

Ukraine and Moldova launch EU accession negotiations

Kacper Sienicki, Kamil Całus

On 15 June, Luxembourg hosted two EU–Ukraine and EU–Moldova Intergovernmental Conferences (IGCs), during which both countries opened the first negotiating cluster (Fundamentals). This cluster forms the backbone of the accession process: it is opened first and closed last. It encompasses the most demanding accession criteria that both countries must fulfil before joining the EU, including those relating to the rule of law and the functioning of democratic institutions. The opening of the first cluster, and thus the formal launch of accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova, is due to be endorsed at the European Council summit in Brussels on 18–19 June. According to the European Commissioner for Enlargement, Marta Kos, the remaining five negotiating clusters are expected to be opened in July.

The positive decision by the IGCs was contingent on the consent of all EU member states. This became possible after Hungary withdrew the veto it had maintained for almost two years, following an agreement with Kyiv on the rights of the Hungarian minority (see ‘[Hungarian-Ukrainian agreement on the rights of national minorities in Ukraine](#)’), which the Ukrainian government approved on 12 June.

The opening of the first negotiating cluster brings to an end a period of political paralysis in Ukraine’s and Moldova’s path towards EU membership. It represents a success for both countries, although the prospect of accession remains distant. Their eventual entry into the European Union will depend not only on progress in adopting and implementing thousands of EU rules and standards, but also on the continued political will of all 27 member states.

Commentary

- **The IGC decision represents a success for both Kyiv and Chişinău and marks another important milestone on their path towards EU membership following the granting of candidate status in 2022.** It constitutes a political endorsement of the earlier technical preparations. In December last year and March this year, both capitals received from the European Commission the benchmarks required for closing all six negotiating clusters. This enabled them to begin aligning their legislation with the EU *acquis* even before the formal opening of the first cluster, thereby circumventing the effects of Hungary’s blockade.
- **The pace of Ukraine’s integration into the EU will depend on progress in implementing reforms, limiting the prospects for rapid accession.** Deputy Prime Minister for European Integration Taras Kachka estimates that implementing all the necessary reforms will take two to three years. However, Kyiv has been slow in carrying out key reforms related to

anti-corruption measures and the rule of law. Of the ten priority actions set out in the so-called Kachka–Kos Plan for 2026, only around 15% have been completed to date. This undermines the credibility of Kyiv's arguments – particularly those advanced by the presidential administration – in favour of a fast-track accession process, under which Ukraine seeks to offer, in effect, its contribution to European security, based on its capabilities and expertise in the use of drones, as a compensating factor.

- **There is little consensus across the EU on the rapid enlargement of the Union to include Ukraine, prompting the search for alternative arrangements.** This is reflected in various 'compromise' proposals designed to bridge the gap between the positions of key EU member states and that of Kyiv, such as Chancellor Merz's proposal for 'associate membership' and the Franco-German non-paper on EU enlargement. The reluctance to move swiftly towards Ukraine's accession stems from a number of concerns, including the risks associated with the ongoing war and the prospect of the EU's borders moving closer to Russia, the scale of corruption and the state of the rule of law in Ukraine, as well as fears about the impact of Ukraine's economy on the markets of member states, particularly in the agricultural and transport sectors. Public sentiment and electoral cycles across the EU are also likely to remain important constraints on the pace of the process, reinforcing governments' caution towards further enlargement decisions.
- **For Chişinău, the opening of the first negotiating cluster is of considerable political significance, as it breaks the deadlock caused by Hungary's veto of Ukraine's accession process.** Although the accession processes of Ukraine and Moldova are formally independent, in practice they have become politically linked, meaning that subsequent negotiating clusters are likely to be opened simultaneously for both countries. The governing pro-Western Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) is expected to present this decision as evidence of its effectiveness and of tangible progress towards European integration. PAS aims to conclude accession negotiations by 2028 and secure EU membership as early as 2030. It proceeds on the assumption that Moldova's negotiations with the EU will advance more rapidly than Ukraine's, since no member state opposes its integration and, as a small economy, Moldova is not perceived as a competitive threat to existing member states, particularly in the agricultural sector.
- **Further progress by Moldova in the integration process will depend on the effective implementation of domestic reforms.** Of particular importance will be the protracted judicial reform process (as recently as October last year, the original deadline for completing the vetting procedure – the assessment of judges and prosecutors – was postponed from the end of 2025 to the end of 2026) as well as the difficult and politically unpopular reform of local government, which envisages a substantial reduction in the number of *raions* (district-level administrative units) and municipalities. In addition, Transnistria – the Moscow-backed separatist enclave in eastern Moldova – remains a structural challenge. Although resolving this issue is not formally a condition, securing the unanimous consent of all 27 EU member states to the accession of a country that does not exercise control over part of its territory and on whose soil approximately 1,500 Russian troops remain stationed appears highly unlikely.