

Why Ukraine (and Moldova) Must Become EU Candidates

by Nathalie Tocci

ABSTRACT

In the fourth month of war, European support for Ukraine risks sagging. This includes dropping the ball on Ukraine's EU membership. Denying candidacy (or offering empty alternatives of potential candidacy) would represent a symbolic debacle for Ukraine and for the EU, and a stunning symbolic win for Putin. Alongside the recognition of full candidacy, equally important is the need to accompany the accession process with concrete benefits in the short term. There is no need to reinvent the wheel here through notions of European political and geopolitical communities. There are concrete formulas like the European Economic Area that have demonstrated to be useful stepping stones to full EU membership. The Ukraine war presents the opportunity to revive enlargement. There are strategic and normative imperatives to seize it. This is true for Ukraine, whose resistance to Russian aggression is inextricably tied to the values on which the EU is founded, but it is true beyond Ukraine as well.

European Union | EU enlargement | Ukraine

keywords

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Introduction

When Vladimir Putin shocked the world with Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine, Europeans were jolted out of their post-World War II slumber. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz spoke for the continent as a whole when he talked of a *Zeitenwende*: a turning point in history.¹ The apparent recognition of this epochal change led Europeans to act in ways hitherto unthinkable. In a matter of weeks, Europeans approved the most far-reaching sanctions ever implemented towards a third state; they stepped up on defence, with Germany announcing a staggering additional 100 billion euro in spending and the EU providing military assistance to a third state for the first time; the EU gave temporary protection to Ukrainian citizens; and welcomed Ukraine's – as well as Moldova and Georgia's – application for EU membership.

In the fourth month of war, European support for Ukraine risks sagging. After five packages of sanctions approved at lightning speed (by EU standards), Europeans spent weeks bickering over the sixth package featuring oil sanctions, ostensibly blackmailed by the EU's in-house autocrat, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. Eventually an oil embargo was agreed, but riddled with exemptions, time lags and technicalities to be resolved along the way. Neither has the EU agreed yet on energy price caps or tariffs, which would require a qualified majority amongst member states due to its falling within the remit of trade policy. On gas, some member states like Bulgaria, Denmark, the Netherlands, Finland, Lithuania and Poland either have cut off Russian gas, or have seen Moscow make the first move,

¹ Federal Government, *Policy Statement by Olaf Scholz, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany and Member of the German Bundestag*, Berlin, 27 February 2022, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/policy-statement-by-olaf-scholz-chancellor-of-the-federal-republic-of-germany-and-member-of-the-german-bundestag-27-february-2022-in-berlin-2008378>.

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but in most cases the gas keeps flowing and Europeans keep paying into Moscow's coffers, now in the infamous "K accounts" featuring both euro and roubles. In some member states, resistance to supporting Ukraine militarily has (re)surfaced, with the notorious delays in the deliveries of German weapons, or the mounting political opposition to military support for Kyiv amongst Italy's populist parties.

All this is happening in the run-up to the European Council on 23–24 June, in which Heads of State and Government are called on to decide whether Ukraine – Moldova and Georgia – can become candidates for EU membership, taking into account the European Commission's assessment of the three countries' applications.

Here too resistance is surfacing.

Allowing such resistance to prevail would be catastrophic. Offering Ukraine a clear and concrete path to EU membership is an imperative, not just to end the war, but to ensure that it will not erupt again in future.

1. The hesitant European embrace of Ukraine

Ukraine applied for EU membership on 28 February 2022, four days after the beginning of Russia's invasion. As missiles rained down across the country and many feared the capital might fall, the timing of Kyiv's application may have looked odd. The opposite is true. Ukraine's application for EU membership is intimately tied to what this war – and resistance to it – is all about. Russia did not invade Ukraine because of NATO expansion, given that no such plans actually existed. NATO may well be a preoccupation in Moscow, but it is certainly not the first – nor the second, at most a distant third – reason explaining Russia's war of choice.

This is an imperial war waged to deny the existence of Ukraine and its people's right to self-determination within a free and democratic state. Ukraine's resistance is an anti-colonial struggle for independence and freedom. Given that the EU is – or should be – all about protecting the values of freedom, human rights and democracy, this is ultimately why Ukraine wants to join the Union, taking the first step to apply precisely as Russian troops crossed its borders.

As the shock of Russia's invasion and Ukraine's resistance drove Europeans to recall their own founding values, the Union was swept by a wave of outrage against Russia and an outpouring of solidarity with Kiev's struggle for freedom and democracy. Europeans suddenly remembered the values worth living and dying for, which they take for granted precisely because of the success of European integration and transatlantic partnership. They were reminded of the meaning of

heroism by a leader who iconically called for ammunition rather than a “ride”.²

When that same leader, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, challenged Europeans to prove they are such,³ the response came loud and clear. The European Parliament backed Ukraine’s application for EU membership, calling EU institutions to grant Ukraine candidate status.⁴ The European Council in Versailles followed suit, affirming that Ukraine “belongs to our European family”.⁵ The Commission did likewise, with President Ursula von der Leyen declaring that Ukraine is “one of us, and we want them in”,⁶ and kick-starting the accession process by personally handing over the questionnaire on membership to Zelensky during her highly symbolic visit to Ukraine’s war-battered capital, against the backdrop of the recently uncovered massacres in Bucha. Several European leaders spoke in favour of Ukraine’s European future, from Tallinn to Rome, Warsaw to Madrid.⁷

Embracing Ukraine’s European journey implies acknowledging the dark causes of Russia’s war of choice. This in turn means contributing not “just” to putting an end to this war, but preventing its recurrence in the future. European – and Euro-Atlantic – integration, rather than being a provocation to Moscow – a view that had been implicitly endorsed by many in Western Europe prior to this large-scale invasion – started being seen as the guarantee against war on the European continent. War in Ukraine can truly end when Ukraine is integrated into European structures. The war uncovered the nexus linking European integration and Ukrainian resistance, a nexus that revolves around the values that lie at the heart of the European project.

That moment of enlightenment did not last long. Solidarity with Ukraine, while still loud in words, risks fraying in action, as the cost of war is felt economically, and

² Sharon Braithwaite, “Zelensky Refuses US Offer to Evacuate, Saying ‘I Need Ammunition, Not a Ride’”, in *CNN*, 26 February 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/02/26/europe/ukraine-zelensky-evacuation-intl>.

³ European Parliament, *Extraordinary Plenary Session on the Russian Aggression against Ukraine: Statement by Volodymyr Zelensky, President of Ukraine and Ruslan Stefanchuk, Chairperson of Ukrainian Parliament*, 1 March 2022, https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/video/_I219165; “President Zelensky’s Full Speech to the European Parliament”, in *YouTube*, uploaded by Newstalk, 1 March 2022, <https://youtu.be/IycwCjg4f8Y>.

⁴ European Parliament, *Resolution of 1 March 2022 on the Russian Aggression against Ukraine (P9_TA/2022/0052)*, para. 37, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0052_EN.html.

⁵ European Council, *Versailles Declaration*, 10-11 March 2022, para. 4, <https://europa.eu/!txdCTy>.

⁶ Meabh Mc Mahon, “Ukraine Is One of Us and We Want Them in EU, Ursula von der Leyen Tells Euronews”, in *Euronews*, 19 May 2022, <https://www.euronews.com/2022/02/27/ukraine-is-one-of-us-and-we-want-them-in-eu-ursula-von-der-leyen-tells-euronews>.

⁷ Estonian Presidency, *Open Letter by Presidents in Support of Ukraine’s Swift Candidacy to the European Union*, 28 February 2022, <https://www.president.ee/en/media/press-releases/53472>; Amy Kazmin, Henry Foy and Roman Olearchyk, “Mario Draghi Endorses Ukraine’s Bid for EU Membership”, in *Financial Times*, 22 March 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/dd2f9015-37cd-4a5b-a825-a156189c8826>; Belén Carreño, “Spain Supports Ukraine’s EU Entry, Foreign Minister Says”, in *Reuters*, 20 May 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/spain-supports-ukraines-eu-entry-foreign-minister-says-2022-05-20>.

consequently, socially and politically across Europe. Democratic and prosperous countries are more resilient than authoritarian ones, displaying a greater ability to react, adapt and bounce back from shocks and crises. The successive existential crises the EU has navigated in the last two decades – from the constitutional crisis, the Eurozone crisis, the so-called migration crisis and Brexit, up until the Covid-19 pandemic – are a testament to this. However, resilience is also about the ability to endure pain over time. In this respect, rich, peaceful and democratic societies are not very resilient, precisely because they have (fortunately) lost the habit of enduring pain for protracted periods of time.

As the economic costs of war increase, notably through rising inflation and slower growth, as European hosts and Ukrainian refugees come to realise there is no immediate return on the horizon, and as the 24-hour news cycle continues covering a war that grinds on, fatigue is kicking into European politics and societies. Fatigue has consequently translated into an unspoken instinct to wish the war away by latching onto the political hooks that make such a turn away morally sustainable, from pacifism to the belief in compromise and diplomacy.

It is natural for European publics to look for escape routes from a war they are feeling the socio-economic ripple effects of, while having the fortune not to experience directly. Latching onto such imaginary exits is a luxury that Ukrainians do not have. Precisely because of this, there is something surreal, in fact sickening, about the way some political and media elites are feeding such escape route narratives, and how nationalist populism could benefit from this and lift its ugly head again.

It is exactly this “softness” of European societies that Putin banks on, which is leveraged and magnified by the political, business, media and academic elites that Russia has “invested” in for many years: this is the moment to cash in on those investments. The slowing pace of sanctions, especially on energy, the resurfacing of European divisions on Russia within and between member states, the delays on weapon deliveries to Ukraine and the repeated – in fact humiliating – one-directional calls by European leaders to Putin declaredly aimed at not humiliating Russia and providing the Russian leader with a so-called “off ramp”, are probably seen as welcome signals of European fragility by the Kremlin.

Ukraine’s European journey could become entrapped in these dynamics. No sooner was the ink of the Commission’s questionnaire dry than several European leaders began voicing concerns, pre-empting the steps that lay ahead. Within capitals, notably in Western Europe, some have started rowing backwards, talking of “potential candidacy” à la Kosovo or Bosnia-Herzegovina, or positing alternatives to EU membership,⁸ ranging from French President Emmanuel Macron’s idea of a

⁸ “Unlikely that Ukraine Will Become a Candidate for EU Membership: Dutch PM”, in *NL Times*, 23 May 2022, <https://nltimes.nl/node/58738>; Cory Bennett and Jacopo Barigazzi, “Von der Leyen Pitches Post-War Ukraine Recovery Package”, in *Politico*, 4 May 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/?p=2084292>.

European political community featuring Ukraine but also the United Kingdom,⁹ to European Council President Charles Michel's blurry notion of a geopolitical community.¹⁰ In fairness, no leader has explicitly claimed that such options would be mutually exclusive with membership, but the vagueness of these proposals and the engrained scepticism of enlargement of some of their proponents implies they are probably viewed as such.

2. Good and bad reasons for enlargement scepticism

There are both good and bad reasons to be cautious about enlargement. As for the latter, it is true that whereas the enlargement policy, particularly to Central and Eastern Europe, was a stunning success,¹¹ once in the Union, the democratisation of some EU member states – i.e., Poland and Hungary – has raised legitimate questions on how to ensure that European norms are respected once in the EU.

The Union, and in particular the Commission, still grapples with this thorny problem, experimenting forms of internal conditionality linked to the NextGenerationEU funds. However, one only needs to think of Hungary's trajectory, notably in the context of the Ukraine war, but also the significantly reduced pressure on Poland by the Commission, to see that there is still a very long way to go to resolve the issue.

Equally legitimate are questions surrounding the EU's institutional make-up and decision-making procedures, ranging from the size of the Commission to the need to move beyond unanimity in foreign policy decision-making. Hungary's obscene weeks long veto over the sixth package of EU sanctions towards Russia speaks for itself. It is reasonable to be concerned about future EU enlargements if the Union cannot guarantee that its founding values are respected once a state accedes.

However, it would be naïve to claim that the causes of resistance stop here. There is also a far less edifying set of reasons behind the opposition to enlargement, ranging from the fear of power dilution within EU structures to the irresistible European instinct to navel-gaze. Enlargement is, by definition, an outward looking project, which has tended to prevail when big outward-looking ideas took hold, be it the consolidation of democracy in southern Europe in the 1980s or the reunification of Europe after the Cold War in the 1990s and 2000s.

⁹ David M. Herszenhorn, Hans von der Burchard and Maia de La Blaume, "Macron Floats European 'Community' Open to Ukraine and UK", in *Politico*, 9 May 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/?p=2089843>.

¹⁰ European Council, *Speech by President Charles Michel at the Plenary Session of the European Economic and Social Committee*, 18 May 2022, <https://europa.eu/!xqBbDJ>.

¹¹ When the Soviet Union collapsed, Poland and Ukraine's GDP per capita was roughly the same.

When those big ideas were overridden by internal crises like the sovereign debt crisis, migration, Brexit, populism or the pandemic, the Union's inward-looking instincts won the day. This plays a major role in explaining why the accession process to the Western Balkans and Turkey has withered. In other words, enlargement has always been a political project, albeit one dressed in technical clothing. When politics swayed in favour of enlargement, enlargement happened, when politics swayed away from it, enlargement died away, regardless of the technical nuts and bolts of the process.

The Ukraine war and its intimate relationship with European integration for the reasons outlined above presents an opportunity to revive enlargement as a political project. This is true not just for Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, but even more so for countries that have languished in the accession process for years, in fact decades. Some of these countries like Serbia and Turkey are clearly now headed in the opposite direction, and it is difficult to imagine how the accession process can be revived under current political conditions.

Yet others – first and foremost North Macedonia and Albania – have been kept unfairly at the door. Europeans, caught up in their internal woes, have persuaded themselves that keeping countries outside the EU (and arguably NATO) was a viable political option, in fact a preferable one to importing troubles from these countries into the Union while provoking Russia as well. The war in Ukraine shattered the illusion that the EU (much like NATO) could have its cake and eat it too: non-enlargement has a massive strategic cost, one that is as high as catapulting the European continent into war. The question is whether and how the opportunity to politically revive EU enlargement is seized, both for Ukraine and beyond.

3. The symbolism of candidacy, its denial, and more

Semantics aside, evidence suggests that applicants for EU membership are either recognised as candidates or they are not. The fudges concocted to politely deny candidacy in recent years – Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina's status as "potential candidates" – boil down to not being a candidate at all. Whether the reasons for denying candidacy were justifiable or not in these cases is beside the point. The point is that these precedents teach us that being a potential candidate amounts to not being a candidate. In other words, Ukraine – Moldova and Georgia – should either be declared candidates or not: a potential candidate is a non-candidate, the choice is black or white.

Given the Ukrainian people's commitment to the values the EU stands for, denying candidacy would represent a symbolic debacle for Ukraine and for the EU, and a stunning symbolic win for Putin. Denying Ukraine candidacy – and arguably Moldova's too, given the country's pro-European trajectory – would be an unforgivable strategic and normative blunder. Following the same logic, there are legitimate reasons to hold back on Georgia's full candidacy now given the de-

democratising bent taken by its government. Were this to be reversed, the calculus should change and Georgia too should be recognised as an EU candidate.

Symbolism is important, but not enough. Alongside the recognition of full candidacy, equally important is the need to accompany the accession process with concrete benefits in the short and medium terms. When an accession process is credible – like the eastern enlargement – it lasts at least a decade. When it is not – as is the case currently for the Western Balkans and Turkey – it lasts two or more decades. Turkey has been an EU candidate for the last 23 years. This hardly constitutes an enticing prospect for Ukraine, or any other candidate for that matter. However, even in the case of a credible accession process, a decade is a long time, and given what Ukraine is enduring, it is far too much.

Here is where ideas for complementary – not alternative – EU benefits and forms of engagement come in useful. There is no need to reinvent the wheel. In fact, attempts to do so through notions of European political and geopolitical communities ring hollow. There are rather concrete formulas that are tried and tested and have demonstrated to be useful stepping stones to full EU membership. The European Economic Area (EEA) is the clearest case in point. Before their full membership of the EU, Austria, Finland and Sweden were members of the EEA, and then entered in the European single market. As the European Stability Initiative persuasively argued, the same trajectory could be imagined for Ukraine.¹² In fact, having already provided temporary protection for Ukrainian citizens, the EU is in practice well on the way towards liberalising one of the four freedoms of the single market: the freedom to move and work across the EU.

Liberalising this freedom permanently would represent a first immediate concrete step towards Ukraine, and usher in a first stage of negotiations focused on the single market, alongside full compliance with the Copenhagen criteria. In light of Ukraine's association agreement (and with the huge caveat of the duration of war), entry into the single market could presumably be negotiated in four-five years, not a decade or longer. Some of these ideas are already being aired in the Commission's new methodology for enlargement to Serbia and Montenegro: Ukraine provides an opportunity to add flesh onto the bones and above all put them immediately into practice.

The Ukraine war presents the opportunity to revive enlargement as a political project. There are strategic and normative imperatives to seize it. This is true for Ukraine, whose resistance to Russian aggression is inextricably tied to the values on which the EU is founded, but it is true beyond Ukraine as well. In fact, the accession process towards the Western Balkans, rather than being used by enlargement sceptics as an excuse not to proceed with Ukraine, should be revived by these new applications for membership.

¹² European Stability Initiative website: *Offer the Four Freedoms to the Balkans, Ukraine, and Moldova*, <https://www.esiweb.org/taxonomy/term/2377>.

The EU has often prided itself of its power to transform others. Indeed, Ukraine, like other applicants before it, can and wants to be transformed. But now it is not just the EU that is changing Ukraine, but Ukraine that can change the EU, for the better. As European flags fly in Kyiv and Ukrainian flags fly across the Union, European leaders cannot hide behind public fatigue and must rise to the challenge.

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