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New Europe Center  
Kyiv, Ukraine

# UNBLOCKING THE EU ACCESSION PROCESS FOR UKRAINE:

a necessary reform for European  
unity and its security

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## SUMMARY

*The European Union's enlargement policy, historically a pillar of its post-war integration strategy, now confronts a profound crisis. Despite increasing geopolitical urgency and Ukraine's progress in reforms that enable the opening of negotiations, the accession process is obstructed by unilateral vetoes, most notably Hungary's, which imperils Ukraine's reforms and its return to Europe, as well as the EU's credibility, cohesion, and strategic influence. The bilateralisation of accession — where member states leverage veto rights for national interests, often unrelated to the merit-based benchmarks or Copenhagen criteria — erodes EU principles and hampers its collective action capabilities. To restore policy integrity and bolster geopolitical clout, the EU must undertake comprehensive reforms, including transitioning decision-making from unanimity to Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) for most of the decisions in the enlargement process. Such reforms are essential not only for Ukraine's future, providing it with a clear path towards integration, but also for ensuring the long-term stability and influence of the European Union.*

## THE CURRENT CRISIS: POLITICAL VETOES AS A SYSTEMIC THREAT

In recent years, decision-making within the European Union has seen an increasingly problematic use of veto power, culminating in the obstruction of critical policies like enlargement. Bulgaria's veto against North Macedonia, Greece's veto against Albania, or Hungary's persistent veto against Ukraine exemplify this trend. Despite Ukraine meeting the criteria to open three clusters — Fundamentals, Internal Market and External Relations — Budapest continues to block Ukraine's accession negotiations process due to bilateral disagreements unrelated to EU accession standards. Ukraine is well aware of the experiences of EU candidate countries in the Western Balkans and anticipates facing similar challenges based on those precedents.<sup>1</sup>

This practice, known as bilateralisation, poses a fundamental threat to Ukraine in this particular case, but also to the Union's functioning. It diverts decision-making from collective merit and shared guidelines toward national interests and political bargaining, undermining EU unity and credibility. The delays and uncertainties this creates weaken the EU's ability to project strength and coherence on the international stage, at a time when Ukraine plays a pivotal role in regional stability and as a bulwark against external threats such as the Russian aggression.

The implications of such an approach are severe. When member states disrupt initiatives beyond the scope of consensus, the EU's internal coherence is challenged, complicating efforts to present a united front on foreign policy, security, and other issues. This fragmentation diminishes the EU's worldwide influence. It erodes its capacity to act decisively during crises, further complicating Ukraine's pursuit of integration and casting doubt on the credibility of the entire enlargement process. ***The damage to the Ukrainian reform agenda is huge, as without a formal development of the accession process, both the EU and Ukrainian society lose their most powerful leverage on reforms***<sup>2</sup>.

The issue of unanimity voting must be viewed in perspective. If dissent is limited to Hungary and perhaps one or two other nations, decision-making

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<sup>1</sup> Alyona Getmanchuk, Leo Litra. Preparing for accession talks with the EU: tips and tricks for Ukraine. New Europe Center, December 2022, [https://neweurope.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Preparing-for-Accession-Talks-with-the-EU\\_eng.pdf](https://neweurope.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Preparing-for-Accession-Talks-with-the-EU_eng.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Ukrainian CSOs call EU member states to grant Ukraine EU candidate status promptly, as recognition of joint achievements. DEJURE Foundation, 26 May, 2022, <https://dejure.foundation/en/voumgds1b1-ukrainian-csos-call-eu-member-states-to/>



remains largely manageable, though not guaranteed. However, if the number of countries adopting obstructionist tactics similar to Hungary's increases, the EU could become unmanageable, regardless of the alignment among the bloc's most influential members.

The challenge is further compounded by the shifting nature of the debate. Previously, Hungary's primary argument for blocking Ukraine was centred on Hungarian minority rights within Ukraine.<sup>3</sup> Now, the narrative has changed; Budapest's core message is that accepting Ukraine would effectively import the war into the EU.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, the issue is no longer about Ukrainian reforms, but rather a strategic decision to block accession regardless of progress in reforms. This leaves very little room for compromise. As a result, the prevailing view is that the debate with Hungary should be paused until after the April elections, when a new window of opportunity may occur. Therefore, it is unlikely that any current efforts, particularly from Ukraine, would yield practical results. However, the issue of Hungary is not singular, as it shows a broad array of problems inside the EU due to the inflexible decision-making process.<sup>5</sup>

The EU sought to pressure Hungary long before relations between Budapest and Kyiv became so strained. In 2018, the European Parliament triggered Article 7 proceedings against Hungary to address concerns regarding the rule of law, democracy, and fundamental rights, and since then, Hungary has been under scrutiny for its continued violations of 12 areas of concern — including judicial independence, corruption and the functioning of the electoral system.<sup>6</sup> From 2018, the process has stalled, remaining at the hearing stage without a formal EU Council vote to determine a "serious and persistent breach" of EU values. It is unlikely that this process will be revitalised in the current context, at least not before the elections. Even if it were to resume post-election, success would require unanimity from all member states (excluding Hungary). This is difficult to achieve, as opposition from just one other state would cause the procedure to fail.

<sup>3</sup> Alexandra Brzozowski. Hungary holds the line on Ukraine EU bid veto after negative referendum. EURACTIV, 26 June, 2025, <https://www.euractiv.com/news/hungary-holds-the-line-on-ukraines-eu-bid-veto-after-negative-referendum/>

<sup>4</sup> Viktor Orban. Hungary does not and will not support Ukraine's membership in the European Union because it would bring the war into Europe and take the money of Hungarians out to Ukraine. MTI, 4 November, 2025, <https://miniszterelnok.hu/en/hungary-does-not-and-will-not-support-ukraines-membership-in-the-european-union-because-it-would-bring-the-war-into-europe-and-take-the-money-of-hungarians-out-to-ukraine/>

<sup>5</sup> Overcoming vetocracy in the EU. New Europe Center, 2025, [https://neweurope.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Overcoming-Vetocracy-in-the-EU\\_eng.pdf](https://neweurope.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Overcoming-Vetocracy-in-the-EU_eng.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Parliament sounds the alarm over Hungary's deepening rule of law crisis. European Parliament, 25 November 2025, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20251120IPR31492/parliament-sounds-the-alarm-over-hungary-s-deepening-rule-of-law-crisis>

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Nevertheless, the number of EU members that see Hungary as a country with systemic violations of the EU values is increasing, as well as the list of breaches<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, the likelihood for a vote on "serious and persistent breach" of EU values is increasing.

According to an analysis<sup>8</sup> of EU Council public voting conducted by the SWP, more than 80% of Council decisions requiring a majority between 2010 and 2024 were adopted by consensus or quasi-consensus. This represents a remarkably high level of agreement. Consequently, the culture of consensus is unlikely to suffer significantly if the voting system for enlargement were modified.

Interestingly, 45 vetoes were applied to unanimous decisions between 2010 and 2024, with one-third of them occurring in the last 18 months alone. Of these 45 vetoes, Hungary accounted for the highest number (19), followed by Poland (7).

## THE IMPERATIVE FOR STRUCTURAL REFORM

The core issue is systemic: current EU rules mandate unanimity at virtually all stages of the accession process, although this is not required by the EU Treaty. This system is susceptible to bad-faith actions by individual members, transforming a merit-based progression into a tool of political obstruction. Reforming this structure is crucial.

A strategic shift is necessary, limiting unanimity to pivotal moments like the final accession decision and possibly the conclusion of negotiations and chapters. For all ongoing stages, transitioning to QMV becomes imperative, particularly to smooth Ukraine's path to membership and remain attached to a genuine merit-based approach. Decision-making for opening negotiation clusters and chapters, adopting benchmarks, and assessing progress under QMV would reduce the impact of any single member's opposition, making the integration process for Ukraine more predictable and efficient. But also not allow accession countries to blame the EU for the delays in

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<sup>7</sup> European Parliament resolution of 24 April 2024 on ongoing hearings under Article 7(1) TEU regarding Hungary to strengthen the rule of law and its budgetary implications (2024/2683(RSP)). Official Journal of the European Union, 17 September, 2025, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52024IP0367>

<sup>8</sup> Paul Bochtler, Rebecca Majewski, Nicolai von Ondarza, Dominik Rehbaum. EU Council Monitor. German Institute for International and Security Affairs, 18 July, 2025, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/eu-council-monitor>

the negotiations, as has been the case for the countries suffering from the bilateralisation.

Moreover, establishing clear rules to address bad-faith vetoes, possibly through sanctions or review mechanisms, is essential for discouraging obstructionism for purely national motives. Reforming these procedural rules would allow the EU to re-establish a fair, merit-based accession pathway, strengthening its processes and enabling a robust response to geopolitical challenges while reassuring Ukraine of its European future.

## THE CASE FOR QUALIFIED MAJORITY VOTING (QMV)

Momentum is building within the EU to transition its decision-making framework from unanimity to Qualified Majority Voting (QMV), a shift seen as essential for streamlining the accession process. By utilising thresholds—specifically 55% of member states representing at least 65% of the population—QMV offers a practical solution to the unilateral vetoes that often obstruct critical progress, and not only for enlargement, but also for other policy areas such as foreign policy, fiscal policy, etc. There is a fragile consensus among most of the members that the EU will have to do this reform before it grows with new members, since it will be very difficult to make decisions with the current system in an EU of 30 or even 35 members.

Many EU officials argue that this transition is overdue and should begin immediately with high-priority areas like foreign policy. Echoing this sentiment in her State of the Union address, EC President Ursula von der Leyen stated, "I believe we should move to qualified majority voting in certain areas, for example, in foreign policy. It is time to free ourselves from the shackles of unanimity".<sup>9</sup>

In the context of Ukraine's accession negotiations, QMV would offer multiple benefits, preventing individual states from halting necessary advances through obstructionist vetoes and facilitating a more efficient and predictable path for Ukraine. ***This is crucial given Ukraine's strategic importance not just politically but also as a stabilising force in Europe.*** Allowing continued negotiations without being thwarted by vetoes enhances the EU's capacity to act collectively and adapt swiftly to external threats. Moreover, implementing

<sup>9</sup> Ursula von der Leyen's State of the European Union speech. Euronews, 9 September, 2025, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/09/10/follow-live-ursula-von-der-leyen-delivers-state-of-the-european-union-speech>



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QMV would demonstrate the EU's ability to reform its structures to cope with evolving geopolitical demands, proving its commitment to principles of fairness and meritocracy. This reform would also signal to Ukraine and other candidate countries the EU's serious commitment to enlargement.

## ADDRESSING CONCERNS OVER EU COHERENCE AND TRUST

While shifting to QMV presents certain challenges, including fears that such moves might weaken EU cohesion or the consensus-based culture, these changes are necessary to meet current geopolitical demands, both in speed and substance of the decision-making. The current veto-induced paralysis — and the pivotal role Ukraine plays in reshaping Europe's geopolitical landscape — demonstrates that the existing system is not fit for purpose, particularly in handling urgent geopolitical challenges where Ukraine's accession is significantly linked to regional stability and security.

***Long-standing concerns that QMV could lead to fragmented actions or ignore minority interests are valid but must be contextualised within the risks of prolonged inaction.*** The issues of paralysis undermine the EU's ability to engage credibly on the global stage and delay necessary reforms for candidate countries such as Ukraine. ***Reforming the negotiation framework to include QMV for initial stages of accession negotiations could strike a pragmatic balance between maintaining unity and enhancing efficiency.*** In terms of the technical process, it would be a rather easy and quick action to change it since the EU needs to revise only the negotiation framework and not the treaties. The only mention in the Treaty is the art. 49, which tells how the final decisions on the enlargement are made, but there are no requirements on the intermediary steps.

Therefore, implementing safeguards such as supermajority thresholds and transparent mechanisms for veto accountability can protect minority concerns while fostering ongoing cooperation. These reforms wouldn't compromise the fundamental values of the EU, but rather, would update its institutional structures to address current geopolitical realities and strategic objectives. Ensuring that decision-making remains functional and aligned with the EU's broader goals is crucial, particularly in crises where countries like Ukraine are pivotal for European security.

## BROADER IMPLICATIONS AND STRATEGIC BENEFITS OF REFORM

Reforming governance frameworks would further restore the EU's status as a credible and rule-based geopolitical actor. Current delays and blockades undermine trust among candidate countries like Ukraine, potential partners, and allies. Demonstrating adaptability through pragmatic decision-making processes would reaffirm the EU's capacity to uphold commitments, making it more appealing for countries considering reforms and membership.

Improvements in internal cohesion within the EU are another expected benefit. **By limiting early-stage veto power and clearly defining decision thresholds, the Union can prevent unilateral actions that threaten its broader ambitions.** This would foster a culture of shared responsibility and trust, strengthening the EU's internal fabric and unequivocally supporting a decisive and organised enlargement policy.

Additionally, these reforms would prepare the EU structurally for future enlargements. Geopolitical shifts continue to reshape Europe, and a more flexible decision-making system would ensure that the EU remains a vital actor in addressing these evolving challenges and opportunities.

## MOVING FORWARD: THE ROADMAP FOR REFORM

Acknowledging the urgent need for institutional adaptation, recent discussions within the EU — such as the German-Slovenian initiative presented by the non-paper in early 2024 — reflect an increased openness to reform. According to officials<sup>10</sup> in Brussels, as many as 20 EU member states are currently supporting the initiative to move from unanimity to QMV for non-essential stages, such as opening the clusters and presenting the benchmarks. As an immediate step, **piloting QMV in Ukraine's negotiation phases, particularly for opening clusters, chapters, and benchmarks, would serve as a proof of concept.** This pilot could offer valuable insights into both the operational and political impacts of broader reforms. Therefore, at the first stage, the EU could adopt the QMV only for the EU-Ukraine negotiation framework, so that the EU does not dive into a lengthy and cumbersome legal process.

<sup>10</sup> Author's own interview in Brussels, October 2025

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The current President of the **European Council**, **Antonio** Costa, has already made efforts to address the issue of changing the negotiation framework. Certain officials in Brussels mentioned an attempt to launch a discussion during the informal EU summit in Copenhagen; however, there was insufficient support. Hungary and **several** unnamed countries **opposed** the discussion.<sup>11</sup>

The key question to address is how to get all EU member states to agree to move to QMV at certain stages, since it will require unanimity, including from countries that are currently blocking the process; therefore, **the EU needs unanimity to move to QMV from unanimity**. The argument that the movement from unanimity to QMV would weaken the ability of member states to "control" enlargement is widely overestimated. First, these countries would not lose their veto power, as they would still retain the ability to veto decisions for closing negotiations. Second, all EU countries are required to go through the so-called «double unanimity,» meaning that, in addition to Council decisions, the national parliaments of member states need to ratify the accession.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, the capacity to block the process before accession remains intact. At the same time, it is important to highlight that there have been instances when Hungary has blocked progress, such as in December 2023. However, in that case, they abstained by leaving the room, and the decision was adopted. This scenario could be repeated multiple times if Hungary is incentivised to do so.

Achieving consensus among member states becomes crucial, with a focus on Ukraine's strategic importance, the necessity of efficient reforms, and leveraging lessons from current limitations, helping to secure necessary support. **Given the geopolitical urgency and evolving political dynamics, prioritising these reforms before the next electoral cycle in 2028 is vital.** The window of opportunity is now, when on all sides, the actors are thinking about how to make the EU stronger. After 2028, the political landscape could look very different, and additional roadblocks for the EU enlargement could emerge.

<sup>11</sup> Author's own interview in Brussels, October 2025

<sup>12</sup> Wouter Zweers, Isabelle Ionnides, Zoran Nechev, Nikola Dimitrov. Unblocking decision-making in EU enlargement. Clingendael, June 2024, [https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/PB\\_Unblocking\\_decision-making\\_in\\_EU\\_enlargement.pdf](https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/PB_Unblocking_decision-making_in_EU_enlargement.pdf)

## CONCLUSION

The current situation highlights the inadequacies in the EU's decision-making structures to meet 21st-century geopolitical realities. Vetoes, notably Hungary's opposition to Ukraine's accession, present threats to the EU's credibility, strategic influence, and internal cohesion. As external pressures mount and regional conflicts persist, adapting the EU's institutional framework becomes essential.

Qualified Majority Voting introduces a practical and necessary measure to restore integrity and effectiveness in the enlargement process, ensuring that candidate states like Ukraine have a clear and achievable path to integration. These reforms not only address current blockages but also establish a more resilient, responsive, and unified EU, better equipped to address future challenges.

Without doubt, the QMV is not able to address all the decision-making issues on enlargement, especially those that are highly political; however, the QMV can move the ball on the candidate countries' side and allow them to engage in a formal process of meeting the aquis.

Failure to implement these changes risks ceding leadership to competitors, undermining Europe's collective security, and eroding the EU's foundational principles. Conversely, swift reform action would illustrate the EU's capacity to evolve in line with strategic interests, reaffirming its commitment to a transparent, inclusive, and meritocratic accession process. This commitment is crucial to maintain the trust of candidate countries and reinforce the EU's global role.

In conclusion, the EU stands at a pivotal juncture where reform is critical. Embracing structures that enhance decision-making efficiency and integrity or risking continued dysfunction will determine the EU's future trajectory. The stakes are high — Ukraine's inclusion, regional stability, and the Union's global credibility demand rapid and decisive action. Implementing qualified majority voting for enlargement, reforming the negotiation framework, and reinforcing accountability mechanisms are essential steps to ensure the EU's future effectiveness, credibility, and unity. Only through such decisive reforms can the EU fully realise its collective potential as a geopolitical actor capable of shaping a secure, prosperous, and integrated Europe in the coming decades.

Ukraine's integration is not just a matter of policy but of strategic importance, serving as a litmus test for the EU's commitment to its foundational principles of enlargement, democracy, and stability. As the EU moves

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forward, embracing these reforms will symbolise a steadfast commitment to these values, demonstrating to the world that the EU can adapt and lead effectively in a complex global environment. Ukraine stands at the forefront of this crucial transition, representing the geographic and symbolic edge of European ideals and security.

Given the Russian hybrid war against the EU countries and a potential conventional war against the EU, Brussels needs to make sure that it has Ukraine as a part of it in the event of a Russian attack on the EU.

Current circumstances suggest that the context for making the proposed changes is **unfavourable**. However, a window of opportunity might **open** as pressure mounts and certain political cycles **draw to a close** — notably in Hungary. Therefore, it is crucial to have the proposals **fully developed** when that opportunity **arises**.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1 ADAPT THE DECISION-MAKING MODEL: QMV FOR PROCESS, UNANIMITY FOR FINAL ACCESSION

To balance efficiency with member state sovereignty, the EU should transition to Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) for intermediate stages of the accession process — such as opening negotiation clusters, chapters, and adopting benchmarks. This ensures that technical, merit-based progress cannot be blocked by bilateral disputes. However, to secure political buy-in from hesitant capitals, the EU must explicitly maintain the requirement of unanimity for the final closing of negotiations and the ultimate decision on accession, ensuring member states retain control over the outcome. The decision needs to be well prepared and developed in order to implement it once there is a window of opportunity.

### 2 PILOT THE QMV FRAMEWORK SPECIFICALLY FOR UKRAINE

Rather than waiting for a comprehensive overhaul of EU regulations, the EU should implement QMV specifically for the Ukrainian negotiation framework as a “proof of concept.” This approach allows for immediate action without a lengthy legal process, preventing delays in Ukraine’s integration while testing the operational benefits of the new voting system before applying it to other contexts.

### 3 ESTABLISH ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISMS FOR BAD-FAITH VETOES

The EU must codify rules to address and discourage vetoes that are motivated by national interests unrelated to the Copenhagen criteria. By implementing review mechanisms or sanctions for obstructionist behaviour, the Union can prevent the “bilateralisation” of the process—where individual members use the accession path as leverage for unrelated political bargaining—and restore the credibility of a merit-based system.

### 4 PRIORITISE INSTITUTIONAL REFORMS BEFORE THE 2028 ELECTIONS

Brussels should capitalise on the current momentum to finalise the reforms before the next electoral cycle in 2028. Acting now is critical to ensuring the EU is structurally prepared to integrate Ukraine as a security asset against Russian aggression, as the political landscape after 2028 may become less favourable to enlargement.





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