



Nona Mikhelidze

## › Strategic Communication on Ukraine’s Accession to the EU: Countering Disinformation and Building Public Support in Italy\*

- › Ukraine’s accession would represent one of the most significant steps in the history of EU enlargement, reshaping the Union’s security, economic and geopolitical landscape. Enlargement is also increasingly an investment in long-term stability, resilience and democratic consolidation.
- › Disinformation and misleading narratives exploit economic uncertainty, Euroscepticism and fears about enlargement, making Ukraine’s accession a key target of information manipulation. Strategic communication is essential to distinguish legitimate concerns from distorted or false claims.
- › Italy can strengthen support for Ukraine’s EU membership by combining factual explanations, trusted messengers and lessons from previous enlargements, demonstrating that accession is a gradual, managed process supported by safeguards, transitional mechanisms and established EU experience.



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The prospect of Ukraine joining the EU has become one of the most consequential political debates facing Europe. Following Russia’s full-scale invasion in February 2022, the EU granted Ukraine candidate status and subsequently opened accession negotiations, transforming enlargement from a distant aspiration into a tangible policy objective. The issue now occupies a central place in discussions about the future of European security, economic resilience and geopolitical stability.

For Italy, this question presents both opportunities and significant challenges. Enlargement is increasingly viewed as a strategic investment in European security and a means of consolidating democratic governance in Eastern Europe, yet public opinion remains cautious. Ukraine’s size and economic structure make its accession qualitatively different from previous rounds: with one of Europe’s largest agricultural sectors, significant industrial capacity and a pre-war population exceeding forty million, Ukraine would become one of the largest member states of the Union. This reality has generated concerns about competition, budgetary implications, institutional balance, labour market pressures and, more broadly, Ukraine’s readiness to meet European standards.

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These concerns are amplified by a highly polarised information environment in which misinformation, disinformation and selective presentations of fact distort public perceptions. Russian information operations have consistently sought to undermine EU-Ukraine relations and enlargement has become a particularly attractive target precisely because it touches on such sensitive issues. Economic uncertainty, inflationary pressures, longstanding Euroscepticism and uncertain trust in EU institutions further provide fertile ground for narratives that frame enlargement as a threat rather than an opportunity.

The challenge for the Italian government is therefore not merely to advocate for enlargement but to communicate effectively about a genuinely complex process. Strategic communication should increase public understanding of accession procedures, address legitimate concerns head-on and counter misleading narratives that distort the debate. Central to this effort is demonstrating how enlargement has been successfully managed in the past, including through transitional arrangements and safeguard mechanisms designed to protect the interests of existing member states.

Against this backdrop, the present brief examines the main misleading narratives surrounding Ukraine's accession, assesses how previous enlargements addressed similar concerns and proposes recommendations for an effective strategic communication strategy aimed at strengthening public confidence in Ukraine's accession.

## **Main misleading narratives surrounding Ukraine's accession and how to counter them**

### **Narrative 1: "Ukraine will join the EU immediately"**

One of the most common misconceptions is that Ukraine's accession is imminent and that membership could materialise within this or next year, regardless of reform progress. In reality, EU accession is among the most demanding political processes in international relations. Candidate countries must align their legislation with the EU acquis, implement extensive reforms and satisfy political, economic and legal criteria across dozens of negotiating chapters. Every member state must unanimously approve each stage of the process and accession treaties require ratification according to national constitutional procedures. Even accounting for the extraordinary geopolitical context, Ukraine's admission is unlikely to occur before 2030 in the most optimistic scenario. The opening of negotiations should therefore be understood as the beginning of a strictly conditional process, not as a near-term membership guarantee.

### **Narrative 2: "Ukraine's corruption makes membership impossible"**

Ukraine's history of corruption and governance challenges is frequently cited as grounds for rejecting its accession outright. Recent developments, however, suggest a more nuanced picture. The existence of dedicated anti-corruption institutions and their demonstrated willingness to investigate high-ranking



**>> EU membership negotiations are specifically designed to promote institutional reform**

political figures, including individuals close to the presidential administration, reflects a degree of institutional resilience largely absent a decade ago. The subsequent removal of officials placed under scrutiny illustrates both the growing operational independence of anti-corruption bodies and the political leadership's responsiveness to allegations of wrongdoing. Such cases do not eliminate concerns about corruption, but they indicate that accountability mechanisms are increasingly functional and that reform efforts are producing tangible results.

More fundamentally, this narrative misunderstands the purpose of the accession process itself. EU membership negotiations are specifically designed to promote institutional reform and ensure that candidate countries meet rigorous governance standards before joining the Union. Throughout the process, candidate states are required to strengthen judicial independence, improve public administration, enhance transparency and demonstrate a credible commitment to combating corruption. Enlargement has historically been one of the EU's most effective instruments for fostering precisely these reforms: the prospect of membership provides strong incentives for political and institutional change, while conditionality allows the EU to monitor progress and impose requirements before accession can occur. Therefore, the existence of corruption challenges in Ukraine does not invalidate the enlargement process; it underscores why a gradual, conditional and closely monitored framework is necessary.

The experiences of Romania and Bulgaria are instructive. Both joined in 2007 under the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM), which maintained post-accession monitoring of judicial reform and anti-corruption efforts for many years, functioning as an ongoing conditionality lever.<sup>1</sup> While the mechanism has been widely criticised for its limited effectiveness and has highlighted the need for stronger and more comprehensive rule-of-law instruments within the EU framework,<sup>2</sup> it nevertheless demonstrates an important principle: accession does not represent the end of the Union's leverage.

Croatia's accession process reinforces the point. The country underwent extensive monitoring in areas such as judicial reform, anti-corruption measures and rule of law and the standards applied to Ukraine today are even more demanding. The accession process itself thus functions as a sustained mechanism of scrutiny and reform – a powerful counterargument to claims that Ukraine could join the Union without genuine compliance with European requirements.

### **Narrative 3: “Ukrainian agriculture will destroy Italian farmers”**

A widespread claim holds that Ukraine's large agricultural sector will overwhelm European markets and threaten the livelihoods of Italian farmers. The narrative highlights Ukraine's vast agricultural land, relatively low production costs and significant export capacity. While these characteristics are real, the conclusion

<sup>1</sup> European Commission, *Rule of Law: Commission Formally Closes the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism for Bulgaria and Romania*, 15 September 2023, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_23\\_4456](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_4456).

<sup>2</sup> Bechev, Dimitar, *Bulgaria and Romania's EU Accession: Lessons Learned*, European Movement Albania and Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy, August 2020, <https://em-al.org/?p=5203>.



»» **The structure of Italian agriculture differs significantly from that of Ukraine, reducing the likelihood of direct substitution in most sectors**

that accession would automatically devastate European agriculture is misleading. The EU has repeatedly managed analogous concerns through transitional arrangements, quotas, safeguard clauses and phased integration into the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Agricultural integration has never occurred overnight. Candidate countries have gradually adopted EU standards while existing member states retained mechanisms to address market disruptions and facilitate adjustment.<sup>3</sup>

Poland, another country with a relatively large agricultural sector, offers an instructive example. Polish farmers did not receive full CAP direct payments immediately upon accession; instead, support was phased in over several years while safeguard measures allowed existing member states to adapt and gave Poland time to modernise its agricultural sector.<sup>4</sup> Future CAP reforms could further mitigate potential imbalances. Budget allocations may be redesigned to favour smaller and medium-sized farms, while external convergence mechanisms could ensure a more equitable distribution of direct payments across member states, providing policymakers with considerable flexibility in managing Ukraine's agricultural integration.<sup>5</sup>

In any case, Italian agriculture competes primarily through quality, geographical indications, specialisation and high-value-added production<sup>6</sup> rather than through direct competition in bulk commodities. The structure of Italian agriculture differs significantly from that of Ukraine, reducing the likelihood of direct substitution in most sectors.<sup>7</sup>

#### Narrative 4: "Ukrainians will flood European labour markets"

Concerns about labour migration have accompanied every major round of EU enlargement. Russian and pro-Kremlin outlets frequently amplify fears that Ukraine's large labour force characterised by lower wage expectations will flood EU labour markets, undercut local workers, depress wages and weaken social protections. These messages are tailored to resonate in countries with strong trade union traditions, such as Germany, France and Italy, as well as in states already hosting substantial Ukrainian refugee populations.

The assumption that accession would automatically trigger uncontrolled migration overlooks both historical evidence and existing policy instruments. Migration flows are shaped by a wide range of economic and demographic factors rather than by accession alone and previous enlargements demonstrated that initial migration increases tend to stabilise over time and

<sup>3</sup> Rudloff, Bettina, "Agriculture: Customary Long-Term Accession Model Possible after Improvement of Competitive Structure", in von Ondarza, Nicolai (ed.), "Ukraine's Possible EU Accession and Its Consequences", in *SWP 360 Degrees*, 22 July 2022, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/ukraines-possible-eu-accession-and-its-consequences#publication-article-65>.

<sup>4</sup> Lukas, Zdenek and Jan Mládek, "Central and East European Agriculture in Integrating Europe", in *wiiw Research Reports*, No. 329 (August 2026), <https://wiiw.ac.at/central-and-east-european-agriculture-in-integrating-europe-p-401.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Hnidan, Solomiia and Anna Mroczkowska, "EU-Ukraine Accession Offers Important Opportunity for Common Agricultural Policy Reform", in *Young European Ambassadors Blog*, 13 June 2024, <https://euneighbourseast.eu/?p=311908>.

<sup>6</sup> European Commission DG for Agriculture website: *Italy – CAP Strategic Plan*, [https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/node/1235\\_en](https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/node/1235_en).

<sup>7</sup> Régner, Elsa and Pierre-Marie Aubert, Ukraine's Accession to the EU: Implications for the European Agricultural Sector", in *EuroChoices*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (August 2025), p. 4-10, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1746-692X.70001>.



»» **Ukrainian workers, many of whom are highly educated, can help fill genuine gaps rather than displace domestic workers**

often generate economic benefits for host countries.<sup>8</sup> When similar fears emerged ahead of the 2004 accession of eight Central and Eastern European states, the EU responded with transitional arrangements known as the “2+3+2” framework, under which existing member states could restrict access to their labour markets for up to seven years. Germany and Austria made extensive use of these provisions.<sup>9</sup> Enlargement does not, therefore, require governments to relinquish control over labour market adjustment.

Moreover, the social-dumping narrative ignores several structural realities. Ukraine's wage levels have been rising steadily, with average nominal wages increasing significantly in recent years and the overwhelming majority of employers reporting salary increases. More fundamentally, EU accession requires adoption of the entire *acquis communautaire* (the core body of EU laws), including legislation on minimum wages, working conditions, occupational safety and labour rights, making systematic wage undercutting incompatible with EU law.<sup>10</sup>

The broader economic picture also warrants attention. The EU labour market currently faces persistent shortages alongside historically low unemployment. Ukrainian workers, many of whom are highly educated, can help fill genuine gaps rather than displace domestic workers. Paired with modernised vocational training and digital education, Ukraine's workforce represents a strong foundation both for the country's recovery and for reaping the benefits of the digital and green transitions.<sup>11</sup>

### Narrative 5: “Ukraine will bankrupt the EU budget and turn net beneficiaries into net payers”

A frequently repeated claim is that Ukraine's accession would fundamentally reshape the EU budget, converting current net beneficiaries into net contributors. This narrative is directed particularly at Central and Eastern European countries that currently receive substantial cohesion and agricultural funding, portraying Ukraine as a direct competitor for European resources.<sup>12</sup>

Available studies suggest that such fears are greatly exaggerated. While Ukraine's accession would require adjustments to EU spending priorities, it is unlikely to transform most current net recipients into net contributors. All budgetary projections remain inherently hypothetical. The ongoing war makes it difficult to predict the state of Ukraine's economy at the time of accession and allocations under the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework are always subject

<sup>8</sup> Kahanec, Martin and Klaus F. Zimmermann, “Migration in an Enlarged EU: A Challenging Solution?”, in Filip Keereman and Istvan Szekely (eds), *Five Years of an Enlarged EU. A Positive Sum Game*, Berlin, Springer, 2010, p. 63-94.

<sup>9</sup> Ulceluse, Magdalena and Martin Kahanec, “Eastward Enlargements of the European Union, Transitional Arrangements and Self-Employment”, in *Journal of Population Economics*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (April 2023), p. 719-742, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00148-022-00904-2>.

<sup>10</sup> Litvinenko, Diana, “War, European Integration and Workforce Scarcity: What Changes Does Ukraine's Labor Market Need in 2026? Key Takeaways from a Roundtable”, in *Vox Ukraine*, 27 May 2026, <https://voxukraine.org/?p=205133>.

<sup>11</sup> European Commission, *Labour Market and Wage Developments in Europe: Annual Review 2024*, Luxembourg, Publications Office of the EU, 2024, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2767/888580>. See also International Labour Organization, *Labour Reforms Take Spotlight at Ukraine Recovery Conference*, 11 July 2025, <https://www.ilo.org/node/713096>.

<sup>12</sup> Emerson, Michael, “The Potential Impact of Ukrainian Accession on the EU Budget – And the Importance of Control Valves”, in *ICDS Policy Papers*, September 2023, <https://www.ceps.eu/?p=40847>.



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to political negotiation. Besides, existing instruments, including spending caps and adjustment mechanisms for cohesion and agricultural funds, already provide policymakers with tools to mitigate potential imbalances.<sup>13</sup>

Historical experience is instructive here as well. During its first two years of membership, Poland received 7.5 billion euros from the EU budget while contributing 4.6 billion euros – a net transfer of 2.8 billion. More significantly, EU membership is estimated to have driven between one-third and one-half of Poland's economic growth between 2004 and 2023.<sup>14</sup> Some other Eastern European countries similarly narrowed their development gap with Western Europe, achieving this despite the disruption of the global financial crisis.<sup>15</sup>

Opening the Single Market to new member states generates positive spillover effects across the Union, as companies expand production, create jobs and increase tax revenues. A more prosperous and integrated Ukraine would likewise become a larger contributor over time. Enlargement is best understood as a long-term investment in shared prosperity – a positive-sum process, not a zero-sum redistribution of resources.

## Conclusions

An effective communication strategy should focus on increasing public understanding while building confidence in the safeguards embedded within the enlargement process. Communication should never portray scepticism as irrational or illegitimate because citizens react negatively when their concerns are dismissed. The approach should instead acknowledge potential challenges while explaining how they can be managed. The objective is not to deny risks but to demonstrate that effective mechanisms exist to address them.

In its communication efforts, the Italian government should involve trusted intermediaries, including business associations, agricultural organisations, local authorities, universities, think tanks and civil society groups. Messages delivered through such actors are generally perceived as more credible than those originating exclusively from central government institutions.

A central component of this strategy should be the systematic use of historical examples showing how analogous concerns were addressed in previous enlargements. The 2004 enlargement, the largest in EU history, generated significant anxieties among existing member states, yet these were managed through a gradual and carefully structured integration process. The key lesson is that enlargement has never operated on a “big bang” model; it proceeds incrementally, accompanied by mechanisms specifically designed to minimise economic and social disruption. Historical comparisons are particularly valuable because they transform abstract debates into concrete evidence, demonstrating that many fears currently associated with Ukraine's accession closely resemble concerns from previous rounds that ultimately proved either

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Normann, Jan, “Poland's 20 Years in the European Union: How the Country's Economy Has Changed”, in *Blue Europe*, 14 June 2024, <https://www.blue-europe.eu/?p=13150>.

<sup>15</sup> Kónya, Istvan, “Catching up or Getting Stuck: Convergence in Eastern European Economies”, in *Eurasian Economic Review*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (June 2023), p. 237-258, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40822-023-00230-2>.



manageable or unfounded.

Ukraine's accession will undoubtedly be more complex given the ongoing war and the country's scale. Nevertheless, the institutional tools, transitional mechanisms and historical precedents needed to manage the process responsibly already exist. By combining factual information with compelling historical examples, Italy can strengthen public resilience against misleading narratives and foster a more informed debate about Kyiv's future place in Europe, contributing not only to the success of enlargement but also to the broader goal of strengthening democratic resilience in an increasingly contested information environment.

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Via dei Montecatini, 17  
I-00186 Rome, Italy  
T +39 06 6976831  
[www.iai.it](http://www.iai.it)



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