

Young Generation Policy Brief

Ukraine's EU accession process

EU credibility at risk

By Matthias Vollmer

A publication by the Jean Monnet Policy Network "ValEUs"

No. 8 | 01 December 2025

Ukraine's EU accession process: EU credibility at risk

BY MATTHIAS VOLLMER

Executive Summary

The EU could lose credibility in the accession process with Ukraine, as Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán is threatening to repeatedly veto the opening of chapter negotiations. This means that the EU cannot guarantee that accession will take place, even if Ukraine fulfills all the reform requirements. This brief assesses three options that could solve the credibility problem: (1) Withdrawing Hungary's voting rights (2) Reforming the unanimity principle and (3) Making systematic use of the chapter structure to intertwine Hungary's cultural and economic interests with Ukraine. The third option is the most suitable, as it would increase Viktor Orbán's interest in Ukraine's accession and ensure predictable progress in the negotiations for Ukraine.

This policy brief is published as part of the EU-funded Jean Monnet Policy Network "ValEUs".

Find out about ValEUs on our website → <https://valeus.eu/>
Follow us on Social Media

The contribution for this issue was provided by:

This issue is published in cooperation with:



PROBLEM

At the EU summit in December 2023, negotiations about Ukraine's accession could only be initiated because Orbán had received political concessions from Brussels and left the room before the vote. However, he threatened that he could block the accession process later on any of the individual negotiating chapters.¹ This possibility exists because each of the 35 negotiation chapters must be opened and closed unanimously by the European Council, in which the heads of government of all Member States are represented.² Ukraine is currently successfully undergoing the so-called screening process, in which the European Commission examines the extent to which Ukraine's national law already complies with EU law and what adjustments are necessary.³ This process is expected to be completed in fall 2025, when the first chapters of the accession negotiations can be opened. So far, Viktor Orbán continues to be against Ukraine accession and has vetoed the opening of negotiations. Even though the EU Commissioner for Enlargement is confident that a solution will be found to the Hungarian government's blockade this time as well,⁴ the signal sent by these internal European differences is fatal. It reveals that the EU will de facto enter into years of accession negotiations without ensuring that accession will take place, even if Ukraine meets all the EU's demands. At the end of the negotiations, a single Member State could block the entire accession process. The EU currently has little to counter this. By basing success on informal agreements, the EU risks undermining its credibility as a reliable partner. As long as there is no clear and transparent strategy for dealing with Viktor Orbán's blockade, the entire negotiation process will appear implausible, unstable, and risky for Ukraine.

POLITICAL RELEVANCE AND CONTEXTUALIZATION

Since the Russian invasion in February 2022, the European view of enlargement policy has changed. The EU has recognized that it must act not only in terms of integration policy, but also geopolitically.⁵ It is very important for the EU that a stable democratic state emerges in the heart of Europe, on the border with autocratically ruled countries such as Belarus and Russia, which is strongly integrated into the European security alliance.

Putting aside the uncertainty about how the war will develop, the chances are good at the moment. Before the Russian attack, around 60% of Ukrainians supported a quick accession to the EU. Now the figure is over 90%.⁶ The civilian population plays a central role in Ukraine, on the one hand in its fight for freedom against authoritarian and imperialist Russia, and on the other hand in its persistent fight for European values such as democracy and the rule of law. Ukrainian citizens are driving the reform process forward, hoping for EU accession. They demand judicial reforms and effective measures against corruption from their government.⁷ The democratically elected President Zelenskyy is also actively advocating EU accession. After applying for full EU membership, reforms to strengthen the rule of law were implemented immediately. In June 2022, the country received a list of extensive reform projects from the EU. In November 2023, the European Commission found that 90% of the requirements had already been met. These included areas such as combating money laundering, reforming the constitutional court system, and taking action against monopolization.⁸ The process of reviewing Ukrainian legislation for EU conformity was also

¹ Solodky, Sergiy. 2025. "Hungary's Veto and the Future of Ukraine's EU Accession." Center for Liberal Modernity, June 18. <https://libmod.de/en/hungarys-veto-and-the-future-of-ukraines-eu-accession/>.

² European Parliament. 2025 "The Enlargement of the Union." Factsheets on the European Union, as of April 2025. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/167/the-enlargement-of-the-union/>.

³ Solodky, Sergiy. 2025.

⁴ Grunden, Maria. 2025. "Es ist unglaublich, wie ein Land, das im Krieg ist, so gut und so viel liefern kann." WELT, May 23. <https://www.welt.de/politik/ausland/article256161282/eu-beitritt-der-ukraine-es-ist-unglaublich-wie-ein-land-das-im-krieg-ist-so-gut-und-so-viel-liefern-kann.html>.

⁵ Lippert, Barbara. 2024. "EU Enlargement: Geopolitics Meets Integration Policy." SWP, January 11. DOI: 10.18449/2024C01.

⁶ Schminke, Tobias. 2023. "Neun von zehn Ukrainern wollen EU-Mitgliedschaft bis 2030." Euractiv, March 3. <https://euractiv.de/news/neun-von-zehn-ukrainern-wollen-eu-mitgliedschaft-bis-2030/>.

⁷ Kellermann, Florian. 2025. "Korruption in der Ukraine: Dieses Gesetz ist nicht hinnehmbar." ARD, July 23. <https://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/europa/ukraine-korruption-protest-100.html>.

⁸ Deutschlandfunk article. 2024. "Start of negotiations: How Ukraine's accession to the EU could proceed." June 26. <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/ukraine-eu-beitritt-stand-100.html>.

carried out swiftly by the Ukrainian government under wartime conditions, and the subsequent bilateral screening talks have already been completed in four of the six thematic clusters.⁹ According to EU Enlargement Commissioner Marta Kos, concrete chapter negotiations could be opened in all six thematic clusters by the end of 2025,¹⁰ but only after the EU has changed Victor Orbán's mind.

In the coming years, all 35 negotiation chapters must be opened and closed unanimously in so-called accession conferences.¹¹ Ukraine's reform achievements and its integration capacity should be decisive here. However, if the impression arises that possible accession depends not on Ukraine's integration efforts but on the fortuitous success of informal agreements between the EU and Viktor Orbán, the EU risks losing its credibility as a reliable and value-based partner. If confidence in a fair accession process that is proportional with the reform efforts is lost, the reform efforts will also wane. The opportunity to stabilize the still young democracy and achieve the broad integration of Ukraine into the European community, which is desired by both sides, could then be lost.

POLICY OPTIONS

The obstructive behavior of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán is developing into a credibility crisis for the European Union. Against this backdrop, three options are presented for how the EU can respond to Orbán's blockade stance in order to maintain its credibility in the accession process.

Option 1: Initiation of Article 7 procedure

The first option is to use a sanctioning instrument against Viktor Orbán's blockade: Article 7 TEU. This article makes it possible to suspend a Member State's voting rights in the Council in the event of a serious and persistent breach of fundamental values (Article 2 TEU).¹² Orbán's threat to block

Ukraine's accession process could be seen as a violation of the principle of loyal cooperation and of important EU values such as solidarity and democracy.¹³ By initiating proceedings against Hungary under Article 7, the EU could withdraw Orbán's veto right on accession issues and thus prevent Hungary from blocking the opening of chapter negotiations. In that case, the credibility problem would no longer exist. However, the hurdles for this process are high. Suspension of voting rights can only be decided unanimously by all the other Member States. Poland and Slovakia, for instance, will most probably vote against such a maximum sanction, since they have a political orientation similar to Orbán.¹⁴

Option 2: Reform of the accession procedure

The current unanimity requirement allows individual Member States to block the accession process for domestic political reasons, thereby damaging the credibility of the entire accession process. Abolishing the unanimity requirement could therefore be a solution to the EU's credibility crisis. EU law (Article 48(7) TEU) allows for so-called "passerelle clauses" for changing the decision-making process in the Council of the EU from unanimous decision-making to qualified majority voting.¹⁵ This would allow decisions on accession negotiations to be taken by (reinforced) qualified majority (i.e., 20 out of 27 states representing 65% of the EU population). Since the majority of the Member States are in favor of opening accession negotiations with Ukraine, the expectation of a transparent and predictable process is maintained. However, activating this "passerelle clause" also requires unanimity. This means that the governments that benefit from the right of veto would have to agree to its abolition.¹⁶ The political reality is that several Member States, not only Hungary but also small

⁹ Solodkyi, Sergiy. 2025.

¹⁰ Grunden, Maria. 2025.

¹¹ European Parliament. 2025.

¹² Tagesspiegel. 2025. "Nach zähen Verhandlungen Ungarn erzwingt Aufhebung von EU-Sanktionen gegen vier Russen." March 14. <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/internationales/ukraine-krieg-ungarn-erzwingt-aufhebung-von-eu-sanktionen-gegen-russen-13367638.html>.

¹³ Karjalainen, Tyyne. 2025. "Can the EU overcome Hungary's veto on Ukrainian membership?" The Loop, July 31.

<https://theloop.ecpr.eu/can-the-eu-overcome-hungarys-veto-on-ukrainian-membership/>.

¹⁴ Karjalainen, Tyyne. 2025.

¹⁵ European Union. "Passerelle clauses." <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/glossary/passerelle-clauses.html>. Accessed September 21, 2025.

¹⁶ Martens, Michael. 2025. "Eine Absage an die EU-Erweiterung." FAZ, April 13. <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/koalitionsvertrag-eine-absage-an-die-eu-erweiterung-110417546.html>.

states, are currently skeptical about abolishing the unanimity principle for fear of losing influence.¹⁷

Option 3: Systematic use of the chapter structure

Option 3 proposes making targeted use of the chapter structure of the enlargement process and working quickly toward concrete agreements and visible progress in selected chapter negotiations. Here, it could be advantageous that Viktor Orbán's blockades are not motivated by principle but by strategy, as he withdraws his veto in exchange for political assurances. Traditionally, the chapter cluster "Fundamentals" (rule of law, democracy) is opened first.¹⁸ However, this order is political and not legally binding. The EU can decide in which order chapters are opened. So far, Budapest has blocked the first chapter cluster, "Fundamentals." Orbán holds Ukraine responsible for not protecting the rights of the Hungarian minority in Ukraine.¹⁹ The EU must take Orbán's motives seriously and involve him actively in the negotiating process. This would facilitate initiating the EU accession process with Cluster 3. Minority protection guarantees, cultural autonomy, and language rights of the Hungarian minority could then be included in the chapter on education and culture. Cluster 4 would focus on establishing cooperation among Hungarian and Ukrainian companies in the transport and energy sectors. In this way, Hungary could gain economic benefits from Ukraine's EU accession. The closer and more advantageous the practical interlocking of policy areas, the greater the incentive for Hungary not to block the process. At the same time, the EU could give priority to negotiation chapters such as the internal market, digitalization, and the environment, which are less relevant to Hungary's national interests and in which Ukraine has already made progress with its reform efforts. The successful alignment of Ukrainian rules with EU standards in the environmental sector could already be laid down in interim agreements or financial support commitments. The internal market is particularly suitable for targeted de facto integration. Here, the EU could already guarantee Ukrainian companies' partial participation in the free movement of goods, services, and capital before accession. The integrative approach to Viktor Orbán's blockade and the coordinated problem-solving

would signal that the enlargement process takes all partners seriously and that, despite internal differences, the EU is in a position to actively pursue its stated goal of Ukraine's full integration into the European community of members.

EVALUATION CRITERIA

The following criteria are to be considered important aspects for assessing the extent to which the proposed measure strengthens the credibility of the EU in the accession process.

- **Effectiveness of the procedure:** This criterion examines whether the procedure is suitable for maintaining the EU's credibility in the accession process. It examines the extent to which the proposed measure can strengthen the impression of a fair, rule-based, and resilient procedure. It assesses whether the EU could fulfill its promise not to let a deserving candidate fail by taking the appropriate measure.
- **Efficiency and long-term political sustainability:** Efficiency assesses the relationship between political effort and political benefit. It evaluates whether existing resources such as time, money, knowledge, and skills are used effectively so that the benefits are great and resources are not wasted. The criterion of long-term sustainability examines whether the solution is functional beyond the current conflict. It also examines whether the measure could contribute to a more robust EU architecture that can withstand future enlargements.
- **Impact on social and territorial cohesion:** This criterion assesses whether the measure is suitable for strengthening the stability and cooperation of the member community. Such communities will resolve conflicts more constructively. Measures will be perceived as more honest and fairer, and the credibility of those involved will be strengthened.

¹⁷ Ondarza, N. v., Stürzer, I. 2024. "The state of consensus in the EU." SWP, April 19. DOI:10.18449/2024A24.

¹⁸ Liboreiro, Jorge. 2025. "Brüssel zu Orban: Keine objektiven Gründe für eine Blockade des EU-Beitritts der Ukraine." Euronews, July 2. <https://de.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/07/02/ukraine-eu-beitritt-orban/>.

¹⁹ Nieczytor, Krzysztof. 2025. "Cluster, open up! Ukraine's opportunities and risks on the road to the EU." Centre for Eastern Studies, April 10. <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2025-04-10/cluster-open-ukraines-opportunities-and-risks-road-to-eu/>.

- **Realistic feasibility:** This criterion assesses whether the proposed procedure is politically and institutionally feasible, can be implemented in a timely way and is practicable. It also examines whether there are any risks associated with implementation or whether there is a risk of harmful effects.

EVALUATION OF THE PROPOSED OPTIONS

Initiation of the Article 7 procedure: Attempting to suspend Hungary's voting rights and thus making the blockade impossible could strengthen the credibility in the short term. On the other hand, this is likely to further worsen the already tense relations between the EU and Orbán. There is a risk that further chapters of the negotiations will become even more politicized. Poland and Slovakia are unlikely to agree to sanctions against Orbán. Territorial cohesion would probably be weakened. As a result, Ukraine's confidence in a robust accession process could decline. Resources such as money, time, knowledge, and expertise are tied up in a years-long institutional dispute with a highly uncertain outcome. In this respect, the procedure is considered to be inefficient and unenforceable in the long term. A failure of the procedure would leave the impression of an inability to act and, in the worst case, could raise doubts about the benefits of accession. It should therefore be rejected.

Reform of the accession procedure: Abolishing the unanimity requirement and switching to majority decisions would greatly limit the possibility of domestic policy-motivated blockades by individual Member States. Accession would no longer be dependent on the veto of a single Member State. This would certainly strengthen credibility to ensure a fair and rule-based process. In the long term, territorial cohesion within the EU would also likely be strengthened. Frequent blockers such as Viktor Orbán would need to integrate their interests into the community in order to avoid being left isolated and without influence. Reforming the accession process would therefore be viable beyond the current conflict, as it would contribute to a more robust EU architecture. At present, however, the abolition of unanimity is itself blocked by the unanimity and veto principle. It is unlikely that Hungary, Slovakia or Poland will agree to this measure. As this option is not politically feasible in the near future, it is not suitable for solving the current problem. If the EU deferred Ukraine with the prospect of a possible treaty amendment in

the future, this would further undermine the EU's credibility. This option should therefore also be rejected.

Systematic use of the chapter structure: Systematic use of the chapter structure offers a great opportunity to reinforce the impression of a fair and robust accession process. By opening chapters in areas where Ukraine has already made progress with reforms and by starting concrete negotiations in these areas, it becomes clear that the EU recognizes Ukraine's reform achievements and is determined to press ahead with accession. This increases the credibility of the entire process and reduces the impression that accession is dependent on the power politics of individual Member States. The process is rule-based and the goal of not letting a deserving candidate fail is clearly evident. The effectiveness criterion is fulfilled.

This option is also efficient. Political and financial resources can be concentrated in areas that are not controversial and that bring immediate benefits to Ukraine, such as internal market integration and digital regulation. This rewards reform efforts and creates an incentive system that promotes further progress. In the long term, this approach strengthens the sustainability of the entire accession process, as gradual integration creates facts that are politically difficult to reverse.

With regard to social and territorial cohesion, option 3 is particularly suitable for reducing tensions and promoting cohesion. By taking Hungary's concerns into account in the chapter negotiations, the political gains for Hungary also increase and the benefits of further blockades decrease. At the same time, Ukraine achieves visible progress that is noticeable in society and the economy. This strengthens cohesion in three ways: between the EU and Hungary through conflict reduction, between the EU and Ukraine through visible integration successes, and between Hungary and Ukraine through the protection of minority rights and the expansion of economic ties. This again strengthens the Ukrainian public's trust in the EU and counteracts the risk of reform fatigue. Option 3 is realistically feasible because it operates within the existing institutional framework.

Overall, option 3 offers the best chance of strengthening the EU's credibility in relation to Ukraine. It enables tangible partial successes and creates a solid foundation for further integration. The EU can thus demonstrate that, despite internal differences, it is capable of actively and rule-based advancing Ukraine's accession.

RECOMMENDATION

To increase the success of option 3, accompanying measures and expanded diplomatic relations should be initiated. In particular, efforts should be made in areas that bring about concrete improvements in living conditions in Ukraine. The reconstruction of schools, clinics, and public infrastructure, the modernization of energy and transport networks, and digital administration and education services should be promoted as a matter of priority. The EU should provide targeted investment incentives for these areas. The European Investment Bank (EIB) and other financial institutions are already providing loans to Ukraine, backed by EU guarantees.²⁰ The EFSD+ Guarantee Fund (European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus) should be used to stimulate private investment in infrastructure and reconstruction in Ukraine. In addition, the EU could further integrate Ukraine into programs traditionally reserved for members (Ukraine is already associated with EU programs such as Horizon Europe²¹, Erasmus+²², and Digital Europe²³). Support from Ukrainian society should be seen as crucial to the accession process. In Ukraine itself, important reform roadmaps have been developed with the active participation of civil society actors. This model of a multi-stakeholder approach should be continued, for example through the formal involvement of NGOs and experts in advisory bodies on the negotiation chapters. Partnerships with EU NGOs and regular EU-Ukraine civil society forums should be used to involve the population in the accession preparations. This will make progress in the accession process directly tangible in everyday life and strengthen trust in EU institutions. In addition, this progress should be clearly communicated. The Commission could report quarterly on the concrete progress made in the negotiations. Given the tense relations between Kyiv and Budapest, close trilateral cooperation should be established. A committee of experts from the EU, Ukraine, and Hungary

should monitor the implementation of minority rights and bilateral agreements. The EU should assume the role of guarantor, ensuring regular monitoring, for example through the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights or the OSCE.

This expanded approach combines diplomacy, reform support, and concrete improvements in people's everyday lives. It defuses conflicts with Hungary and creates the conditions for returnees to return to a functioning, European-integrated Ukraine.

²⁰ European Investment Bank. 2025. "European Commission and EIB Group sign €2 billion guarantee under Ukraine Facility to support country's reconstruction and resilience." EIB, March 6. <https://www.eib.org/en/press/all/2025-124-european-commission-and-eib-group-sign-eur2-billion-guarantee-under-ukraine-facility-to-support-country-s-reconstruction-and-resilience/>.

²¹ Horizon Europe. "Specific support for Ukrainian research and innovation." <https://horizon-europe.org.ua/en/about-horizon/support-for-ukraine/>. Accessed September 21, 2025.

²² European Commission. 2025. "New support initiatives announced at Ukraine Recovery Conference in Rome." Erasmus+, July 14. <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/news/new-support-initiatives-announced-at-ukraine-recovery-conference-in-rome/>.

²³ European Commission. 2022. "Solidarity with Ukraine: Digital Europe Programme open to Ukraine to access calls for funding." Digital Strategy, September 5. <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/news/solidarity-ukraine-digital-europe-programme-open-ukraine-access-calls-funding>.

The Author(s)



MATTHIAS VOLLMER

Matthias Vollmer is a master's student in European Studies at the European University Viadrina. Having grown up bilingual, his academic interests lie in cross-border issues at the intersection of economics, politics, and law. During his bachelor's degree in business administration at the Free University Berlin, he focused on corporate governance, social responsibility, and law. In addition to his studies, he has already gained work experience in the fields of anti-corruption, data protection, and environmental, social, and governance issues, and works as a student assistant at a law firm.

About the Project

ValEUs brings together 20 universities from five continents, combining their strong expertise in EU studies across a wide range of academic disciplines. The Jean Monnet Network will foster joint research capacities, develop innovative teaching collaboration, and engage in societal policy debate to establish impactful policy recommendations. ValEUs is funded by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Commission (2024-2026).

Imprint

ValEUs. Research & Education Network on Contestations to EU Foreign Policy



Co-funded by
the European Union

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.

Project number: [101127800](#)

Email: contact@valeus.eu

Website: <https://valeus.eu/>