

## UKRAINE/EU: A symbolic step forward in a long journey toward EU membership

- A recommendation by the European Commission (EC) to start EU accession talks is a symbolic move that heightens optimism in Ukraine about the country's future amid Russia's devastating invasion.
- The launch of the talks would put Kyiv on a long-term reform pathway and could become a unifying objective for pro-Western political forces in Ukraine.
- Besides the accession-related reforms, a sustainable settlement of the war with Russia and EU institutional reform are crucial prerequisites for Ukraine's membership in the bloc.

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The EC's enlargement package published on 8 November recommended the Council to open accession talks with Ukraine and Moldova. Regarding Ukraine, the EC lauded a "powerful reform dynamic, despite the ongoing war," and concluded that the country has fully implemented four out of seven steps outlined by the EC when granting Ukraine an EU candidate status in June 2022. The three remaining steps — the fight against corruption, de-oligarchization, and the protection of national minorities — require further work and will be reassessed by EC in March. Once these reforms are completed, the EC would propose a negotiating framework as a basis for the start of the accession talks.

The decision to open accession talks requires unanimous support from all 27 EU member states. Preliminary consultations on the topic are already taking place, and a vote is expected during the next European Council meeting on 14-15 December. Securing Hungary's backing might be challenging as Budapest sees Ukraine as not ready to start membership talks and intends to conduct an informal national poll on the subject. Budapest might use the issue as a lever in the ongoing talks with the EC over its access to frozen EU funds.

### Implications

For Ukraine, the possibility of opening formal accession talks some 18 months after it was granted a candidate status is a major achievement. On the one hand, it reflects Ukraine's reform efforts and a strong public and political will to join the bloc. On the other hand, it shows a geopolitical impetus in Brussels to accelerate EU enlargement as a driver of socio-economic development, the rule of law, and security across Europe.

Despite a long pathway toward EU membership, the start of the talks would offer the Ukrainian public some optimism about the country's future at a time when the continuity of external support for Kyiv is becoming increasingly uncertain, and mounting war fatigue is eroding public trust in the country's authorities. Politically, the accession talks would put Kyiv on a long-term reform pathway overseen by Brussels and could become a unifying objective for pro-Western political forces in Ukraine. Although the start of accession talks would not commit the EU members to accept Ukraine into the bloc by a certain date, an overly protracted process could be counterproductive, as illustrated by the growing disillusionment with the membership prospects in Serbia.

Notwithstanding various reforms to meet the accession criteria, one of the main prerequisite for Ukraine's membership in the bloc will be the sustainable settlement of the war with Russia and the establishment of credible guarantees against future aggression. Without such guarantees, it is difficult to envision a full-scale reconstruction effort and large EU investments into the country that would come with Ukraine's membership in the bloc.

Finally, the building momentum for EU enlargement has reinvigorated political discussions in Europe about EU institutional reform. The addition of large and relatively underdeveloped member states, such as Ukraine, would have major implications for the bloc, including but not limited to its governance, decision-making, funding, and security. Debates on the issue are still in the early stages but will likely pick up during the next 2024-2029 legislative term.

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