

A thaw in relations? Hungary unblocks the opening of two clusters in Ukraine's EU accession negotiations

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On 13 October, at the EU–Ukraine Intergovernmental Conference in Luxembourg, all EU member states agreed to open the second (Internal Market) and third (Competitiveness and Inclusive Growth) negotiating clusters with Ukraine, comprising a total of 17 negotiating chapters. These set out the conditions for Ukraine's future economic integration with the EU and cover the rules necessary for functioning within the EU's single market, including the free movement of goods, capital and workers, customs and industrial policy, taxation, competition, the provision of services and consumer protection. The European Council endorsed this decision at a summit on 16 October. Ukraine's Deputy Prime Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration, Vsevolod Chentsov, described the criteria set out in these clusters as 'the core of Ukraine's economic transformation' and stated that progress in these areas would be decisive for the country's integration into the EU single market.

The opening of the clusters became possible when Hungary lifted its veto following Ukraine's adoption of an amendment to the education law on 12 October. The amendment restored the status of national minority schools to institutions where at least half of the pupils attend classes in which some subjects are taught in a minority language. It also permits the use of national symbols and minority languages throughout the educational process in all schools offering bilingual classes, including at school assemblies, during state examinations, in communication with parents and for record-keeping.

Following a meeting with President Volodymyr Zelensky on the sidelines of the European Council summit, Hungarian Prime Minister Péter Magyar thanked Ukraine for the amendment to the education law and for a resolution adopted by the Ukrainian parliament (Verkhovna Rada) in September recognising the deportations and forced labour of Hungarians from Transcarpathia between 1944 and 1946 as crimes. The two leaders agreed to maintain contact at ministerial level; according to the Office of the President of Ukraine, Zelensky was invited to attend the commemorations marking the 70th anniversary of the Hungarian Uprising.

The first official meeting between Magyar and Zelensky and the Hungarian prime minister's agreement to open two further negotiating clusters (bringing the total to four out of six) demonstrate an easing of tensions in bilateral relations, but do not yet signal a lasting change. The pace of Ukraine's progress towards EU accession will depend on how quickly reforms are implemented, *particularly in the areas of the rule of law and the fight against corruption*, and on the political will of the EU's 27 member states.

Commentary

- **Meeting the criteria set out in the second and third negotiating clusters will facilitate the integration of Ukraine's economy into the EU single market even before the country becomes a member**, in line with the European Commission's concept of gradual integration of candidate countries. Closing negotiations in these areas will once again require unanimity among all EU member states, with disputes likely to arise over transitional periods and the protection of individual member states' interests.
- **Kyiv and Brussels aim to open the remaining negotiating clusters (the fourth and fifth) before the end of this year.** These cover regulations in sensitive areas such as agriculture and transport, and efforts to open these clusters could face resistance from individual member states, including Hungary. In November, the European Commission will publish its annual reports assessing the progress made by candidate countries, along with accession roadmaps for the four most advanced candidates – Ukraine, Moldova, Montenegro and Albania.
- **The amendments to the education laws implement only the education-related provisions of the Ukrainian–Hungarian agreement.** However, they do not address Hungary's other demands, including those concerning *the use of minority languages in public administration and the provision of services*. In practice, most of the measures set out in the amended legislation were already in place but lacked a legal basis.
- **Hungary's agreement to open the two negotiating clusters confirms its conditional approach to Ukraine's EU accession negotiations.** The agreement builds on the understandings reached in June 2026, which envisaged expanding minority rights in the areas of education, language and culture. Fulfilling these commitments will be crucial: those relating to education are to be implemented by the end of 2026, with the remainder to follow in 2027. Failure to fulfil them could reignite the dispute and prompt Hungary to block further negotiations. Unlike Viktor Orbán's government, Péter Magyar's cabinet has opted for dialogue aimed at securing concrete concessions. The agreement allows Magyar both to present himself as an effective defender of the Hungarian minority's rights and to rebuild Hungary's standing within the EU.
- **The decision to unblock Ukraine's EU accession negotiations does not signify a complete shift in Hungary's policy towards the country.** Magyar still appears to be mindful of criticism from the previous governing camp and of anti-Ukrainian sentiment fuelled by Fidesz. He opposes accelerating the negotiations and has announced plans to hold a referendum on Ukraine's EU accession. Hungary continues to withhold military assistance from Ukraine and refuses to allow arms shipments destined for Ukraine to transit through its territory. Despite an invitation from Kyiv, it also remains outside the so-called Carpathian Eight format, and Magyar has abandoned plans to build fuel storage facilities in Hungary for Ukraine. The agreement reached with Kyiv in June and Hungary's consent to open four negotiating clusters therefore represent only a first step towards normalising and rebuilding bilateral relations.