumen-radev-summit/33020556.html>

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/bulgarian-president-greets-participants-in-banned-pro-russian-march/>

## PERCEPTION OF ENLARGEMENT IN BULGARIAN SOCIETY

Public opinion largely follows the divisions between the political parties; a person's stance depends on whom they vote for. Thus, we have the overwhelming majority of the champions of enlargement – the Euroatlantic parties. If we follow this logic and look at the popularity of parties like BSP and "Revival" we can also see that about a quarter of Bulgarians are most likely against the enlargement. It is worth mentioning that during the interviews some experts pointed out that the people who vote for these parties are also often susceptible to Russian propaganda.

When speaking on the matter of concerns, we remember the Republic of North Macedonia which will always be an issue when looking at enlargement from Bulgaria's perspective. It is connected to a national trauma that takes roots all the way back to the "Greater Bulgaria" XIX-XX century concept. Within this irredentist concept, Bulgaria must encompass some of the territories of modern Serbia, Greece, Turkey, Romania, and the entirety of North Macedonia. North Macedonian population as well as the rest of the people from the acquired territories would thus be seen as Bulgarians. At the same, this is a national trauma that is slowly being worked out within Bulgarian politics and population through rescinding the territorial claims, putting down the expansionist ambitions, and communicating on more friendly terms with the North Macedonian government and people. It is a grand process that might take multiple generations but it is safe to say that Bulgaria is slowly getting there.

Another problem in the course of Ukraine's accession that we can't forget about is the fears of the Bulgarian agrarians and farmers when they are posed with the Ukrainian grain, which caused many protests in Bulgaria in the span of the last few years. As one of the experts suggested:

” The Bulgarian agricultural sector, specifically the Bulgarian grain producers, have been very vocal against the previous deals concerning Ukrainian grain and the effects of the war.

Last but not least is the concern about losing some EU funds in the case of the new country's accession to the Union. One of our experts pointed out the following:

” [...] It is very likely that we will lose some EU funds if the EU budget policy is not reformed to a great extent to allow more financing for less developed countries. Because Bulgaria, of course, is one of those countries that receives money from the EU funds.

Despite the aforementioned concerns, Bulgarian society can potentially recognize certain benefits of enlargement. As was voiced by our experts, access to the new qualified labor can stimulate the Bulgarian economy, alongside

access for the enterprises (both small and large) to the tariff-free trade in different economic sectors, with raw material, services and manufacturing featuring prominently in expert discussions. The biggest projected winners, in our experts' opinion, are going to be the Bulgarian Military Industrial Complex, metal producers, and industry in general, as well as the IT sector.

At the same time, experts also mention that Bulgarian Black Sea security and economic development, as well as infrastructural and energy projects, could become a great starting point for facilitating the cooperation between Ukraine and Bulgaria. One of our experts shared:

” I think a really huge area in which we can actually start working better is the naval maritime security of the Black Sea region, which is one huge area for improvement that we can do for both of our sakes. Of course, next, economic cooperation will be huge in infrastructure projects in relation to the Black Sea itself, but also the ground infrastructure and the interconnections around the region, where we can involve the other countries that are on the path of negotiations as well. And there is also a huge field of energy, of course, which will have a huge impact on the cooperation.

Still, as was mentioned before, the Bulgarian population is not interested in the issue of EU enlargement, mostly focusing on internal issues and expecting the political parties to attend to those first before thinking of any other problem. It is safe to assume, nonetheless, that Bulgarians wouldn't be against the accession of Ukraine or any other country if they followed the demands presented during the negotiations and carried out all needed reforms. The same goes for North Macedonia, as even the major Euroatlantic political force GERB-SDS is not against it joining the EU per se, but wants North Macedonia to meet Bulgarian demands.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Bulgaria is currently not looking at the EU Enlargement as its main issue, nor does it consider it to be even a secondary issue. The topic is not often brought up in the political landscape or in the media. Yet, when the time comes, the Bulgarian parliament would most likely be ready to respond positively to other nations joining the Union. The only exception to that rule is the Republic of North Macedonia which would need a certain level of political balancing and reconciliation with the Bulgarian side in order not to fall into the same trap of being vetoed from negotiations.

It is still advised for the North Macedonian government to proceed with caution during the negotiations and not try to unnecessarily anger the Bulgarian population and the government. There is no dispute that Bulgar-Macedonian relations are in constant threat of spiralling out of control for the smallest of reasons. Each scandal risks nullifying

months of hard work of the diplomats and having to start from scratch. Actions of the North Macedonian side can directly influence potential crises both in how they start and how they flow. Some Bulgarian experts think that Skopje should implore caution and tactfulness in its diplomatic strategy, for a slight diplomatic misunderstanding or mistake risks backfiring in the form of Bulgarian veto and deterioration of bilateral relations.

On the matter of enlargement in the context of Ukraine, we advise Ukrainian stakeholders to have a dialogue with the Euroatlantic parties of Bulgaria, as they're both most receptive, and supportive and possess a majority in the Bulgarian parliament at the time of writing this report. As such, with the current balance of power, we advise the candidate countries not to put too much effort into lobbying the Russophile and the National-populistic parties when seeking allies that support their European Union accession endeavor.

When it comes to the general public, the best possible strategy is to educate people (potentially through cooperation with the European Union) on what the enlargement will actually mean to them. The focus should be put on the new opportunities that come with the inclusion of new markets, as well as potential huge infrastructural projects that bordering new EU members will definitely bring.

Bulgaria itself is a vital potential partner for Ukraine in the Black Sea region, and from an economic perspective, it would undeniably want to increase cooperation in the infrastructure and energy sectors as soon as the opportunity presents itself. Bulgaria, as one of the comparatively new members of the European Union, could also help any nation that wants to join the Union as an advisor (on the parliamentary level, offering insights on the reforms that were already implemented, possible observations and improvements of those policies; on the governmental level, especially for when it comes to conducting the decentralization reforms and implementing the other reforms 'on the ground'). They have just recently gone through all the necessary accession processes and could prove vital in providing the knowledge and more likely than not support in lobbying the accession of the new members among the EU countries of the Balkans.

# HUNGARY'S PERCEPTION OF THE ENLARGEMENT OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

## GENERAL STANCE ON THE EU ENLARGEMENT PROCESS

Hungary has a long-standing tradition of supporting the EU enlargement process, as its own accession to the European Union was a pivotal moment in its post-communist transformation. However, this position has been complicated in recent years, as the Hungarian government, led by Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party, has manipulated public sentiment on enlargement for political leverage. While Hungary officially supports EU enlargement, especially for the Western Balkans, its approach has become increasingly conditioned by national interests and political alliances. Orbán's government has used the enlargement process to further its geopolitical and economic goals, sometimes at odds with broader EU interests, especially in relation to Ukraine and the Balkans.

### Western Balkans

Hungary's primary interest lies in the accession of the Western Balkan states, specifically Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Albania. This is due to Hungary's long-standing strategic ties with the region driven by both historical and contemporary geopolitical considerations. Hungary views the region as crucial for regional peace and security, particularly in light of its geographical proximity to the EU. "All those slowing down the integration of the Western Balkans are working against security in the EU,"<sup>42</sup> said Péter Szijjártó, Hungary's Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Economic interests play a significant role, with Hungary increasing its investments and exports to the region in recent years. Serbia stands out as Hungary's most significant partner among the Western Balkan countries with a substantial share in bilateral trade. Hungary's exports to Serbia reached \$3.42 billion, while imports

amounted to \$1.69 billion in 2022<sup>43</sup>. Between 2017 and 2022, Hungarian exports to Serbia increased by 102%, while imports grew by 157%. North Macedonia and Bosnia also represent important partners, with Hungarian exports to these countries growing by 35% and 25%, respectively, and imports from North Macedonia rising by an impressive 287%. In contrast, Albania and Montenegro play a considerably smaller economic role for Hungary and their share in Hungary's overall trade remains minimal, despite some growth.

The growth of trade, especially with Serbia, can be attributed to the destabilization of traditional energy routes. As Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán stated, "There is no country more important to Hungary's security than Serbia," especially in light of the disruption to alternative routes caused by the Russian war against Ukraine<sup>44</sup>. This has propelled a series of joint projects which include investments in oil and gas transportation, the modernization of electricity infrastructure, expansions in natural gas storage, and advancements in gas trading capabilities. A joint electricity exchange is slated to begin operation by the end of 2024. Orbán also stated that "Europe needs Serbia more than Serbia needs the EU," as he envisions Serbia as a contributor of "new momentum, new dynamics, and new energy" for Europe.

Hungary's support for the Western Balkans' European integration aligns with its foreign policy. Politically, Hungary sees expansion as a way to forge alliances with like-minded countries within the EU, creating a bloc that could help balance the influence of dominant Western European powers, particularly France and Germany. According to Orbán, "European politics collapsed since the start of the Russian-Ukrainian war because the essence of the European power system was the Paris-Berlin axis", and the emerging void needs to be filled by creating a new axis. Budapest's position in this new

<sup>42</sup> Hungary signs foreign policy cooperation action plan with Bosnia and Herzegovina. (2024, January 29). About Hungary. <https://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/hungary-signs-foreign-policy-cooperation-action-plan-with-bosnia-and-herzegovina>

<sup>43</sup> Hungary (HUN) Exports, Imports, and Trade Partners. The Observatory of Economic Complexity. <https://bit.ly/40LdtjB>

<sup>44</sup> <https://abouthungary.hu/blog/pm-orban-serbia-is-hungary-s-most-important-partner-for-energy-security-67364b1ab1ad7p>

axis would be one of leadership. Rather than remaining a passive member of the EU or merely responding to Western European priorities, Hungary seeks to become a key player in a new coalition that not only resists the dominant Western EU powers but also pushes for a more decentralized European system that allows for greater national autonomy within the Union. Some argue that Hungary's enlargement stance may be serving this goal, aiming to bring in countries that might align more closely with Hungary's political priorities. Hungary's strong support for Serbia's membership, despite concerns about Serbia's political readiness, is particularly telling in this context.

### Ukraine

Hungary has a distinctly different view when it comes to Ukraine's specific bid for EU membership; its stance has evolved significantly, moving from strong support to a more cautious position. Until 2017, Hungary endorsed Ukraine's ambitions for EU membership. However, that year marked a turning point, following a series of legislative changes in Ukraine that were perceived by Hungary as limiting the rights of the Hungarian minority. In recent years, Hungary has used the minority rights issue as a pretext to block Ukraine's EU aspirations, with Budapest's official position stating that Ukraine is "not ready" for EU membership due to its political and economic challenges, as well as the ongoing war.

In recent years, Orbán's stance on Ukraine has been marked by deep skepticism. He has criticized the notion of opening EU membership negotiations with Ukraine, calling it "senseless, irrational and wrong," and famously abstained from the European Council's decision to support Ukrainian accession talks<sup>45</sup>. Orbán insists that Ukraine is not prepared for the rigorous requirements of EU membership, pointing to unfulfilled conditions and the complexities brought on by Ukraine's ongoing war with Russia. He argues that the push for Ukraine's accession is motivated by Brussels' agenda rather than a true readiness on Ukraine's part. Orbán further criticized the EU's approach, accusing Brussels of driving entire Europe into what he describes as a hopeless war with Russia<sup>46</sup>.

## POLITICAL PARTIES' PERCEPTION

While Orbán represents the dominant government position, the political landscape regarding EU enlargement and Ukraine's accession is more complex than that. Contrasting positions between the ruling party, Fidesz, and various opposition parties characterize it.

### Domestic Level

**The Fidesz party**, led by Viktor Orbán, advocates for EU enlargement in the Western Balkans but remains opposed to Ukraine's accession, although such a position is not universal for all party members. Fidesz has repeatedly emphasized that the Balkans' integration is essential for European security, and Viktor Orbán has argued that "Europe will never be complete without the integration of the Balkans."<sup>47</sup>

A common Hungarian narrative around the enlargement is the country's commitment to equal treatment of all candidate countries and the necessity of such an approach across the whole EU. Accession of the Western Balkans is often presented as fair: "We promised to the Western Balkans countries twenty years ago that they will be given entry, and it is time to fulfill the promise,"<sup>48</sup> Orbán remarked. Fidesz-affiliated former Minister of Justice Judit Varga also expressed this sentiment, stating that Western Balkan integration remains central to Hungary's EU presidency agenda for 2024 and that resources should support both Ukraine and the Western Balkans to ensure balanced regional development<sup>48</sup>.

**The KDNP (Christian Democratic People's Party)**, as part of the Fidesz-KDNP Party Alliance, does not often engage in detailed discussions on EU enlargement but aligns with the ruling party's stance. Nacsa Lőrinc, a parliamentary representative of KDNP, emphasized that EU expansion is in the security, economic, and political interests of the European Union. He pointed out that delaying enlargement would weaken the Union, and Hungary finds it unacceptable for the EU to be weakened due to this delay<sup>49</sup>. According to Nacsa, Hungary's fundamental interest lies in the accession of the Western Balkan countries to the EU.

**The Tisza Party**, Hungary's largest opposition group, holds an ambiguous position on Ukraine's EU accession. They have expressed strong opposition to sending weapons to Ukraine<sup>50</sup> and refrained from voting for financial support to the country in the European Parliament<sup>51</sup>. However, the Tisza Party has avoided a definitive stance on the future of EU enlargement, focusing more on domestic political concerns. It remains uncertain whether they will ultimately support Ukraine's EU membership.

<sup>45</sup> <https://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/pm-orban-eu-membership-of-ukraine-is-a-bad-decision-which-hungary-wants-no-part-in>

<sup>46</sup> <https://www.fidesz.hu/hirek/brusszeli-babkormanyt-akarnak-magyarorszag-nyakaba-ultetni>

<sup>47</sup> <https://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/pm-orban-europe-will-never-be-complete-without-the-integration-of-the-balkans>

<sup>48</sup> <https://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/fidesz-lawmaker-calls-for-eu-integration-of-western-balkans>

<sup>49</sup> <https://kdnp.hu/hirek/nacsa-lorinc-az-europai-unio-alapveto-erdeke-bovites>

<sup>50</sup> <https://www.politico.eu/article/european-peoples-party-hungary-weapons-war-in-ukraine-aid-peter-magyar/>

<sup>51</sup> <https://howtheyvote.eu/votes/169676>

**The Democratic Coalition (DK)**, with 15 seats in the Hungarian Parliament, advocates for a “United States of Europe” as the future of Europe, emphasizing a vision where Hungarians can live with the same rights and benefits as other Europeans<sup>52</sup>. They support the further expansion of the European Union, provided that candidate countries meet the necessary criteria for accession, as outlined in their 2017 program<sup>53</sup>.

**Momentum**, another one of Hungary’s opposition parties with 10 seats in the parliament, strongly supports Ukrainian EU membership. “We are 100% pro-Ukraine’s membership,” said a party’s representative during one of our interviews. He described the EU’s current approach as “slow and pathetic,” arguing that Ukraine deserves to be a member because of its commitment to European values, particularly in light of its struggle since 2014. Momentum’s leader, Tompos Márton, echoed these sentiments, saying that “if the Orbán government really cared about Hungarian interests, they would support the accession of Ukraine to the EU, as membership could help heal divided people and rectify the wounds of the past.”<sup>54</sup>

**The Our Homeland movement** with 6 seats in the parliament takes a strong stance against not only enlargement but the European Union in general, advocating for Hungary’s withdrawal from the EU. Party leader László Toroczkai suggests that if their political vision prevails, Hungary would either push for a European Union based on sovereign states or seek bilateral agreements with its nations. He criticized the EU’s influence, calling for Hungary to align more with non-Western nations and prioritize national sovereignty, declaring, “Europe belongs to the Europeans, Hungary belongs to the Hungarians.”<sup>55</sup> Toroczkai also advocates for an immediate ceasefire in Ukraine and a negotiated peace, stating that if Ukraine’s statehood were to dissolve, Hungary should claim Transcarpathia.

### EU Level

Hungary’s position promoted at the EU level is best illustrated by the country’s ongoing presidency in the Council of the EU (1 July and 31 December 2024). As Péter Szijjártó, the foreign minister, stated in February 2024, this presidency was intended to become “the most pro-enlargement European Union presidency of all time”<sup>56</sup>. Indeed, the Hungarian presidency program emphasized promoting enlargement, particularly when

it comes to the Western Balkans<sup>57</sup>. Similarly to the rhetoric of the ruling Fidesz party at the domestic level, any talks about accession are conditional on the “actual performance” of candidate countries, not contemporary political interests and geopolitical pressures. Along these lines, Szijjártó made it clear that being at war would not be considered a merit during the accession process when talking about Ukraine joining the EU.

The Hungarian presidency’s agenda aimed to push for the opening of new chapters for Serbia, to facilitate Montenegro’s progress, and to initiate meaningful negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, and Moldova. Regarding Ukraine, Szijjártó stated that enlargement should be about promoting stability and peace, not importing conflict.

There are Hungarian voices, however, that hold a different view. Representatives of the DK in the European Parliament, particularly Csaba Molnár and Klára Dobrev, present a critical perspective on Hungary’s presidency. “I can tell you, Mr. Prime Minister, that nobody was really interested in your program, because it is frivolous. We are waiting for his presidency to end,”<sup>58</sup> said Dobrev. She highlights the “spy bank” scandal, accusing the Hungarian government of facilitating Russian interference within the EU<sup>59</sup>. She frames this as a betrayal of European values. Molnár, in turn, emphasizes Hungary’s reliance on Russian energy as a major issue, accusing Orbán’s government of undermining EU efforts to reduce dependence on Russian fossil fuels<sup>60</sup>. While they did not directly address the issue of enlargement in the context of Hungary’s presidency, their criticism of the political games Hungary is playing on the European level can easily be extended to this part of Hungary’s program too, especially when it comes to pushing for the accession of Serbia for what is presented as “energy security” reasons.

An analysis of the voting records on key resolutions regarding Ukraine reveals significant divides among political parties on the EU level. Most Hungarian MEPs abstained or did not vote for the Resolution on the Sustainable Reconstruction and Integration of Ukraine, indicating hesitancy to openly endorse or oppose Ukraine’s Euro-Atlantic integration<sup>61</sup>. Exceptions included representatives from the DK (Attila Ara-Kovács, Klára Dobrev), Momentum (Katalin Cseh), Jobbik (Márton Gyöngyösi), and MSZP (István Ujhelyi), who supported the resolution. Another vote for temporary trade-liberalisation

<sup>52</sup> <https://dkp.hu/hirek/4967/europa-jovoje-az-europai-egyeseult-allamok>

<sup>53</sup> A demokratikus koalíció programja. (2017). Demokratikus Koalíció.

<sup>54</sup> <https://x.com/MartonTompos/status/1758544269886009766>

<sup>55</sup> <https://index.hu/belfold/2024/01/27/toroczkai-laszlo-mi-hazank-mozgalom-evertekelo-beszed/?token=fd86817f43d69c4b5468078b19b81147>

<sup>56</sup> <https://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/fm-hungarys-will-be-the-most-pro-enlargement-eu-presidency-of-all-time>

<sup>57</sup> <https://hungarian-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/programme/programme/>

<sup>58</sup> [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-10-2024-10-09-INT-2017002235797\\_HU.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-10-2024-10-09-INT-2017002235797_HU.html)

<sup>59</sup> [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-10-2024-11-13-INT-2017006269444\\_HU.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-10-2024-11-13-INT-2017006269444_HU.html)

<sup>60</sup> [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-10-2024-09-17-INT-2017001912504\\_HU.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-10-2024-09-17-INT-2017001912504_HU.html)

<sup>61</sup> <https://howtheyvote.eu/votes/156440>



measures for Ukraine showed a clear split<sup>62</sup>. Ara-Kovács and Molnár (DK), along with the same representatives from Momentum and MSZP, supported the measure. All ten voting Fidesz representatives opposed it, emphasizing their broader skepticism toward policies perceived as benefiting Ukraine at Hungary's expense. As for the motion for continued financial and military support for Ukraine, Dobrev and Molnár (DK) backed the resolution, whereas six Fidesz representatives, along with Zsuzsanna Borvendég (Our Homeland Movement), opposed the measure<sup>63</sup>. A significant number of Tisza members abstained (5 of 6). The most recent vote concerned Ukraine Loan Cooperation Mechanism<sup>64</sup>. Once again, Dobrev and Molnár supported the resolution, Borvendég opposed it, all members from Tisza abstained, and Fidesz didn't vote.

The voting patterns of Hungarian MEPs highlight a stark alignment between positions held at the EU level and Hungary's domestic political landscape. Pro-European opposition parties, such as the DK and Momentum consistently support measures advancing Ukraine's integration and aid, reflecting their broader commitment to EU values. Conversely, the ruling Fidesz party, along with far-right forces like the Our Homeland Movement, oppose such initiatives, aligning with their nationalist and often Eurosceptic approach at home. Abstentions by Tisza representatives suggest cautious diplomacy, mirroring a domestic trend of careful positioning on EU enlargement. This gives us a clue as to how Hungary's representatives to the European Parliament would vote when it comes to making decisions on accession of Ukraine too.

In contrast, when it comes to initiatives benefiting the Western Balkans, such as exceptional trade measures for countries linked to the Stabilisation and Association process<sup>65</sup> or establishing the Reform and Growth Facility, all Hungarian MEPs who participated in these votes supported them<sup>66</sup>. This unanimity underscores Hungary's consistent pro-enlargement stance toward the Western Balkans, which aligns seamlessly across domestic and EU levels.

Much of Hungary's official stance on EU enlargement depends on the domestic political landscape. A shift in government after the 2026 elections could change Hungary's approach if the more Ukraine-supportive and Brussels-aligned opposition parties come to power. Such a possibility, however, is highly unlikely. Currently, the ruling Fidesz-KDNP coalition enjoys strong public support, with 41% of the population backing it as

of September 2024<sup>67</sup>. In comparison, the Tisza Party, which is emerging as the second-largest political force, garners 31% support but has not clarified its stance on EU enlargement. Other opposition parties are trailing far behind, each receiving less than 10% of public support. These figures indicate that a shift in power is unlikely in the near future, making it vital to learn how to work with the status quo.

## PERCEPTION OF ENLARGEMENT IN HUNGARIAN SOCIETY

The topic of EU enlargement does not occupy a central place in Hungarian public discourse, often overshadowed by other domestic and foreign policy issues. Nonetheless, public opinion on the matter is far from homogenous, as revealed by a survey in September 2024 which explored Hungarians' attitudes toward potential EU member states<sup>68</sup>.

Accession of Montenegro enjoys the highest level of support (44%), followed closely by Türkiye (42%) and Serbia (41%). However, the support for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova, Albania, and Northern Macedonia is more divided, with a larger portion of Hungarians expressing opposition to them entering the EU. Pro-government voters tend to favor the accession of Türkiye (50%) and Serbia (48%) but are majorly opposed to the accession of Kosovo (56% against). The DK-MSZP-P alliance (opposition parties) supporters also show support for Türkiye (49%) but are generally more favorable towards the accession of other Balkan countries like Montenegro (47%), and North Macedonia (47%). There is substantial opposition to countries like Moldova, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, and Albania entering the EU in both camps.

What stands out in the Hungarian context is the relatively high public support for Türkiye's EU accession, a stance that diverges from broader European sentiment, where Türkiye's membership prospects have been largely sidelined for years. One contributing factor to this could be the Hungarian government's significant influence on public opinion, particularly through state-controlled media. Hungarian officials frequently emphasize the strategic importance of Türkiye, particularly in its role as an energy transit hub. For instance, Minister Szijjártó emphasized the role of the TurkStream pipeline in Hungary's natural gas imports, with Türkiye having ensured the reliable transit of 6 billion cubic meters of gas last year. He also highlighted plans for Hungary's EU presidency to prioritize strengthening Türkiye-EU relations, including convening a meeting of the Türkiye-EU Association Council, renewing the customs

<sup>62</sup> <https://howtheyvote.eu/votes/168586>

<sup>63</sup> <https://howtheyvote.eu/votes/169676>

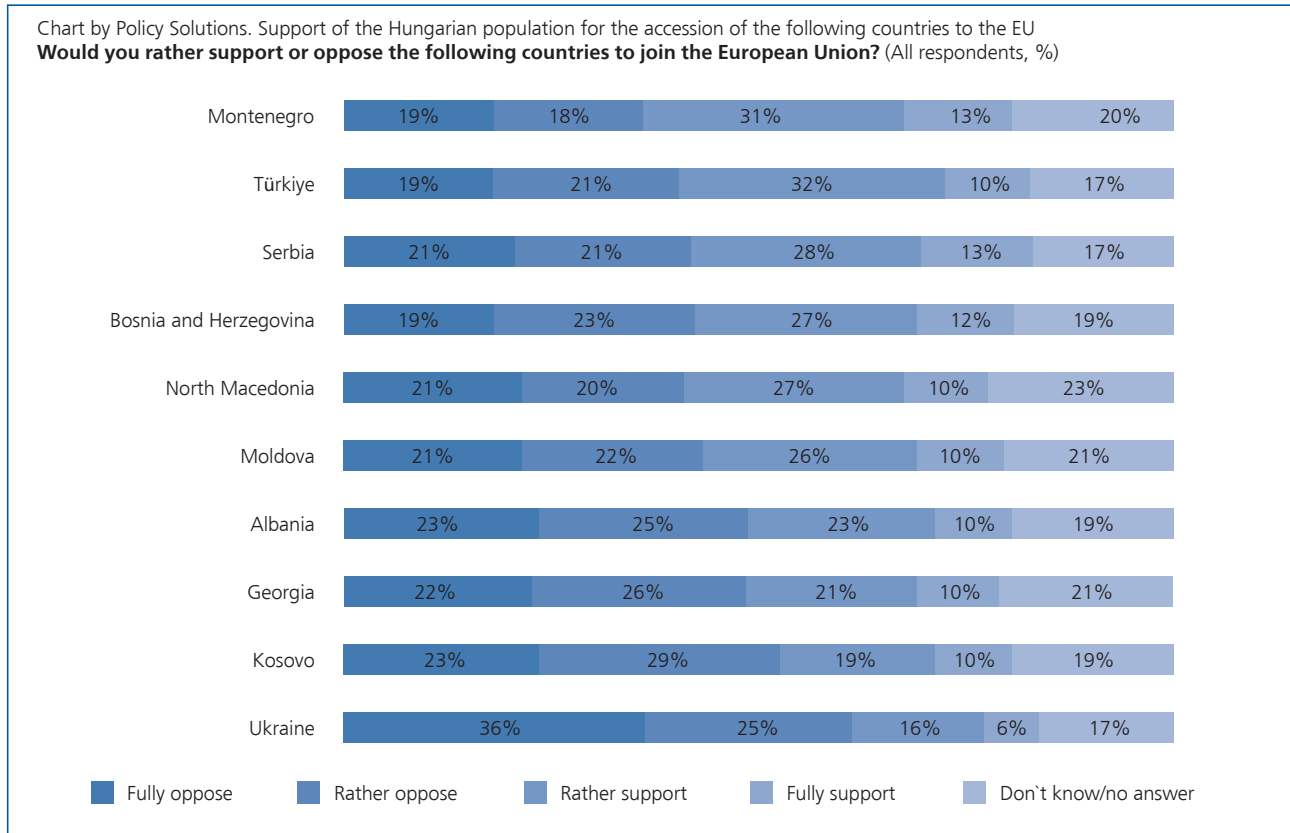
<sup>64</sup> <https://howtheyvote.eu/votes/169889>

<sup>65</sup> <https://howtheyvote.eu/votes/163052>

<sup>66</sup> <https://howtheyvote.eu/votes/168282>

<sup>67</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1107460/hungary-political-party-preferences/>

<sup>68</sup> <https://www.policysolutions.hu/en/analyses>



union, and advancing visa simplification initiatives<sup>69</sup>. Another area that is positively framed is Türkiye’s role in managing migration pressures, which aligns with Hungary’s domestic narrative<sup>70</sup>. The Hungarian government further underscores Türkiye’s contributions to peacebuilding, particularly its mediation efforts in the Russian war against Ukraine, such as facilitating the Black Sea grain deal<sup>71</sup>.

**Ukraine’s** bid for EU membership is particularly contentious in Hungary, with a dramatic negative shift in public opinion in 2024. While a narrow majority of Hungarians opposed Ukraine’s accession in 2023 (51%), by 2024 the opposition had deepened to an overwhelming 61%. This shift can be attributed to the intensification of anti-Ukrainian rhetoric, primarily driven by the Hungarian government. Among the various voter groups, Tisza Party voters are the least opposed to Ukraine’s accession, though still in the minority (34% support, 53% oppose). Pro-government voters, however, show the most pronounced opposition (73%), which reflects the government’s rhetoric. Similar to the situation with Türkiye, perceptions of Ukraine’s potential EU accession are significantly shaped by the Hungarian

government’s influence through the media. In February 2024, for example, it was reported that Hungarian officials seized 40 tons of supposedly GMO-contaminated maize from Ukraine<sup>72</sup>. This announcement coincided with an increase in unverified reports casting doubts on the quality and safety of Ukrainian agricultural products. Days later, thousands of Hungarian farmers protested at the Ukrainian border against the European Commission’s decision to extend unrestricted Ukrainian agricultural imports, accusing Brussels of endangering Hungarian agriculture and undermining local farmers<sup>73</sup>.

## MAIN ARGUMENTS AROUND UKRAINE’S ACCESSION

### Economy

Based on the expert feedback we collected through interviews, Hungary seems to put more focus on the economic opportunities that will come with the accession of Western Balkan rather than Ukraine. This, however, should not be attributed to the lack of awareness of Ukraine’s market potential. When it comes to Ukraine, there are numerous economic benefits, particularly in the realm of infrastructure and connectivity, recognized by the Hungarian political elites. Ukraine’s geographical

<sup>69</sup> <https://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/fm-cooperation-between-hungary-and-turkey-is-a-real-success-story>

<sup>70</sup> <https://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/fm-turkey-is-key-to-the-security-of-hungary-and-the-eu>

<sup>71</sup> <https://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/facebook-statement-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-6694cec6cf01a>

<sup>72</sup> <https://www.budapesttimes.hu/hungary/agriculture-minister-gmo-contaminated-ukrainian-seed-seized-in-hungary/>

<sup>73</sup> <https://hungarytoday.hu/hungarian-farmers-protest-against-the-extension-of-unlimited-ukrainian-import/>

location positions it as a strategic transit hub, and experts foresee benefits for Hungary in bolstering connectivity with the broader European-Asian markets through Ukraine. A reestablished Silk Road corridor, extending to Hungary, could offer the shortest route for Chinese freight trains bound for Europe. With transit potential, enhanced transportation networks – including highways, high-speed railways, and expanded border crossings – would inevitably follow to facilitate the seamless movement of goods and services.

At the same time, the ruling parties emphasize economic challenges, not opportunities, when commenting on Ukraine's forthcoming EU accession. Fidesz even frames Ukraine's accession as a direct threat to Hungary's economy. One major factor behind this is the competition posed by the scale of Ukrainian agricultural production. Orbán regularly cites concerns over the negative impact on Central European countries, including the increased competition from Ukrainian agricultural products<sup>74</sup>. With a large agricultural sector of its own, Hungary views the influx of Ukrainian goods as a direct threat to its local producers. This sentiment was vividly illustrated by farmer protests across the region, including in Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Hungary, where farmers voiced their discontent with what they see as unbalanced competition from Ukrainian goods. During the protest in February 2024, István Jakab, president of MAGOSZ (Hungarian farmers' association) highlighted that the scale and efficiency of Ukrainian megafarms pose a major challenge. He argued that these farms aim to infiltrate the EU market, potentially reducing subsidies for European farmers by up to 30%, a move that could weaken local agriculture and clear a path for Ukrainian products.

This ties together with the most dominant narrative: Ukrainian membership will harm the EU's financial balance, and "at least nine EU member states, including Hungary, would no longer be eligible for funding and would become net contributors."<sup>75</sup> This message is consistently repeated by Hungarian officials both domestically and internationally and significantly influences the population's views of the forthcoming enlargement. Needless to say, the concerns surrounding Ukraine's EU accession, while valid, are often extremely exaggerated. Fears about the economic burden Ukraine's membership might place on the EU, particularly regarding funding, are not entirely grounded in reality. The EU has mechanisms like the Cohesion and Structural Funds, designed to distribute financial support based on regional needs, ensuring that new members receive assistance without overwhelming the budget.

## Security

The second significant factor is the influence of the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine on the security landscape of the European Union if Ukraine were to join. The Hungarian government maintains the position that Ukraine cannot join the EU while the conflict is still going on. The government's stance is firm on delaying Ukraine's EU membership until peace is restored. Minister Szijjártó emphasized that the EU must avoid importing the risk of war, which is why the current conflict in Ukraine presents a challenge to its accession process.

For Hungary, the issue of European security is less about ideological alignment or shared democratic values, and more about practical factors like economic stability, energy security, and direct national interests. As mentioned above, the Hungarian government has emphasized its interest in supporting the EU membership of the Western Balkans, because it aligns with Hungary's security approach. Closer ties with the Balkans are seen as offering potential economic benefits, energy cooperation, and migration control measures.

The debate around security is also somewhat intertwined with the typical Hungarian sentiment of appeasing Russia. The Hungarian government has maintained strong political and economic relationships with the Russian government, even continuing visits to Moscow during the ongoing war in Ukraine<sup>76</sup>. Hungary's dependence on Russian gas and oil has been used as a key argument by the government, claiming that without this energy supply, the Hungarian economy would collapse. "Whether you like it or not, the reality is that the safe and affordable supply of natural gas to our country is not possible without cooperation with Russia," Péter Szijjártó wrote in his Facebook post<sup>77</sup> after Hungarian MVM and Russian Gazprom signed an additional commercial contract: Russian natural gas will continue to flow to Hungary.

## Minority Issue

The third factor influencing Hungary's stance is the issue of the Hungarian minority in Ukraine. The Hungarian government frequently emphasizes the protection of this ethnic group to justify its critical position towards Ukraine's EU membership. Drawing parallels with Hungary's position on the war, Minister Szijjártó has made clear that until Ukraine restores the rights of the Transcarpathian Hungarian community that were in place before 2015, Hungary will continue to oppose Ukraine's EU accession<sup>78</sup>.

<sup>74</sup> <https://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/pm-orban-hungary-does-not-support-ukraines-eu-accession>

<sup>75</sup> <https://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/fidesz-meps-ukraine-s-eu-accession-could-lead-to-europes-collapse>

<sup>76</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cxw2k9dnjmno>

<sup>77</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/szijasarto.peter.official/posts/1067810741478885?ref=embed\\_post](https://www.facebook.com/szijasarto.peter.official/posts/1067810741478885?ref=embed_post)

<sup>78</sup> <https://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/fm-ukraines-eu-accession-would-bring-war-to-the-bloc>

A key legislative change that was criticized by Hungary is the 2017 Education Law<sup>79</sup>. It is important to mention that the Venice Commission acknowledged Ukraine's efforts to promote and strengthen the role and usage of Ukrainian, but emphasized the need to preserve a sufficient share of subjects taught in minority languages, especially in secondary education. To address these concerns, the Commission recommended extending the transition period for implementing the education law and exempting private schools from these requirements<sup>80</sup>. In response, the Ministry of Education of Ukraine introduced varied educational models for basic and specialized education, ensuring that certain subjects continued to be taught in minority languages. Notably, Ukraine extended the transition period for schools teaching in EU official languages until September 2023. The Language Law<sup>81</sup> (2019) reflected these adjustments. However, the Commission issued additional recommendations<sup>82</sup>, and Hungary continued to strongly criticize the law.

The 2020 Law "On Complete General Secondary Education, Law"<sup>83</sup> and the 2022 Law "On National Minorities (Communities) of Ukraine"<sup>84</sup> aimed to fulfill the recommendations. The Venice Commission positively assessed the adoption of the long-awaited law on minorities, highlighting its compliance with international standards. However, the Commission noted that earlier recommendations regarding Ukraine's education and language laws remain relevant<sup>85</sup>. To address some of the recommendations Ukraine amended these two laws in December 2023. While these efforts were acknowledged, Hungary's reaction remained critical. Péter Szijjártó, after meeting with his Ukrainian counterpart at the time, Dmytro Kuleba, stated that the legislative changes "stopped a negative spiral"<sup>86</sup> but "a long way to go" remains in fully addressing the issue.

From Ukraine's perspective, its legislative changes are seen as an essential tool for strengthening national unity, particularly in the context of the Russian aggression since 2014. The Ukrainian government argues that the laws are not intended to discriminate against minorities but to protect Ukrainian as the state language while still allowing for wide use of minority language<sup>87</sup>. Hungary, however, perceives the law as a violation of the rights of Hungarian speakers in Ukraine.

Discussions between Ukraine and Hungary on the issue have been ongoing. Most recently, on September 30th, 2024, Ukraine's Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha met with Péter Szijjártó in Budapest. Following their talks, Sybiha highlighted "positive dynamics" in resolving matters related to minority rights. Despite the diplomatic efforts, there are still significant challenges ahead in improving relations between the two countries regarding the rights of Hungarian minorities. Hungary is likely to continue raising the issue at a high political level, leveraging it as a strategic tool to further its broader political objectives, including exerting influence over Ukraine's European integration process.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Hungary maintains a pragmatic and strategic approach to EU enlargement, but its stance reflects a marked inconsistency when it comes to different countries. It strongly supports the integration of the Western Balkans, particularly Serbia, Bosnia, and North Macedonia. Hungary's interest in this region is driven by strategic factors, including the region's importance for peace, security, and energy cooperation, as well as economic interests like increasing investments and exports. Additionally, Hungary views the integration of the Balkans as a way to enhance its foreign policy objectives while balancing the influence of Western European powers.

In stark contrast, Hungary's stance on Ukraine's EU membership is markedly different. The ruling Fidesz party under Orbán is opposed to Ukraine's accession. Hungary's concerns stem from multiple factors. First, it fears that an influx of Ukrainian agricultural products could disrupt the EU market and harm local farmers. Additionally, the Hungarian government maintains that Ukraine cannot join the EU while engaged in an active war. Hungary's close economic and political ties with Russia, particularly its reliance on Russian energy, also shape its cautious stance. Finally, ongoing tensions over Ukraine's policies toward its ethnic Hungarian minority have further strained bilateral relations, adding a significant obstacle to Hungary's support for Ukraine's membership bid.

Our recommendations for Ukrainian stakeholders are as follows:

1. **Prioritize promoting cohesion on the EU level.** Several factors may influence Hungary's stance on enlargement, arguably the most important being the level of consensus within the EU itself. If a strong majority of EU countries support a fast-track process for Ukraine or other candidates, Hungary might struggle to maintain its opposition. A unified stance across the EU would put pressure on Hungary to align with the broader direction.

79 [https://mon.gov.ua/npa/law-education#\\_Toc493603844](https://mon.gov.ua/npa/law-education#_Toc493603844)

80 [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD\(2017\)030-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD(2017)030-e)

81 <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/2704-19?lang=en#Text>

82 [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD\(2019\)032-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD(2019)032-e)

83 <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/463-20?lang=en#Text>

84 <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/2827-20?lang=en#Text>

85 [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD\(2023\)021-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD(2023)021-e)

86 <https://apnews.com/article/hungary-ukraine-minority-rights-zakarattia-language-29c4244859b0992d4beacc03450c5d84>

87 <https://bit.ly/4130mLV>

2. **Communicate enlargement benefits directly with the Hungarian population.** It is clear that Hungary could benefit financially from the expansion of the EU, especially to the East, in terms of increased trade, investments, and access to new markets. This is, however, intentionally communicated in a distorted way to Hungarians, as manipulations around enlargement bring short-term political gains. Finding ways to reach the population of the country should remain a priority.
3. **Continue dialogue on minority rights:** As ongoing tensions over Ukraine's policies towards its ethnic Hungarian minority remain a significant issue, dialogue on this matter should be a priority. Efforts should focus on not only ensuring that Ukraine's legislation guarantees the protection of national minorities but also actively and publicly communicating the progress to European colleagues and the Hungarian population. This approach would leave less space for political manipulations around the issue by the ruling Hungarian parties.
4. **Proactively address concerns related to the economy:** Given Hungary's concerns about potential economic disruptions, particularly in agriculture, Ukraine could consider proposing targeted agreements at the EU level that include measures such as quotas, tariffs, or transition periods to mitigate the influx of Ukrainian agricultural products.

# POLAND'S PERCEPTION OF THE ENLARGEMENT OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

## GENERAL STANCE ON THE EU ENLARGEMENT PROCESS

**In Poland, support for the European Union (EU) enlargement prevails both in the government and Polish society.** The experts we interviewed characterized this support as 'openly positive', 'much more liberal', 'more open for relations', 'very open for enlargement' etc.

Poland's approach to EU enlargement prioritizes Ukraine as the key prospect, with Moldova and the Western Balkans being of secondary importance in public discourse. In the case of Moldova, it is mostly the country's relatively small size that makes it less of a priority compared to the larger Ukraine and countries of the Western Balkans collectively; it is also economically less significant for Poland. At the same time, discussions around the Balkans tend to focus on foreign policy priorities rather than economic factors. Historically, the Balkans were largely absent from Poland's strategic imagination of EU enlargement, and it is only now that Southern Europe is starting to penetrate the national debate on the topic. It is safe to say, however, that there's little focus on a broader "big bang" enlargement; the focus is primarily on Ukraine.<sup>88</sup>

In the last decade, Poland has actively advocated for Ukraine's deeper European integration operating mostly through initiatives such as the Eastern Partnership and within the framework of Ukraine's Association Agreement with the EU from 2014. Poland took more proactive Warsaw driven steps too, like organizing the Cox-Kwasniewski mission in 2012<sup>89</sup>, and, more recently, Andrzej Duda's advocacy tour for Ukraine's EU accession in 2022<sup>90</sup>. Since the onset of Russia's invasion, Poland has emerged as a key ally of Ukraine, acting as a major supplier of weapons, advocating for Ukraine's interests on the global stage, and providing refuge for millions of displaced people. Enlargement of the EU and accession of Ukraine into the Union became an even more important part of Ukraine-Poland relations than before.

Drawing on its own experience, Poland wants Ukraine to meet various economic, environmental, and legal criteria, similar to the requirements Poland faced prior to its EU membership. This conditionality is a typical and consistent position across all CEE states: fair accession requires unified rules for both former and current candidates, and the political realities around Ukraine's accession should not influence its technical path to EU membership. For Poland, it is important not to "invite corruption – not just general corruption, but corruption that would hinder growth and prevent equal opportunities."

## THE QUESTION OF ECONOMY

Economic competitiveness, particularly in agriculture, remains a concern for Poland in Ukraine's accession process, as Ukraine's large and competitive agricultural sector could pose a challenge for Polish farmers. The main societal group currently feeling threatened is small and medium-sized agricultural producers, who often rely on monoculture and are heavily protected by the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). The protection of farmers creates a strong emotional response in Poland: the country has a broader deeply rooted concern about food security and a priority to ensure that domestic food production will be maintained. This is best illustrated by the still ongoing protests in Poland: Ukrainian agricultural goods, cheaper in price, easily produced en masse, and unregulated by EU laws, posed a threat to Polish producers, who are bound by the Green Deal and strict fertilizer rules. This led to a lot of instability and will continue to do so in the process of enlargement, if not managed carefully.

This is why Poland advocates for gradual integration that would prevent any sudden disruption to Polish farmers and allow economies to adjust. Poland's government sees these transitional mechanisms as essential to smoothing out economic disparities and ensuring that Ukraine's accession does not harm Poland's agricultural sector in the short term:

<sup>88</sup> [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-adopts-2024-enlargement-package-2024-10-30\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-adopts-2024-enlargement-package-2024-10-30_en)

<sup>89</sup> [https://icps.com.ua/assets/uploads/images/files/ua\\_pl\\_relations\\_icps.pdf](https://icps.com.ua/assets/uploads/images/files/ua_pl_relations_icps.pdf)

<sup>90</sup> <https://www.ukrainianworldcongress.org/polish-president-duda-goes-on-tour-of-europe-to-advocate-for-ukraines-eu-integration/>

” This is the second condition: we cannot support Ukraine’s access to the European Union just like that, unconditionally. We need assurances from the European Union that when Ukraine joins, Polish industry, economy, and agriculture won’t become victims of this accession.

Despite the risks, there was a pragmatic view that Poland should embrace this **competition as an opportunity rather than a threat**, using EU instruments to manage disputes technically. Focusing on short-term economic grievances instead of long-term strategic partnerships could negatively impact Poland’s stance within the EU and reduce its credibility as a leader during the Presidency and later on<sup>91</sup>. There is optimism in our interviewed experts that EU integration could drive Poland’s modernization and create new business opportunities:

” It’s a competition. [...] My personal point of view is that we can’t compete with Ukrainian agriculture producers because they are simply too big. And the structure is different. We should somehow adapt. Trying to use the resources that are coming from Ukraine and proceed this somehow in Poland and make mutually beneficial business out of that.

Another one of the major issues surrounding enlargement is its impact on the EU budget and net recipient status. Poland, as the largest net recipient of EU funds (receiving EUR 8.2 billion in 2023)<sup>92</sup>, is concerned about how it could affect its position. However, some believe that its net recipient status would not be significantly impacted by Ukraine’s accession.

” It will not be as costly as they say. I mean, every assessment I see now indicates that the cost would be about 1% of the EU GDP budget. One percent is manageable; that’s not a problem. This will not change Poland’s overall position as a net recipient of new funds. Given that Ukraine’s GDP is currently on par with Slovakia, this is not a significant amount of money. As a result, most of these funds will still remain with net recipients. (P-03)

Experts from the International Centre for Defence and Security expressed similar skepticism regarding concerns that Ukraine’s potential EU accession would convert all current net beneficiaries into net payers. They concluded that Ukraine’s possible integration into the EU appears relatively manageable, especially considering the ongoing support mechanisms established under the Ukraine Facility Plan<sup>93</sup>. On top of this, Ukraine will have to undergo a long transitional period before it can receive

the same level of agricultural subsidies as existing EU members, similar to Poland’s experience.

Overall, Poland suggests that Ukraine’s EU entry will likely occur between 2028 and 2035, aligning with future EU budgetary frameworks.

” We usually calculate through the prism of EU budgetary frameworks. We did the same during the Polish membership negotiations. It looks like the next EU budget after 2027, covering 2028-2035, will be the budget to prepare the European Union for a launch month. The subsequent budget, after 2035, could potentially be a budget for an already enlarged Union, which gives us a perspective of about ten years.

An important thing to remember until then is that any current or forthcoming economic disputes between Poland and Ukraine are regular in the context of enlargement:

” It’s something both Poland and Ukraine need to get used to because it’s no different than what used to happen between Poland and Germany or France and Spain when these countries were joining the EU. These kinds of disputes are normal in the EU enlargement process, and we shouldn’t make them more political than they are.

Building on this, Ukraine’s journey toward EU membership and adopting the EU’s rules is a game-changer – it’s what will eventually create a level playing field between Ukraine and Poland. The EU integration process is crucial because it gives both sides a framework to work through these kinds of issues.

### Poland’s Role in Ukraine’s Recovery

Another major area for economic cooperation that might become a strong ground for the future is the joint effort of the reconstruction of Ukraine. According to the World Bank calculation, Ukraine’s reconstruction will require almost USD 486 billion<sup>94</sup>, and the number is consistently growing as Russian shelling of peaceful infrastructure continues. In 2023, the Ukrainian president named Poland as Ukraine’s key post-war reconstruction partner<sup>95</sup>; Ukraine’s National Recovery Plan even contains specific initiatives directly connected with Poland. On the political level, there are many signs that the reconstruction of Ukraine might become one of the major focal points of Ukrainian-Polish cooperation<sup>96</sup>. Poland is taking a proactive approach in this direction

<sup>91</sup> <https://www.politico.eu/article/poland-ukraine-protest-losers-shout-down-winners-from-eus-embrace/>

<sup>92</sup> <https://www.pap.pl/en/news/poland-largest-recipient-eu-funds-report-says>

<sup>93</sup> <https://cdn.ceps.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/ICDS-Policy-Paper-Impact-of-Ukrainian-Accession-on-the-EU-Budget.pdf>

<sup>94</sup> <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/en/news/uriad-i-svitoyi-bank-predstavlyi-rdna3-potreby-na-vidbudovu-ukrainy-skladaiut-vzhe-maizhe-486-miliardiv-dolariv>

<sup>95</sup> <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/russia-ukraine-war/ukrainian-president-puts-poland-at-top-of-post-war-reconstruction-partners/2864775>

<sup>96</sup> <https://prismua.org/en/english-prospects-of-ukrainian-polish-cooperation-in-the-context-of-reconstruction-of-ukraine/>

too: a new Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk appointed Paweł Kowal as the Special Plenipotentiary for the Reconstruction of Ukraine. To date, Mr. Kowal facilitated the creation of the Council for Cooperation with Ukraine<sup>97</sup>, which includes representatives from various sectors such as science, business, and government. The council aims to strengthen Polish-Ukrainian relations by fostering partnerships for Ukraine's reconstruction, including a branch in Podkarpacie to support cross-border efforts. Additionally, Kowal has worked to involve Polish businesses in reconstruction, with over 3,000 companies expressing interest, especially in the energy and healthcare sectors, reflecting strong Polish commitment to Ukraine's recovery.<sup>98</sup> Despite these practical steps, the experts emphasized the concrete plans for the role of Poland in the reconstruction are far from being finalized, and Polish counterparts, including Mr. Kowal, are actively seeking expert advice on the matter, which opens room for discussion.

What remains unclear is the scope of Poland's role in Ukraine's post-war reconstruction. Some experts believe Poland will play a leading role, while others argue it will have lesser involvement. Most of the interviewees adopted a balanced view, recognizing Poland's potential but also the limitations attributed to resource constraints compared to larger powers like the United States. Poland is likely to contribute as a subcontractor to larger international projects rather than leading major reconstruction efforts. It is also understood that Poland's role should be in some more niche areas where it can bring the most added value (e.g., rebuilding city transportation).

What is important to remember is that Polish investments in Ukraine have been strong historically, and there is potential for continued engagement as the business climate improves. There will be potential in agriculture, transportation, IT, small and medium enterprises cooperation. Especially given the fact that there is a substantial number of Ukrainian businesses already present in Poland, about 600 Polish companies operating in Ukraine, and around 1 million Ukrainians who fled their country due to the war settled in Poland. Poland "... can leverage our know-how and the deep understanding that Poles have of the situation in Ukraine. Additionally, we can make use of our network."

### Poland as Part of the Larger European Debate

A significant debate within the European Union concerns whether enlargement should precede internal reforms or vice versa. Poland belongs to the camp that advocates for enlargement first, arguing that the Union should focus on incorporating new members like Ukraine before undergoing major internal reforms. Ukraine's

integration process, according to the experts, should not be held hostage to internal EU reform discussions (like agricultural policy, voting systems, and representation in EU institutions, etc.). From the Polish perspective, EU enlargement, including Ukraine's accession, can advance without formal treaty changes, to potential delays. There seems to be consensus that both Ukraine's reforms and EU adaptations should proceed in tandem, coming together at the end of the process to ensure smooth integration without unnecessary delays.

” The EU should adapt to this next wave of state changes, as suggested by many different politicians within the EU and the European Commission. We need to somehow change ourselves to have the absorption capacity to integrate Ukraine, which is much larger than Montenegro, for example. ... We should be cautious, and I believe that what we should do is make these two processes parallel: the EU is changing and reforming while Ukraine is also reforming, adopting, and opening and closing chapters, clusters, and so on.

Interviewees also addressed the debate around potentially offering new countries partial membership. They emphasized the importance of granting Ukraine full EU membership rather than a partial or phased integration. They argue that full membership is essential for aligning Ukraine with EU standards and regulations, which would create a level playing field between Ukraine and existing EU members like Poland. This alignment is viewed as crucial for reducing economic tensions. There is little discussion in Poland about scenarios other than Ukraine joining the EU, with the consensus being that integration is essential for security and stability in the region.

**Poland's upcoming presidency of the European Union in 2025 is seen as a key opportunity to streamline Ukraine's accession process.** This presidency could provide Poland with the leverage to push forward chapters of Ukraine's EU negotiations that are ready for opening. However, it is also acknowledged that the overall process will take time and must be carefully managed to ensure compliance with EU standards.

### POLITICAL LEVEL

Polish-Ukrainian relations have deteriorated over the past two years, characterized by a growing lack of trust and ineffective communication. This is often exacerbated by radical political rhetoric, predominantly on the Polish side, fuelled by Ukraine seemingly not paying enough attention to Poland as a partner. Among the most acute issues are the historical question of the Volyn Massacre and disputes over grain exports. Despite the ongoing tensions, the experts we interviewed remain positive that when it comes to making the decision about letting Ukraine into the European Union, Poland will be in favor.

<sup>97</sup> <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/31065>

<sup>98</sup> [https://common-future.pl/media/zmrppqdy/en\\_stan-na-05-10\\_common-future\\_agenda\\_2024.pdf](https://common-future.pl/media/zmrppqdy/en_stan-na-05-10_common-future_agenda_2024.pdf)



On the domestic level, Polish political parties continue demonstrating a strong consensus in supporting Ukraine's EU accession. The centrist Civic Platform (PO) members have highlighted Ukraine's candidacy for the European Union as an opportunity to strengthen the EU's borders and enhance regional stability<sup>99</sup>. The right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) emphasizes Ukraine's role as a buffer against Russian aggression and prioritizes accelerated reforms to facilitate integration. This stance is also reflective of PiS's broader foreign policy, which seeks to strengthen Eastern Europe's defense against Russia while ensuring Ukraine's integration into Western structures like the EU<sup>100</sup>. The progressive Left (Lewica) and pro-European Poland 2050 (Hołownia's movement) advocate for robust EU financial and institutional support to assist Ukraine in meeting accession criteria. Despite differences in framing, most major parties recognize Ukraine's membership as a geopolitical necessity for regional stability<sup>101 102</sup>.

On the EU level, voting records of Polish Members of the European Parliament (MEP) on key EU resolutions regarding Ukraine also reveal a strong unified stance in support of Ukraine's integration. Polish MEPs have consistently backed resolutions that promote Ukraine's alignment with EU standards, such as those related to the reconstruction and sustainable integration of Ukraine post-conflict<sup>103</sup>. As one MEP remarked, "Ukraine's future lies within the European Union, and we must support them in every possible way"<sup>104</sup>. They have also supported the key resolutions related to military aid, financial support, and sanctions against Russia; 88% of Polish MEPs voted in favor of the recent September resolution on Continued financial and military support to Ukraine by EU member states.<sup>105</sup>

## PERCEPTION OF ENLARGEMENT IN POLISH SOCIETY

While there is a consistent pro-enlargement consensus among the core political parties, there has been a slight change socially. The experts attribute this change to, first and foremost, an acute and often-debated **issue of the Volyn tragedy**, largely discussed in the media. The society still remains generally pro-enlargement but in the case of Ukraine, some conditionality is forming. And this conditionality is directly related to the historical issue at hand.

<sup>99</sup> <https://nweasterneurope.eu/2024/03/11/polish-approach-to-the-transatlantic-and-european-ambitions-of-ukraine-north-macedonia-and-moldova-a-reality-check-of-public-debate/>

<sup>100</sup> <https://www.politico.eu/article/pires-face-choice-over-their-countrys-standing-in-europe/>

<sup>101</sup> <https://eu.boell.org/en/2024/06/03/polands-political-marathon-navigating-road-2024-eu-elections>

<sup>102</sup> <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13523270701674624>

<sup>103</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> <https://www.pap.pl/en/news/poland-presents-joint-statement-ukraines-eu-access-talks>

<sup>105</sup> <https://howtheyvote.eu/votes/169676>

” The Ukrainian side should finally admit that UPA committed a crime, a war crime, or maybe even genocide in Volyn in 1943 because it's a hard topic for Polish society. It was, it is and it will be. We can't change it. So this is condition number one. It's emotional, right?

The interviewees emphasized the importance for Ukraine of being mindful of the problem of the Volyn massacre, as it could easily sway public sentiment when the time of a referendum on Ukraine's EU membership comes:

” ... at the end of the day, in most countries, there will be a requirement to hold a referendum. If Ukraine is thinking about joining the EU, it needs to work with all 27 member states – and their societies. You can easily imagine what the result of a referendum in Poland would be if historical issues were not resolved. For example, if those issues remain unresolved and there's an accession treaty, a referendum in Poland could easily result in a “no” vote. This is why the government says that resolving these issues will be a requirement.

What is also important in this context is that at the top-political level, this issue is also very much influencing the relationship between the countries. Ukrainian-Polish relations notably deteriorated between 2015 and 2016 due to disputes related to the Volyn massacre. These disputes escalated into political actions, including Poland's establishment of the National Day of Remembrance of the Victims of the Genocide of the Citizens of the Polish Republic Committed by Ukrainian Nationalists<sup>106</sup>, and accusations of anti-Polish sentiment in Ukraine<sup>107</sup>. In response, Ukraine suspended permissions for searches and exhumations of Poles buried in Ukraine<sup>108</sup>. The tensions continue to this day, with some progress finally achieved now that Ukraine allowed the exhumations. However, if not careful, the Polish political parties might continue further politicizing the issues, which directly impacts the perception of Ukraine among their voters.

Another thing that might play a role in the future referendum and is currently changing the perception of Ukraine in Poland for worse, is a slight gap in strategic communications on Ukraine's side. Some of the statements made by Ukrainian political figures, including President Zelensky's speech in New York at the United Nations General Assembly<sup>109</sup> and former Minister of Foreign Affairs Dmytro Kuleba's statement in Olsztyn<sup>110</sup>

<sup>106</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National\\_Day\\_of\\_Remembrance\\_of\\_the\\_Victims\\_of\\_the\\_Genocide\\_of\\_the\\_Citizens\\_of\\_the\\_Polish\\_Republic\\_Committed\\_by\\_Ukrainian\\_Nationalists](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Day_of_Remembrance_of_the_Victims_of_the_Genocide_of_the_Citizens_of_the_Polish_Republic_Committed_by_Ukrainian_Nationalists)

<sup>107</sup> <http://archiwum.polradio.pl/5/38/Artykul/333974>

<sup>108</sup> [https://lb.ua/news/2017/06/20/369645\\_ukraina\\_zapretila\\_polskim.html](https://lb.ua/news/2017/06/20/369645_ukraina_zapretila_polskim.html)

<sup>109</sup> <https://kyivindpendent.com/there-can-be-no-just-peace-without-ukraine-zelenskys-full-speech-at-the-un-general-assembly/>

<sup>110</sup> <https://unn.ua/en/news/kulebas-statement-about-ukrainian-territories-caused-a-political-uproar-in-poland-tusk-and-ukraines-foreign-ministry-react>

Box 1.

**EU supporter vs skeptics in Poland: portraits**

**Supporters of the EU and its enlargement** tend to be more liberal, particularly among the younger generation. They argue that the EU is essential for global competitiveness, as individual countries struggle to succeed alone in the contemporary geopolitical landscape. Supporters' belief is that unity strengthens their position, making them more resilient and able to compete effectively. Pragmatic benefits of EU membership include increased wealth, ease of travel, economic prosperity, geopolitical stability, and greater work opportunities.

EU skeptics often argue that EU membership compromises national sovereignty, claiming that countries are forced to follow 'directives from Brussels' **and are** 'dominated by German influence'. They may view the EU as a form of 'German expansionism'. This sentiment is reflected at both societal and political levels, as politicians' views often mirror public opinion in a democracy. While it is normal to have diverse opinions in a democratic society, the discourse surrounding the EU has become increasingly polarised, raising concerns about the implications of such divisions.

were badly received in the Polish society. Statements of this kind get widely picked up in the Polish media and become a matter of nationwide discussion. And while it might seem like they make sense on the political level, they often bring harm to the societal one.

As for the **enlargement in general**, the support for it varies slightly among EU supporters and skeptics (Box 1) and is directly tied to the perception of the Union in Poland. According to the state research agency CBOS<sup>111</sup> Polish support for the EU in 2024 has declined to 77% following a historically high approval rate of 92% in 2022. This is the lowest level of support since 2013 (even though it remains high relative to other European countries). Although Polish support for EU membership has generally been stable in the two most recent parliamentary elections – 2015 and 2019 – the Law and Justice Party, which tends to continue multifaceted conflicts with the EU, has received overwhelming support from Polish voters, which is, after all, quite telling<sup>112</sup>.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Poland's support for Ukraine's EU accession is driven by both strategic security concerns and the desire to strengthen regional stability. From Poland's perspective, Ukraine's integration into the EU is critical not only for its own future but also for the broader security of the European continent, particularly given the ongoing threat posed by Russia. Polish political unity across party lines underscores the importance of Ukraine's accession, although challenges remain, particularly related to economic adaptation and historical grievances. Despite these issues, Poland's stance is overwhelmingly supportive, with the aim of facilitating Ukraine's integration while ensuring that Poland's interests, particularly in agriculture, are safeguarded through transitional mechanisms. Effective communication and collaboration will be key to ensuring that Ukraine's path

to EU membership aligns with Polish interests while fostering trust and partnership.

1. **Address Historical Grievances Proactively:** It remains important to acknowledge and engage in dialogue over sensitive historical issues, such as the Volyn Massacre, to build trust with Polish society and ensure public support for Ukraine's EU membership, especially in the context of a potential referendum.
2. **Foster Economic Cooperation:** It is worth exploring potential ways around upcoming economy-related disputes now: leverage the ties that already exist, develop joint economic initiatives to address concerns about competition in agriculture and other sectors, and explore ways to make Ukrainian exports mutually beneficial, such as leveraging Polish processing capabilities for Ukrainian goods.
3. **Build a Stronger Connection with Poland:** Ukrainian political leaders need to pay more attention to Poland – not just as a neighbor, but as a key ally. Taking time to understand what's happening in Poland, including its political landscape and societal concerns, can help avoid public missteps that often spark strong emotional reactions. Treating Poland as a valued partner, rather than focusing solely on larger players like the U.S. or Germany, will go a long way in improving relations and fostering trust.

<sup>111</sup> <https://notesfrompoland.com/2024/04/29/polands-support-for-the-eu-lowest-in-over-a-decade/>

<sup>112</sup> <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/soeu-2022-0054/html>

# ROMANIA'S PERCEPTION OF THE ENLARGEMENT OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

## GENERAL STANCE ON THE EU ENLARGEMENT PROCESS

Romania – the South-Western neighbour of Ukraine is an important stakeholder in the process of European enlargement and the European integration of Ukraine. The country itself is a recent EU member state (joined the EU on January 1, 2007) and has an institutional memory of the accession negotiations. Also, it has achieved high results in a number of areas which gives it a chance to be labelled as a relative success story of European integration.

Joining the EU, and establishing transparent and clear standards and “rules of the game” made the Romanian agricultural market attractive for investments and big players. The county’s agricultural sector provides jobs for over 23% of the Romanian workers, which is the highest percentage of people employed in agriculture in the EU. Romania is also one of the countries with the highest share of farmers over 65 years (44.3%).<sup>113</sup> While initially the agricultural sector was lacking investments and faced a deficit of innovative approaches, following the EU accession the major agricultural companies entered Romania. Meggle, Smithfield Foods, Bunge, Cargill, Glencore, and Lactalis currently operate in Romania.

In addition, Romania is in the same group as Estonia, Poland, and Slovakia in terms of the developed technological and start-up market for this important and sensitive segment of the market.

Romania could enter the top ten economies of the European Union (EU), and in the next ten years the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) could reach 700 billion euros, thirty times more than in 1994, according to forecasts from ING Bank Romania.<sup>114</sup> The Economist’s intelligence unit notes that Romania has been a bright spot on a rather dismal European landscape, and real GDP growth is set to rebound in 2024 and remain strong by EU standards in 2025-28.<sup>115</sup>

The chances of being fully integrated into the Schengen zone are growing. On November 22, 2024, Austria agreed to lift its veto against Romania and Bulgaria’s full accession to the Schengen Area.<sup>116</sup>

The government also has high expectations regarding joining the eurozone in the coming years. Romanian authorities have set a target to adopt the euro between 2027 and 2028<sup>117</sup> although it may require substantial reforms and consistent efforts to align with the eurozone’s criteria.

Romania’s growing influence within the European Union suggests it could have an important share in shaping the bloc’s future policies, particularly concerning enlargement. This stance aligns with its firm support for Ukraine’s accession to the EU, reflecting Romania’s belief that expansion is essential for ensuring European stability, security, and peace. Rooted in its own successful integration experience, Romania views EU membership as a transformative force for societal and economic progress. Across political elites, civil society, academia, and media, there is still a strong consensus on the strategic and moral imperatives of enlargement. As one Romanian interviewee put it:

” Romania is unanimous on this topic... we consider that enlargement is one of the most important policies of the EU.

To ensure this position remains irreversible, it is worth examining Romania’s argumentation and monitoring the evolving geopolitical dynamics in Bucharest, particularly as the EU faces a complex and shifting political landscape which is reflected by the elections in 2024 (both at the national level in the EU member states and at the level of the European Parliament).

<sup>113</sup> [https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/cap-my-country/cap-strategic-plans/romania\\_en](https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/cap-my-country/cap-strategic-plans/romania_en)

<sup>114</sup> <https://www.agerpres.ro/english/2024/10/15/ing-bank-report-romania-s-gdp-could-double-in-next-ten-years--1370912>

<sup>115</sup> <https://country.eiu.com/romania>

<sup>116</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/7805349d-2406-495a-b50b-b2bdaad5c78e?utm>

<sup>117</sup> <https://seenews.com/news/romania-aims-to-adopt-euro-in-2027-2028-enter-schengen-this-year-pm-1185343?utm>

### Ukraine, Moldova, and Regional Cooperation

Romania has always prioritized the Republic of Moldova's European integration as a strategic and cultural need. President Klaus Iohannis reiterated this pledge, saying that Romania is committed to assisting Moldova's route to EU membership and that the country is still a strong supporter of the EU's expansion process. This dedication is further evidenced by the joint declaration signed by Presidents Iohannis and Maia Sandu on August 31, 2024<sup>118</sup>, aimed at enhancing Moldova's resilience and advancing its EU integration efforts.

Moldova's geopolitical position, bordered only by Romania and Ukraine, underscores the importance of regional stability for its European aspirations. Problems in the Transnistrian area, a breakaway entity inside Moldova's borders with close links to Moscow, could be made worse by an unstable Ukraine. Moldova faces serious security threats as a result of this instability, which also makes the country's EU integration process more difficult. Romania's strategic interest in maintaining a safe and secure area, which is essential for Moldova's own European future, is thus in line with its support for Ukraine's EU membership. By advocating for Moldova's and Ukraine's EU integration, Romania aims to foster a cohesive and secure Eastern European region.

Apart from its dedication to the Republic of Moldova, Romania's approach to EU enlargement is also shaped by pragmatic national calculations. Romania greatly lessens its own security concerns by endorsing the EU's inclusion of both Moldova and Ukraine, especially given the unstable Eastern European environment. The possibility of a Russian attack against Moldova is a crucial factor to take into account. Romania would be put in a difficult situation by such a development. A strong response might be beyond Romania's current capacity and present further dangers.

” Imagine what would happen, if Moldova were under such pressure like Ukraine is now. That would put Romania in a very delicate position because we would not be really able to do something about that. We always repeat that we will always be there for Moldova, but we don't want to have in Moldova a Ukrainian scenario, not even close, not even half of it, because it would put the political establishment in Romania in a very, very awkward position.

Moldova's integration into the EU offers a strategic solution to this dilemma. Within the EU, any threat to Moldova would become a shared responsibility of the entire bloc, effectively reducing Romania's unilateral burden. This approach is consistent with Romania's broader security strategy, allowing it to defend Moldova's accession as a moral imperative and a practical necessity. In essence, facilitating Moldova's

EU membership provides Romania with a cost-effective means of strengthening its neighbor's security without requiring the development of alternative, potentially more expensive, and complex defense mechanisms. This dual rationale underscores why Romania remains a staunch supporter of EU enlargement.

” Even the more populist parties have critical considerations, but they never say explicitly we have to put an end to enlargement. Especially in the case of Moldova.

There are perspectives suggesting that Moldova's EU integration might proceed at a faster pace compared to Ukraine. This is attributed to Moldova's smaller size, lower population, and certain practical advantages, such as the fact that the *acquis communautaire* – the body of EU laws and regulations – has already been translated into Romanian, Moldova's official language. These factors could streamline the technical and administrative aspects of the accession process.

” It is easier due to the size to have Moldova on board faster than Ukraine. Unfortunately, this is a fact of life.

However, this potential advantage for Moldova does not diminish Romania's unwavering support for Ukraine's EU integration. Bucharest remains committed to advancing the European aspirations of both countries, recognizing that their membership would collectively strengthen regional stability and security. Romania's position reflects its strategic interest in fostering a cohesive and prosperous Eastern Europe, where the integration of Ukraine and Moldova into the EU serves as complementary, rather than competing, objectives.

### Regional Cooperation

Romania is a firm advocate of regional cooperation, actively engaging in and hosting key initiatives such as the Bucharest Nine (B9) and the Three Seas Initiative (3SI). In September 2023, Bucharest hosted the 3SI Summit and Business Forum, bringing together leaders from 12 EU member states to enhance cooperation in transportation, energy, and digital sectors. During the summit, Greece was welcomed as the 13th participating state.<sup>119</sup>

Additionally, the Bucharest Nine (B9), a group of NATO's Eastern flank countries co-founded by Romania and Poland in 2015, serves as a platform for Eastern European NATO members to coordinate security policies, especially in response to regional challenges.

Bucharest acknowledges that the inclusion of Ukraine and Moldova in regional frameworks and eventually into the European Union could significantly bolster the

<sup>118</sup> <https://www.moldpres.md/en/news/2024/08/31/24006768>

<sup>119</sup> <https://ine.org.pl/en/outcomes-of-the-2023-bucharest-three-seas-initiative-summit/>

influence of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) within the EU. It sees this as an opportunity to enhance regional connectivity, economic cohesion, and collective security. However, Romania treads carefully in supporting this expansion to ensure it does not fuel perceptions that regional initiatives are designed to oppose or undermine Western Europe.

Such concerns are not unfounded. The Three Seas Initiative (3SI), for instance, has sometimes been viewed by Western European states as a platform predominantly driven by Poland to amplify its regional influence. Arguably, this perception was intensified after former U.S. President Donald Trump attended the 3SI summit in Warsaw in 2017, and delivered his controversial speech<sup>120</sup>, which created unease regarding the initiative's broader geopolitical implications.

Romania, while supportive of strengthening the CEE region's role in the EU, is acutely aware of the risks of such perceptions. A misstep could lead to a division within the EU, especially if a new U.S. administration were to exploit the ambitions of some CEE states to deepen divisions between Eastern and Western Europe. Consequently, Romania's strategy is twofold: to enhance the region's influence within the EU while avoiding any overt confrontation with the core Western European states.

” ...there is the question of how Western Europe will perceive this accession, this dual Poland-Ukraine alliance, which can become a force at the European level [although] of course Romania can be aligned to this kind of alliance.

Romania's cautious approach to EU enlargement is mirrored in the perspectives of the Project's interviewees, who emphasize the importance of avoiding new imbalances within the Union. This sentiment extends to the role of Ukraine in its accession process. While engaging with Western European states is crucial for Kyiv's EU ambitions, it is equally important for Ukraine to maintain strong and constructive relationships with its neighboring states, including Romania.

” Ukraine has done a great thing by bilateral diplomacy with Germany, France, and other important political actors on the European scene. But also, my recommendation is they should have a more active, proactive approach regarding Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Cyprus, Malta... And of course, Ukraine has a lot of things to offer Romania.

” I know that Ukraine sees more value in developing relations with Western Europe. But a lot of roads towards Brussels, like it or not, go through Romania.

Kyiv, therefore, faces the challenge of crafting a balanced and nuanced strategy that not only addresses the expectations of Western Europe but also considers the interests and concerns of its immediate neighbors. Such a strategy is vital to ensure that Ukraine's accession contributes to strengthening the EU rather than introducing further divisions. Romania, as a neighboring state, highlights this need for equilibrium, advocating for an integration process that respects the cohesion and unity of the EU while enhancing regional stability and cooperation.

## ROMANIA'S POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

In 2024, Romania underwent a comprehensive electoral cycle, including local, European, parliamentary, and presidential elections. The outcomes reaffirmed the dominance of pro-European, Western-oriented parties (PSD, USR, PNL, and UDMR) in the Romanian parliament<sup>121</sup>. These parties have consistently demonstrated unwavering support for Ukraine's European integration and have facilitated military assistance, including the provision of Patriot missile systems, as well as established channels for Ukrainian imports.

However, the political landscape has shown signs of shifting. The parliamentary elections on December 1, 2024, revealed significant gains by far-right parties, such as the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), S.O.S. Romania, and the Party of Young People (POT). This development indicates a growing nationalist sentiment that could potentially influence Romania's foreign policy and its support for Ukraine. The anti-elitist movements may transform the anti-EU arguments they currently utilize into anti-enlargement sentiments.

Despite these challenges, Romania's commitment to supporting Ukraine remains evident. The government approved the donation of a Patriot missile defense system to Ukraine<sup>122</sup>, reinforcing its role as a key ally in the region. Additionally, Romania has facilitated the transit of Ukrainian grain exports through its Black Sea ports<sup>123</sup>, providing critical support to Ukraine's economy amid ongoing conflicts.

Romania's political system has demonstrated considerable resilience in the face of Russian meddling, maintaining its commitment to democratic principles and its pro-European trajectory. Despite attempts at interference, particularly during the recent electoral cycle, Romanian institutions, civil society, and the media have shown an ability to identify and counter external threats effectively.

<sup>120</sup> <https://quilllette.com/2017/07/09/trumps-warsaw-speech-defending-west-defending-illiberalism/>

<sup>121</sup> <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-12-04/romanian-pro-eu-parties-agree-coalition-to-stave-off-far-right>

<sup>122</sup> <https://www.romania-insider.com/romanian-president-clears-patriot-donation-ukraine-2024>

<sup>123</sup> <https://www.voanews.com/a/romania-aims-to-double-ukrainian-grain-transit-capacity-/7224981.html>

For example, during the 2024 elections, allegations of Russian influence – particularly through disinformation campaigns on social media platforms – prompted swift action from Romanian authorities and European institutions. The Constitutional Court’s by its decision annulled the first round of the presidential elections, citing evidence of coordinated Russian efforts to manipulate public opinion.<sup>124</sup>

Also, the decision-making process in the field of foreign policy remains sustainable and is really impacted by the political agenda of certain parties:

” Our political leaders, when it comes to fundamental foreign policy decisions, are restrained... the system [of checks and balances] controls our leaders.

## MAIN ARGUMENTS AROUND ENLARGEMENT

There is a notable consensus across Romania’s political spectrum supporting EU enlargement, with no significant opposition from mainstream political parties. Even populist and right-wing groups, such as AUR, have moderated their rhetoric under the influence of European party affiliations. This reflects on public opinion: a 2023 survey revealed that 72% of Romanian respondents favored the EU’s enlargement to include additional countries, placing Romania among the top supporters of enlargement within the Union.<sup>125</sup>

For mainstream political forces in Romania, the arguments in favor of EU enlargement include a pragmatic recognition of the investments already made in Ukraine. The concept of being “too big to fail” resonates strongly, considering the substantial efforts and resources dedicated to supporting Ukraine’s economy, rebuilding infrastructure, and ensuring stability. The financial and political capital invested by both Romania and the EU makes Ukraine’s integration a logical next step to safeguard these investments and prevent destabilization.

Moreover, Ukraine’s potential contribution to the EU’s security dimension serves as a compelling argument. Ukraine already possesses a well-trained and experienced military, trained through years of war, with advanced weaponry and operational readiness. Its inclusion in the EU would not only enhance the bloc’s collective security but also strengthen its defense capabilities in a strategically critical region.

However, the path to EU membership for Ukraine must be accompanied by strict conditionality, particularly regarding necessary reforms. While Ukraine’s military strength and strategic importance are undeniable,

integration into the EU requires alignment with its values, standards, and institutional frameworks. This is especially critical in the security sector, which must undergo significant reforms to ensure transparency, accountability, and alignment with EU norms.

” You can’t afford to have a big country that you supported with money, that you supported with weapons, that learned how to use all those weapons on, and not having, for instance, democratic control of armed forces and intelligence service or a suitable rule of law or a remarkable way of fighting corruption, so on and so forth.

The prevalence of both moral and pragmatic arguments in Romania’s stance underscores its steadfast support for Ukraine’s EU integration. Guided by the ethical imperative of solidarity with a neighboring country under threat and pragmatic considerations such as regional stability it is highly unlikely that Romania would question Ukraine’s integration trajectory or exercise a veto during the process.

” I don’t think that there are problems that could not be solved between Romania and Ukraine. But at this moment, I do not see how Romania could veto Ukraine’s accession talks to the European Union.

Romania, like Poland and other EU member states, has expressed concerns about the impact of Ukraine’s strong agricultural sector on local farmers. While not as vocal as Polish protests, Romanian farmers have raised issues about competition and the need for transitional measures to protect domestic markets.

” There are politicians who use populist rhetoric... especially regarding agriculture and farmers.

Economic disparities between Ukraine and existing EU members necessitate safeguards during the integration process, including transitional periods for compliance with EU standards in agriculture, trade, and environmental policies.

## STANCE ON EU TRANSFORMATION

Romania’s stance on EU reform reveals a certain dualism, reflecting both aspirations for a more effective Union and concerns about potential imbalances. Romanian experts widely agree that EU enlargement and reform should progress simultaneously, as the integration of new members must be accompanied by adjustments to ensure the Union’s functionality. However, the substance of these reforms raises critical questions.

On one side, there is frustration with the current unanimity requirement, which allows individual countries, like Hungary, to veto crucial decisions and stall collective action. This has fueled support for changes that would enhance decision-making efficiency, such as shifting toward qualified majority voting in certain areas.

<sup>124</sup> <https://apnews.com/article/romania-election-president-georgescu-court-585e8f8f3ce7013951f5c7cf4054179b>

<sup>125</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1404319/future-eu-enlargement-public-opinion/>

On the other hand, there is apprehension that such reforms could disproportionately empower larger member states, particularly Germany and France, thereby undermining the principle of equality among EU members. Romanians fear this could lead to a structural imbalance within the Union<sup>126</sup>, marginalizing smaller and mid-sized states like Romania in favor of a concentration of influence in Western Europe.

## PERCEPTION OF ENLARGEMENT IN ROMANIAN SOCIETY

The topic of EU enlargement is not widely discussed within Romanian society. This can be attributed, in part, to a general lack of specific knowledge about the complexities surrounding the issue including the specific political, economic, and legal processes, which are often not readily accessible to the public. Another reason is the consideration of risks coming from Russia:

” We are Russophobic, yes, but we also recognize that Russia is a powerful actor in the neighborhood. Therefore, it’s important to tread carefully and sometimes remain silent – you never know how things might unfold.

Additionally, Romania’s mainstream political parties’ cautious stance contributes to the poor public discourse on this issue. Aware of the lack of consensus within the EU and the political sensitivity of the topic, these parties maintain a low profile on the matter. By avoiding public discussions, they seek to avoid unnecessary criticism from opposing political factions or skeptical segments of the population.

This cautious approach, however, carries significant risks. While the topic of EU enlargement remains largely absent from the public debate, populist forces, often influenced by external actors such as Russia, could seize the opportunity to bring it into the spotlight. By framing the issue through a critical or divisive lens, they could manipulate public sentiment, turning it against the mainstream pro-European consensus.

In such a scenario, leading political forces may find themselves on the defensive, forced to react to a debate they have avoided shaping. Arguably, adopting a proactive stance with a clear, pro-enlargement agenda could yield better outcomes. By initiating and leading public discussions, mainstream parties could educate the public, counter misinformation, and build a stronger consensus around the benefits of enlargement. A proactive approach would not only neutralize the populist narrative but also strengthen Romania’s position as a champion of EU integration for Ukraine and Moldova, reinforcing its role as a regional leader.

” You really need to have discussions with society and to touch upon these very sensitive issues.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Romanian interest in strengthening the region of Central and Eastern Europe, natural security concerns, understanding of the benefits of the EU enlargement (based on its own recent experiences), and geographical proximity of Romania to the candidate countries - Ukraine and Moldova – makes the country an important stakeholder in the process of European integration.

The long-term commitments to support the Republic of Moldova grounded on cultural, historical, and linguistic similarities, alongside the pragmatic calculations of security and economic benefits ensure unwavering support for the integration of the Republic of Moldova. The same motivation applies to the Romanian stance on the EU integration of Ukraine. Prioritization of integration prevails over minor bilateral tensions and remains one of the pillars of the sustainable foreign policy of Romania.

The process of integration should go in line with the process of the EU’s decision-making reform, although here Romanian government and society have a two-fold position. While recognizing the inefficiency of the decision-making process which can be stumbled by the ‘veto’-right of a single member state, Romanians fear that the reform and switching to a majority system might disbalance the EU granting more influence to the Western powerhouses while neglecting the sovereignty of smaller member-states.

The same ambivalence can be noted in assessing the potential of the CEE region and promoting regionally driven initiatives. While recognizing the necessity to promote the region within the EU and to strengthen its say in European affairs, Romania seeks to support equilibrium in East-West relations within the EU, avoids confrontation with the Western capitals, and supports the primacy of solidarity principles.

The aforementioned facts prove that Romania is and will remain a strong supporter of European enlargement and may contribute significantly to the accession of Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova. Avoiding confrontation with Western capitals, Bucharest might not take the lead in advocating the process of European integration of its Eastern neighbors, but it will definitely belong to the coalition of states that won’t veto the integration since it corresponds with the Romanian national interests grounded both on moral imperatives and pragmatic calculations.

However, to guarantee the sustainability of the current course Romania has to focus on public outreach, highlighting the benefits of EU enlargement for both the country and the region. Open discussions can help counter populist narratives and reinforce public support.

<sup>126</sup> <https://rejournal.eu/sites/rejournal.versatech.ro/files/articole/2014-05-10/2304/je202520-20dumitriu20stefanescu.pdf>

The recent events also suggest that both political elites and civil society in Romania and in the region should develop strategies to address the potential rise of anti-enlargement rhetoric, ensuring that public discourse remains constructive and aligned with Romania's strategic interests. In this regard, it is worth working with Romanian stakeholders to highlight the mutual benefits of Ukraine and Moldova's EU membership, fostering public support and dispelling misconceptions.

Considering Romania's experience and know-how to navigate the complexities of EU accession, particularly in sectors like governance, agriculture, and judiciary reform can be of added value.

Last but not least, Ukraine and Moldova should invest more efforts into cultivating stronger ties with Romania by strengthening bilateral cooperation, focusing on shared interests and coordinated efforts in trade, infrastructure, and EU advocacy, and showcasing a united approach to shared threats.



# SLOVAKIA'S PERCEPTION OF THE ENLARGEMENT OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

## GENERAL STANCE ON THE EU ENLARGEMENT PROCESS

Spring 2024 marked Slovakia's 20th anniversary as a member of both the European Union (EU) and NATO. It's a milestone that invites celebration, yes, but also reflection. Two decades in, Slovakia boasts a unique vantage point on EU enlargement – a perspective shaped by its own bumpy road to membership and its evolving identity as a member state.

The Slovak experience of EU accession wasn't a smooth one. The split of Czechoslovakia in 1993 put Slovakia on a separate path from its neighbors. Negotiations for EU membership began early, but the political turbulence of the Mečiar years (1994–1998) brought the process to a grinding halt. Mečiar's tenure became synonymous with democratic deficits that left Slovakia out in the cold, both from EU integration and NATO enlargement in 1997. This exclusion sparked a profound national reckoning – a kind of identity crisis that eventually culminated in political change. When Mikuláš Dzurinda took over as prime minister in 1998, the focus shifted to catching up with regional peers like the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary. By 2004, Slovakia had joined the EU and NATO, but the sting of earlier exclusion remained a defining feature of its political memory.

This history fundamentally shaped Slovakia's attitude toward EU enlargement. As a country that experienced exclusion, Slovakia adopted an empathetic approach to aspiring member states:

” The attitude of Slovaks, after joining the EU, was that we need to help any country aiming to join. We understand that some countries may face political or other difficulties, but we need to be advocates for them. From the time Slovakia joined the EU, all political groups included in their governmental programs the priority of helping the people of the Eastern Partnership and the Western Balkans. We aimed to share lessons, advocate for them, and influence Western European elements.

Yet, Slovakia's role as an advocate has not been without its contradictions. Officially, Bratislava remains a steadfast supporter of EU enlargement. While the official line is resolute, Slovakia has struggled with strategic coherence in its enlargement policy<sup>127</sup>. Beyond repeated affirmations of support, Bratislava has often failed to articulate a clear roadmap for turning its advocacy into actionable influence. Instead, Slovakia has leaned on well-meaning but generalized calls for reform and alignment. This gap between aspiration and strategy leaves Slovakia's role in the process somewhat undefined, despite its genuine commitment.

The main principle of Slovakia's approach to EU enlargement is as follows: the candidates should be evaluated based on merit, their completion of reforms, and their alignment with the *acquis communautaire*. The country seems to follow through on this. When Bulgaria was blocking the integration of North Macedonia and wanted to add a historical criterion to the accession process, Czechia and Slovakia strongly refused to endorse it. “The text ... contained elements, including the notion of falsifying history, that in our view would be hugely detrimental to the enlargement process and could potentially bring about further complications,” they said.<sup>128</sup> The countries emphasized commitment to objective criteria that will help avoid the politicization of the process.

### Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia

Russia's aggression has brought the EU's neighborhood policies into sharp focus, amplifying the stakes of integration for countries like Ukraine and Moldova. Slovakia, sharing a border with Ukraine, is acutely aware of these dynamics. While domestic political instability has complicated Bratislava's ability to project a unified foreign policy voice, its position on Ukraine's EU aspirations has remained firm. Prime ministers past and present – whether Dzurinda, Radičová, or even the often-controversial Robert Fico – have all voiced support for

<sup>127</sup> [https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2024-08/EU%20Enlargement%20Discourse%20in%20Slovakia\\_0.pdf](https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2024-08/EU%20Enlargement%20Discourse%20in%20Slovakia_0.pdf)

<sup>128</sup> <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/12/18/czecks-slovaks-reject-bulgarias-historical-twist-to-enlargement-criteria/>

Ukraine's European integration, despite divergent views on other issues like NATO membership or Russia<sup>129</sup>. The position on the matter is consistent on the EU level too: when the EU granted Ukraine candidate status in 2022, Slovakia was among ten member states unequivocally in favor of the decision. Slovakia's support goes beyond symbolic gestures. The Heger government proposed creating a "Group of Friends of European Integration of Ukraine" to assist with the complex accession process. This initiative aimed to divide responsibility for the 30 sectoral chapters of the EU single market among supportive member states, making the process more manageable.

More recently, State Secretary Marek Eštok again reaffirmed Slovakia's stance, and in February 2024 actively backed the European Commission's recommendations for Ukraine, Moldova, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Georgia<sup>130</sup>. He has praised the progress made in the integration processes of Ukraine and Moldova<sup>131</sup>. Slovakia has welcomed the convening of the first Intergovernmental Conferences with these countries, marking the start of formal accession talks.

Ukraine is currently capturing most of Slovakia's attention in the context of enlargement:

” ... in the case of Western Balkans or Moldova, the topic of enlargement is not so much the topic for public discussion, but more for business people and specialists, diplomats, politicians. There is less attention paid to it than in the case of Ukraine. We are not neighbors.

Recent developments in bilateral relations also underscore Slovakia's strong backing for Ukraine's EU integration. At a recent meeting in Uzhhorod between Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico and Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal, Fico reiterated Slovakia's unconditional support for Ukraine's European path<sup>132</sup>. This builds on earlier commitments made by the previous Slovak government under Eduard Heger, which had formalized multiple intergovernmental agreements that, among other things, would help Ukraine better integrate with the EU<sup>133</sup>. These agreements predated the war and Ukraine's formal application for EU membership but laid critical groundwork for Slovakia's active role in the accession process.

<sup>129</sup> <https://hnonline.sk/svet/96153005-jedenast-krajin-eu-ziada-otvorit-pristupove-rokovania-s-ukrajinou-a-moldavskom>

<sup>130</sup> [https://www.mzv.sk/en/web/szbrusel-en/pressreleasedetail?p\\_p\\_id=sk\\_mzv\\_portal\\_pressrelease\\_detail\\_portlet\\_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p\\_p\\_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=20015052](https://www.mzv.sk/en/web/szbrusel-en/pressreleasedetail?p_p_id=sk_mzv_portal_pressrelease_detail_portlet_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=20015052)

<sup>131</sup> [https://www.mzv.sk/en/web/szbrusel-en/pressreleasedetail?p\\_p\\_id=sk\\_mzv\\_portal\\_pressrelease\\_detail\\_portlet\\_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p\\_p\\_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=23457123](https://www.mzv.sk/en/web/szbrusel-en/pressreleasedetail?p_p_id=sk_mzv_portal_pressrelease_detail_portlet_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=23457123)

<sup>132</sup> <https://kyivindependent.com/shmyhal-fico-meeting/>

<sup>133</sup> <https://slovakia.mfa.gov.ua/news/denis-shmigal-ta-eduard-heger-obgovorili-aktualni-pitannya-ukrayinsko-slovackoyi-spiivpraci-v-ramkah-oficijnogo-vizitu-ochilnika-slovackogo-uryadu-v-ukrayinu>

Moldova has similarly benefited from Slovakia's support, with Bratislava urging the opening of negotiations to accelerate its EU accession process<sup>134</sup>. It does not, however, enjoy the same level of attention as other candidate countries. Moldova is a bit of a "terra incognita" for Slovaks: economically and culturally, it is much farther away from Slovakia compared to Ukraine or the Western Balkans, and the intensity of Slovakia's relationship with Moldova is less prominent.

While Georgia's EU membership prospects remain stalled, Slovakia continues to advocate for Georgia's pro-European orientation, emphasizing the importance of maintaining progress despite current setbacks<sup>135</sup>. Slovakia's position will depend on the outcome of the current protests in Georgia.

### Western Balkans

Slovakia's engagement with the Western Balkans is deeply rooted in history, culture, and diplomacy. Slovak officials frequently cite linguistic and cultural ties, historical connections, and a shared legacy of transition as motivators for their support. Slovakia's ethnic minorities in Serbia and Croatia also provide an important bridge between the countries.

Since joining the EU, Slovakia has focused much of its diplomatic energy on the Western Balkans, playing an active role in shaping the EU's policies toward the region. Slovak leaders have supported milestones such as Montenegro's independence referendum in 2006 and the opening of Croatia's EU accession talks in 2005. Bratislava was the first to ratify Croatia's accession treaty<sup>136</sup>. During its 2016 presidency of the Council of Europe, Slovakia prioritized Western Balkan enlargement, reflecting its commitment to these aspirants' European integration<sup>137</sup>.

The expertise and experience of Slovak diplomats have further enhanced Bratislava's influence in the region. Miroslav Lajčák, Slovakia's former foreign minister, has held several high-profile roles, including EU Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue. The late Eduard Kukan also contributed significantly as the UN Secretary-General's special envoy for the Balkans<sup>138</sup>. Slovakia is also a founding member of the "Friends of the Western Balkans" initiative, launched by Austria in 2023, which aims to reinforce the EU accession

<sup>134</sup> <https://hnonline.sk/svet/96153005-jedenast-krajin-eu-ziada-otvorit-pristupove-rokovania-s-ukrajinou-a-moldavskom>

<sup>135</sup> [https://www.mzv.sk/en/web/szbrusel-en/pressreleasedetail?p\\_p\\_id=sk\\_mzv\\_portal\\_pressrelease\\_detail\\_portlet\\_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p\\_p\\_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=49877250](https://www.mzv.sk/en/web/szbrusel-en/pressreleasedetail?p_p_id=sk_mzv_portal_pressrelease_detail_portlet_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=49877250)

<sup>136</sup> <https://www.sabor.hr/en/press/news/slovak-parliament-first-ratify-croatias-eu-accession-treaty>

<sup>137</sup> [https://dgap.org/system/files/article\\_pdfs/2014\\_06\\_dgapanalyse\\_slovakia\\_www\\_final.pdf](https://dgap.org/system/files/article_pdfs/2014_06_dgapanalyse_slovakia_www_final.pdf)

<sup>138</sup> <https://www.gmfus.org/news/v4-and-eu-enlargement-advocates-limited-influence>

prospects of countries in the region. It has greatly promoted the opening of accession talks with Bosnia and Herzegovina<sup>139</sup>. While the economic benefits of Western Balkan enlargement are modest – collectively, the region’s GDP equals that of Slovakia – Bratislava views integration as essential for regional stability and security.

## SLOVAKIA’S POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

When it comes to EU enlargement, Slovakia’s political scene surprises with its near-unanimity. From 1998 onwards, the country’s governments – regardless of who’s been in power – have consistently included support for the Western Balkans and Eastern European countries in their foreign policy priorities. To this day, all major political actors hold the same position.

Robert Fico’s **Smer-SD** dominates Slovakia’s political map and brings plenty of contradictions to the table. Fico’s public persona often leans on populist narratives, with skepticism about NATO, pointed critiques of Ursula von der Leyen, and an overtly cautious stance on Ukraine’s military support. Yet, despite this, Fico and Smer consistently support Ukraine’s EU aspirations; the same applies to Peter Pellegrini’s **Hlas**. This duality is telling. Leaders of these two parties seem to know that, for all the populist posturing, Slovakia’s long-term interests align with European integration. While their rhetoric can sound anti-Western, their actions in support of enlargement suggest a more pragmatic calculation.

On the opposition side, the message is clear and consistent: enlargement is non-negotiable. **Progressive Slovakia** and the **Christian Democratic Movement** are vocal advocates for expanding the EU, framing it as a way to stabilize the region and anchor Slovakia more firmly within Europe.

The only potential wild card in Slovak politics is the far-right **Republika** which holds about 7% of support. Their position on EU enlargement is harder to pin down – they’ve been conspicuously silent on the matter and focused on more typical issues for Slovakia, like migration.

## MAIN ARGUMENTS AROUND ENLARGEMENT

Enlargement offers significant economic opportunities for Slovakia – this is a widely recognized and undisputed opinion in the country. On the EU level, the integration of new member states will boost intra-EU trade, strengthen the bloc’s economic clout on the global stage, and provide Slovakia with tangible macroeconomic benefits.

On the bilateral level, there are multiple areas where deeper cooperation could be very effective and align with Slovakia’s economic interests. In the case of Ukraine, it is the energy sector that is particularly important. Cooperation in the energy sector has been discussed for many years and continues to progress even during the war<sup>140</sup>. Slovak industry stakeholders already operating in some neighboring countries and view Ukraine as a potential new market. Access to vast resources is also seen as promising, as Slovakia is currently trying to attract investors to build new factories in sectors like renewables and batteries for electromobility. Easier access to strategically important resources in Ukraine could increase Slovakia’s attractiveness as a location for such investments.

There is potential for regional development too. Slovakia suffers from significant regional disparities between its western and eastern parts. The western part, closer to Austria and the Czech Republic, develops much better and attracts more investment. Meanwhile, Eastern Slovakia, which borders Ukraine, struggles due to its marginal position on the EU’s external border. This part of the country has long faced underdevelopment and stands to gain significantly from increased cross-border trade and additional funding. Comparisons have been drawn to Austria’s eastern regions, which saw substantial economic benefits following Slovakia’s EU accession in 2004.

The long-term benefits of enlargement extend beyond economics. Enlargement offers Slovakia opportunities to strengthen its regional and international positioning. Post-war reconstruction in Ukraine presents a chance for Slovak industries to participate in rebuilding efforts, particularly in infrastructure, energy, and manufacturing. Overall, the consensus was well captured by one of our experts:

” It is in our national interest to have Ukraine as part of the European Union. This membership would provide an economic impetus for the development of Slovakia.

What is important is that these benefits need to be communicated clearly and continuously. The events of the last year have shown that it is very easy to politicize economic matters, even if they are temporary. Agriculture has proven a contentious issue, with Ukrainian grain exports causing tensions in Slovakia and neighboring states. Slovak farmers have protested what they perceive as unfair competition, and concerns have been raised about market distortions<sup>141</sup>. Such developments were not surprising to some of our experts:

<sup>139</sup> [https://www.mzv.sk/en/web/szbrusel-en/pressreleasedetail?p\\_p\\_id=sk\\_mzv\\_portal\\_pressrelease\\_detail\\_portlet\\_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p\\_p\\_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=22487506](https://www.mzv.sk/en/web/szbrusel-en/pressreleasedetail?p_p_id=sk_mzv_portal_pressrelease_detail_portlet_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=22487506)

<sup>140</sup> <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/en/news/ukraina-ta-slovachchyna-pohlybliuit-spivpratsiu-u-sferi-enerhetyky-ta-infrastruktury>  
<sup>141</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/18/ukraine-to-sue-poland-slovakia-and-hungary-over-grain-ban-politico>

” If someone tells us that we have to accept everything just because of the open market, populists will use all Ukrainian agriculture products, and some segments of Slovak society will not like it.

The cargo transport sector also expressed its grievances around Ukraine: it faced some unique difficulties that came with the start of the war and the opening of the EU market for Kyiv. A key issue is that currently, these companies do not have access to the insurance they need to work in Ukraine, while Ukrainian drivers can continue to operate without issues, thus creating uneven competition. Experts seem to believe that this is a challenge that will resolve itself with the establishment of peace. Post-war stability would enable banks and insurers to re-enter the market, restoring a level playing field for Slovak and Ukrainian transport companies.

Agriculture, however, will continue to be an acute issue as the integration of Ukraine goes on. Slovak farmers worry about market competition from Ukraine, particularly given their reliance on EU subsidies under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), as well as on the cohesion funds. They fear that not only will they lose the funding they have been getting but also that an unprepared Slovakia could suddenly shift from being an EU budget net beneficiary to a net contributor. The resolution of this issue remains an unclear perspective. The redistribution of the budget will have to happen; it is necessary if the Union wants to include Ukraine, Moldova, and the six Western Balkan countries. Now in the EU, however, there is no clear understanding of how this redistribution will work, thus exacerbating anxieties in countries like Slovakia.

An additional issue that has not shown itself yet is the free movement of labor. Even though many Ukrainians are already working in Slovakia, it has not caused any public backlash yet. However, this is an issue that could be easily politicized, especially by nationalist and populist forces, and will most likely get exploited in the future.

## STANCE ON EU TRANSFORMATION

Slovakia has consistently benefited from the current EU framework, particularly through agricultural and cohesion funding, and is reluctant to support reforms that might diminish these advantages. As a net beneficiary of the EU budget – not the largest, but still significant – Slovakia is not opposed to the restructuring of the EU budget only if it does not affect cohesion or agriculture. Any reform that might lead to reduced financial inflows is unlikely to gain traction in Bratislava. It is important for Slovakia that the revision of the EU budget takes into account the need for infrastructure development in the border areas with Ukraine<sup>142</sup>, but at the same time, Slovakia does not support proposals to increase the budget or create new EU-wide resources.

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<sup>142</sup> <https://bit.ly/4hkNOFu>

This same resistance extends to other structural reforms within the EU. Slovakia is firmly opposed to removing the veto power in areas where it still applies, particularly in foreign policy. The Slovak government views the veto as a critical safeguard of national sovereignty, a stance frequently reinforced in public discourse. The idea of transitioning to qualified majority voting (QMV) in sensitive areas like foreign policy is framed as a direct threat to Slovakia’s ability to protect its interests within the Union. Such reforms, while arguably necessary to facilitate a large-scale enlargement, are categorically rejected by the current government, which has used sovereignty as a rallying cry in domestic political campaigns.

One of the institutional issues central to these debates is the future of the European Commission and the principle of one commissioner per member state. Slovakia, like other smaller EU countries, views this principle as crucial for ensuring representation in Brussels. Although alternatives such as rotating strong portfolios or introducing deputy commissioner roles have been discussed, these ideas have not gained significant traction in Bratislava<sup>143</sup>. Protecting the current structure is seen as integral to safeguarding Slovakia’s voice in the EU’s decision-making processes.

The veto is another contentious point. “The priority of the Slovak Republic in the Union is to protect our national and state interests and promote the preservation of the right of veto in areas where it is still possible to use it,” detailed Minister Blanár, permanent representative of the Slovak Republic to the European Union.<sup>144</sup> While the previous Slovak government had shown some openness to creative compromises – such as limiting the frequency of veto use or exploring models like those proposed by Belgium and Germany – the current administration has taken a much harder line. For the current government, preserving the veto is non-negotiable and framed as essential for defending national sovereignty.

This tension is also evident in Slovakia’s relationship with the current European Commission. Slovak MEPs, particularly from Robert Fico’s Smer party, did not support Ursula von der Leyen’s Commission during its approval vote. Smer representatives either voted against or abstained<sup>145</sup>. Fico and his party have openly criticized von der Leyen for perceived shortcomings and have expressed skepticism about her leadership, particularly in handling peace efforts related to the war in Ukraine<sup>146</sup>. This criticism extends to other EU leaders, such as Estonia’s Kaja Kallas, whom Fico has described as too hawkish. This is an early indicator that potential propositions from the Commission on enlargement will be immediately rejected or received with high skepticism on the Slovak side.

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<sup>143</sup> <https://bit.ly/3ErqVh>

<sup>144</sup> <https://bit.ly/3Q6TneE>

<sup>145</sup> <https://bit.ly/3EnWgFs>; <https://bit.ly/3Q5XdF1>

<sup>146</sup> <https://bit.ly/4hmkwXe>

## PERCEPTION OF ENLARGEMENT IN SLOVAK SOCIETY

While the country's political elites and expert community broadly support Ukraine's EU aspirations, the general public remains detached from the enlargement discussion. Recent polls suggest that only 47% of Slovaks support further expansion of the Union. This lukewarm reception reflects a broader trend of growing Euroscepticism, with just 48% of Slovaks viewing EU membership positively, compared to the EU average of 52%. Given this trend, engaging the public more on enlargement might be difficult, as the nation is more or less taken by domestic issues.<sup>147</sup>

The Slovak government's position on Ukraine complicates public perception of the enlargement. As one of our experts remarked:

” ... people supporting the governing coalition parties don't seem to be against enlargement. However, I don't think this is sustainable in the long term because the government is saying all sorts of things about the current Ukrainian leadership. Over time, this could shift public perceptions of enlargement. So far, though, they haven't presented it as a problem, unlike Ukrainian membership in NATO, which supporters of the governing parties would likely oppose.

Indeed, while officially supporting Ukraine's EU membership, the government has echoed rhetoric similar to that of Hungary's Viktor Orbán, expressing skepticism about Ukraine's leadership and policies and damaging the perception of Ukraine long-term. Additionally, despite the support for Ukraine's EU aspirations, the process is already becoming somewhat politicized. Nationalist and populist parties are starting to leverage fears about labor migration and competition in agriculture.

Ukrainian stakeholders also face challenges in managing perceptions. Some of the experts mentioned that statements by Ukrainian officials projecting rapid accession timelines, such as fulfilling EU criteria within two years, come across as overambitious to Slovaks and negatively influence their perception of Ukraine as a candidate.

While there is little conditionality around the accession of Ukraine in Slovak society, some issues remain. Slovakia's historical relationship with Ukraine is relatively limited, primarily shaped by shared borders and the Transcarpathian region. What is stunning, however, is that the issues related to the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) and Stepan Bandera, problematic in Ukraine-Poland relations, find their resonance in Slovakia too, even though there is no direct historical connection.

These topics, often amplified by Soviet-era propaganda, evoke mixed negative emotions regarding Ukraine among Slovaks. Articles about Bandera or perceived far-right symbolism in Ukraine continue to resonate, adding a layer of complexity to public sentiment.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As Slovakia celebrates 20 years in the EU, it stands as both a success story and a cautionary tale. Its journey underscores the transformative potential of EU membership, but it also highlights the challenges of sustaining momentum and coherence in enlargement policy. For Bratislava, the task ahead is clear: to translate its history of empathy and advocacy into a more strategic and impactful approach to EU integration. The stakes are high – not just for Slovakia, but for the future of a Europe still grappling with the meaning and boundaries of its union.

Ukraine has to meet Slovakia halfway and build robust strategies to navigate the bilateral complexities around the enlargement process. Ukrainian stakeholders should prioritize targeted actions across diplomatic, societal, and economic dimensions.

### 1. Strengthen the Narrative of Mutual Benefit

- **Link Ukraine's Reconstruction to Regional Development:** It should be clearly articulated how Ukraine's EU membership would benefit neighboring countries, especially Slovakia. The Ukrainian government should emphasize opportunities for Slovakia's less-developed eastern regions, such as increased trade, investment, and cross-border infrastructure projects.
- **Highlight Shared Economic Gains:** Showcasing Ukraine's potential contributions to the single market, including key sectors like agriculture, energy, and renewables, might bring down tensions around the potential harm Ukraine's integration might bring.
- **Identify Beneficial Niches:** One must work with Slovak stakeholders to identify areas where Ukrainian production can complement Slovak industries, such as agriculture, energy, and electromobility.

### 2. Build Societal and Cultural Bridges

- **Foster Cultural Exchange:** It is important to use cultural initiatives to present Ukrainians as familiar neighbors with shared values and histories to counter-narratives that portray Ukrainians as outsiders.
- **Address Historical Sensitivities:** Engaging historians and cultural institutions to provide balanced explanations of contentious historical topics, such as the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, will help dispel lingering Soviet-era propaganda and misunderstandings.

### 3. Engage Diverse Stakeholders in Slovakia

- **Expand Partnerships Beyond Traditional Allies:** It is important to move beyond pro-Western NGOs to include trade unions, regional organizations, and

<sup>147</sup> [https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2024-08/EU%20Enlargement%20Discourse%20in%20Slovakia\\_0.pdf](https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2024-08/EU%20Enlargement%20Discourse%20in%20Slovakia_0.pdf)

other influential groups that can shape Slovak public opinion and political discourse, and highlight how Ukrainian industries can complement Slovak businesses, creating win-win scenarios for cross-border economic growth.

- **Create networks of Ukrainians in Slovakia:** Mapping Ukrainians working in different structures (e.g., universities) will strengthen the advocacy effort within the country. Currently, the network is practically non-existent and does not realize its potential.

#### 4. Leverage Slovak Expertise

- **Learn from Slovakia's Accession Journey:** Actively seeking Slovak guidance on harmonizing legislation with the EU acquis and implementing sectoral reforms will go a long way, as the country is prepared to share its experiences if it is given the opportunity. Moreover, Slovakia has a unique experience of unevenly transitioning from a post-socialist economy to an EU member, which may in many ways apply to the case of Ukraine.

**Maintain Consistency in Bilateral Agreements:** It is a must to explore the option of continuing to work on implementing agreements signed under previous administrations, such as sectoral harmonization efforts. This will ensure continuity and formalize the partnership without extra effort.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR ACTION

The complexity of the problem of European enlargement demands complex solutions which should consider the multifaceted political landscape in the EU and in separate members states, the shaky equilibrium between the interests of the Western and Eastern European states, and the balance of empathic and pragmatic approaches.

The path of CEE states to membership was marked by rigorous reforms, societal transformations, and the need to balance national interests with European expectations. At the same time it was propelled by the political will of the EU member states, international politics, pragmatic calculations of the big players. The candidate states, including Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova most probably will face the same challenges and only similar combination of factors will eventually lead to accession. While expecting this outcome, the candidate countries have to get prepared though and there are a few practical steps that already are to be considered to neutralize the obstacles and utilize favorable conditions.

This historical experience makes the **CEE states more empathetic toward the aspirations of candidate countries like Ukraine, Moldova, and those in the Western Balkans**. This experience shapes their attitude towards accession process, when, on the one hand, **they are eager to support reforms and to share experience**. However, on the other hand, bearing in mind their own experience and concessions they've made, these countries are **less willing to accept the idea of unconditional and accelerated accession**. Rather they may assist in supporting reforms than accept bypassing them because of political reasons.

In this regard **the government of Ukraine should prioritize comprehensive reforms and make sure deliverables are well communicated with the governments of CEE states in bilateral dialogue**. Besides, utilizing the CEE states' accession experience can be of added value. Therefore seeking for technical assistance and knowledge sharing, requesting consultations on the issues of legal harmonization and public administration reforms, engaging in training and capacity-building programs can be beneficial for Ukraine.

Also, EU accession remains a peripheral topic in public and political discourse within CEE states, reflecting an

elitist perception of the complex accession process and framing enlargement as an issue predominantly managed by political elites. This **limited engagement with broader society presents a potential risk, as populist movements may exploit anti-EU sentiments** to further their agendas – a vulnerability that Russia is likely to fuel through disinformation and propaganda. To address this challenge, **it is crucial for the Ukrainian government to adopt proactive measures aimed at fostering public support for EU integration, countering populist narratives, and mitigating external influence**.

Preventing such scenario can be possible by launching **targeted public diplomacy campaigns** emphasizing common democratic principles and political and cultural ties with CEE nations rooted in common interests and challenges. Utilizing digital platforms effectively to reach young people, working with civil society organizations and journalist networks, publicizing bilateral success stories and partnerships may **enhance public awareness on the process of European integration, prevent populists from labelling it as purely elitist process**, assist in countering populist narratives and Russian disinformation.

Pragmatic arguments can effectively garner support from specific segments of CEE society. Eastern regions bordering Ukraine, which currently face economic stagnation, are particularly vulnerable. These areas, marked by poverty and limited economic opportunities, become easy targets for manipulation by Russian propaganda and domestic populist movements. **To prevent the weaponization of these vulnerabilities, it is essential to engage with local communities and leadership, emphasizing the tangible benefits of EU enlargement for these regions**. Building alliances with the populations in these areas around shared expectations for enlargement can not only make the prospect of EU integration more appealing to CEE countries but also reduce the influence of populist forces that thrive on misinformation and manipulation in these fragile regions. **The potential of the partnerships built in the process of implementation of the EU's cross-border cooperation programs can be essential in this regard**.

Given Ukraine's size and developmental needs, its accession would drastically expand the pool of eligible regions, creating a scenario where current member states might receive less funding or even lose funding altogether. In order to counter this argument, both CEE countries and candidate state should advocate new funding mechanisms by **pushing for an expanded EU budget for enlargement and supporting reforms that focus on efficiency and impact rather than geographical quotas, focus on co-developing projects that benefit both Ukraine and neighboring EU states, support the idea of temporary compensation mechanisms for member states that might lose funding during the transition.**

Ukrainian agricultural products are cheaper due to lower production standards, less stringent regulations, and lower labor costs. This creates a competitive imbalance for EU farmers, who are bound by higher costs to meet EU regulations. For countries like Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary, where agriculture plays a significant role in the economy, the influx of cheaper Ukrainian products could undermine local markets and lead to protests, similar to those already seen during the temporary opening of EU markets to Ukrainian goods. Ukraine can partner with neighboring EU countries to co-develop export strategies targeting new markets in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. This collaboration can help distribute agricultural products more evenly, reducing market saturation in the EU and providing mutual economic benefits. **The idea that is worth discussing is developing a collective brand that emphasizes the quality and safety of agricultural products from the CEE region, enhancing competitiveness in global markets. Creating platforms (e.g. Cross-Border Agricultural Committees) for continuous dialogue between Ukrainian and EU farmers to address concerns, share best practices, and develop joint responses to common challenges can be part of the solution. Obviously, these steps are to be accompanied by active engagement in EU forums to contribute to policy-making processes, ensuring that the interests and perspectives of Ukrainian agriculture are considered.**

Last but not least **Ukraine should actively engage in discussions about EU reform, recognizing that this process is crucial for ensuring a functional and inclusive European Union that can successfully accommodate new members.** Such engagement can be reached by mobilizing its academic and policy-making experts to join ongoing debates about EU reform, and supporting the discussions initiated by France and Germany, and further developed within a Weimar Triangle.

**Ukraine's experience with Russia's aggression makes it a critical voice in discussions about the future European security order.** Here Ukraine can be an active stakeholder if not a driving force for

**advocating for a security framework that integrates candidate countries and strengthens collective defense mechanisms,** bridges security reforms with the enlargement ambitions, initiates both EU and non-EU cooperation aimed at enhanced security in Europe.

Ukraine has already established successful models of bilateral cooperation, such as meetings between the prime ministers and cabinet members of Ukraine and neighboring countries, and even joint sessions of the Cabinets of the neighbouring countries. Expanding this formula to include more regional and EU-wide discussions can be helpful in building coalitions with like-minded countries, amplifying Ukraine's voice in shaping EU policies and reforms. **Variety of such coalitions may balance the uncertainty surrounding CEE states' commitment to EU enlargement, and increase Ukraine's chance for accession through the diversified approach rather than relying solely on any single ally or bloc of countries.**

Meanwhile, CEE countries will need to engage with EU institutions and candidate countries to address concerns around funding, competition, and market access. Ensuring that enlargement does not disproportionately disadvantage current members will be key to maintaining public and political support. These concerns are not insurmountable, but they require careful management, clear communication, and policies that balance the needs of both existing and prospective member states.





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Enlargement is currently a peripheral topic for all CEE countries and does not dominate the national political debate. The issue is expected to get more and more politicised as the accession process progresses, thus requiring Ukrainian stakeholders to start preparing the ground for negotiations on the expected issues now.



The member states that joined the EU during the 'Big Bang' enlargement of 2004, often perceived as having entered the Union for predominantly political reasons, now adopt a demanding stance toward candidate countries, emphasizing the full implementation of EU accession requirements.



Agriculture and access to cohesion funds are the most sensitive areas in Ukraine's EU accession process. The CEE countries, largely dependent on the EU financial support under CAP and cohesion policy, fear losing their net beneficiaries statuses.