

The EU opens accession talks with Ukraine and Moldova

Krzysztof Nieczypor, Marta Szpala

On 14 December, the European Council decided to open accession negotiations with Ukraine & Moldova, and to grant Georgia candidate status. Despite the threat of a veto, Hungary eventually abstained (Prime Minister Viktor Orbán left the meeting room during the vote). At the same time, Budapest's objections meant it was not decided to revise the multiannual financial framework, the main element of which was to grant €50 billion in aid to Ukraine. The European Council is expected to return to this issue early next year.

The adoption of a negotiating framework with Ukraine and Moldova – the convening of the first intergovernmental conference (IGC) formally opening the negotiations – would depend on Kyiv and Chişinău meeting all the conditions formulated by the European Commission (EC). The EC's report on the matter is expected in March 2024, but the Council has not set a specific date when it will be considered.

Commentary

- This decision confirms the EU countries' readiness to take a strategic approach to the European integration of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova. The firm stance adopted by the majority of countries on this issue made it possible to overcome the Hungarian threat of a veto and reach a decision quickly. The day before, the EC unblocked part of the funds for Hungary which had been frozen (€10.2 billion from the Cohesion Fund). However, Budapest will probably try to negotiate further concessions in order to resolve subsequent issues concerning Ukraine; these may include getting as much funds as possible from the amount currently frozen by the EU (around €20 billion).
- The next step will be to adopt a negotiating framework with Ukraine and Moldova. This will also require unanimity, and will have to take place before the first IGC, when negotiations will start and a screening process (a review of domestic regulations to ensure their compatibility with EU legislation) will be initiated. At the same time, the issue of integration has been closely linked to the process of internal EU reform, in a nod towards countries such as Germany and France. At the summit in June 2024, a Roadmap is to be adopted which will set the course of action on this issue. By next June, EU countries are expected to have agreed on the main areas and priorities for adapting the Union to admit new members. These two processes – enlargement and internal reform – can be expected to run in parallel.
- The agreement to start accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova is the culmination of a year-and-a-half-long process of implementing the reforms identified in

the EC's June 2022 report and periodic progress assessments (see '[The glass half empty. An assessment of Ukraine and Moldova's progress in implementing EU recommendations](#)'). Kyiv has managed to fulfil the vast majority of the seven recommendations identified by the Commission (including reforming the procedure for the election of Supreme Court judges, judicial authorities and institutions set up to fight corruption, and introducing anti-money laundering legislation, a media law, and laws on de-oligarchisation and the national minorities). The Ukrainian government managed to implement a significant part of the reforms in the last days before the Brussels summit as they postponed the most difficult and politically controversial conditions (see '[Ukraine: another amendment to the law on national minorities](#)'). The only recommendation as yet unadopted, relating to the legal regulation of lobbying activities should not encounter any major problems; the relevant draft law has already been registered in the Ukrainian parliament).

- The same is true for Moldova, which has managed to meet six of the nine conditions set by the EC and has made clear progress in the remaining three, most difficult areas (justice reform, the fight against corruption and de-oligarchisation). Therefore, the EC's assessment of the fulfilment of all requirements, which will most likely be published in March 2024, will most probably be positive; that will allow for the formal preparation of the negotiating framework and the start of talks on EU membership for Ukraine and Moldova next spring.
- Hungary's blockage of the decision to aid Ukraine poses a major challenge for Kyiv. The Ukraine Facility envisages the earmarking of €50 billion between 2024 and 2027, €18 billion of which would be sent in the coming year. Given the huge deficit in next year's Ukrainian budget (exceeding \$40 billion) EU support is crucial for the country, especially in the context of the prolonged impasse in the US Congress over a \$60 billion aid package for Ukraine. EU leaders are likely to return to negotiations on support in January. Consideration is also being given to bypassing the Hungarian veto by granting Kyiv financial assistance outside the EU budget, on the basis of intergovernmental cooperation among the 26 member states.