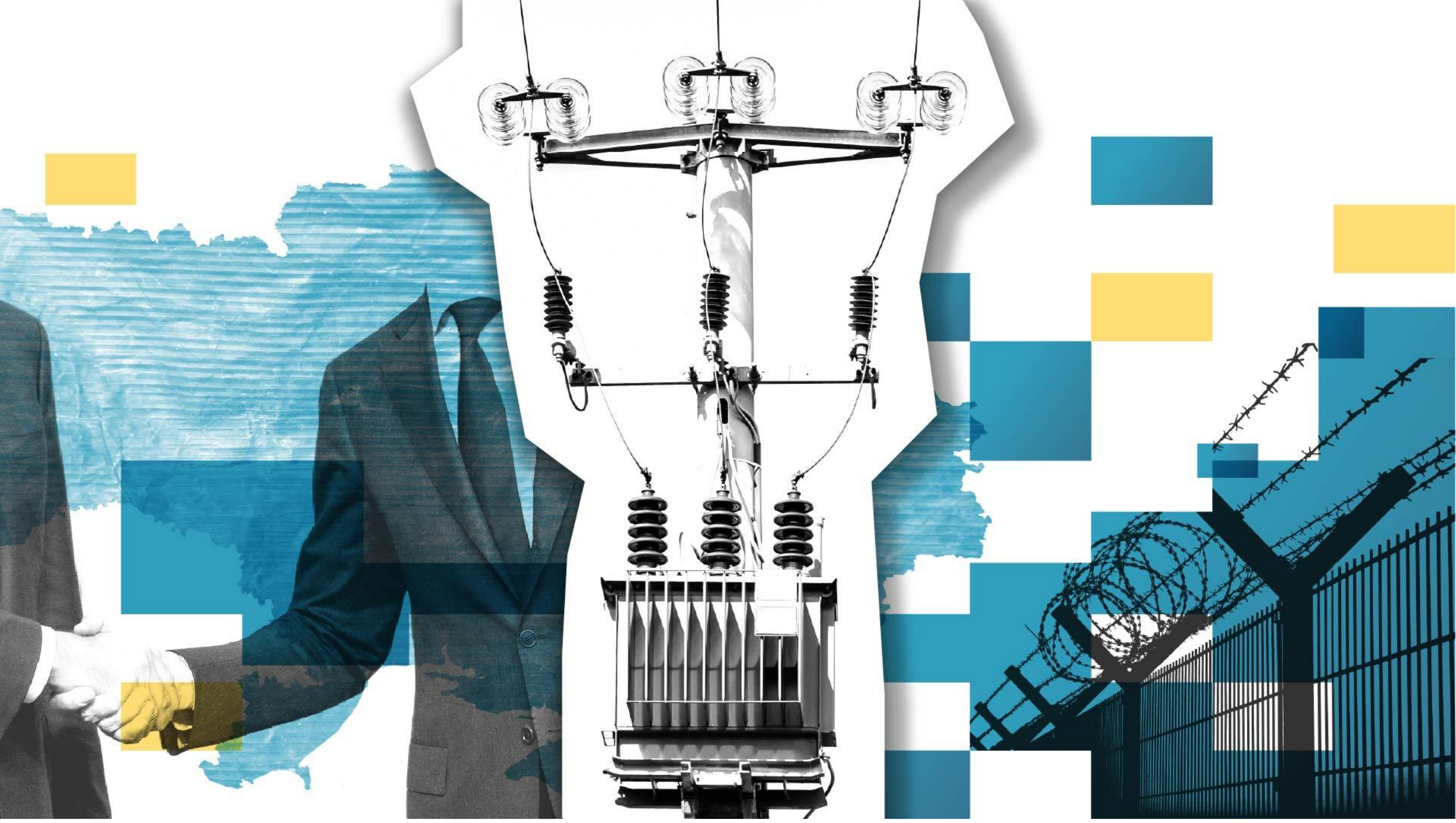

INTEGRATION ACCELERATOR

How to anchor Ukraine in the EU before membership

by

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The EU must adopt a more realistic approach to Ukraine's integration. Suggesting that membership is just around the corner risks undermining the EU's credibility and weakening its leverage over the reforms that accession requires. The opening of accession negotiations on the first two clusters, together with the recent Franco-German non-paper on EU enlargement, have given new impetus to Ukraine's European path. Nevertheless, accession remains a long-term process constrained not only by the pace of reforms in Ukraine, but also by political realities within the Union itself.

A realistic approach means shifting the focus from politically driven accession timelines towards concrete integration milestones that deliver visible benefits. This should become the cornerstone of the EU's strategy towards Kyiv: functional integration is not an alternative to membership, but a way of progressively and irreversibly anchoring Ukraine in the European security and economic space while preparing the ground for full EU accession.

Idea

This is no longer merely a question of enlargement, but a European security issue. Ukraine already possesses one of the continent's most capable armies, significant battlefield experience and a rapidly developing defence-industrial sector. Anchoring Ukraine more deeply in European structures would strengthen both Ukraine's resilience and Europe's long-term security architecture. This makes the credibility of the EU's approach towards Ukraine strategically important.

Anything short of full EU membership in the near term is likely to disappoint Ukrainians. If expectations in Ukraine are not met, disillusionment could weaken the country's pro-European orientation and create openings for Russian hybrid warfare tactics. While Ukraine is unlikely to reverse its European course, unmet expectations could fuel reform fatigue and reinforce narratives that the EU's promises are ultimately unattainable. This would erode the EU's ability to drive reforms through the prospect of integration and eventual membership. Functional integration should therefore be treated not simply as an economic instrument, but as a geopolitical tool that reduces Russian leverage by building irreversible interdependence between Ukraine and the EU while strengthening Europe's long-term security architecture.

Impetus

The EU should complement the accession process through an integration accelerator centred on deeper functional integration. A precedent already exists. In 1989, when full accession was not yet politically feasible, Commission President Jacques Delors proposed anchoring European Free Trade Association (EFTA) countries in the Single Market without immediate accession. This model, later realised through the European Economic Area (EEA), enabled deep economic integration and regulatory convergence before membership became politically possible.

A similar logic should guide the EU's approach to Ukraine today. Gradual integration is the most politically sustainable way to reconcile support for Ukraine across the Member States with the integrity of the enlargement process. The strategy should combine three mutually reinforcing dimensions: *functional integration, political integration* and *societal integration*.

Firstly, functional integration should focus on areas where practical gains are already achievable, including electricity market coupling, digital integration, industrial standards, trade and defence-industrial cooperation. Full coupling of Ukraine’s electricity market with the EU by 2027 would support reconstruction, attract investment, strengthen energy security and resilience, and integrate Ukraine more deeply into the European energy market. Defence-industrial cooperation offers another example, as argued by Ondřej Ditrych and Luigi Scazzieri in the chapter 'Defence Integration Booster'.

Secondly, if Ukraine is expected to align with EU rules and absorb the costs of partial access to the Single Market, it should also be granted political recognition and inclusion. Ukrainian ministers could therefore participate without full voting rights in selected Council discussions related to energy, transport, digital policy and defence-industrial cooperation, while Ukraine should be progressively included in relevant EU platforms and agencies. This would help ensure that integration is experienced not only as conditionality, but also as political belonging.

Thirdly, integration must be visible to citizens. Ukraine’s participation in the ‘Roam Like at Home’ policy from January 2026 demonstrates how European integration can deliver tangible improvements in everyday life. Similar efforts in mobility, education and people-to-people exchanges would help ensure that the benefits of integration are experienced not only through institutional cooperation, but also in citizens’ daily lives. These initiatives should be accompanied by coherent strategic messaging from the EU and Ukraine that clearly explains what each integration milestone delivers and how it advances Ukraine's path to EU membership.

Instruments

The next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) offers an opportunity to align the EU's financial support more closely with Ukraine's integration trajectory. While the proposed Ukraine Reserve, channelled through the pre-accession Global Europe instrument, will make available up to €100 billion for 2028–2034, this falls well short of Ukraine's estimated reconstruction needs of more than €520 billion over the coming decade. Future EU support must do more than finance recovery: it should also accelerate Ukraine's integration into the Union. To this end, the Ukraine Reserve should link reconstruction funding, accession-related reforms and sectoral integration within a single strategic framework. Financial support should increasingly be tied to concrete integration milestones in areas such as energy, digital policy, transport and defence-industrial cooperation, while reforms should also improve Ukraine's business and investment climate to help mobilise much-needed private investment.

At the same time, the EU must recognise that deeper market access will entail adjustment costs. Certain Ukrainian sectors – such as steel, transport and energy – could face significant competitive and regulatory pressures from closer participation in the Single Market. Market opening should be accompanied by transitional arrangements, safeguard mechanisms and targeted financial support. Continued access should remain conditional on sustained reforms, democratic alignment and improvements in the rule of law, allowing the EU to maintain leverage against backsliding.