



IN A NUTSHELL

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War at our Doorstep - A Wake-up Call for the EU's Stalled Enlargement Agenda

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70 years ago, the process of European integration began with the Treaty of Paris coming into force. Six states joined together in the European Steel and Coal Community (ECSC) in an effort to unite a war-torn continent through economic integration - a move which brought peace to a continent that many had until then considered intrinsically prone to war. Since then, the European Union (EU) has undergone considerable transformation and as a result has not always enjoyed a positive reputation but has also been described as overly bureaucratic and at times undemocratic. For decades, the enlargement process has stagnated.

Still, Ukrainian President Zelenskyy's call for immediate accession shows that the image of the EU as a guarantor of peace persists. Even more, peace is no longer just a goal, but its guarantee has become a legitimization for EU membership itself. Following this logic, Zelenskyy's demand is based on the premise that if Ukraine is fighting Russia, it is defending peace in Europe and therefore deserves EU membership. He is by no means alone with this opinion. The President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen also shares this sentiment, saying: *"Ukrainians are ready to die for the European perspective. We want them to live with us the European dream"*. While von der Leyen does not endorse immediate accession, this statement served as an important symbol of solidarity with Ukraine. However, her message also begs the question of how we normatively evaluate the determination of potential member states.

Should Ukraine become an EU member? Yes. Does the willingness to die for the EU alone make them a worthy EU member state? Absolutely not. No nation has had to pay such a

high price to be recognized as a potential EU member state, nor should it. So, are the EU's proclamations of solidarity nothing more than virtue signaling? Perhaps not. Ukraine's unique situation might reignite the stalled EU enlargement process. The EU has moved unusually fast. Only four months separated Ukraine's application and the recognition of its EU candidate status. As can be observed in the Balkan states, usually this takes several years. For a while it did not appear as though any of the current candidate countries would join in the foreseeable future.

In contrast to public perception, Ukraine's efforts to become a member of the EU are by no means a recent occurrence. Rather, it is a process stretching over 18 years, during which the EU has demonstrated a somewhat ambivalent attitude toward Ukraine's EU membership. In 2005, the European Parliament announced its support for Ukrainian membership. Only a short time later, expectations were curbed by a decreased enthusiasm for EU enlargement. Olli Rehn, then EU Enlargement Commissioner, cautioned that the EU was taking on too much with enlargement and that the Western Balkan states would be the focus of any forthcoming enlargement. At some point, the prospect of membership was even dropped entirely within the narrative of EU-Ukraine relations. As a result, in 2014 the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement was signed, which falls under the EU's Neighborhood Policy and does not constitute an agreement within the framework of the EU's enlargement. Then last year, the European Parliament published a report on the progress of the 2014 EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, concluding that Ukraine was not ready for membership.

Since February 24, 2022, everything has changed: Today, war is raging close to the EU's border, but the reality in Ukraine has also painfully shown how vulnerable European peace is. What started out as an organization to regulate the French-German steel and coal industries to prevent future wars today serves as a beacon of peace on the European continent. Instead of emphasizing the heroism of Ukrainians to die for European values, the war should be a wake-up call for the EU to reevaluate its role as a peace-keeping project. In the same way, accessioning Ukraine is not an act of charity toward a war-stricken country but is in the interest of the EU.

The decisions reached at the European Council Summit on June 23, 2022, were the first steps in the right direction, but they do not go far enough. Ukraine has advanced its reforms in the social sector, the judiciary, and the fight against corruption. Of course, there is still a long way to go and the implementation of EU rules and regulations into Ukrainian law will be even more challenging during times of war. At the same time, the candidate status and the threat coming from Russia might also accelerate reforms. Furthermore, Ukraine fully shares our European values and defends them against those who violate freedom, solidarity, and justice. Since the start of the Russian war of aggression, the Ukrainian society, its institutions, and government have demonstrated remarkable democratic resilience. In times of

democracy backsliding, like in Viktor Orbán's Hungary, such conviction of fundamental democratic values would be particularly valuable for the EU and its credibility. Furthermore, the EU single market benefits from its member states, and even though economic stabilization is an ongoing issue, Ukraine has a lot to offer: it is home to a market of over 40 million consumers and highly educated young workers, has some of the most fertile soil in Europe, and is one of the biggest electricity producers in Europe.

We need the EU to break out of its passive approach to enlargement. EU enlargement must no longer be treated as a solely a technical process but also as a geopolitical instrument. Doing so does not imply neglecting the Copenhagen Criteria, but rather developing an honest commitment to EU enlargement. Otherwise, the EU's credibility as a global player, effective diplomatic actor, and peace-keeping community is at risk.

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