

Fast Forwards and Sticky Issues: The Unfolding Eastern Enlargement of the EU

Kerry Longhurst



Bucharest, March 2025

Fast Forwards and Sticky Issues: The Unfolding Eastern Enlargement of the EU

Kerry Longhurst¹

A step-change in the EU's relations with its eastern neighbours began in 2022 when Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia applied for EU membership in the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.² Though far from a defence alliance, in the eyes of these aspiring Member States, the European Union represents a source of much needed political, social and economic resilience during difficult times. This opinion paper reasons that enlargement to both the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine is not only desirable, but also necessary if the EU is to evolve into a meaningful security provider.

Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine's relations with the EU have been steadily advancing in the context of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) since 2009, which promoted alignment with EU laws, policies and norms. The EaP provided reform footholds which led to association agreements, far-reaching free trade agreements, as well as visa-free regimes. The EaP also fostered connectivity in the fields of energy, transport, and education.

The EU responded positively to the three membership applications and in June 2022 candidate status was awarded to the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, but with further progress linked to reforms. By the time of the European Council in December 2023, the EU declared itself ready to open accession negotiations with the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, despite the fact that only limited progress was made on the stipulated reforms.³ Georgia's path panned out differently. The country became a candidate in December 2023, but due to democratic backsliding, a fraudulent election, and the Georgian government's disavowal of what it saw as 'EU interference' in its domestic politics, membership talks were halted by the ruling Georgian Dream party in November 2024, which sparked massive anti-government / pro-EU demonstrations across the country, which remain ongoing.

It goes without saying that both Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova's EU paths are inescapably linked to geopolitics, the urgency of which has pushed them to the top of Brussels' enlargement agenda and prompted discussion of the need for a 'fast-track' accession for the two countries. Ongoing war in Ukraine, the potential for further Russian irredentism and the apparent about-turn in the U.S. foreign policy, which favours Russia over Euro-Atlantic solidarity and a just peace in Ukraine underscores the need for the EU to get serious about reigniting the enlargement process. Crucially, as European states rearm and bolster their collective security and defence muscles without U.S. leadership, enlargement should be emphasised as an integral element of multi-dimensional long-term security guarantees to tie Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova to the EU's economic, political and transformative orbit. Acceding to the EU, would also help both states to become 'steal porcupines' and 'indigestible

¹ Kerry Longhurst, PhD, is a Jean Monnet professor at Collegium Civitas in Warsaw, Poland.

Disclaimer: The material reflects the opinion of the author and does not represent the position of the European Institute of Romania or of other institutions.

² Ukraine presented its application on 28th February, followed by the Republic of Moldova and Georgia on 3rd March 2022.

³Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, 2023, "Eastern Partnership Index", <https://eap-csf.eu/content/uploads/2024/07/EaP-Index-2023-.pdf>.

to potential aggressors’ as described by the EU Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen in her call for Europe to begin to rearm.⁴

From a current vantage point, whilst membership for Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova is a strategic EU goal, the next Eastern enlargement takes place in a novel context characterised by multifaceted risks and challenges, many of which are beyond the EU’s control.⁵

First, the unfolding eastern enlargement has a strong geopolitical character which pits the EU against Russia in a competition for spheres of influence. This contrasts sharply with the 2004, 2007 and 2013 enlargement rounds, which occurred during periods of relative peace. So, although the war in Ukraine is a convincing reason to support enlargement, it implies negotiating with a country at war. The Republic of Moldova’s potential EU accession also has geopolitical implications. The Transnistria-region stations some 1500 Russian troops and though largely ‘frozen’, Transnistria could become a new epicentre of Russian aggression.

Second, the unfolding eastern enlargement emphasises speed, which again, distinguishes it from previous rounds when it took an average of nine years from application to accession. Some EU leaders have advocated for the year 2030 as the deadline for the next enlargement, which leaves little time for Ukraine and Republic of Moldova to absorb the *Acquis Communautaire* and also for the EU to ready itself. Crucially, an expedited enlargement contradicts the tried and tested approach and risks admitting members with systemic political, economic and security-related problems.

Third, the economic and political gaps between Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and the existing EU states are vast, and arguably more significant than was the case in the previous eastern enlargements. According to the Nations in Transit Index, both Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova are ‘transitional or hybrid’ regimes implying that although there has been no significant backsliding recently, democracy remains fragile.⁶ On the economic front, wealth disparities remain weighty and Ukrainian and Moldovan business environments still lack the necessary structural reforms for EU accession.

Fourth, several ‘sticky’ systemic problems and reform blockages persist in the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine in critical spheres linked to Cluster One of the EU’s negotiation framework. Cluster One covers ‘the fundamentals’, namely the rule of law, democracy, and good governance-related ‘values-laden’ indicators and is the first to open and the last to close in membership negotiations – thus the accession ‘master key’. In the context of an expedited accession the following ‘sticky’ problems are likely to grow in significance.

- Both countries have yet to establish effective **anti-corruption institutions** replete with enforcement mechanisms and a consistent track record of tackling high profile corruption cases and securing incarcerations.

⁴ Delegation of the European Union to Ukraine, 2025, “Doorstep by President von der Leyen at the leaders’ meeting on Ukraine in London”, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/ukraine/doorstep-president-von-der-leyen-leaders-meeting-ukraine-london_en.

⁵ Kerry Longhurst, Vanessa Tinker, 2024, “Sticky or stuck? Challenges of Bosnia’s and Moldova’s accession into the EU”, *European Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 2024, No. 1, pp. 67 – 86, <http://dx.doi.org/10.31338/1641-2478pe.1.24.4>.

⁶ Smeltzer, Mike. Karppi, Alexandra, 2024, “Nations in Transit 2024. A Region Reordered by Autocracy and Democracy”, Freedom House, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2024/region-reordered-autocracy-and-democracy>.

- Neither the Republic of Moldova nor Ukraine have made sufficient headway in **dismantling oligarchic structures** and implementing new laws to prevent the rise of future oligarchs able ‘capture the state’.
- The social contract in both countries is weak, if not broken, which is manifest in **low public trust** in state institutions, political parties and, in some cases, politicians.
- Both countries have **polarised politics**, which amongst other factors, impede Parliament’s capacity to play a constructive role in legislating for EU accession.
- The Republic of Moldova and Ukraine remain in the midst of reforms geared to bolstering the **independence of the judiciary**. Progress has been noted in both states, yet systemic change to ensure alignment with European norms remains elusive. Ukraine’s reform efforts, though laudable are also stymied by the effects of the war and continuance of martial law.
- Both states capacities for EU negotiations are affected by **deficiencies in public administrations**, which are in need of modernisation not least to improve recruitment and retention of qualified civil servants.

What next?

If we acknowledge that enlargement has proven to be the EU’s most effective foreign policy tool in the past and that the costs of not enlarging are considerable, the task facing the EU is how to manage the process at a reasonable pace, especially in light of current geopolitical factors, but also to avoid the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine’s ‘sticky’ problems from affecting the EU’s values and institutional integrity.

First, the EU needs to restate that the eastern enlargement is an integral part of the security community that it has obliged itself to build since announcing its rearmament and that it is not an optional extra. Second, sticky systemic issues need to be confronted with effective sticks and carrots, and with civil society as a full stakeholder in decision making processes. This will help ensure that EU reforms in the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine are sustainable and carried out transparently with authorities accountable for their policies. Third, a ‘gradualist’ approach to membership needs to underpin the enlargement methodology, rather than the possible alternative(s) of softening accession criteria. Accordingly, different types or gradients of membership might be envisaged to reflect concrete achievements and verifiable degrees of compliance with the EU *Acquis*. This would emphasise enlargement as a process (and not just an end-product) anchored to states’ development agendas and resilience building efforts. This would also help overcome the current strict member / non-member arrangement, which leaves the latter group in a vulnerable no-man’s land. Fourth, any new initiatives from Brussels towards the candidates should show clear alignment with negotiating Clusters and / or chapters to reenforce the achievability of membership. Fifth, all stakeholders should lean into geopolitics; foreign and security policy dimensions of EU membership should receive more emphasis in accession negotiations and candidates significantly rewarded for their efforts and compliance in this important domain. Finally, without promising a specific year, a timeframe should be articulated with tangible rewards and outcomes plotted along the way, so that Ukrainian and Moldovan citizens get to feel the benefits of EU membership well before accession occurs and also so that Brussels can give a positive message to internal and external audiences about becoming a confident, coherent and effective security provider.