



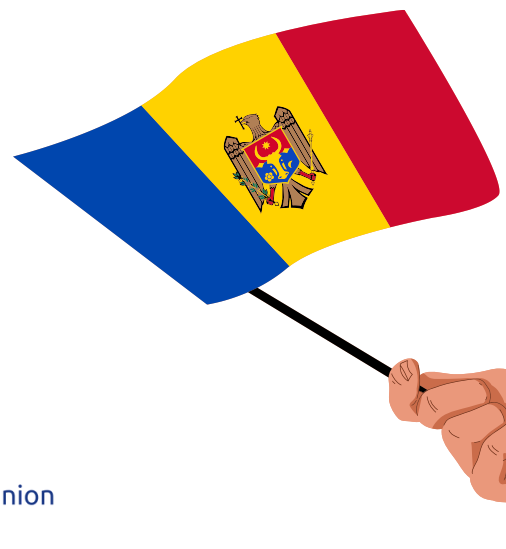
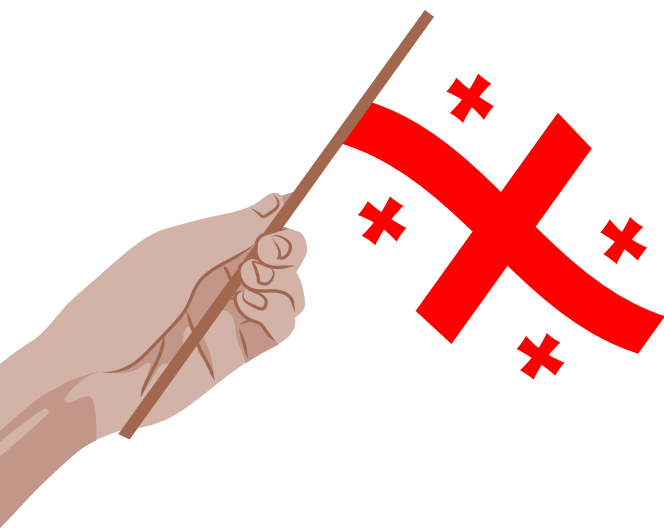
**TEPSA** \_\_\_\_\_  
Trans European Policy Studies Association

# EXPERTS' DEBRIEF

- SPECIAL ISSUE -



## HARNESSING THE EU ACCESSION PERSPECTIVE FOR CONSOLIDATING DEMOCRACY IN ASSOCIATION TRIO COUNTRIES



Co-funded by  
the European Union

# INTRODUCTION



**MARIAM KHOTENASHVILI**

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*“How can democracy be best fostered in the Association Trio countries (Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova) in the coming years? What difference, if any, would the EU enlargement framework make for further democratic development of the Trio?”*

In answer to this question, TEPSA has received 18 contributions from experts across Europe, presented in this publication. Almost all are unambiguously in favour of providing to Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova a credible prospect of future membership of the European Union. The analyses largely concur that the EU has a significant historical opportunity to stabilise the Eastern Neighbourhood by granting candidate status to the three countries. As Umland puts it, this would be an important step towards giving “full structure to the East European geopolitical space”.

Several authors underline that the choice whether or not to grant candidate status to Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova will have impact also on current EU members: “[Russia’s war against Ukraine] is also a war of models. The EU’s ability to act according to this reality will shape the future of the continent. If candidate countries move towards the Union, the collective resilience of the continent will increase” (Toygür). Raik highlights the integration of European-oriented neighbours as a “geopolitical necessity with a view to the EU’s ability to defend the rules-based order in Europe.” At the same time, many contributions underline that inaction on this opportunity would involve significant cost to the EU (e.g. Vilpišauskas, Groza). As Pociumban notes, “preserv[ing] ‘grey zones’ in the eastern neighbourhood will mean leaving an open door for Russian aggression and further destabilisation in the region.” Bosse notes that “keeping countries that want to become members on hold is not only frustrating, but also opens the door to democratic backsliding.” The EU is thus facing a “moment of truth” (Pashkov & Melnyk).

The guiding question invited experts to reflect on the difference the EU enlargement framework would make compared to Association Agreements. Most authors see a significant difference. Delcour considers that “moving to the enlargement framework would be a game-changer for political reforms” in the three countries. A “credible merit-based membership perspective” (Butković) would provide “strong incentives for democratization” as in previous rounds of EU enlargement (Dobrescu & Schumacher). Schimmelfennig underlines the importance of “both the credibility of the EU’s threat to withhold membership if democratic conditions are not met and the credibility of the EU’s promise to admit a country that fulfils the democratic conditions.” Wunsch notes that “democratic development for the [Association Trio] will be a long-term process that will require considerable domestic efforts in the countries concerned and corresponding political will on the EU’s side to support – and, ultimately, reward – reforms in a consistent and credible manner.” A credible membership perspective would be not only a “carrot” but also a “heavy stick” (Umland), as “derailing from the commitments that come along with a candidate status would be too costly for the Trio, and will have much more serious implications than a slow-down of the Association Agreement implementation” (Akhvlediani).

Ample lessons can be drawn from past and ongoing enlargement processes. Many contributors point notably to the authoritarian backsliding of Hungary and Poland. In the Balkans, Wunsch notes, “the EU has overseen the emergence of ‘stabilitocracies’ that combine strong leadership with weak democratic credentials.” Schimmelfennig also warns that “the offer of membership is not sufficient [...] if governments perceive the costs of democratic reform to exceed the benefits of membership. Authoritarian and autocratic governments typically reject democratic conditionality.”

Important improvements in EU enlargement policy are therefore needed: in particular, the EU should move beyond a technocratic approach focused on dealing with the executive branch (Bosse) towards fostering “vibrant democratic contestation” where “real alternative visions of society [are] deliberated [in] healthy public spheres” (Oleart/Theuns). Dobrescu & Schumacher underline the difference between socialising the elites vs. “embedding democracy sustainably into the fabric of societies”. The considerable enthusiasm among Ukrainians, Moldovans and Georgians about a real European future is an opportunity for preventing/undoing state capture. Conscious effort is needed to strengthen the “democratic resilience of actors and institutions” (Oneașcă). As Andguladze notes, “the enlargement framework has the potential to provide more empowerment for local actors from civil society and political parties than the Eastern Partnership initiative has ever offered.”

None of the contributors suggest splitting the Association Trio by leaving some of the countries outside the accession framework. Duff proposes “affiliation status as an interim measure [that would] engage the political parties, public administration at national and local level, judiciaries and national parliaments of the three candidates into direct dialogue with the EU institutions.” A “good experience of affiliate membership” would, in his view, “hasten, not impede, integration”. On the other hand, most authors underline the importance of a definitive prospect of EU membership. In Toygür’s words, “only a credible prospect of future membership can lead to durable reforms.”

As Akhvlediani notes, the democratic transformation of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova in the last two decades has been largely driven by the strong will of their people. However, further progress in consolidating democracy will depend also on the establishment of a favourable geopolitical context. The challenge is not only to maintain citizens’ determination, improve the functioning of state institutions and enhance the EU accession framework. The three countries’ future will also depend on the overall security conditions that the free world will succeed or fail to bring about in the Eastern Neighbourhood.

# List of contributors

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On her latest visit to Kyiv on 11 June, European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen expressed confidence that the EU will likely grant Ukraine candidate status to join the bloc. She said that the Ukrainian authorities had 'done a lot' towards candidate status, but that there was 'still need for reforms to be implemented, to fight corruption for example'. For many EU Member States from central and eastern Europe, and also for the countries of the Association Trio, the EU membership perspective presents a geopolitical symbolic and strategic move, aimed at addressing the countries' geopolitical vulnerability vis-à-vis Russia. Yet, the membership perspective also matters for democratic reform in all three countries, as it is democracy that serves as an anchor of domestic political stability and economic growth in the long term, thus constituting a geopolitical objective in its own right.

While the Association Trio countries have achieved considerable policy convergence with the EU through the implementation of the Association Agreements and DCFTAs over the past years, progress in the spheres of democracy, rules of law and governance have been patchy, including episodes of backsliding and inertia. The three countries' scores for the fight against corruption have depreciated, and scores on the independence of the judiciary and independent media had decreased in Georgia and Ukraine specially. A European Parliament Resolution of 9 June 2022 highlighted again the worsening state of media freedom in Georgia and the government's attempts to delay judicial reform. While much of the democratic backsliding originates in the political choices of the three countries' governing elites and other formidable domestic constraints such as oligarchic state capture, the EU's reduced commitment to democratisation in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries over the past years has certainly also played a role. Despite calls to step up cooperation, the EU has not proposed any major new or ambitious proposals to develop its relations with the EaP countries since 2014. To be fair, the EU has invested significant support in ambitious sectoral reforms through the AAs/DCFTAs, including advanced conditionality and financial assistance. However, up to now the partner countries have mainly used cherry-picking strategies to implementation, partly because of the lack of funds to cover the high costs of transformation, and partly because of only lukewarm efforts by the EU to monitor and verify actual implementation in the areas of democracy and governance.

Can candidate status and the eventual prospect of EU membership enhance democratic reforms in the Association Trio countries? The answer is an unambiguous 'yes'. Embarking on a road towards membership is very different to the cul-de-sac status of a neighbourhood country. Candidate status creates a new and most powerful momentum for reforms, including the strongest form of EU conditionality, and a significant upscaling of EU financial assistance for and monitoring of reforms. The membership perspective will also boost pro-reform forces in government, parliament and civil society.

But can the EU deliver? Much depends on what happens after granting candidate status to the Association Trio countries. First, Russia is still invading Ukraine, and it will continue to try to destabilise the entire region and threaten further aggression.

The EU has to continue to stand united, show resolve vis-a-vis Russia and create a strong security and defence policy. Without this resolve, the EU accession of the Trio countries will sooner or later fall victim to geopolitical divisions between Member States, which will directly play into the hands of Moscow. Enlargement fatigue, too, and the EU's aversion against Treaty revisions to make an enlarged EU governable again, also seriously jeopardise the process. Keeping countries that want to become members on hold is not only frustrating, but also opens the door to democratic backsliding. Second, the economic reconstruction of Ukraine is a vital precondition for reforms, and the key question is how the EU would finance a large-scale rebuilding of Ukraine, which is estimated to cost four times the EU's foreign-aid budget. Third, EU democracy promotion efforts must go hand in hand with peacebuilding and reconciliation. The war has been causing extreme human suffering. By the end of May 2022, the Ukrainian Prosecutor's office has documented more than 14,000 Russian war crimes. One third of Ukrainians are estimated to have been displaced in Ukraine. Durable solutions will be needed to allow war-affected, traumatised populations to rebuild their lives and communities as a basis for trust into democratic processes and institutions. Fourth, the EU should strike a better balance between engaging in top-down negotiations with governments on the one hand, and actively including parliaments and civil society into negotiation and monitoring processes on the other hand. Previous enlargement negotiations have often strengthened the executive at the expense of parliaments and civil society, and in the negotiations of the AAs/DCFTAs, the EU has too often tolerated the direct influence of powerful oligarchs, thereby indirectly contradicting its own anti-corruption efforts. Last but not least, the EU needs to develop a more 'political' engagement alongside its largely technocratic approach to accession. Support for democracy needs to become a priority, alongside a better understanding of the (geo-)political context in each of the Association Trio countries.



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Ukraine's, Georgia's and Moldova's European aspirations have already been publicly and repeatedly acknowledged by the EU's Commission and Council. Moreover, the European Parliament has asked the EU's executive bodies several times to finally offer the three post-Soviet countries a clear membership prospect. In March 2022, Ukraine was even singled out, by the European Council, as belonging to "our European family" – whatever that means. Nevertheless, none of these inconsequential official statements have opened the path to accession for Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova.

With the provision of even only a "potential candidate" status to the three countries, their 30-year period in limbo would eventually change. In spite of Ukraine's far larger desires, this shift will already be fundamental. A transfer of Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova from the stage of associated partners to prospective accession candidates makes a not only symbolic, but substantive difference. It would be geopolitically, administratively, legally, and psychologically significant.

The three countries' status as potential or even proper EU candidates would change the international relations of Eastern Europe. The current security-political grey zone between the West, on the one side, and Russia as well as its satellites Belarus and Armenia, on the other, would become less grey. To be sure, only the three potential/proper candidate countries' eventual accession to the EU and, in the cases of Ukraine and Georgia, NATO, will eventually give full structure to the East European geopolitical space. Yet, an official membership perspective from the EU would already designate where the train is heading. A future accession offer would, from the perspective of the three aspirants, provide direction for their future domestic reforms and foreign affairs.

It would, from the West's perspective, provide an important 'carrot' with which the EU can speed up the East European transition. A membership perspective also constitutes a heavy 'stick' in the hands of Brussels. The aspiring countries' eventual inclusion is already assumed, yet still conditional upon full compliance with EU standards. Thus, the future accession offer is an effective instrument for Brussels and domestic reformers in the three countries to exert pressure on reluctant actors and immobile structures in the government, parliament, and administration.

With a potential or full candidate status for Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, the current ambivalent, if not contradictory meaning of their ambitious Association Agreements with the EU would be clarified. Since 2014, these three Agreements have been de facto preparing the Association Trio for membership in the Union. Yet, the mammoth treaties do not contain this aim de jure. In case of an announcement of a forthcoming candidacy, the EU would finally correct this obvious inconsistency in the already ongoing Association process with the three aspirants.

Once there is a clear membership perspective, it would become obvious for all actors involved what the next steps for Kyiv, Tbilisi and Chisinau will be.

The three applicants, Brussels and member states could use the experience and institutions of recent EU arrivals and of other aspirants from Eastern Europe to formulate the three new potential candidates' agenda for the next years. Knowledge, skills, models, and assistance from such countries as Estonia, Bulgaria or Croatia can be utilised for the Association Trio's gradual rapprochement with the EU. A number of ad hoc institutions created by Brussels to prepare the Western Balkan countries for accession, like the Centres for Security Cooperation and of Excellence in Finance, could now also include Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova.

The three states' designation as potential or even full EU candidates would above all be an important boost of morale to Ukrainians, Georgians and Moldovans. Citizens of the three post-Soviet countries would finally understand what future awaits them, their children, and grandchildren. In particular, for Ukrainians, currently in a fight for their nation's very existence, a demonstrative EU signal that their country's path to future membership is now officially open, would be uplifting.

Last but not least, for Moscow, an unequivocal positive answer from Brussels to Kyiv, Tbilisi and Chisinau will be a significant signal. Even an only potential candidate status for Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova will influence Russian-Western relations. Westward-looking Russians would be confronted with a collective European statement on the strategic relevance of these countries for the EU. A positive Western message for the Association Trio would be in glaring contradiction to the Kremlin's portrayal of the three nations as failed or even non-existent. It would, in particular, challenge Putin & Co's massive material and ideational attack on the lives, homeland and identity of Ukrainians. The Union should not miss this chance to make the statement of what the European idea stands for as powerful as possible.



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The Association Agreements (AA) were expected to create a 'strong political bond' with the EU and yet, over the past few years political reforms have proved especially difficult to implement in the three associated countries. None of the three countries has followed a linear path toward democratisation. Crucially, some countries have even seriously slid back with respect to basic democratic principles and commitments, as is currently the case in Georgia. This is despite tighter EU monitoring and greater emphasis on political reforms compared to the early 2010s, when the EU prioritised a technical understanding of domestic reform centred around approximation with its acquis in internal market-related areas.

In fact, the wide-ranging commitments made as part of the AAs entail high political costs for the ruling elites in terms of moving towards transparent decision-making processes, loosening their control over the political system and ensuring the independence of other branches of power (especially the judiciary). By contrast, the benefits of conducting deep political reforms are blurry for the elites in the absence of a clearly recognised EU membership perspective. Therefore, under the current association framework the EU's capacity to act as an anchor for democratic change is limited. Despite high-level political involvement, the EU has thus far not been able to reinvigorate the democratic process in Georgia. To take just one example, the EU-mediated deal reached in April 2021 under the auspices of the President of the European Council is not operational as the ruling coalition decided to withdraw from the agreement a few months after signing it.

Providing the associated countries with a membership perspective would certainly not turn them into fully-fledged democracies overnight, as democratisation is in essence a homemade process, and a lengthy one too. However, moving to the enlargement framework would be a game-changer for political reforms in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. In light of the recent reform of the enlargement process and the emphasis placed on the 'fundamentals' (rule of law, economic criteria and public administration reform), it would only reinforce the EU's monitoring of political developments in the three countries. In addition, it would enhance the exposure of the Associated Trio's political actors (including the Parliaments) to the EU's democratic and consensus-building practices. Crucially, an accession perspective would act as a strong incentive to conduct political change while also attenuating the related costs for the elites, as it would embed political reforms in a longer time horizon going well beyond the forthcoming election cycles.





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During the past decades, enlargement has worked as a powerful tool to support and consolidate democratic reforms in large parts of Europe, from Southern Europe in the 1980s to Central and Eastern Europe in the post-Cold War era. Yet there have also been substantial failures that expose the limits of enlargement as a transformative process, notably the democratic backsliding of Hungary and to a lesser extent Poland after their EU accession and stalling reforms in the Western Balkans.

In the new, volatile security environment following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the democratisation of the Western Balkans countries as well as of the EU's Eastern neighbours becomes more strongly intertwined with geopolitical contestation and the future of European security order. Integration of the EU's unstable but European-oriented neighbouring countries has become a geopolitical necessity with a view to the EU's ability to defend the rules-based order in Europe and constrain the impact of authoritarian major powers, above all Russia but also China.

Against this backdrop, the EU should revitalise enlargement as a tool to promote democracy and stability in the continent. It should immediately (at the June European Council) grant a proper candidate country status to Ukraine and specify the conditions for a positive reply to the applications of Georgia and Moldova. The accession process should be developed into a more step-by-step, staged integration, with candidate countries gradually joining EU policies, financial frameworks and institutional structures in areas where they already meet the conditions. In addition to the technical adjustments of accession procedures, a strong political signal is needed to confirm the EU's determination to actually work towards the goal of full membership of the candidate countries. These steps would motivate the countries to work harder on democratic reforms. At the same time, strict conditionality has to be maintained with regard to full membership and also financial support to the candidates.

### **Further readings:**

- Blockmans, S. and Raik, K. (2022), "Ukraine's Path to EU Membership: How to Turn a Geopolitical Necessity into a Viable Process", Policy Paper, June, Estonian Foreign Policy Institute/International Centre for Defence and Security.



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Russia's aggression against Ukraine is both a symptom and a catalyst of the global trend towards hazardous confrontation between the civilised democracies and the agglomeration of authoritarian state-centric regimes.

As stated in the Batumi summit declaration, “The relations between the Associated Partners and the European Union are founded on the common values on which the EU is built – democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law.” The significance of the Association Trio should in this context be taken into account by the European Council at its June summit when considering Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova as candidates for EU membership.

For Ukraine in particular, the future decision on the candidate status has a significant impact on security aspects and will demonstrate a political will and determination of the EU leaders to share not only common values, but also common risks. Putin's aggression against Ukraine is part of the Kremlin's ambitions to reshape the European political and security space.

For Ukraine, the European Council's decision is of paramount importance and weight. First, the candidate status will put an end to uncertainty in the relations between Kyiv and Brussels, it will institutionalise Ukraine's European integration course, and it will essentially doom the Kremlin's “forced reincarnation” plans for the post-Soviet space. Second, this will be an important impulse for continuing internal transformations and a powerful moral and political incentive for Ukrainians who defend their European future. And third, Ukraine's candidate status will be crucial, as a tool for ensuring and adhering to democracy, human rights, transparency and efficiency of state institutions and civil society structures in the long martial law, which has been extended until 23 August 2022. It will also strengthen the fundamental democratic foundations of Ukraine's reconstruction in the post-war period.

Without any pathos and exaggeration, the June European Council meeting will be a “moment of truth” in relations between Kyiv and Brussels, an opportunity for the EU to prove solidarity with a country currently fighting for its European choice at the most difficult period of the war.



## TINATIN AKHVLEDIANI

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Over the past three decades, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have pursued similar paths of building democracies. Looking back, their story shows that a strong will of people leads to the internal transformation, setting a strong foundation for democracy. It is geopolitics, however, that allows democracy to survive and prosper.

Rose and Orange Revolutions in Georgia and in Ukraine back in 2003 and 2004, and Twitter Revolution in Moldova in 2009 were illustrations of such strong public will that could lead to internal transformation, laying a cornerstone for building democracy in the Association Trio countries. Yet, further progress on democratic development has since been largely dependent on geopolitics. This is because Trio countries co-exist with democratic and autocratic powers in the contested neighbourhood between the European Union and Russia. While the EU, in line with its Treaty, has been promoting European values and democracy in its neighbourhood, Russia has been pursuing military invasions to stop democratic development of the three states. And so, democracy could be fostered as much as public support could survive Russia's military invasions and as much as the EU could show its strong support to the Trio. Moreover, while the EU has been carefully avoiding 'provoking' Russia, by applying strategic ambiguity in its Eastern Neighbourhood, Russia's military invasions have been pressing the EU to act more assertively on the world stage and to help the Trio countries in their struggle for democracy.

It was Russia's military invasion of Georgia back in 2008 that pressed the EU to launch its Eastern Partnership (EaP) policy in 2009 to set the cooperation framework with its six Eastern neighbours, including the Trio countries. Taking a step forward by concluding Association Agreements (AA) with the Trio further caused Euromaidan uprising, the outbreak of the war in Donbas and Russia's annexation of Crimea back in 2014. And it was current Russia's full-scale military invasion of Ukraine that has brought the EU membership applications of the Trio on the EU's agenda.

Along with surviving Russia's military invasions, it was the strong public support for the European future that served as a major pointer for shaping democracy. As evidenced by public opinion polls the overwhelming majority of the people of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia stay committed to their European choice and their struggle for democracy. This is why the Trio countries have made a significant progress on the implementation of the AAs over the past decade, now outperforming even some of the EU candidate countries .

The Trio countries still face their own internal challenges to strengthen democracy that require completing rule of law reforms, rooting out corruption and informal governance. While progress on these reforms needs to be made internally, the EU can play a major role to incentivise and systematize democratic transformation in the Trio countries, by granting candidacy to them. As the Trio still represent fragile democracies, candidacy should come with a significant reform agenda and strong conditionality. With this, the EU, on the one hand, would further strengthen the public will in the Trio countries for their European choice and democratic reforms, and on the other hand, would tie them to the path of reforms. Derailing from the commitments that come along with a candidate status would be too costly for the Trio, and will have much more serious implications than a slow-down of the Association Agreement implementation, which does not offer an end-goal of EU membership.

Overall, unlike Russia that has been exploiting its military power to stop its neighbours' democratic transformation, the EU has soft but powerful tools to foster democracies in the Trio: its neighbourhood and enlargement policies. The EU's Eastern neighbourhood policy, embodied in the EaP, has already led to an emergence of the Trio, and now it is the enlargement policy, and granting candidacy that needs to show the prospects for democratic developments in the Trio. Otherwise, democratic reforms can be compromised or even lost through Russia's wars, constant security threats and informal governance by Russia-backed oligarchs in the Trio countries.

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## IULIAN GROZA

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The EU and the entire Eastern neighbourhood are going through major challenges posed by Russia's unjustified and brutal war against Ukraine. It is also a huge challenge for Moldova. Even though Moldova is not under a military attack today, for years it has been continuously targeted by the Kremlin's hybrid aggression, disinformation and propaganda. A significant number of political actors have turned into Russian proxies and 12% of Moldova's territory is illegally occupied by Russia.

Moldova's application for the EU membership on the 3rd March 2022 has been made in exceptional circumstances. Of course, Russia's war in Ukraine triggered it; the whole European project is a response to war and authoritarianism on the European continent. And it's only logical for the EU to take geopolitical considerations into account when making the decision on granting Moldova the EU Candidate status. But Moldova's EU membership bid also fully corresponds with its long-standing European aspirations and strategic European choice. Moldova is a European country, it shares a common history, language, culture and border with the EU. Moldova worked hard and mobilized an inclusive national effort of the authorities, civil society, business and diaspora to complete the Commission's questionnaire in no more than one month.

The EU is the main political, economic, investment and development partner of Moldova. Moldova is also strongly connected to the EU already by almost a million of Moldovan citizens who work, study and live in the EU today. The European integration is Moldova's key foreign and domestic policy priority. EU membership is the only strategic option to give Moldova a chance to develop into a fully functional democracy, part of the free world. The EU is the only option. There are no other options left.

Moldova's democracy is gradually strengthening. Today, Moldova has a pro-reform and pro-European Government, Parliament and President who are fully committed to advancing systemic reforms, ensuring rule of law and strengthening an independent and corrupt free justice system. Moldova's economy and trade is increasingly connected and integrated into the European market. Thanks to the Association Agreement and over 7 years of building a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area with the EU, now almost 2/3 of Moldova's exports go to the EU market and over a half of imports originate from EU member states.

The full implementation of the EU-Moldova Association Agreement, which covers mostly the same Chapters as the accession procedure remains a crucial milestone for bringing Moldova closer to the EU. Granting EU candidate's status will energise and give a clear direction to this process.

Moldova is aware that the European integration is long and complex process. But Moldova proved that is ready to embark on this path. Moldova is also fully aware of the sensitivities of the enlargement process within the EU itself. But the results of the Conference on the Future of Europe and idea of a new complementary "European Political Community" is yet another prove that EU leaders are seeking creative and forward looking ways to revive the enlargement policy and deepen the European integration process.

Moldova is not looking for shortcuts. Moldova's European path will take time and effort. But Moldova crucially needs this new beginning now. As with the Western Balkans and previous EU enlargements, every aspiring country has its own path and speed. Moldova's way to accession should be based on meritocracy and achieved results.

Moldova is not trying to jump ahead of Western Balkans either. Moldova has been with Western Balkans since 2001 when it joined the Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe. Moldova's profile is similar to Balkans in many ways. It would be only fair that, if the EU uses the meritocratic lens to define Union's future, and if the next enlargement round includes some of the Balkan countries, it should also include Moldova, which scores not worse, but often better.

Moldova is often cited as the poorest country in Europe. But regardless of the level of prosperity, the Moldovan government and society behave like Europeans. Solidarity is one of the pillars of a united Europe. Moldova not only speaks about solidarity but practices it. Moldovans welcomed 100.000 Ukrainian refugees into their homes. Moldova may have few resources but has the will to share them with other European states.

Moldova needs a political decision that will be guiding its democratic transformation process for decades ahead. Recognising a future membership perspective and granting the EU candidate status now is a chance for Moldova to make European integration irreversible. This is the moment for the EU to show political flexibility – not on procedures, but on overall approach.



## NATASHA WUNSCH

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The EU's enlargement process has long been hailed as a tool for democracy promotion, allowing candidate countries to undergo 'democratisation by integration'. The balance sheet for the Eastern enlargement round, however, is mixed: while some countries, in particular the Baltic states, have preserved stable and relatively advanced levels of democratic quality, the situation is much more precarious in others. Most notably, two EU Member States – Poland and Hungary – head the list of the most fastly autocratising countries in the world, with Hungary already considered to have fully reverted to an 'electoral autocracy.' The EU has struggled to develop effective responses, standing seemingly helpless in the face of the 'authoritarian equilibrium' it has allowed to fester in its midst.

Among current candidate countries in the Western Balkans, the situation is no better. Rather than setting the region firmly on a path, the EU has overseen the emergence of 'stabilitocracies' that combine strong leadership with weak democratic credentials. Moreover, deep-seated state capture poses a considerable and long-term obstacle to democratic transformation. The EU's conditionality has not only failed to break this deadlock but effectively consolidated corrupt elites' hold on power by providing them with resources and legitimacy while weakening domestic political competition and accountability. The revised methodology on enlargement, with increased emphasis for rule of law fundamentals, has failed to translate into the required reinvigoration of the enlargement process.

What does all this mean for Ukraine's bid for EU membership? Following Russia's invasion and the ongoing atrocities, Ukraine is eminently deserving of the EU's solidarity as well as its military and political support. The most immediate priority should be to show a united front against Putin's aggression and to supply Ukraine with the weapons needed to defend itself. Granting the country candidate status would underline the EU's commitment to a free and democratic Ukraine, making the membership perspective a symbolic step that sends a geopolitical signal. Democratic development for the 'Association Trio' (Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova) will be a long-term process that will require considerable domestic efforts in the countries concerned and corresponding political will on the EU's side to support – and, ultimately, reward – reforms in a consistent and credible manner.

### Further readings:

- Richter, S., N. Wunsch (2020). 'Money, Power, Glory: The linkages between EU conditionality and state capture in the Western Balkans', *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 27, No. 1, pp. 41-62.



## ANDREW DUFF

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of the European Parliament

The European Council took note of the state of preparation of the Commission's Opinions on the membership bids of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova which must be delivered in time for its next meeting on 23-24 June. In truth, as both the Commission and the Council are divided about how to react to the three unexpected and uncalled for accession applications, there was not more to say. The upcoming meeting, however, will be very different — and very difficult. Some members want widening without deepening, some deepening without widening, and others neither of the two.

The Commission should use the Opinions to spell out what the accession process is and why it matters. It might also remind everyone how far away all three countries were before Russia's invasion from meeting the Copenhagen criteria for eligibility as accession states. While there were recent positive developments towards fulfilling the potential of the 2014 association agreements in terms of the rule of law, more progress was still necessary.

As I have written previously, the EU should give a warm emotional response to President Zelenskyy's initiative but use it as a pretext to re-examine the whole of its enlargement strategy. There is a strong case for President Macron's suggestion to install a new form of partial EU membership as a framework for closer political ties and economic convergence. Affiliation on that basis could be for Ukraine an interim stage from which it will later launch a bid for full membership. For the UK, EU affiliate status could be a satisfactory permanent solution. Hungary might be tempted to accept relegation to affiliate membership. In all cases, membership of a European Security Council embracing EU and NATO could provide much stronger security guarantees than exist at the moment.

Affiliate membership for the Association Trio would give them opportunity to become accustomed to the political and regulatory culture of EU governance, notably the rule of law, before advancing their bids for full accession. Experience suggests that candidate states launched into full membership can quickly backtrack from respecting the balance of rights and obligations that they assumed in their accession treaties. Affiliation status as an interim measure would engage the political parties, public administration at national and local level, judiciaries and national parliaments of the three candidates into direct dialogue with the EU institutions. A bipartisan approach to European integration would be encouraged — something so badly missed in the case of the UK. Business, social partners, universities and NGOs would be exposed to the climate of economic competition that access to the EU internal market implies. EU economic assistance would be better and more reliably spent.

Good experience of affiliate membership would hasten, not impede, integration. As a by-product of affiliation, Ukraine's participation in the European security council that focussed on the Russian threat would give it a platform in Europe that it lacks at the moment. Kyiv would have a voice at the table when the EU and the US recalibrate their geopolitical strategy and take steps to consolidate the security of the wider Europe. These measures, taken together, should encourage EU Member States to become more coherent — and more favourable — in their approach to eastern enlargement.



It's time for new architecture for the wider European neighbourhood. As the European Parliament will confront the European Council with proposals for revising the Treaties at the same meeting, the leaders may choose to appoint an expert reflection group to prepare independently options for the inevitable constitutional Convention. This also should be welcomed. I write more about this in my new book *Constitutional Change in the European Union*, to be published shortly by Palgrave Pivot.



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Russia's unjustified aggression against Ukraine has proven a decisive impetus for the Association Trio (Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine), and the three countries applied for EU membership earlier than planned. Taking aside obvious geopolitical reasons, their inclusion in the EU enlargement framework may provide significantly upgraded tools to foster much-needed democratic reforms. Indeed, democratic conditionality, a key element of the Enlargement policy, is one of the most important mechanisms through which the EU seeks to promote democratization in candidate countries. The high popular support for European integration may further strengthen the momentum for reforms and pressure the governments to show readiness for their implementation. According to the latest polls, around eighty per cent support EU membership in Ukraine and Georgia, and sixty-one per cent in Moldova. Seizing such momentum of high domestic support and inclusion of the Trio in the EU enlargement framework may contribute to their democratisation process in the short and medium-term.

In the longer term, the enlargement framework represents a demanding and lengthy set-up for candidate countries. The EU's new approach towards accession negotiations puts the judiciary and fundamental rights as one of the main drivers of the progress of negotiations. This approach requires much more ambitious and nuanced efforts from candidate countries to make progress in the accession negotiation and, therefore, can be an opportunity for the Trio to remedy reform-related problems. However, it must be noted that there is no simple recipe for success. In this regard, the Western Balkan countries' protracted and complicated accession process is the point of reference.

The EU has been criticised for having a technical approach within the enlargement framework, applying a 'ticking the box' attitude and neglecting the substance of the reforms. If the enlargement framework is to provide greater incentive to the Trio for democratic reforms, the EU should also work closely with a broad pool of actors and not just the governments. The enlargement framework has the potential to provide more empowerment for local actors from civil society and political parties than the Eastern Partnership initiative has ever offered. Supporting a bottom-up pressure in this process is crucial to fostering democratic reforms. The focus should be on helping the Trio deliver quality reforms, ensuring that the candidate country has the means and will to implement them and thus strengthen their democratic resilience. Finally, clear and effective communication to the Georgian, Ukrainian, and Moldovan population, both from their respective governments and the EU, is a must. Setting the specific incentive - the EU membership - as a realistic goal will provide much more clarity for the citizens on where their countries are heading in future.



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On the face of it, it is plausible to assume that placing Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia within the enlargement framework would lead to 'democratisation by integration'. To candidate countries in Central and Eastern Europe, political conditionality and the definitive prospect of EU membership provided strong incentives for democratisation. The EU's undeniable leverage over the domestic politics of aspiring members fostered unprecedented political transformation and democratic reforms.

At the same time, the political pressure that accompanied some of these reform processes weakened their long-term durability and robustness. Accession processes have been notoriously technical, bureaucratic, opaque and unfit for (general) public consumption. One of the most profound – when it comes to its putative consequences – flaws of previous accession rounds has been the EU's blind spot with respect to engaging citizens, as opposed to governments. It has long been acknowledged that, while accession negotiations have been able to occasionally socialise elites into EU-preferred procedures and practices, in-depth democratisation encompassing societal attitudes has by-and-large evaded EU Europeanisation processes.

Previous EU accession processes have proved adept at shaping institutional opportunities for democratic change, but they have fallen short of ensuring that democratic institutions match the citizenries they govern. Neither have they fostered deliberative and consultative practices that are key to achieving 'institutions-in-reality'. A membership perspective can exert significant leverage on the Association Trio countries. But the EU must not lose sight of the fact that consolidated democracy must primarily be cultivated domestically and that democratic habits of thought and action must become part of the fiber of the people in order for political democracy to be secure. The most sustainable way to foster democracy in war-torn Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia is by supporting a genuine link between, on one hand, accountable, transparent, effective and trustworthy rule-of-law based institutions and, on the other hand, inclusive and participatory citizenship. An empowered demos might not be the fastest and most effective way of achieving the reforms required by the taxing accession process, but it is the only viable way to create and preserve substantive democracy.

EU membership is no panacea for democratic shortcomings, as recent democratic backsliding in some of the new Member States demonstrates. Embedding democracy sustainably into the fabric of societies requires that the EU goes beyond its narrow focus on elites in candidate countries, by engaging with the citizenry at large and supporting a multitude of instruments through which citizens can breathe life into democratic institutions and structures.

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Recent events and high-intensity shocks—such as the backsliding of Poland and Hungary on democratic standards in the EU, the war for Ukraine in Europe, and the US democracy crisis—marked a return of resilience to the forefront of public discourse, both at European as well as the global level. Consequently, a sizeable need arises for supporting the democratic resilience of actors and institutions, especially in the associated countries of the Eastern Partnership – Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

A further democratic development of the trio must be considered as part of a larger endeavour, aiming to support the economy of effort in all European countries. It is an ethical prerequisite for limiting losses in improving the efficiency of each society and its livelihood. The collective actors and public goods games, mass mobilization strategies and social media, are key in improving the European fabric of values.

Keeping Georgia, Republic of Moldova and Ukraine closer to the EU provides them with leverage against authoritarian actions. EU enlargement promotes needed reforms, against a background of positive examples, good practices and needed resources. Furthermore, peer pressure opportunities are essential in guiding a democratic construction of the common European future.

These countries share a common Soviet legacy and a turbulent transition process since the 1990s, struggling to redefine their identity and learn to act autonomously. Their fragile path, full of ups and downs, must be considered as normal under the given conditions.

Positive personalities acting as national influencers may play an important role in fostering democracy in Georgia, Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine. As horizontal association was severely discouraged, if not annihilated, during the communist era, it is important that legitimate civil society organisations grow faster and learn to work out the agenda for political progress.

The best way to strengthen democratic resilience—and make economy of effort—is to **change how people think and the way they act**. The process involves strategic thinking, sharing a vision and acting together. Accordingly, the EU could reconsider and consolidate relatively new resilience policies, such as the Global Strategy for the EU's Foreign and Security Policy or the Strategic Approach to Resilience in the EU's External Action, as well as frameworks for EU Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy.



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Whether and how status as EU candidate countries will support Association Trio countries in advancing and consolidating their democracies depends on how the subsequent accession negotiations proceed. The way in which the EU has attempted to foster democracy outside the EU has been characterised by a ‘one-size-fits-all’ model.

Despite rhetoric to the contrary, candidate countries have been expected to unilaterally converge to EU standards. Yet, even if cohesion in terms of fundamental values is essential for the EU to be a unified legal community, a commitment to democracy and equal partnership suggests there should be greater scope for differentiation. Accession is not only a ‘carrot’ that can incentivise governance reforms. The net benefit of EU membership may be considerable, but there are also costs to candidate countries given the demands of wide and deep reforms. The EU must not ignore the fact that such transformations come at considerable sacrifices for some EU membership comes not only with rights but also with myriad obligations.

A helpful way to think about it is in terms of sequencing. Reforms on democratic fundamentals need to be robust before more substantive reforms. The reason for this is that these latter reforms must be the product of adequate democratic procedures for them to be democratically legitimate at the domestic level. Wide and deep reforms to the economy and alignment with the EU acquis are fundamentally political choices. Democratic legitimacy demands that such choices are made in the context of a vibrant public sphere, in which a plural set of political parties compete in free and fair elections, and where trade unions and civil society play a meaningful role in shaping public discourse and policy-making.

This perspective breaks away from an ‘administrative’ understanding of democracy that emphasises the legal dimension over the political one. For democracy to be vibrant, processes of representation and contestation must include the confrontation of real alternative visions of society, deliberated in an open way in civic spaces that facilitate such exchanges—in other words, in healthy public spheres.

For this reason, the accession process should not only be following a series of checklists of legal-constitutional reforms, economic thresholds and legislative alignment. Real commitment to EU fundamental values in the accession process demands that the EU supports candidate countries in fostering vibrant democratic contestation. This is especially urgent given that authoritarian EU Member States may serve as an inspiration for some political elites in candidate countries who may be attracted by the benefits of EU membership but reluctant to give up control. Which brings us to our last point—seriously addressing democratic backsliding within EU Member States is vital for the credibility and coherence of promoting democracy in EU candidate countries. For how can we see the speck in our brother’s eye when we have a beam in our own?

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Croatia is the newest member of the EU, which will celebrate the anniversary of its ten-year membership of the Union in 2023. Croatia's experience with the EU accession process is highly relevant for Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, because through this process a significant socio-economic transformation of the country has been achieved. Croatia was the first New Member State which in its accession process experienced a stricter EU conditionality with respect to democratisation and the rule of law. The Negotiating Framework with Croatia contained a clause which allowed the EU to suspend negotiations in case of a serious breach of the principles of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and the rule of law. The EU also introduced a safeguard clause which allowed a more stringent monitoring of implementation, particularly after temporary closure of the negotiation chapter. Still, the most important innovation with respect to democratisation was introduction of a Chapter 23 “Judiciary and Fundamental Rights”, which did not exist as a separate chapter in the previous enlargement rounds.

During the accession process Croatia adopted numerous new laws and processes and reformed many of its institutions which improved the overall functioning of its democracy. However, arguably even after the accession the country did not completely execute a judicial reform that would meet the EU rule of law standards. This explains the fact that in the post-accession period when EU's conditionality lost much of its weight, there were setbacks in Croatia's anticorruption efforts. Almost ten years after EU accession, the legal framework for preventing corruption is still incomplete. The European Commission's 2021 Rule of Law Report on Croatia noted that the country needs to strengthen its legal framework on the prevention of conflicts of interest and that it has to adopt a code of ethics for members of the government and parliament. While Croatia joined the EU in 2013, the 2021 Eurobarometer on the perceived independence of the national justice systems in the EU shows that since 2016 there has been a continued downward trend in Croatia's perceived judicial independence. In 2021, only 17% of the Croatian citizens surveyed believed that their judicial system was independent - the lowest rating in the EU, with the EU average being 54%.

As a result of the setbacks with respect to democratisation and the rule of law in some Central and Eastern European states, as well as in Croatia, during recent enlargement rounds, the EU's enlargement strategies have been adapted. Already the EU's 2011 Strategy relies on the principle that issues relating to democratisation and the rule of law should be tackled early in the accession process and according to action plans, as they require the establishment of convincing track records. A further decisive step in strengthening the EU's pre-accession conditionality in these critical areas was taken in March 2020 with the adoption of the new Enlargement Methodology. The rule of law now takes a fundamental role in the accession process, since access to funds for improving various sectors is also tied to progress in implementation of this principle.

These changes in conditionality have guided the Western Balkan candidate countries towards more extensive democratising and rule of law reforms. However, none of these changes, however needed and useful they have been, have contributed to solving the core problem of today's enlargement policy: the accession process as such has significantly slowed down.

Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, on their way towards EU membership, will face the same challenges as the Western Balkan countries. Namely, that the adaptation costs in many areas, including democratisation and the rule of law, are higher since these countries started farther away from the EU standards, which in the meantime have been strengthened. In this respect it would be of fundamental importance that the EU creates further financial incentives aimed at aiding the acceding countries in implementation of effective and lasting democratisation-related reforms. It would also be essential for both sets of countries that the EU offers them a credible merit-based membership perspective, which has arguably been lacking.



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Russia's war against Ukraine has changed the architecture of the EU foreign policy and its neighbourhood policy. Following Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia submitted their applications for the EU membership. The Commission's opinion will be published next week, followed by the European Council conclusions on 23-24 June. In order to foster democracy, good governance and rule of law in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, the countries need to receive a clear roadmap towards EU accession. Trying to preserve 'grey zones' in the eastern neighbourhood will mean leaving an open door for Russian aggression and further destabilisation in the region. It would leave the societies of the countries without a clear development path and direction, and closer integration with Russia is not an option that these countries would pursue.

Opening the accession process and moving the countries to the enlargement portfolio means committing to additional economic support. In this framework, economic and recovery packages (with conditionality), coupled with support to civil society and independent media, could bolster advancing reforms and preserve democracy. In this context, even more differentiation is needed among the three countries.

Ukraine, amid the war, has applied for the EU membership clearly stating its EU aspirations and readiness to defend democratic values. Offering a membership perspective for Ukraine also implies providing further support to its democracy. Yet, its democracy is tied to victory in the war and the reconstruction of the country, which is currently estimated to cost around €500 billion-€600 billion. Such instruments as Solidarity Trust fund for Ukraine are important in this context.

Moldova, which according to the EUI democracy index is in the top 10 countries with most improved democracy in 2021, was upgraded from 'hybrid regime' to 'flawed democracy', because of its functioning government and political participation. However, impacted by the war, Moldova is dealing with economic, energy, and migration challenges, coupled with risks of hybrid threats and security destabilisation. In order to support the current, most reformed-oriented government since Moldovan independence, the country needs both immediate and long-term economic support packages to mitigate the raising prices (the inflation rate in May reached 29%), especially on energy. The support is needed swiftly to ensure that the government can survive current crises and pursue its reform agenda. Otherwise, the government risks facing social unrests.

Georgia, a former EU association pioneer, is dealing with democratic backsliding, and its democracy rating has been declining in the past 4 years. Continuous political polarisation, attacks against media, opaque electoral laws are undermining Georgia's democratic prospects. Nevertheless, Georgia has a strong civil society and at this crucial time needs EU support towards reforms and against democratic backsliding. Not offering a clear membership perspective at this moment will hinder Georgia's democratic path and risks pushing Georgia under higher influence from Russia. An EU accession offer under concrete conditions will increase the accountability for the Georgian government and strengthen the role of civil society.

In this context, and to support the further democratisation process, the three countries shouldn't be left in the limbo between the EU and Russia and, no matter the name (candidate / potential candidate status), an accession roadmap is instrumental to support the democratic transition of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.



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When Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy signed the application form for EU membership from a war zone, he was not only seizing the moment of unprecedented support for his country, but also opening up the wounds of a long-standing debate on enlargement. Georgia and Moldova followed the footsteps of Ukraine, bringing the Association Trio to the centre of the debate. If the European Council gives the green light for their candidacy status next week, new countries will be added next to the Western Balkans and Turkey in the long-term waiting room for EU membership.

For the candidacy status and accession negotiations to work as real fertilisers of democratic reform, there should be light at the end of the tunnel. Only a credible prospect of future membership can lead to durable reforms. Furthermore, transitional integration, immediately making that waiting room a tool of further rapprochement – will equally be important. If concrete short-term benefits – beyond the already existing association agreements of candidate countries – could be offered, fostering democracy could be more attainable.

For that to be on the table, we need a change of thinking. The issue is that today enlargement is mostly perceived as a favour to candidate countries. This is why the EU's absorption capacity (which surely is an important consideration and a part of the Copenhagen criteria) is frequently used as a counter argument to accession. The aspects related to democracy promotion, good governance and the possibility of better cooperation in foreign and security policy are not necessarily seen as primary by many in the EU. One key reason for that is the democratic backsliding in some EU Member States - mainly Hungary and Poland - discourages further investment in the region in form of EU membership. That perception has to be challenged if the EU is serious about being a geopolitical actor.

It is important to understand that today, rethinking enlargement policy is not only about candidate countries' European future, but also EU's ability to shape its continent. It was thanks to European integration and the transatlantic alliance that many countries have advanced their democracies in the 20th century. It is now the time to extend this model to wider Europe. Today, Russia's war of aggression is taking place to challenge Ukraine's existence and its path towards a more democratic model. It is important to underline that this war is also a war of models. The EU's ability to act according to this reality will shape the future of the continent. If candidate countries move towards the Union, the collective resilience of the continent will increase.





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Four days after the start of Russia's unprovoked war in Ukraine, the latter applied for EU membership, followed by applications of Moldova and Georgia. Ukraine's resistance against occupation and its fight for freedom has given a new meaning to the values which form the core of the EU as a community of democratic states. Therefore, the recognition of Ukraine as a candidate country by the European Council in its forthcoming summit on 23-24 of June would be a powerful symbolic message that would boost the morale of Ukrainians fighting on the frontlines and their supporters in the West.

It would show that the EU and its Member States are indeed serious about defending individual freedoms, human rights and rule of law. Besides, granting EU candidate status and outlining concrete measures to strengthen democratic governance and open economy in Association Trio would provide an important incentive for reforms which has so far been lacking within the association framework.

The experience of the Baltic States is a good example how a mixture of popular domestic consensus and external incentives coupled with EU's political, economic and technical support can consolidate democratic institutions. In the case of Ukraine, EU membership perspective would also allow the EU and its Member States to exert stronger influence on reconstruction of post-war Ukraine by linking financial and technical assistance to rebuilding country's infrastructure and reforming its institutions, with potential positive spill-over effects on neighbouring countries. Domestic enthusiasm for EU accession together with external assistance and monitoring of reform progress could lead to a breakthrough in establishing transparent governance and rule of law.

Democratic backsliding in some EU Member States has made some EU capitals cautious with respect to granting EU candidate status to the Association Trio. Evidence of corruption and rent-seeking within the Association Trio countries should not be ignored either. However, the failure of the EU to respond strategically to this turning point in history, or *Zeitenwende* to use the term of German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, would be a huge missed opportunity with potential negative effects on upholding democratic values in Europe and beyond. The 'big bang' enlargement of the EU, which followed the end of the Cold war, consolidated democratic reforms and contributed to unprecedented prosperity of its Members. Similarly, a renewal of EU enlargement policy in response to Russia's war of aggression and increasingly assertive China is an opportunity of historic importance.





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There is solid research evidence that a credible conditional membership perspective is the strongest instrument of the EU to support democratic consolidation in neighbouring countries. In the absence of offering membership, the EU has not had a systematic effect on democracy in non-member states. Trade, partnership and cooperation agreements do not have that effect; association is only effective if it comes with an explicit membership perspective. The offer of membership is not sufficient, however, if governments perceive the costs of democratic reform to exceed the benefits of membership. Authoritarian and autocratic governments typically reject democratic conditionality.

In addition, the conditional offer of membership needs to be credible. Credibility refers to both the credibility of the EU's threat to withhold membership if democratic conditions are not met and the credibility of the EU's promise to admit a country that fulfils the democratic conditions. Credibility is highest if democratic consolidation is the only or the strongest reason for the EU to admit new member states and if the candidates do not have attractive alternative options besides EU membership. In this vein, the Russian aggression in Ukraine has severely increased the attractiveness or necessity of further European integration for the Association Trio. At the same time, EU enlargement for geopolitical reasons risks undermining the credibility of democratic conditionality if it implies turning a blind eye on democracy and the rule of law for strategic reasons. Moreover, high credibility requires EU coherence and consistency. The more the EU speaks with one voice, and consistently rewards compliance over time and across candidate countries, the more credible its threats and promises are.

If enlargement is highly contested among the member states and becomes subject to double standards, bilateral disputes between member and candidate countries, or referendums in the member states, the credibility of the accession promise diminishes – and so does the willingness of candidate countries to comply with EU democratic conditions. Finally, the compliance pull weakens with the duration of the accession process.

In sum, offering conditional membership is the best way for the EU to advance democratic reforms. It is not sufficient, however. When the EU decides to offer candidate status to the Association Trio, it needs to pay strong attention to credibility. It must ensure that geopolitical considerations do not sideline democracy and the Association Trio does not get special, fast-track treatment. Because the Association Trio starts with partly severe democracy and rule of law problems, the accession process is bound to be long and difficult. It is therefore important that the EU offers intermediate rewards beyond the existing association treaties to preserve momentum.

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All the opinions expressed in this publication are the sole view of the authors, and do not represent the position of their Institutes nor of the Trans European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA).

TEPSA would like to thank all researchers who contributed to this issue.

Editing and proofreading: Mariam Khotenashvili, Hugh Evans (TEPSA)  
Formatting: Andrea Sabatini (TEPSA)



Co-funded by  
the European Union