

**Difficult Times Demand Bold Action from the EU.
Speed and Creativity are of the Essence**

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The following article reflects the views of the author, and not necessarily those of the U.S. Government, the U.S. Department of State, or the Wilson Center.

In European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's September 13, 2023 State of the European Union [address](#), she suggested the EU could accomplish as much with 30+ members as it could with 27.¹ In other words, three or more members would not bring the EU to a grinding halt. Later, on December 14, European leaders at a two-day [EU Summit](#) in Brussels voted unanimously to open EU membership talks with Ukraine and Moldova, and to grant candidate status to Georgia. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy called the decision a "victory" for Europe and Ukraine that "motivates, inspires, and strengthens."² [Moldovan President Maia Sandu](#), who will be seeking reelection in 2024, called the EU's decision "a historic step for the destiny of our country" and later stated that "Our future lies in the European family and it is necessary to say clearly – the whole country – which path we choose for Moldova." She then called on Moldova's parliament to initiate the holding of a referendum this coming autumn, by which the Moldovan public would make clear its position on EU membership.³ U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan welcomed the news from Brussels as "historic" and called it a "crucial step toward fulfilling [Ukraine's and Moldova's] Euro-Atlantic aspirations." Georgia's pro-EU President, Salome Zurbishvili, also hailed the EU vote as a "monumental milestone."

The decision means the EU and Ukraine will start the membership process, even while Ukraine is at war with invading Russian forces. The EU Summit that just [took place](#) on March 20-21 discussed European support for Ukraine, European security and defense, enlargement, migration, and agriculture, among other issues.⁴ The EU is currently debating the two time-demanding issues of enlargement and internal, institutional reform. Recognizing the real concern that an EU that enlarges too rapidly may paralyze it, it is possible that the next round of EU enlargement could be gradual.

Naturally, these issues are EU ones, and the decisions are European ones to make. Nevertheless, the U.S. has an enduring interest in a successful EU, and in a Europe that is whole, free, and at peace (including within itself). Americans are known positively for their pragmatism, as well as having an opinion on every issue. In this case, one could make a very good argument for a smaller enlargement that brings in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia no later than 2030, assuming they each have met EU membership requirements, vice holding up enlargement until a larger group can enter in one fell swoop.

The Geostrategic Factor

The geostrategic imperative is obvious. Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia are members neither of the EU nor of NATO. Since August 2008, when Russia showed it was willing to unleash military force to keep its neighbors – in this case, Georgia – “in line,” the Kremlin has viewed both Ukraine and Moldova as low-hanging fruit, ripe for the picking. Russia did what it did in Georgia and then in Ukraine, in part, to send a message to other neighbors looking westward. All the former Soviet republics along Russia’s periphery are and should be nervous about their neighbor to the north and east. Russian soldiers continue to occupy 20% of Georgia’s sovereign territory. In the case of Armenia, Russian soldiers “helping” them as so-called peacekeepers have served as an important tool of leverage for Moscow. The pattern is obvious. The Russian soldiers are potential destabilizers, thus the Kremlin wields both political/diplomatic and military power.

While Russia has been bogged down in Ukraine since its February 2022 brutal and unjustified full-scale invasion, that does not mean it cannot take action in Moldova. At least 1,500 soldiers are on Moldovan territory – in the breakaway region of Transnistria – without Chisinau’s consent, and despite Russia’s 1999 Istanbul commitments to withdraw its forces.

Moldovan President Maia Sandu has linked her country’s EU membership with that of Ukraine, writing that Moldova would not be where it is without “Ukraine’s brave resistance against Russia’s brutal invasion.” Moldova and Ukraine share a 759-mile-long border, part of which (282 miles) backs up against Transnistria. Since 1992, Ukraine has played a part in the OSCE-facilitated [peace talks](#) to try to resolve the Transnistria conflict.⁵ Since February 2022, the border posts that run along Ukraine’s border with Transnistria [have been closed](#)⁶, reducing the likelihood of mischief from the Russian soldiers in that region, and causing Transnistria to bring imports in through Moldova.

President Sandu claims that for Moldova, the accession process and membership in the EU are critical to its independence, alleging that Russia was trying to [seize](#) power in Chisinau in 2023.⁷ Asserting that Moldova is “firmly on the path” to EU membership, Sandu characterized the EU’s decision as a “warm embrace” and “an award for all [Moldovan] society, all those who choose democracy and prosperity” – a compliment which also recognizes that there are many in Moldova who are for neither under the EU brand. (Recent [polling](#) in Moldova shows that 63 percent of

those polled favor EU membership, while 35 do not support it.⁸ Interestingly, many businesses in Transnistria support Moldovan EU membership, as the EU is their main market.) Russia attempted to make it clear to all concerned that it is in control of Transnistria by refusing to shut down six polling stations operating there for the Russian Presidential elections on March 17; Moldova [responded](#) by expelling a Russian diplomat.⁹

The Time Factor

The process of joining the EU can take years. People in Ukraine know that it may take a long time for Ukraine to obtain full membership. Ukrainians who support EU membership see it as locking in their democratic, Euro-Atlantic path and the goals of the 2014 “Revolution of Dignity.” The Revolution of Dignity saw Ukraine’s pro-Russian president at that time, Viktor Yanukovich, flee Ukraine for Russia after his security forces killed over 100 protesters on Maidan Square from November 2013 – February 2014. (The Maidan Square gathering was, in part, a popular response to Yanukovich’s last-minute decision to tie Ukraine’s economy to Mr. Putin’s Eurasian Economic Union project, even though Yanukovich had promised to pursue EU membership as part of his re-election campaign.)

The EU membership process requires candidate countries to pass a series of reforms to adhere to the conditions and principles enshrined in Articles 6 and 49 of the Treaty of the European Union, and the 1993 [Copenhagen criteria](#).¹⁰ These requirements touch on features ranging from geography (e.g., is the country in Europe or not) and the economy (e.g., is it a functioning market economy that can compete within the EU space or not) to common values shared by the Member States including respect for human dignity and human rights, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and minority rights. A prospective EU member must also adopt and implement the EU *acquis* – the body of EU law that takes precedence over national law.

Ukraine has slowly but steadily adopted laws and regulations in line with EU accession requirements, such as those protecting workers’ rights and the rights of members of [sexual minorities](#), although critics still complain Ukraine has a long way to go to complete all of the EU-required reforms.¹¹ “Ukraine has completed...well over [90 percent](#) of the necessary steps that we set out last year in our report,” Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said during a November 4, 2023 press conference in Kyiv, referring to Kyiv’s justice and anti-corruption reforms, among others.¹² (There are 35 chapters related to membership, and the criteria in the justice chapter are usually the most difficult for EU candidates to meet.) In September 2021,

Ukraine's Verkhovna Rada adopted law 5599 to address [de-oligarchization](#)¹³; the law was subsequently referred to the EU's Venice Commission for review, but critics claim it is unconstitutional.

The speed at which Ukraine could enter the EU will depend on the progress it makes on these 35 chapters – and how fast it can make it. The EU revised its enlargement methodology in 2020; chapters are now handled in [six clusters](#) – removing some flexibility for candidates to kick tough chapters down the road.¹⁴ While it might once have been possible to open some of the more technical chapters (10, 18, and 22, for example) to harvest “quick wins” and show swift progress at the start, these are now grouped with other, more challenging chapters.

There is still the question hanging over the EU about whether EU reforms (including to the EU Treaties) happen before enlargement or happen in parallel to enlargement negotiations. There is also the question about whether EU decision-making in common foreign and security policy and some other areas should continue to require unanimity – as it does now – or whether decision-making should simply require a [qualified majority vote](#) (e.g., when 55 percent of member states vote in favor, and a proposal is supported by member states representing at least 65 percent of the total population).¹⁵ At least nine EU member states favor the latter¹⁶, fearing that Russia will take advantage of the requirement for unanimity to meddle in EU decision-making by pressuring a single EU member state to veto.

Clearly, the EU is not yet unified on how quickly the next set of candidates should enter the union. European Council President Charles Michel has said that he wants a timeline for enlargement [ending in 2030](#).¹⁷ Others reportedly find this too ambitious. The fastest a country entered the EU was three years (Finland). The longest a country took was 14 years (Cyprus). Striking the right balance is important for setting expectations for the governments and peoples of EU candidate states.

So, EU members are showing creativity in trying to square the circle. Some are talking about a tiered entry system of the kind that has already been proposed to the Western Balkan countries to bring them closer to the EU through the [Western Balkans Growth Plan](#). This approach promises access to the EU's open market once certain reforms are carried out, but prior to full membership.¹⁸

The EU accession process as it currently stands has at least 100 decision points which require unanimity to allow a candidate country to move forward. That's at least 100 points at which accession can stall or be obstructed by Russia's malign meddling.

The longer the accession clock is ticking, the better the odds for the Kremlin. Time is neither on Ukraine's side, nor Moldova's.

The Europeans Weigh the Issues

There are several concerns within the EU about Ukraine membership. Chief among them is European security.

But the Ukrainians themselves are not looking to the EU to provide security assistance. With the equipment and support they are receiving from transatlantic allies, they are defending their territorial integrity. EU membership would provide another type of security: a firm anchoring in the economic, trade, regulatory and value system built by the EU over decades. EU membership would support and facilitate their economic growth and define their trajectory.

There are of course ongoing discussions about the EU budget allocation, which allows a new member to tap into EU funds to equalize its living standards across the Union's member nations. Those concerned about Ukraine's entry into the EU point to an [internal EU study](#) conducted in July 2023 that asserted that if Ukraine were to become an EU member, then it would have been eligible to receive 186.3 billion Euro (\$201.4 billion) over the EU's seven-year budget. (That is around 17 percent of its 2021-2027 budget.)¹⁹ There are also concerns about the impact of the free movement of labor.

The labor concerns that some have raised have largely already been addressed, however. Those refugees who initially left Ukraine fanned out across Europe, integrated into their places of refuge, and are contributing to the economies of the host countries. Many of them want to go back to Ukraine now. Indeed, if anything, there are many countries, like Germany, that are trying to figure out how to keep laborers from other countries – like Poland and Ukraine – in Germany. While it is true that migration as an issue is receiving more coverage in the EU ahead of June 2024 European Parliamentary elections, the discussion is focused more on non-European labor than European labor within the European market.

On February 1, the European Council supported the revision of the EU's budget to allow for the provision of 50 billion Euros (\$54 billion) in macro-financial support to Ukraine in the form of a [2024-2027 Ukraine Facility](#). The Ukraine Facility provides the EU funds to the Ukrainian government in installments, with the first

one in March. The Ukraine Facility envisages the implementation of structural reforms in the public sector, a number of economic reforms that will make Ukraine's business and entrepreneurial climate more attractive, and targeted development of priority economic sectors that will ensure rapid economic growth. The Ukraine Facility also will target eight billion Euros (\$8.7 billion) to cover risks to investors in priority sectors through the EBRD, EIB, and other international financial institutions. It is anticipated that this allocation will attract an additional 30 billion Euros (\$32.6 billion) in investments to Ukraine. In this way, the EU is already further connecting Ukraine to the global market, and thereby insulating it against Russian capture.²⁰

The American Perspective

There will be real economic opportunity in Ukraine once the war ends in a way that upholds Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. For American companies, the puzzle to solve is providing them with risk insurance – and that is easier said than done.

Interestingly, though, the risk that American companies are concerned about is not the war or any future security threat posed by Russia. It's chiefly corruption. Ukraine's infrastructure sector, for instance, is not as transparent as it could be. Defense reform needs to happen, especially in the area of procurement. Government-wide, there needs to be more transparency in decision-making. Since September 2023, the team of U.S. Special Representative for Ukraine's Economic Recovery Penny Pritzker has been working hard to get the conditions right in Ukraine to make it more attractive for business.²¹ The requirements of EU membership, and Pritzker's efforts, are mutually supportive and meeting the requirements will transform Ukraine.

At its January 2023 launch, the Multi-agency Donor Coordination Platform (MDCP) brought together Ukraine, the EU, the G7, and several IFIs to coordinate economic assistance to Ukraine in line with Ukraine's needs, its efforts to advance on the path to EU accession, and the requirements of its donors. Supported by a Secretariat hosted by the European Commission in Brussels, the Platform will help Ukraine recover in ways that are sustainable, inclusive, and "green," and which enhance strong democratic institutions, the rule of law, and anti-corruption measures. The Platform's Steering Committee on February 14 agreed to enlarge its membership to include four new members: the Republic of Korea, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden, and six new Observers: Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and

Spain. The four new members have committed over \$5.5 billion to Ukraine's economic recovery and reconstruction.²²

Ukraine is contributing to the European market even now. Ukraine has been exporting power to Europe through the connection that was set up in March 2022.²³ It is a source of revenue. As Ukraine's power grid is rebuilt, opportunities will increase.

A solid, mutually beneficial relationship with Europe is vital to America's security and prosperity. It is not just a clever talking point that Europe is being a good neighbor to Ukraine in its time of trial. The United States should encourage Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration out of its own self-interest, including the United States' longstanding interest in strong trans-Atlantic relations. The historic motto of Poland's freedom fighters, "For Our Freedom and Yours" now transcends geography and time – from Poland to Ukraine, and now to the entire West.

Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia Should Advance Together Toward EU Accession

Until Georgia's ruling party introduced a draft "foreign agent" law drawn from last year's Kremlin-style text, the EU had seen Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia as a trio advancing together for good reason. If all three countries meet EU recommendations for accession, they should advance together.

The Ukrainian government and people both support EU membership. Polling over time indicates that there is now overwhelming public support within the Ukrainian population for EU membership.²⁴ Ukrainian support for EU membership increased during the various revolutions Ukraine has experienced (with independence, the Orange Revolution, and then the Euro-Maidan Revolution of Dignity). Prior to Russia's full-scale war in February 2022, Ukrainian support for EU membership stood at 65-70 percent. Since February 22, 2022, it has reached 95 percent plus.

The EU sees Moldova as comparatively challenging, as the population is less on board with the EU than the government. Mid-December 2023 polling by the International Republican Institute (IRI) shows that a clear majority of respondents in Moldova have supported EU membership since at least 2021, hovering at around 63-64 percent, with support coming mainly from the capital of Chisinau and Moldova's northern and central regions. Support is lower in southern Moldova. This explains President Sandu's call for a referendum on EU membership in the autumn.

This makes eminent sense and provides plenty of time to increase popular support for Moldova’s European path.

While a sizeable [portion](#) of Georgia’s population supports EU membership – up to 81 percent by some accounts – its government has a complex relationship with Russia and has refused to impose sanctions on Russia since the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. (Georgia itself was invaded by Russia in August 2008.) That said, Georgia does implement EU, UK, and U.S. sanctions and has been a reliable partner in preventing sanctions circumvention. Mid-December 2023 [polling](#) in Georgia shows that the dedication of the Georgian people to the goal of European integration is unwavering and has shown a significant increase in favor of political and economic cooperation with the EU over the last year. A National Democratic Institute (NDI) and CRRC Georgia poll showed that 79 percent of the respondents support EU membership for Georgia.²⁵ While EU membership is supported across party lines, there are differences between Georgian citizens and their government, with the former favoring Georgia’s European integration more than the latter, even though EU membership is an objective inscribed in Georgia’s constitution, and Foreign Minister Darchiashvili has publicly stated Georgia is working towards membership.

Close the Gray Zone

EU enlargement, to include Ukraine and Moldova at a minimum, but ideally also Georgia, would effectively close the gray space that has existed since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991 in the area that perhaps matters most to many citizens – the economy. Statehood and shared identity are vital and intertwined features of a full-fledged, viable nation state, and security is, of course, vital to an independent nation state remaining so. But the economy of a country is its life-force.

In countries like Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, oligarchs wield significant economic power that translates into real political power – oftentimes challenging the ability of a given government to serve its people. The degree to which those oligarchs are beholden to malign actors in Russia may affect how much influence Russia has in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. The same is true for oligarchs’ ties to the PRC. This kind of behind-the-scenes, negative leverage is harder for observers to see, but the threat it poses can be equal to if not greater than the threat of military invasion. EU enlargement is, as the [European Parliament](#) characterized it in November 2023, “a strategic investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity, as well as a driver for democracy and European values across the continent.”²⁶

Conclusion: Now is the Time for EU Creativity

The EU has demonstrated that it has flexibility to encourage reforms critical to successful accession, even if the European Council has not yet decided to invite a potential member to begin negotiations. On November 8, 2023, the European Commission adopted a “Growth Plan for the Western Balkans” that will essentially convey some of the benefits of EU membership to the countries constituting this region *before* they enter the Union. The benefits are mainly of a socio-economic nature and are clearly designed to sell the EU to skeptical publics who may not be hearing the most accurate information from their leaders or other interests about the advantages of membership. For the EU, the successful accession of the Western Balkan countries – Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Kosovo – would speed up the enlargement process and consolidate Europe as a political and geographic reality. This “Growth Plan” includes 6 billion euros (around \$6.5 billion) in grants and loans – to be provided to the prospective members after reforms are carried out.

The EU should consider employing greater flexibility in bringing Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia on board – perhaps extending similar grants and concessional loans to them after they have carried out the fundamental reforms that will make their countries more attractive to foreign investment and promote regional stability. The quicker the economic convergence, the greater the likelihood that Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia will succeed in their bids for EU membership – and possibly before the 2030 goal.

¹ [State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen \(europa.eu\)](#), accessed on March 31, 2024.

² [EU to open membership talks with Ukraine and Moldova \(bbc.com\)](#), accessed on January 26, 2024.

³ [Moldova Pro-West President Sandu To Seek Reelection, EU Referendum \(rferl.org\)](#), accessed on March 13, 2024.

⁴ European Council Meeting (21 and 22 March 2024 – Conclusions) at [euco-conclusions-2122032024.pdf \(europa.eu\)](#), accessed on March 29, 2024.

⁵ The OSCE and the Moldova-Transnistria Conflict: Lessons in Mediation and Conflict Management at <https://www.shrmonitor.org/assets/uploads/2017/09/Hill.pdf>, accessed on January 29, 2024, and The United States and the Transnistrian Conflict at <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eur/rls/fs/53741.htm>, accessed on March 31, 2024.

⁶ Transnistria tensions: Will Russia try to annex Moldova's breakaway region? | Russia-Ukraine war News | Al Jazeera, accessed on March 13, 2024.

⁷ Moldova's President Calls Out Russian Meddling at <https://cepa.org/article/moldovas-president-calls-out-russian-meddling/>, accessed on March 31, 2024.

⁸ IRI Moldova Poll Finds Continued Support for EU, Optimism in the Country's Direction, Rising Approval of President Sandu | International Republican Institute, accessed on February 6, 2024.

⁹ Moldova expels Russian diplomat over presidential polling stations in breakaway Transnistria region | AP News, accessed on March 19, 2024.

¹⁰ Accession criteria (Copenhagen criteria) - EUR-Lex (europa.eu), accessed on January 29, 2024.

¹¹ In A Historic Step, Ukraine Passes Legal Protections for Nation's LGBT Citizens - Human Rights Campaign (hrc.org), accessed on January 29, 2024.

¹² Ukraine's EU Roadmap Explained After Landmark Endorsement (newsweek.com), accessed on March 31, 2024.

¹³ Ukrainian parliament adopts law on oligarchs (ukrinform.net), accessed on January 29, 2024.

¹⁴ Revised enlargement methodology (europa.eu), accessed on March 19, 2024.

¹⁵ Qualified majority - Consilium (europa.eu), accessed on April 15, 2024.

¹⁶ Nine EU countries join forces to reform voting rules on foreign policy and dent veto power | Euronews, accessed on March 18, 2024.

¹⁷ Speech by President Charles Michel at the Bled Strategic Forum - Consilium (europa.eu), accessed on March 31, 2024.

¹⁸ Commission presents a new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans including €6 billion in grants and loans to accelerate economic convergence with the EU - European Commission (europa.eu), accessed on January 29, 2024.

¹⁹ Explainer: Why quick Ukraine membership would be a challenge for EU | Reuters, accessed on March 31, 2024.

²⁰ European Council backs EUR 50 billion financing for Ukraine, paving way for further approval of Ukraine Facility | Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine (kmu.gov.ua), accessed on March 4, 2024.

²¹ Leaked U.S. strategy on Ukraine sees corruption as the real threat - POLITICO, accessed on March 31, 2024.

²² Main page - Ukraine Donor Coordination Platform (coordinationplatformukraine.com), accessed on March 4, 2024.

²³ Ukraine expands EU energy exports in fresh display of wartime resilience - Atlantic Council, accessed on March 31, 2024.

²⁴ [IRI Polling Shows Strong support for EU accession in Ukraine and Moldova | International Republican Institute](#), accessed on March 13, 2024.

²⁵ [NDI POLL: Georgian citizens remain committed to EU membership; Nation united in its dreams and shared challenges | National Democratic Institute](#), accessed on March 13, 2024.

²⁶ [JOINT MOTION FOR A RESOLUTION on 30 years of Copenhagen criteria - giving further impetus to EU enlargement policy | RC-B9-0500/2023 | European Parliament \(europa.eu\)](#), accessed on March 31, 2024.