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PRAGMATIZING THE EU ENLARGEMENT POLICY

Kyiv's EU strategy for the upcoming years should ensure strong relations with EU member states – the accession process is more likely to be blocked by them than Brussels after the war-time consensus fades away. While new membership applications pose a challenge to the Union's coherence, multi-speed integration will be the future of the EU with or without new members.

The signing of the European Union membership application by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on the fourth day of Russia's invasion of Ukraine was not a turning point in the history of Ukraine. Ukraine has steadily – yet slowly and falteringly – pursued integration with the EU since the 2013–14 Euromaidan events. Ukraine's wartime membership application is, however, a potential change-maker for the EU's enlargement policy, which has been characterized by slow progress with accessions and member states' reservations towards enlargement. As a consequence, mistrust among applicant countries towards the process has increased, and the joint EU approach to future enlargement has become more ambiguous.

European reactions to Ukraine's membership application varied from demands for an accelerated process to an acknowledgement that there is no fast-track option available, and therefore alternative ways to support Ukraine should be sought. Some European commentators oppose Ukraine's membership in Western international organizations in principle to avoid confrontation with Russia, while others have doubted the readiness of Ukraine to become an EU member in principle, which is why the accession criteria and patience have been highlighted. A more general argument against EU enlargement is that new member states increase diversity within the Union, further complicating EU decision-making. Another counterargument is that the EU

member states should deepen their cooperation rather than grow in number.

However, these challenges – as well as policy solutions to them – predate Ukraine's membership application. Since the early days of the Union, EU member states have circumvented political blockages through forms of differentiated cooperation. Multi-speed integration will be the future of the EU in many fields with or without new candidates, with willing and capable member states deepening integration in some policy areas and others potentially following in the future. Brexit and the democratic backsliding of Hungary and Poland have already strengthened the trend, while also highlighting that there is no leeway for differentiation in

the rule of law or democracy fundamentals in the EU. Similarly, policy options are already in place for keeping some member states out of certain areas of integration until they have fulfilled the conditions. Bulgaria, for example, has been an EU member state since 2007 but is still excluded from the Schengen Area.

Unsurprisingly, the pragmatist idea of phasing in the membership process for Ukraine and creating new “islands of cooperation” has gained in popularity. Any substitute for actual EU membership, such as French President Emmanuel Macron’s idea of a “European Political Community”, will hardly meet the expectations of Ukrainians for their Western integration; however, some type of piecemeal approach is likely to characterize the process ahead. Staged accession may offer a solution that rewards Ukraine for progress in reforms, while acknowledging the EU’s internal sensitivities vis-à-vis enlargement.

While many problems of EU enlargement can indeed be resolved case by case through flexibility, the question of the size of the Union requires a unanimous solution. In a European Council meeting on 23 June, the EU member states agreed on granting not only Ukraine but

also Moldova and Georgia a membership perspective, with Ukraine and Moldova gaining candidate status. The membership path of the Trio will continue to depend on the unanimity of the 27 member states. Recent experiences from the Western Balkans do not bode well: for example, North Macedonia’s path to the EU has been repeatedly blocked by opposition from the member states.

The key lesson for Ukraine is that its EU strategy should prioritize strong and functional bilateral relations with all EU capitals in addition to working on the technical membership criteria. The EU member states are not only the gatekeepers for Ukraine’s EU integration, they can also provide political and economic support during the accession process. While material support has been crucial for Ukraine’s ability to defend itself against Russia’s invasion, European investments in Ukraine will also be vitally needed after the war. The Union is already expected to help rebuild Ukraine, but its new Global Gateway infrastructure investment programme relies heavily on member state funding.

The EU’s enlargement policy subscribes to the idea that both the membership as well as the accession

process itself will increase stability, democratic rule, and peace on the shared continent. Recently, its role in guiding vulnerable countries out of the dangerous grey zone of geopolitical ambiguity has also been highlighted. While not officially signalling a membership perspective, the Association Agreement signed in 2014 has de facto been prepping Ukraine for EU membership, albeit with varying results.

The limited progress with reforms in Ukraine thus far demonstrates that huge efforts will be required in order to take practical and not only symbolic steps towards Ukraine’s EU membership. Corruption, economic development, and the stability of Ukraine’s democratic institutions are just some of the concerns for the next few years. Membership conditionality is considered one of the strongest carrots that the EU has to support the development of its neighbouring countries: more progress with reforms is typically achieved during the accession process than before or after it. Finally, the process is also a race against time, as countries in limbo continue to be extremely vulnerable to Russia’s aggression. /