

# EU Enlargement: Exporting Stability or Importing Instability?

Despite the security risks involved, there can be no going back on the EU's commitment to a renewed enlargement process. Professor **Michael Leigh** outlines what steps policymakers need to take to fulfil the EU's aspiration of securing stability.

European Union membership negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova are due to start this spring. Bosnia and Herzegovina has edged forward in the queue, and Georgia's not far behind. There's talk of Montenegro joining the EU by 2030. The EU has re-launched the enlargement process in record time because of the precarious geopolitical situation in Europe. This is meant primarily to express solidarity with Ukraine after Russia's invasion and signal to Vladimir Putin that Brussels rejects any notion that Ukraine, its neighbours or the Balkans form part of a Russian sphere of influence.

## Impact on EU security: Ukraine's vulnerability could become the EU's

The EU's offer of eventual membership to Kyiv is intended to bolster the security of both Ukraine and the European Union. Yet the true implications of Ukraine's potential membership for European security have been largely ignored. Security would not be enhanced by admitting a country partly occupied by a hostile foreign power. On the contrary, Ukraine's vulnerability would become the EU's vulnerability if it joined without concluding a peace treaty with Russia and without obtaining NATO guarantees. The EU could stipulate that a peace treaty is a precondition for membership, but this would be handing a veto to Vladimir Putin. A peace treaty is unlikely when fighting finally stops, given the two sides' diametrically opposed war aims. A ceasefire or armistice are probably the most that can be expected. Skirmishing could continue after the war has ground to a halt.

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Russian-occupied territories comprise 20% of Georgia's national territory and Transdniestria in Moldova is a Russian-sponsored pseudo-state. The EU's Cyprus experience should be a warning about taking in a new member whose government does not fully control its national territory and which comprises an unrecognized separatist authority. This greatly complicates the EU's relations with Turkey and is the main political constraint on EU-NATO cooperation. A similar situation with Ukraine would expose the EU to much greater security risks. Passing over this issue in silence stores up problems for the future.

Before Russia's invasion, there had been no question of offering Ukraine (or its neighbours) an EU membership perspective. This was among the pretexts that the pro-Russian Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich used to refuse to sign the association agreement with the EU in 2013. The "Euromaidan" demonstrations, their violent repression, Yanukovich's flight to Russia and the annexation of Crimea followed. The association agreement, still lacking a membership perspective, was signed in 2014 by the new Ukrainian government.

The EU changed its position after Russia's attack on Ukraine because enlargement is its main foreign policy carrot, while sanctions are its main stick. Yet offering membership talks without a comprehensive impact assessment amounts to "betting the house" on a highly uncertain prospect.

The EU insists that progress in membership talks is "merit based." Negotiations are meant to start with issues like human rights, the rule of law, the fight against corruption and judicial independence. But the candidates still face profound governance challenges quite apart from the war and Russian occupation. Just before the EU recognized Ukraine as a candidate for membership in June 2022, French President Emmanuel Macron [told](#) the European Parliament that accession might take decades. If negotiations eventually succeed, France, and probably several other member states, will hold a referendum on EU expansion, a notoriously unpredictable way to seek public consent.

### Impact on EU decision-making: caught between a rock and a hard place

Analysts sympathetic to Ukraine's membership bid [minimize](#) its likely impact on the EU budget and major policies. But the Commission has [recognized](#) in its March 2024 communication that enlargement calls for internal reforms as well as a thorough review of EU policies. However, the EU's enlargement methodology, which was not designed for countries in the precarious situation of the present candidates, remains largely unchanged and should also be updated.

Expansion to as many as 36 countries, including Balkan aspirants, would transform the EU and make decision-making much more difficult. So, there have been calls to abolish the veto right of individual states in the few sensitive areas where it remains. But several smaller EU countries cling to the veto to protect their interests. Even the governments most avid for Kyiv's accession, to prevent Russian encroachment, are appalled at increased imports of Ukrainian farm products. Poland has led the campaign for import restrictions on Ukrainian agricultural products.

In light of these risks and uncertainties, the EU is considering proposals for gradual, step-by-step membership long advocated by think tanks. Increased financial assistance, joining the EU's single market and access to EU agencies could make the waiting room more comfortable.

But candidates might view this as a distraction from full membership, their main goal. More than twenty years ago, then Commission president Romano Prodi [offered](#) them, to little avail, "a stake in the internal market" and participation in "everything but institutions". Today such piecemeal progress has little appeal to Ukraine, a country engaged in a proxy war to protect not only itself but Europe as a whole.

### No going back: essential steps towards shared stability

The EU's commitment to further enlargement, mainly intended to strengthen European security, seems unequivocal. Yet many ambiguities and contradictions remain. What, then, is to be done?

Above all, the EU and its member states should be unstinting in economic and military assistance to Ukraine, especially if aid from the United States dwindles.

There can be no going back on the EU membership path, despite the hasty way it began and the security risks involved. Several EU governments sought to postpone the

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start of accession negotiations until after the European Parliament elections in June, fearing that this would be unpopular with voters. Yet Eurosceptic and anti-immigration views are likely to strengthen their position in the elections. Hungary, under its Moscow-leaning government, will take over the EU Council's rotating presidency in July. So, if enlargement is deemed important for Europe's future stability and prosperity, membership talks should begin without delay.

The EU should face down farm lobbies, demanding restrictions on imports from Ukraine. When the fighting stops, the EU will be a major contributor to the country's reconstruction. This assistance should be designed to help Ukraine meet European green, digital and single market standards.

Good communications about enlargement, countering fake news spread by Russia and its minions, will be essential to maintain public confidence. The emphasis in the negotiations should be on concrete deliverables from both sides. The accession process should be reversible in the event of democratic backsliding.

If these recommendations are followed, the EU can fulfil its aspiration to be an exporter of stability rather than an importer of instability.



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