

GEOPOLITICAL IMPORTANCE OF UKRAINIAN EU MEMBERSHIP

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Abstract:

The ongoing war in Ukraine has renewed attention to the geopolitical significance of the European Union's enlargement policy and emphasizes the strategic weight of Ukraine's potential accession. The paper explores the Ukrainian case in EU enlargement process aiming to analyze the importance of Ukraine's potential EU membership by examining the benefits of its natural resources and geopolitical aspect of EU enlargement policy.

Keywords: *European Union, enlargement, Ukraine, geopolitics, resources*

Introduction

In the light of ongoing security crisis Ukraine's aspiration for EU membership is no longer viewed solely through the lens of economic integration or democratic conditionality, but increasingly as a matter of geopolitical urgency. Ukraine's position, as a large Eastern European country bordering Russia, along with its natural resource wealth, both contribute to its attractiveness in the European integration process. To assess the potential benefits of Ukraine's membership for the EU and the broader approach to the enlargement process, this paper analyzes EU-Ukraine relations, EU enlargement policies and the advantages the EU could gain from Ukraine's accession. The first part of the paper provides a brief overview of the historical trajectory of EU-Ukraine relations. The second part explores the EU's enlargement strategy between 1973 and 2013, while the third part focuses on the strategic implications of Ukrainian accession, considering the economic benefits and regional security. Since the country's location and resources are fundamental geopolitical elements, this research is based on the hypothesis that, in addition to economic and democratic conditionality, the EU also takes the geopolitical interests into account in its enlargement policy.

1. Brief overview of Ukrainian – EU relations

Ukraine is the second biggest country in Europe with territory of 603,549 km², borders Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Moldova, Russia and Belarus. As a country of Former Soviet Union, Ukraine was grouped into the Eastern Europe subregion. From the late 18th to the early 20th century, Ukrainian lands were part of the Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires. Following the collapse of these empires between 1917 and 1921, Ukraine attempted to establish itself as an independent nation-state (Britannica, 2025). On December 30, 1922, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was founded with the signing of an agreement by Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, and the Transcaucasian Republic (composed of Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan). Largely part of Ukraine became a republic of the Soviet Union, although parts of western Ukraine were divided between Poland, Romania and Czechoslovakia. By the end of the Second World War, the borders of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic were redrawn to include the western Ukrainian territories. In 1991, with the Soviet Union collapsed, on August 24, Ukraine declared independence and became a free, democratic and sovereign state within internationally recognized borders. A few months later with the signing of Alma-Ata Protocol on December 21, 1991, nearly all ex - Soviet republics became members of Commonwealth of Independent States (regional intergovernmental organization in Eurasia) and six months later, on May 15, 1992, almost all CIS members signed the Collective Security Treaty a defensive military

alliance (Commonwealth of independent states, 2014). In 1997, Ukraine joined forces with Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Moldova to form the Consultative Group, an initiative that eventually evolved into the Organization for Democracy and Economic Development (GUAM), officially established in 2006. The initiative was driven by a shared aspiration to pursue closer integration with Euro-Atlantic structures.

EU-Ukrainian relations were formally established in 1998, primarily focused on democratic reforms and economic cooperation and providing a financial and technical assistance. In 2004, Ukraine joined the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) but due to internal political instability it was not granted potential candidate status. Aside from the High Representative Javier Solana's effort to prevent violence (Pifer, 2007), the EU was not directly involved in resolving the Ukrainian's 2004 political crisis associated with the Orange Revolution. The ENP was launched to foster stability, security and prosperity, and aimed to strengthen relations with neighboring countries. In 2009, the EU signed Eastern Partnership Initiative (EPI) with Ukraine, which was primarily focused on facilitating accelerated political association and deeper economic integration with EU Eastern neighbors. The Association agreement was initiated in 2012 and was planned to be signed during the EU Eastern Partnership Summit held in Vilnius in November next year. The refusal of then President Yanukovich to sign the Association Agreement in December spark mass protests and the political crisis known as *Euromaidan*. The subsequent pro-European government signed the agreement, marking a new phase in Ukraine's relations with both the EU and Russia. As a result of EU - Ukraine cooperation deepened, tensions with Russia escalated, culminating in the Russian annexation of Crimea and support for separatist movement in Donbas region. The EU did not directly engage in resolving the Donbas conflict

¹, but was engaged in trilateral agreements with Ukraine and Russia to reduce Russia's trade concerns related to the EU - Ukraine Association Agreement. In 2018, Ukraine withdrew from the Commonwealth of Independent State and in 2019 amended its constitution to define EU and NATO membership as strategic objectives. In 2021 the EU signed Memorandum of understanding for a Strategic Partnership with Ukraine designed to integrate raw material value chains, identify collaborative projects and promote economic development in resource-rich country as Ukraine. Following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, EU-Ukraine relations intensified in a way that within four months Ukraine was granted candidate status, and within a year and a half the accession negotiations were opened. Driven primarily by security concerns EU members emphasized the urgency of EU expansion and has adopted a differentiated and geopolitically approach toward Ukraine. The EU integration process has always been shaped, in part, by geopolitical factors, but never with the urgency presented by the Ukrainian case.

2. Geopolitical dimension of the EU's enlargement (1973-2013)

The European Union was founded by six countries through the signing of the Treaty establishing the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951. Over time, the EU expanded through seven enlargement rounds - in 1973, 1981, 1986, 1995, 2004, 2007 and 2013 - reaching a peak of 28 member states (currently 27, following Brexit). Each of these enlargements differed in terms of economic development, political systems and prior ideologies of the candidates, as well as of interests of EU member states.

The first and the fourth enlargements included economically developed countries from the Northern Europe (Denmark, Ireland, the United Kingdom (1973), Sweden, Finland and Austria (central Europe) 1995). These countries had stable economies and political systems, which facilitated their accession. The second and third enlargements brought in three Southern European countries: Greece (1981), Portugal, and Spain (1986). These states were economically weaker and in transition process from dictatorship to democracy, making their accession more complex. The rest of the enlargements: fifth, sixth and seventh enlargements further expanded EU to include two Mediterranean islands Malta and Cyprus, as well as eleven Central and Eastern European countries. Czech Republic, Slovakia,

¹ Two of EU members states - France and Germany- were parties to the Minsk II Agreement along with Ukraine and Russia signed on February 12, 2015. The parties agreed 12-point peace plan that proposed, among other things, the cessation of fighting, the withdrawal of heavy weapons, the release of prisoners, and the removal of foreign troops from Ukrainian territory.

Hungary, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland and Slovenia joined in 2004, Bulgaria and Romania followed in 2007 and Croatia joined in 2013.

Following the last enlargement, EU expansion was no longer a top priority, despite ongoing candidacies of Turkey (since 1999) Macedonia (since 2005), Montenegro (since 2010), Serbia (since 2012) and Albania (since 2014). In the following period, these countries, except for Turkey and with addition of Bosnia and Herzegovina, became part of the Berlin Process². Eight years later in 2022 Bosnia and Herzegovina granted candidate status along with Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. Currently six candidates are engaged in active accession negotiations: Montenegro (since 2012), Serbia (since 2014), Albania (since 2020), Macedonia (since 2022), Moldova and Ukraine (since 2024). Considering the EU accession processes of all current candidate countries, a significant disparity in the pace of these processes can be observed. For example, Macedonia waited 17 years from obtaining candidate status to starting accession negotiation, while Ukraine progressed from candidate status to negotiations in just a year and a half. In the case of Macedonia, the EU agreements aimed to strengthen democratic institutions, promote economic stability, uphold the rule of law, and safeguard fundamental rights. The Stabilization and Association Process was designed to first stabilize the region (Balkan region) and facilitate integration into the EU. It provided a framework for political dialogue, encouraged international and economic cooperation, supported legal harmonization with EU standards and aimed to establish a free trade area and improved regional cooperation. In Ukraine's case, EU agreements were more focused on trade and economic cooperation, avoiding direct challenges to Russia's sphere of influence. In fact, the EU maintained relations with both Ukraine and Russia based on its own geopolitical interests.

The geopolitical approach to enlargement is not a new phenomenon in the European integration process. The first enlargement, despite initial French opposition to the United Kingdom's accession³, was widely viewed as a means to deepen integration and enhance the EU's global standing, especially with inclusion of UK (Schramm, 2025).

The second and third enlargements occurred during the Cold War, a period in which political influence over a large number of states was a priority for both Western and Eastern rivals. Although Greece's accession raised concerns, particularly regarding agriculture and state support for favored industries, while Spain's membership was especially contentious due to fishing disputes with existing members, which also affected Portugal's accession, the European Council proceed with enlargement. This decision was driven by the geopolitical motive of consolidating democracy in the region during the Cold War (Schramm, 2025). An additional factor may have been the strategic territorial positioning of these countries, with their access to the Mediterranean Sea rendering the EU borders more geopolitically significant.

The fourth enlargement took place after the end of the Cold War, which motivated the three previously neutral countries to join the EU. Subsequent enlargements included two islands with strategic positions in the Mediterranean Sea, seven countries from the former Eastern bloc, two counties with access to the Black Sea, contributing to the regional stability. Two former Yugoslav states with access to the Adriatic Sea also joined. For the Scandinavian and Baltic countries EU membership was seen as a way to firmly anchor the country to the West (Finland and Sweeden), to safeguard independence and reduce Russia's influence (in the case of the Baltic countries). From the EU's

² The Berlin process was set up in 2014 as a platform to increase cooperation between the Western Balkans Six and the Berlin Process host countries (Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Slovenia, and the United Kingdom) as well as the EU. It provides high level political support and broad outreach and visibility to regional cooperation initiatives and respective policies, as well as to EU connectivity projects in the region. The Process also involves the EU institutions, international financial institutions and the region's civil society, youth and businesses.

³ The French opposition (De Gaulle) stemmed from conflicting economic interests between continental Europe and Britain, as well as concerns that the UK's entry could undermine the Common agricultural policy (CAP) and shift the European Economic Community (EEC) toward becoming a vast free trade area. In addition, the Gaulle perception was that UK acting as a gateway for US influence in Europe and he was afraid that could unsettle the franco-German alliance.

perspective, the Eastern enlargement was an opportunity to extend democracy, stability and prosperity (Osypchuk, 2023). Germany, UK and Danmark emerged as key proponents of fifth enlargement primarily to the integration of 100 million consumers from rapidly growing economies into the internal market (Gjeta, 2020). The 1999 Kosovo war in particular led EU to agree on opening accession negotiations with all ten, instead of the initial six candidates (Cyprus, Estonia, Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovenia).

Due to their proximity, Austria and Germany supported enlargement to ensure stability in Central and Eastern Europe. Similarly, Denmark and Sweden backed the Baltic states, while Greece and Italy favored Bulgaria and Romania (Bosse, 2024). Nevertheless, the sixth enlargement is often viewed as a controversial chapter in the history of EU enlargement, considering the significant and persistent deficiencies in the rule of law, particularly within key state institutions such as the judiciary and law enforcement agencies, that persisted also many years after the accession of Bulgaria and Romania (Vlašić F., 2014). In fact, these concerns led to the introduction of the *Cooperation and Verification Mechanism* designed to monitor the post-accession adherence to democracy and human rights standards after their accession. The seventh enlargement encountered political obstacles as well. In 2009 Slovenia vetoed Croatia's accession over an unresolved maritime delimitation dispute. Later in 2013 Slovenia has shelved Croatia's ratification because of the old bank dispute related to Ljubljanska Banka. At that time the Carl Bildt, Sweden's foreign minister, stated that no country should politically veto its neighbors, emphasizing that such actions run counter to the EU's working principles (Vogle, 2009). In the Ukrainian case the main obstacles have come from Russia, as external actor and from Hungary as an EU actor. According to Hungary's prime minister Orban, Ukraine's EU membership would harm Hungary's national interests and would have implications for Hungarian security, economy and agriculture. At a government press briefing, held in April 2025, Gulyás, the head of the Prime Ministers's Office, emphasized that Ukraine's accession should be determined by merit rather than political pressure (Abouthungary, 2025).

3. Geopolitical importance of Ukrainian EU membership

According to CIA data, Ukraine is classified as a lower-middle-income, Eastern European economy outside EU. The country has well-developed transportation sector including 21,733 km of railways, 169,694 km roadways (2014), 1,672 km of waterways (2012), 26 ports (3 large, 8 small, 15 very small and 8 ports with oil terminals (2024). The country also has a merchant marine 410 vessels (comprising 1 container ship, 83 general cargo ships, 14 oil tankers, and 312 others) (2023), along with 152 airports and 44 heliports. Additionally, Ukraine possesses an extensive pipeline network: 36,720 km for gas, 4,514 km for oil, 4,363 km for refined products (2023) (cia.gov, 2025). The gas pipelines network is divided into two transit corridors: the western corridor (Brotherhood with Soyuz pipeline, the Progress pipeline and Urengoy-Pomary-Uzhhorod pipeline) and the southern corridor (with five pipelines) and one internal corridor - the north-south corridor crossing the Luhansk Oblast. The north-south corridor was closed, however during the Russo-Ukrainian war, Russia continued to use it to supply Donbas regions which is not controlled by the Ukrainian Government. Another corridor which was closed recently is Soyuz corridor, for the not renewed transit contract with Russia which ended on December 31, 2024. In fact, Ukraine stands to lose around \$800 million in transit fee, but decision aligns with efforts by Ukraine and its allies to cut off the Kremlin's source of funding for the war. Additionally, Russia's share of EU imports of pipeline gas dropped from over 40% in 2021 to about 11% in 2024. For pipeline gas and LNG combined, Russia accounted for less than 19% of total EU gas imports in 2024 (European Council, 2025). Europe has largely replaced Russian gas with alternative sources, including LNG from the U.S. and Qatar and pipeline supplies from Norway. In fact, Norway provided over 33% of all gas imports. Countries like Austria and Slovakia have secured alternative routes, minimizing the impact of halting gas transit through Ukraine, while Hungary still uses the Russian gas from south corridor via Turk Stream (RFE/RL's Russian Service, 2024). Considering this new situation and the loss of transit fee, Ukraine still doesn't face significant issues in closing the pipelines, as the country possesses substantial natural gas reserves. Ukraine's estimated natural gas reserves amount to approximately 5.4 trillion cubic meters (tcm), including 1.1 tcm proven reserves and over 400 million tonnes (Mt) of gas condensate. The overall structure of Ukraine's hydrocarbon production is composed of 89% natural gas, 7.9% oil and 3.1% gas condensate. While natural gas is the

primary resource, the most profitable reserves are located at depths exceeding 5,000 meters (Liepins, 2024).

These energy resources, combined with Ukraine's geographical position, underline the country's potential strategic value for the European energy system, especially in the context of EU enlargement and energy security. Ukraine's accession to the EU holds to potential to significantly influence the transformation of the EU's energy market. It would enhance the Union's access to substantial natural gas reserves and offer considerable capacity for expanding renewable energy production. Moreover, Ukraine possesses extensive gas storage infrastructure which has already contributes to European energy security. This storage capability is poised to become a strategic asset in ensuring stability and supply resilience throughout the EU's ongoing energy transition (Khachatryan, 2024).

Regarding other key geopolitical resources, the data shows the following: the crude oil reserves are estimated at 395 million barrels (2021 est.); total petroleum production is 3,000 barrels per day (2023 est.) while refined petroleum consumption is 248,000 barrels per day (2022 est.). The proven reserves of natural gas are 1.104 trillion cubic meters (2021 est.); the production is 18.725 billion cubic meters (2022 est.); the consumption is 22.856 billion cubic meters; while exports are 95.994 million cubic meters and imports are 5.404 billion cubic meters. The total proven coal reserves are 34.375 billion metric tons; the production is 4.248 million metric tons (2022 est.); the consumption is 10.953 million metric tons; while exports are 9,000 metric tons and imports are 6.553 million metric tons. Many of these resources also appear among Ukraine's top imported commodities. In 2023 the five leading import commodities by value (estimated to \$88.83 billion) were: refined petroleum, cars, natural gas, packaged medicine and plastic products. The top five import partners based on percentage share, were: China (16%), Poland (14%), Germany (8%), Turkey (6%) and the USA (4%). Ukraine's top five export commodities based on value of percentage share in dollars were: corn, seed oils, wheat, iron ore and soybeans. The leading Ukrainian export partners were Poland (12%), Romania (9%), Turkey (7%), China (6%) and Spain (6%) (Ukrainian Geological Survey, 2024).

The European Union remained Ukraine's largest trading partner, accounting for 56% of Ukraine's total trade in goods (2023). On the other hand, Ukraine ranked as the EU's 16th largest trading partner, representing 1.2% of the EU's overall trade in goods. Bilateral trade between the two partners reached a total value of €61.9 billion in 2023, more than doubling since the implementation of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) in 2016. EU imports from Ukraine amounted to €22.8 billion, with key export categories including cereals (21.9%), animal or vegetable fats and oils (9.2%), ores, slag and ash (8.3%), oil seeds (8.2%), and iron and steel (7.9%). Ukraine continued to be the EU's third-largest source of agri-food imports by value. On the other hand, EU exports to Ukraine totaled €39.1 billion, primarily comprising mineral fuels and oils (16.6%), motor vehicles (9.9%), machinery (9.1%), electrical machinery (8.9%), and arms and ammunition (4.3%) (European Commission, 2024). Considering Ukraine's an enormous agricultural land (71 per cent of its surface) its EU membership could catalyze greater food security in Europe and has significant potential to add to Europe's food supply stabilizing prices and preventing inflation (Khachatryan, 2024). EU trade would increase with Ukraine as part of the Single market and by 2040, the model predicts 15 per cent higher imports and 9 per cent higher exports for Ukraine if it gains EU accession in 2030.

Beyond its agricultural potential and trade prospects, Ukraine's strategic importance for the EU also derives from its vast endowment of natural resources, many of which are critical for Europe's energy transition and industrial competitiveness. Ukraine is one of the richest countries in natural resources claiming to hold nearly \$ 15 trillion worth of minerals. According to data from Ukraine geologic survey, Ukraine possesses 5% of the world's natural resources (Ukrainian Geological Survey, 2024). These include Europe's largest reserves of lithium (ranking first in Europe and accounting for 1% of global reserves) which is essential for production of lithium batteries use for energy storage, electric vehicles and electronic devices, ceramics and glass. Ukraine also has the largest uranium reserves in Europe and ranks among top 10 globally, making it vital for energy security and nuclear power generation. The country holds the largest titanium reserves in Europe and is among the top five globally for titanium rutile reserves, with 1% of the world's reserves. Titanium is widely used in aerospace, armor, chemical processing, marine hardware and medical implants. Graphite reserves are

estimated at 18.6Mt, representing 6% of global reserves, placing Ukraine among the world's top five and the leading European country in graphite resources. Ukraine also possesses 13.9Kt beryllium, essential for the nuclear, aerospace, military, acoustic and electronic industries and it is fifth – largest producer of gallium which is crucial for semiconductors and LED production. Additional resources include manganese (140Mt), iron ore (6.5. Bt), copper, cobalt and nickel. Despite this wealth, a significant portion of these resources remain underutilized due to insufficient capacity and technological limitations. However, although Ukraine's critical raw-material supplies would be a welcome addition to the EU as crucial factor in energy transition and independence for Europe, many of Ukraine's natural resources, approximately 20%, including around half of its rare earth element deposit, are situated in the territories under Russian occupation (PFOR, 2025). As mentioned before, the Memorandum of Understanding between the European Union and Ukraine on a Strategic Partnership on Raw Materials signed in 2021 reflects a shared commitment to enhance cooperation in the field of raw materials and batteries. The aim is to bring about closer integration of critical raw materials and battery value chains, with mutual benefits. Considering this agreement the European Commission has warned of possible violations of EU free competition rules if the new agreement (2025) between Ukraine and USA disproportionately favors US companies at the expense of European ones. Indeed, although the European Union offered its own agreement on "critical materials" to Ukraine, Ukraine preferred to deal with the USA (Starcevic, 2025). The minerals agreement, signed on April 30 between Ukraine and USA, guarantees full control over the subsoil, infrastructure and natural resources, but does not provide security guarantees to Ukraine⁴.

Conclusions

Ukraine's relationship with the EU evolved particularly after 2014, following Russia's annexation of Crimea and more recently 2022 invasion. These events culminated in Ukraine being granted candidate status and initiating accession negotiations in record time. Over the EU's seven previous enlargement rounds, decision-making has been guided by several key criteria: expansion and development of the economic market; the maintenance of political stability and promotion of democratic values during the Cold War; and the eastward extension of the EU's borders in the post-Soviet period with aim to achieve regional stability, market extension and continental unification. The research demonstrated while the economic and democratic criteria remain central, the case of Ukraine underscores the increasing weight of geopolitical consideration in accession decisions. Ukraine's strategic location, abundant natural resources and role in regional stability have elevated its significance within the EU's strategic calculations. Ukrainian accession process seems to be unique due to the ongoing war. As part of its solidarity effort with Ukraine, the European Commission has accelerated the EU accession process with Ukraine and imposed sanctions on Russia.

The results of the research confirm the hypothesis that the EU enlargement is not solely based on economic or democratic conditionality but also involves strategic calculations, particularly in response to external actors like Russia, reintroducing the geopolitically motivated expansion into EU's agenda. The analysis frames Ukraine as geopolitical actor with vast resources, infrastructural capacity and market potential. Its value lies in its extensive natural resources (including critical raw materials, such as lithium and titanium), strategic infrastructure (such as pipelines and transport corridors) and large agricultural land which could contribute to EU food and energy security and enhance regional stability. However, the most important challenge remains ending the war and continuing with the reforms necessary and required for Ukraine's full integration into the EU.

⁴ The US Trump administration has set its sights on Ukraine's vast mineral resources and proposed a deal: to secure a portion of Ukraine's rare earths in exchange for US support in the war against the Russian aggressor (PFOR, 2025).

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