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New Europe Center
Kyiv, Ukraine

HARNESSING MOMENTUM: SECURITY AND REFORMS AS THE DRIVING FORCE OF THE EU'S ENLARGEMENT

ANALYTICAL REPORT
ON THE OUTCOMES
OF THE

4th EU
Accession
Exchange
Forum

Kyiv, October 21, 2025

In partnership with:



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The EU Accession Exchange Forum is organized by the New Europe Center in partnership with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration of Ukraine, the International Renaissance Foundation, and the Institute for European Policies and Reforms (Republic of Moldova), with Ukrinform and European Pravda serving as media partners. The EU Accession Exchange Forum is taking place with EU support, within the EU-funded "Whole-of-Society Accession" project implemented by the International Renaissance Foundation.

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CONTENTS

5	TOP-10 Forum Takeaways
6	Opening remarks
6	Key Takeaways
8	Session 1. Ukraine as a Game-Changer: Imagining an EU Enlargement from Inside Out
8	Key Takeaways
12	Conclusion
13	Session 2. Advocating Sectoral Benefits: What Advantages Does the New Enlargement Bring for the EU?
13	Key Takeaways
16	Conclusion
17	Session 3. Stronger Together: Ukraine, Accession Countries, and Europe's Security Interdependence
17	Key Takeaways
21	Conclusion
22	Session 4. Above All, the Fundamentals: Rule of Law and Anti-Corruption as an Anchor of EU Accession
22	Key Takeaways
26	Conclusion



The European Union is increasingly aware of its own geopolitical weight and responsibility. This transformation requires discussing not only reforms in candidate countries, but also internal changes within the EU itself. During the annual EU Accession Exchange Forum, organized by the New Europe Center, experts from member states and candidate countries had the opportunity to examine the key questions and challenges facing both national governments and European institutions in the context of future enlargement. This analytical report presents the main insights and recommendations developed on the basis of discussions among government representatives, as well as leading foreign and Ukrainian experts and diplomats.

The EU Accession Exchange Forum is organized by the New Europe Center in partnership with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration of Ukraine, the International Renaissance Foundation, and the Institute for European Policies and Reforms (Republic of Moldova), with Ukrinform and European Pravda serving as media partners. The EU Accession Exchange Forum is taking place with EU support, within the EU-funded "Whole-of-Society Accession" project implemented by the International Renaissance Foundation. EU Accession Exchange Forum is dedicated to develop a key expert platform for all candidate countries for membership of the EU, whose task is to exchange lessons learned in the process of accession talks and develop recommendations on how to make the EU enlargement process more effective.





TOP-10 FORUM TAKEAWAYS:

- 1. The futures of Ukraine and the EU are inseparable.** Ukraine is already a central pillar of European security, and EU enlargement is a geopolitical necessity that determines Europe's ability to act rather than merely react.
- 2. Ukraine is a security provider.** The EU must prepare for a prolonged confrontation with Russia by strengthening its defence-industrial base, joint procurement, and strategic planning together with Ukraine.
- 3. Enlargement is a mutual investment, not charity.** Ukraine strengthens the EU economically, technologically, militarily, and politically; integration makes the continent more resilient and competitive.
- 4. The success of enlargement depends on three components:** reforms in candidate countries, reforms within the EU itself, and the political will of member states. None of these factors can secure progress on its own.
- 5. Reform stagnation is unacceptable.** Blockages by individual member states must not halt reform implementation in candidate countries — especially in the areas of rule of law and anti-corruption.
- 6. Trust is the core currency of the process.** Attacks on Ukraine's anti-corruption institutions undermined partners' confidence and complicated advocacy on sanctions, frozen assets, and overcoming Hungary's veto.
- 7. Candidates expect predictability from the EU.** A merit-based, clear, and predictable accession process minimizes "reform fatigue" and sustains internal motivation for transformation.
- 8. Public opinion in the EU provides a strategic window of opportunity.** Support for enlargement — particularly regarding Ukraine — is now consistently high across most member states.
- 9. Populism, Euroscepticism, and disinformation are key risks.** Candidate countries and member states must work together to strengthen communication on enlargement and build an honest dialogue with EU citizens.
- 10. Gradual integration is essential.** Flexible cooperation formats can limit the impact of political blockages. Candidate countries should join all available EU institutional mechanisms to advance step-by-step integration.

OPENING REMARKS

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The future of the EU and Ukraine is interconnected. Ukraine already plays a key role in Europe's security, whilst EU membership is considered as a long-term security guarantee.
- The EU enlargement process is at a historic moment that will shape the European Union for decades to come; its failure or success will have structural consequences for the whole of Europe.
- Public opinion in the EU has shifted significantly in favour of enlargement, and support for Ukraine is at an all-time high compared to previous stages of European integration.
- The path to enlargement remains complex and multilevel: success depends, in particular, on reforms in candidate countries, internal reforms in the EU and political processes in Member States.
- Reforms are necessary but often painful and unpopular, requiring changes in political culture and broad public participation.
- European societies and institutions must remain resolute, as populism and Euroscepticism pose a real threat to enlargement.



Sergiy Solodkyy, Director of the New Europe Center, began his speech with a general conclusion: the common theme of all panel discussions at the Forum is security. He stressed that although reforms — in particular the fight against corruption and the establishment of the rule of law — are absolutely critical, security remains a matter of state survival. Solodkyy stressed that the European Union can no longer rely solely on being 'normative' or 'soft' power. In his words, Europe must become a strong global actor, and its strength must now also be measured by the power of its armed forces, defence industry and the resilience of its societies.

The key theme of his speech was the interdependence of Ukraine and the EU in the field of security. Solodkyy emphasised: 'A strong Europe is impossible without a strong Ukraine, just as a successful Ukraine is impossible without a successful EU.' Ukraine, he said, not only seeks membership as a guarantee of its future security, but is already a de facto guarantor of security for the entire continent.

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Sergiy Solodkyy,
Director of the New Europe
Center



Oleksandr Sushko,
Executive Director of the
International Renaissance
Foundation

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The speech by **Oleksandr Sushko**, Executive Director of the International Renaissance Foundation, focused on the historical importance of the current stage of Ukraine's European integration and the role of civil society in this process. He emphasised that the Forum is of particular importance among the many events organised by the Foundation, as it continues a long-standing tradition of dialogue that began during the discussions on the Association Agreement and is now working towards Ukraine's future membership in the EU.

Sushko stressed that Europe is currently experiencing a 'dramatic historical moment' that will determine its future for decades to come. In his opinion, the success or failure of the current stage of enlargement will be decisive for the very essence of the European Union. He drew attention to Eurobarometer data showing that the majority of EU citizens support enlargement, and Ukraine is the leader among candidate countries in terms of support in member states.

At the same time, he stressed that the success of enlargement depends on a combination of factors: reforms in Ukraine, internal reforms within the EU itself, and political processes in member states where there is opposition to enlargement. He noted that resistance will not disappear completely and that the issue of membership will remain part of active political gamesmanship in Europe. Speaking about Ukrainian reforms, Sushko stressed that the path of reform is not a 'given' and is certainly not an easy process. Some reforms are painful, unpopular, and require significant changes in political culture.

SESSION 1. UKRAINE AS A GAME-CHANGER: IMAGINING AN EU ENLARGEMENT FROM INSIDE OUT



KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Ukraine's decision to apply for EU membership just days after the full-scale invasion is a turning point that prompted a rethinking of the enlargement policy and endowed it with new political and moral weight.
- The Ukrainian government has demonstrated unprecedented speed in meeting accession requirements, from fulfilling Commission recommendations to joining parts of the EU internal market.
- Ukraine does not seek concessions but predictability — a clear, merit-based roadmap where each reform brings tangible progress and prevents reform fatigue.
- The current blockage of negotiations by one member state was cited as a key obstacle, but experts urged maintaining momentum through informal consultations and parallel internal EU reforms.
- Enlargement should move forward together with internal EU transformation, rather than being postponed because of it.
- Member states also have "homework" to do - adapting institutions, budgets, and public communication to prepare for future enlargement.
- The experience of the Western Balkans was presented as a lesson for Ukraine, that political will, institutional discipline, and transparent communication can accelerate integration.
- Ukraine's and Moldova's accession paths are closely connected, and finding creative ways to overcome vetoes and procedural blockages is essential to keep the enlargement process credible and forward-moving.



Katarina Mathernova,
Ambassador of the European
Union to Ukraine



Katarina Mathernova, Ambassador of the European Union to Ukraine, said that the double shock of February 2022 — the full-scale invasion and Ukraine's immediate decision to apply for EU membership, fundamentally changed Europe's perspective. "When we were still figuring out how to get bulletproof vests to Ukraine, its leadership thought about applying for membership," she said, calling that moment a "watershed" that brought new energy and purpose to the enlargement debate. In her words, EU membership has become "a symbol of hope," sustaining Ukrainians through the most difficult phases of the war.

Katarina Mathernova emphasized that enlargement is no longer a background agenda. Ukraine's application reawakened strategic thinking in Brussels and across capitals, stimulating discussions not only about Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, but also about the Western Balkans. She stressed that the pace and depth of Ukraine's reforms are extraordinary given wartime realities: a country fighting for its survival while simultaneously modernizing its institutions. The key challenge now is maintaining the sustainability of reforms in the absence of elections and amid limited formal progress on accession steps that require unanimity among 27 member states. "We have taken the process very far and very fast," she said.

The importance of continuity was underscored. The process may seem technocratic and slow, but it is essential because the reforms themselves strengthen Ukraine regardless of timing. Katarina Mathernova concluded with a broader message about Europe's security and identity: "Our only hope is to help Ukraine prevail in this war and to have Ukraine be with us, its resilience, its innovation, its technology, because the future of Ukraine is the future of Europe." She also called attention to the non-military dimension of conflict, noting that hybrid warfare: disinformation, cyberattacks, remains a direct threat to democratic systems.

Oleksandr Ilkov, Director General of the Government Office for Coordination on European and Euro-Atlantic Integration of Ukraine, described Ukraine as the country that revitalized the EU enlargement policy and transformed it into a living and dynamic process. He provided an overview of Ukraine's path: from candidate status and the completion of the European Commission's recommendations to record-speed legislative screening and integration into the EU internal market (for example, the "Roam Like at Home" initiative). He noted that the government has approved key policy roadmaps on the rule of law, democratic institutions, public administration reform, and the protection of national minorities, and that Kyiv is ready to open all six negotiating clusters by the end of the year.

Oleksandr Ilkov argued that Ukraine's message to its partners is straightforward: it does not seek special treatment but clarity and predictability. "We need a clear and credible roadmap where every successful reform is rewarded with tangible progress," he said, adding that genuine merit-based progress would help prevent reform fatigue. He cautioned that major reforms now require substantial political capital, and without visible movement in the negotiation process, there is a risk of losing engagement. While Hungary's continued blockage



Oleksandr Ilkov,
Director General of the
Government Office for
Coordination on European and
Euro-Atlantic Integration, Ukraine

of Cluster 1 remains a challenge, Oleksandr Ilkov suggested that informal technical consultations within the EU Council could help maintain momentum until a formal decision is made. He underlined that internal EU reforms and enlargement should proceed “hand in hand,” and not serve as a pretext for postponement. Concluding, he stated that Ukraine’s membership will not only complete the European project, it will transform it into a stronger, more secure, and more confident Union.



Lia Quartapelle,
Member of the Chamber of
Deputies of Italy

Italian MP **Lia Quartapelle** placed Ukraine’s accession within a broader reflection on Europe’s own responsibilities. The invasion, she argued, posed fundamental questions: “Are we able to maintain peace in our continent? Are we able to guarantee security and well-being to our citizens in the face of external threats?” Ukraine has enormous “homework” ahead, she said, but the same applies to member states, which must adapt their institutions and policies to the arrival of a large, reforming country. “It’s not possible that we only ask Ukraine to do homework,” she noted, pointing to the need for EU-level reforms, especially regarding decision-making and fiscal mechanisms.

Lia Quartapelle highlighted the need to engage European citizens honestly in this transformation. One-third of the EU budget currently supports agricultural policy, she reminded, and Ukraine’s entry will require adjustments: “We have to explain this to our public opinion now, not later.” She also warned that future enlargement cannot be built on contradictions: “It would be ironic to have inside the EU members with voting rights that don’t comply with fundamental principles, and members without voting rights that fought for those principles.” She finished her speech, encouraging creativity in finding flexible forms of cooperation with partners such as the UK, Norway, and Canada, and stressing that “Ukraine will bring new energy, new ideas, and more unity than ever on fundamental values.”

Drita Abdiu-Halili, former Deputy Chief Negotiator of North Macedonia, reflected on the experience of the Western Balkans. Her country, which gained candidate status in 2005 and opened accession talks only in 2022, demonstrates “how complex this path can be.” The war in Ukraine shifted enlargement from a technocratic exercise to a question of geopolitics and security. Yet geopolitical urgency alone is not enough, progress must rest on sustained reforms and institutional credibility.

Drita Abdiu-Halili underlined that Ukraine’s determination serves as inspiration rather than competition for the Western Balkans. “Your progress is not a setback for us; it’s a reminder for everyone,” she said, emphasizing that lessons from the Balkans could help make the overall process more dynamic and efficient. She welcomed the new methodology that allows for gradual or accelerated integration, whereby candidates can benefit from partial participation in EU structures even before full accession. She also called for improved communication about the EU’s tangible support: financial aid, infrastructure investment, and education programs, so that citizens understand the concrete benefits of integration. She also mentioned that countering disinformation should be rooted in transparency: “Answer with correct information and good communication, so that you don’t have time to read Russian media in the morning.”



Drita Abdiu-Halili,
Former State Secretary at the
Secretariat for European Affairs
and Former Deputy Chief
Negotiator, North Macedonia

Iulian Groza, Executive Director of the Institute for European Policies and Reforms, described enlargement as being at a geopolitical turning point. He characterized Ukraine and Moldova as interconnected politically, economically, and symbolically, adding that “for Moldova, Ukraine is truly a shield against Russia’s aggression, as it is for the whole of Europe.” The EU’s decision in 2022 to grant both countries candidate status, followed by the opening of accession talks, sent a clear message that the European project extends to those who defend its values under fire.

Iulian Groza mentioned Moldova’s experience of hybrid warfare: disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks, and covert financing, and what is the national effort to resist them through cooperation among institutions, civil society, and international partners. He said that confronting Russian propaganda requires more than reactive debunking: “You need to understand the narratives and design a counter-narrative to secure the information space.” On the procedural side, Iulian Groza questioned the excessive use of unanimity in the EU’s reformed enlargement methodology, suggesting that consensus should apply at the end of the process rather than to every interim step. While creative approaches such as frontloading could help sustain progress, he stressed that ultimately these are political decisions that must be addressed directly with member states. Synchronizing Moldova’s and Ukraine’s accession tracks would strengthen both countries’ security: “Moldova is safer with Ukraine in the European Union, and Ukraine will be safer with Moldova in the EU.”

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Iulian Groza,
Executive Director, Institute for
European Policies and Reforms
(IPRE), Moldova

Moderator



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Sylvie Kaufmann,
Editorial Director, Le Monde,
France

CONCLUSION

The discussion showed that Ukraine's bid for EU membership has changed how Europe understands enlargement, turning it from a routine policy into a matter of shared security, values, and responsibility. The country's resilience during the war has made it a symbol of Europe's strength and renewal. Ukraine's transformation in the face of invasion has restored confidence in the European project and pushed the EU to rethink its own identity, unity, and ability to act together. Enlargement is no longer just a bureaucratic process — it has become a question of security, solidarity, and shared democratic values.

At the same time, lasting integration will depend on candidate countries' continued reforms and the EU's readiness to show political courage and consistency. The discussion emphasized that trust and clarity are key to keeping both societies motivated and aligned. Speakers agreed that Ukraine's progress should be based on real achievements, while the EU must update its internal rules to stay effective. As Ambassador Mathernova noted, the outcome of the war and the future of the Union are deeply connected: Ukraine's success will shape Europe's own strength and direction.



SESSION 2. ADVOCATING SECTORAL BENEFITS: WHAT ADVANTAGES DOES THE NEW ENLARGEMENT BRING FOR THE EU?



KEY TAKEAWAYS

- EU enlargement is not a charity but a strategic investment in competitiveness, resilience, and collective security.
- Ukraine's defense innovations are key assets that could strengthen Europe's military and technological capabilities.
- Integration with Ukraine would make the EU more resilient, adding industrial capacity, agricultural strength, and opportunities.
- The process of enlargement could help modernize the Common Agricultural Policy and prove that meaningful reforms are possible even in crisis conditions.
- Ukraine's recovery and reconstruction potential depend on credible security guarantees and sustained international investment.
- Public perceptions of enlargement within the EU remain highly politicized, requiring clear communication and visible progress on rule of law.
- Early engagement with economic sectors that may feel threatened by Ukraine's competitiveness, particularly in agriculture, is essential for building consensus.
- Fact-based transparency and joint communication are critical to counter misinformation and populist narratives about the costs of enlargement.
- Ukraine's environmental progress and commitment to climate neutrality strengthen Europe's collective ability to achieve sustainability and green transition goals.
- Ukraine's successful integration will define both its own future and the EU's ability to act as a united and credible geopolitical force.



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Oleksandra Betliy, Leading Research Fellow at the Institute for Economic Research and Policy Consulting, emphasized that EU enlargement is not an act of charity but a strategic project rooted in competitiveness, resilience, and security. She stressed that Ukraine's accession would enhance Europe's economic and military potential, noting that Ukraine has "one of the best and most adaptive armies in Europe." The country's experience with modern military technologies and flexible defense systems, she argued, can strengthen the EU's ability to build its own deterrence.

Oleksandra Betliy,

Leading Research Fellow, Institute for Economic Research and Policy Consulting, Ukraine

In her view, a larger EU would be "more stable and economically resilient." Ukraine's agricultural strength, machine-building sector, and flexible business environment create new global competitive advantages for the Union. She suggested that parts of European production currently based in China could relocate to Ukraine, reducing logistics costs. Ukraine's membership, she added, could accelerate long-overdue reforms of the Common Agricultural Policy, described as "expensive and inefficient," and demonstrate that deep reforms are possible even during wartime. Betliy also pointed to progress in education and workforce development, highlighting the new law on vocational training. Ultimately, she argued, Ukraine's reconstruction will depend on credible security guarantees: "If there are security guarantees, investments will come."



Jana Kobzova, Programme Co-Director of the European Security Programme at the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), emphasized that the war and EU enlargement are inseparable. "If the war is lost, there will be no enlargement," she noted, highlighting the decisive role of Ukraine's Armed Forces in keeping the prospect of enlargement alive. She also stressed the unprecedented nature of Ukraine's accession and pointed out that, this time, the EU will need to assume greater leadership and coordination instead of relying on external partners.

Kobzova warned that public opinion in member states is becoming increasingly politicized. Europeans support Ukraine in the war, but that does not automatically translate into support for full membership. She underlined that credibility rests on the rule of law — "the guarantee that a decision issued by a Ukrainian court is as reliable as one in the Netherlands or Spain." She also highlighted the importance of early engagement with groups that may feel exposed to competition from Ukraine, particularly in the agricultural sector.

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Jana Kobzova,

Programme Co-Director — European Security Programme, Senior Policy Fellow, European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR)

Roman Nitsovych, Research Director at DiXi Group, drew attention to the broader political context surrounding the debate. He noted that many Europeans no longer view the EU as a guarantor of stability and prosperity, while fears related to migration, economic imbalances, and the costs of enlargement are increasingly exploited by populist and Eurosceptic forces.

As a response, he outlined two key approaches. The first is fact-based transparency — illustrated by the case of false claims about Ukrainian electricity exports driving up prices in Greece. The second is a focus on mutual economic benefits: in 2024 alone, imports of Ukrainian electricity generated €670 million for European producers. He stressed that energy cooperation, reconstruction, and the green transition can form the basis of a genuinely mutually beneficial partnership. His core message was clear: “The cost of inaction will always exceed the cost of integration.”

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Roman Nitsovych,
Research Director, DiXi Group,
Ukraine



Anastasia Pociumban,
Research Fellow, German Council
on Foreign Relations (DGAP),
Germany

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Anastasia Pociumban, Research Fellow at the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP), highlighted the information vacuum surrounding enlargement. She noted that although a majority of EU citizens support the process, two thirds do not feel sufficiently informed — a gap that allows manipulation on issues like migration, corruption, and financial risks. She stressed that enlargement is “a geopolitical necessity,” not a moral gesture.

Expert underscored the importance of communicating successful reforms in candidate countries and actively countering Russian disinformation. “We have to shape the narratives before Russia does,” she said. In her view, enlargement regulates mobility rather than increases migration, exports anti-corruption standards, and ultimately costs less than managing the consequences of instability.

Nataliya Andrushevych, Chair of the Governing Body of the Society and Environment NGO, focused on the environmental dimension of enlargement. She noted that despite the complexity of the climate chapter, Ukraine has already made substantial progress, reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 33% compared to 1990 and exceeding the EU's interim targets.

She explained that Ukraine can strengthen the EU's green transition by providing access to strategic resources such as lithium and hydrogen and by opening new markets for renewable technologies. Ukraine's ecosystems, forests, and soils could enrich Europe's natural environment. She stressed the need for research-based communication and early dialogue with EU environmental organisations to avoid misunderstandings, as illustrated by the Dutch debate during the Association Agreement ratification.

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Nataliya Andrushevych,
Chair of the Governing Body,
Society and Environment, Ukraine

Moderator **Hanna Hopko**, Chairwoman of the ANTS Network, closed the discussion with a call for a more strategic EU approach to defence and industrial policy. She criticized the influence of entrenched lobbying groups and urged the Union to prioritise innovation. Her conclusion was unequivocal: "Real EU enlargement means not only welcoming Ukraine into the family, but also turning the Union into a geopolitical actor... With Ukraine, you will lead. Without Ukraine, we will all face problems."

Moderator

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Hanna Hopko,
Chairwoman, ANTS NGO,
Ukraine

CONCLUSION

The session demonstrated that Ukraine's integration into the EU brings practical benefits in security, economy, energy, and environmental policy. Participants agreed that enlargement is not an act of charity but a mutual investment in Europe's competitiveness and resilience. Ukraine's capacity for reform and innovation positions it as both a contributor to and a catalyst for the EU's transformation.

At the same time, the discussion underscored the need for honest communication and joint problem-solving to address public fears and political resistance within the Union. Fact-based transparency, strategic engagement with affected groups, and clear narratives about shared gains emerged as essential tools for sustaining momentum. As several speakers concluded, the cost of hesitation will far exceed the cost of integration. And Ukraine's success will define not only its own future but also the credibility and strength of the European project.



SESSION 3. STRONGER TOGETHER: UKRAINE, ACCESSION COUNTRIES, AND EUROPE'S SECURITY INTERDEPENDENCE



KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Europe's security and enlargement agendas are inseparable, making Ukraine's integration a strategic necessity rather than political symbolism.
- The war exposed the EU's need to embed defense and deterrence among its core principles alongside democracy and rule of law.
- Ukraine should be treated not as a security recipient but as a security provider contributing directly to Europe's protection.
- Integrating Ukraine strengthens the EU's military, industrial, and political capacities against global competitors.
- The U.S. role in European security is becoming less predictable, compelling the EU to assume greater responsibility.
- Flexible coalitions and joint defense initiatives can help overcome slow decision-making within the 27-member structure.
- Rapid and proactive integration steps are vital to prevent Russian interference and counter disinformation.
- Ukraine's participation in EU and NATO mechanisms would signal unity, strategic autonomy, and credibility for the Union.
- Delays in Ukraine's integration would increase Europe's vulnerability, while decisive action would make the continent stronger and more resilient.



Ihor Dolhov,
Ambassador Extraordinary and
Plenipotentiary, International
Analyst, Ukrinform, Ukraine

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Ihor Dolhov, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Ukraine, International Analyst, Ukrinform, opened his speech by recalling the EU's accession formula: respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, human rights, and minority rights. He also noted that security and defense are absent from that list. He argued that the full-scale war has forced Europe to confront this gap: "The EU delegated this mission (to defeat Russia) to Ukraine," while the Union itself now has the chance to reaffirm itself as a global player. In his view, the war catalyzed a transformation already visible in the EU's seat at the G7 table, in responsibility for sanctions and wartime decisions, and in the recognition that Europe faces a prolonged arms race and a Cold War of the 21st century. The implication is clear: common values require protection, and enlargement is part of projecting the capacity "to act, not only to react."

He linked this strategic shift to Ukraine's role on the battlefield and the risks of hesitation. If the EU does not integrate its neighbourhood, he warned, "these territories will be immediately occupied by Russians." A larger Union would be "stronger, more resilient, and more competitive," while Ukraine's participation would reinforce Europe's military, industrial, and political capacity to face global rivals from China to the Middle East and Latin America. He stressed that European rules "are not the tablets of Moses," calling for greater flexibility to adapt to new security conditions. He also welcomed the creation of an EU Commissioner for Defence and Space, underscoring the point that having weapons is not enough — Europe also needs "the political will to use them."

Nona Mikhelidze, Senior Fellow at the Italian Institute of International Affairs (IAI), set out three problems in Europe's current approach. First, parts of Europe, especially the southern part, still treat the war as a bilateral Ukraine-Russia conflict rather than aggression against Europe, which leads to viewing military-industrial measures as temporary assistance instead of a structural pillar of European security. Second, she cautioned against the dangerous assumption that Russia's exposed weaknesses mean it cannot threaten NATO or Europe: Moscow has adapted, shifted to a war economy, and can coerce with drones, cyberattacks, energy pressure, migration routes, and disinformation. Third, she argued that the transatlantic relationship is undergoing a structural change: U.S. security guarantees can no longer be taken for granted."

From this follows a different role for Ukraine: not merely a security recipient but a security provider. Europe should treat support to Kyiv as a structural investment in its own security, prepare for a long-term confrontation with Russia, including the risk of "frozen conflicts" on the EU's borders, and "act collectively and not nationally" in security and defence policy. In a later remark, she pointed to recent Russian drone attacks on Poland and Denmark as proof of unpreparedness: few drones were shot down, extremely expensive interceptors were used against cheap targets, and the overall response was reactive. Interest in joint drone production with Ukraine and Ukrainian teams training partners in air defence are positives, she said, but Europe still lacks a proactive policy for looming threats.

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Nona Mikhelidze,
PHD, Senior Fellow, Institute of
International Affairs (IAI), Italy



Daniel Szeligowski,
Head of Eastern Europe
Programme, Polish Institute of
International Affairs, Poland



Daniel Szeligowski, Head of the Eastern Europe Programme at the Polish Institute of International Affairs, emphasized that enlargement “will not happen” without credible security conditions. He cautioned against relying on universal formats, noting the growing demand in Europe for flexible coalitions of the willing. Addressing the U.S. role, he pointed to a possible shift toward greater isolationism, which raises dilemmas about the pace and shape of Europe’s emerging security architecture.

From the Polish perspective, prolonging Pax Americana remains a priority, while Ukraine seeks a new system in which it is fully integrated. This requires acting simultaneously through NATO, the EU, and regional coalitions, and strengthening autonomous defence capabilities in Central and Eastern Europe. Cooperation is complicated by trust deficits, differing views on what constitutes Ukrainian victory, limited political capital, and pressure from far-right forces. He outlined several immediate steps: integrating Ukraine into EU strategic planning, expanding joint procurement, linking Ukraine to Europe’s energy and raw-materials chains, and ensuring rapid decision-making, since “five to ten years is far too long.”



Susan Stewart, Senior Fellow at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), presented findings from the SWP–IRSEM study showing that Europe is developing a “critical mass” of understanding: Ukraine belongs inside the future security architecture, while Russia does not. She noted that small coalitions of like-minded states will continue to play a role, but NATO and the EU will remain the core frameworks, alongside the growing need for a stronger European security pillar.

She noted, however, that strengthening the EU’s security role is constrained by ongoing competition over competencies between Brussels and member states. For Ukraine, this requires working simultaneously on several levels — through bilateral channels, in small coalitions of like-minded states, and within EU institutions. She also warned against a “concentric circles” scenario in which Ukraine advances quickly in defence integration but falls behind economically, stressing that gradual integration must unfold across multiple sectors. Commenting on Russia’s drone attacks on NATO countries, she suggested that while some governments may initially react cautiously, repeated incidents will only reinforce the understanding that “Ukraine’s security and Europe’s security are one and the same.”



Susan Stewart,
Senior Fellow, German Institute
for International and Security
Affairs (SWP), Germany

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Ramadan Ilazi,

Head of Research, Kosovar Center for Security Studies (KCSS), Former Deputy Minister for European integration of Kosovo

Ramadan Ilazi, Head of Research at the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies and former Deputy Minister for European Integration of Kosovo, named Ukraine as the place “where the light is strong,” invoking the post-1989 struggle to embed liberal democracy in the East. He emphasized that Ukraine “saved the Western Balkans,” diverting destabilization and reviving the EU’s raison d’être as a peace project: membership cannot be reduced to technocracy when a country has spent the last four years fighting and spilling blood to protect the very idea of Europe. Russia’s other front lines run through the Balkans, he warned, citing the presence of a Russian intelligence and military center in candidate states and the danger of appeasement and complacency.

His policy prescription is to move faster than Russian disinformation by operationalizing integration: create operational formats now. Ukraine should be a member or observer in the European Defence Agency and the EU Agency for Cybersecurity; NATO should accredit a Center of Excellence in Kyiv; and the EU should stop treating the argument that Ukraine cannot join because it is at war as anything more than a political argument. Bringing Ukrainian voices into EU institutions would itself be a signal of resolve and cohesion, he concluded, and reinforcing the Union’s capacity to “speak with one voice” is key to strategic autonomy.

Moderator **Dmytro Shulga**, Europe and World Programme Director at the International Renaissance Foundation, pressed the panel about how Europe views Russia now. He asked the core questions heard in member-state debates: Is Russia still a threat? Is it too weak to attack others? How much time does Europe have under an American umbrella? His answer was: “we are having as much time as Ukrainian armed forces allow us to have.” The war is evolving, Russia is adapting to drone-centric warfare, and European readiness to fight the war Russia is waging is uncertain. Without a shared threat perception, readiness, and a clear place for Ukraine “in this whole system,” Europe risks a vicious circle of denial and delay.

Moderator

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Dmytro Shulga,

Europe and World Programme Director, International Renaissance Foundation, Ukraine

CONCLUSION

Europe's security and enlargement agendas are deeply intertwined. Participants agreed that Ukraine's integration into the EU should be viewed not as assistance to a war-torn country but as a strategic investment in Europe's own safety and resilience. The war has exposed the need to include defense and deterrence among the EU's core principles, transforming enlargement into a means of strengthening the Union's ability to act, not merely to respond. The discussion emphasized that Europe must prepare for a long-term confrontation with Russia, develop flexible coalitions and collective defense capabilities, and integrate Ukraine into strategic planning and procurement. With the U.S. playing a less predictable role, the EU must take greater responsibility for its own protection and recognize Ukraine as a security provider rather than a beneficiary.



SESSION 4. ABOVE ALL, THE FUNDAMENTALS: RULE OF LAW AND ANTI-CORRUPTION AS AN ANCHOR OF EU ACCESSION



KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The Ukrainian government's attack on anti-corruption institutions has significantly undermined the trust of international partners and complicated the process of joining the EU.
- Partners expect Ukraine to demonstrate real political will for reform, ensure the independence of institutions, transparent competitions, and the absence of manual control.
- Reforms require a 'sandwich' approach. The only mechanism that works in Ukraine is pressure from civil society and the media, pressure from international partners, and the participation of reformers within the system. It is this combination that offers a chance to stay the course and correct mistakes.
- Reform despite obstruction. EU partners will expect Ukraine to reform even without the formal opening of the relevant clusters. Stagnation in reforms will be perceived as a lack of political will for change in general.
- Russia will bet on the internal destabilisation of Ukraine. In a situation where the Kremlin is unable to achieve military victory, the key strategy is to undermine Ukraine from within — through discrediting, propaganda and the destruction of institutions. This makes preserving the independence and stability of institutions a critically important element of national security.
- Attacks on the anti-corruption infrastructure have complicated advocacy in the EU — both in terms of sanctions, frozen assets and overcoming Orbán's veto — demonstrating how vulnerable the trust of partners remains.

Ivanna Klympush-Tsintsadze, Chair of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine Committee on Ukraine's Integration into the European Union, highlighted the problem of eroded trust in relations between Ukraine and the European Union, caused by the attack by the Ukrainian authorities on the anti-corruption infrastructure in July 2025. According to her, this attack significantly complicated Ukraine's European and Euro-Atlantic integration process. She stressed that the rule of law and the fight against corruption are fundamental to successful EU accession.

Ms. Klympush-Tsintsadze stated that Ukraine has a real chance for membership, but the responsibility for its realization lies with the authorities. She expressed concern that attacks on anti-corruption bodies are continuing, and therefore partner trust has still not been restored. She emphasized that a successful accession process is only possible through the "Ukrainian sandwich" rule: pressure from civil society and media, pressure from international partners, and actions by reformers within the system. Klympush-Tsintsadze separately noted that the Verkhovna Rada has lost real agency (or subjectivity), the system of checks and balances is being eroded, and that society and partners are currently the only guarantee that Ukraine can correct its course. The formation of clear conditionalities, adherence to which will be monitored by society and partners, can help ensure a successful accession process and the accountable implementation of reforms by the authorities.

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Ivanna Klympush-Tsintsadze,

Chair of the Committee on Ukraine's Integration into the EU of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine



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Mattia Nelles, CEO and Co-founder of the German-Ukrainian Bureau, outlined the complexity of the environment in which Ukraine's supporters in the EU operate. He supported Ukraine's progress in reforms, noting that "it is difficult to be the 'perfect student' during a war of annihilation." Despite this, he stressed that the authorities significantly undermined trust in themselves within the EU due to the attack on anti-corruption institutions in July 2025. Restoring trust is especially crucial in key EU member states, such as Germany, or in member states that will hold referendums on the issue of enlargement (e.g., France or the Netherlands).

Mattia Nelles,

CEO and Co-founder, German-Ukrainian Bureau, Germany

Another important factor is avoiding stagnation and backsliding of reforms in candidate countries, particularly in a situation where the formal opening of clusters may be delayed due to blocking by individual member states. Ukraine needs not only to prevent regression, but also to seek instruments for moving forward.

Nelles urged against reducing everything solely to the policy of conditionality, as this approach, for example, cannot solve the problem of manual control of institutions.



Ivane Chkhikvadze,
Head of EU Policy, Araminta,
Georgia



Ivane Chkhikvadze, Head of EU Policy at Araminta, presented the perspective of Georgia and Georgian society on the situation in Ukraine. Currently, due to internal issues and the fight with the “Georgian Dream” party, society may be paying less attention to Ukraine, as all resources and energy are being directed towards opposing internal conflicts. This also means that the attacks on anti-corruption institutions in Ukraine were barely covered in Georgia. For the active citizen in Georgia right now, it is not just about fighting for the rule of law or against elite corruption, but about saving the statehood, which reduces the relevance of EU accession negotiations. However, speaking about the overall framework of the accession process, Mr. Chkhikvadze emphasized that it is necessary to continue reforms and fulfil the conditions to obtain candidate status and start accession negotiations. If the fulfilment of criteria and conditions is sacrificed for a certain political goal, the country may ultimately lose both the results of the reforms and the progress on the path to the EU.



Paola Peduzzi, Deputy Director of *Il Foglio*, highlighted that the public discussion about Ukraine is being distorted by the mass media, which often fails to provide a comprehensive understanding of the situation. “If you just check TV shows and media, you will have a completely distorted understanding of the situation here. I don’t know why we have higher standards for Ukraine than we have for our leadership,” the expert noted. The expert suggests the possible reason for the change in attitude towards Ukraine is the shifting narrative in countries lacking a geopolitical understanding of the war. In 2022, Ukraine was perceived as the first line of defence for democracy, but that understanding is now being lost in countries that do not border Russia.

Despite this, more than half of the Italian population still supports the idea of financial assistance to Ukraine. However, “media exhaustion” from the war in Ukraine is growing increasingly stronger in Western societies. To counteract this, it is necessary to work more with public opinion, as the active use of “war fatigue” in the mass media may further influence European societies and complicate the adoption of decisions regarding aid to Ukraine.



Paola Peduzzi,
Deputy Director, *Il Foglio*, Italy



Olena Halushka,

Member of the Board, International Renaissance Foundation, Co-founder, International Center for Ukrainian Victory (ICUV), Member of the Board, Anti-corruption Action Center, Ukraine



Olena Halushka, a Board Member of the International Renaissance Foundation, Co-founder of the International Centre for Ukrainian Victory (ICUV), and a Board Member of the Anti-Corruption Action Centre, emphasized the danger of undermining anti-corruption institutions and why their protection is critically important for democracy, European integration, and international trust in Ukraine.

She stressed that despite martial law and the limited space for civic engagement, democracy is deeply embedded in Ukrainian society, and it was society itself that managed to protect institutions when political authorities attacked them. This also explains why the West continues to place its trust in Ukrainian society.

She reiterated the high level of support for EU accession in Ukraine: 74% of Ukrainians support the country's EU membership. Another important figure is that 75% of Ukrainians strongly support the conditionalities put forward by the European Union toward Ukraine. This demonstrates the EU's very strong legitimacy in helping us push for reforms and maintaining the democratic process on track.

Halushka drew attention to the broader context: democracy is receding globally, and illiberal forces are rising in Europe and the USA. Because of this, the "window of opportunity" for Ukraine's integration into the EU is very narrow.

She also highlighted that since Russia cannot defeat Ukraine militarily, it is attempting to undermine it from within using discredit, propaganda, and institutional corrosion. Therefore, preserving the independence of institutions is critically important. Halushka also explained that the July events complicated Ukraine's advocacy efforts within the EU — especially regarding sanctions, frozen assets, and overcoming Orbán's veto.

Moderator



Sergiy Sydorenko,

Editor, European Pravda, Ukraine

CONCLUSION

The attack on anti-corruption institutions in July 2025 had a significant impact on Ukraine. On one hand, they significantly slowed down Ukraine's integration process and caused an erosion of trust among partners. On the other hand, July events showed the level of Ukrainian democracy and resilience, as well as the fact that European integration continues to be the driver for reform and the "lighthouse" for Ukraine's future.

In order to safeguard the process of reforms and accession, Ukrainian officials should learn the lessons from this situation, show political will to reform, even if the accession process is slowing down and becoming more technical. At the same time, reforms must be controlled and pushed with the help from external partners, the opposition and civil society. Precise conditionality that can be monitored by society can help in this process and is necessary to counteract forces that oppose Ukraine's accession to the EU.





ABOUT NEW EUROPE CENTER

The New Europe Center was founded in 2017 as an independent think tank. The New Europe Center became recognized by offering high-quality analysis on foreign policy issues in Ukraine and regional security by combining active, effective work with advocacy.

The New Europe Center's vision is very much in line with the views of the majority of Ukrainians about the future of their country: Ukraine should be integrated into the European Union and NATO.

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