Progressive EU Accession Path for Ukraine

27 MAY 2026

Myroslava Hetman

Progressive Accession as a New Path for Ukraine towards EU Membership
Introduction

In times of geopolitical crisis, the EU faces security challenges and looks to enlargement as a way to strengthen its position. This is a legitimate response, but enlargement is not an end in itself. The EU's accession process exists to ensure that new members are genuinely prepared for the rights and obligations of membership, and that the Union retains its capacity to function as it grows. A politically accelerated accession that bypasses this process would not serve the long-term interests of either side.

At the same time, the pre-accession period can be long, and the existing methodology offers limited mechanisms to reward reform progress with concrete benefits before accession is complete. This proposal argues that the EU can and should address this gap. Building on the concept of accession association proposed by Lippert, von Ondarza and Seebass (SWP Comment 17, 2026), it presents a mechanism, termed here Progressive Accession, that provides Ukraine, that is a special case compared to other candidates, with real integration benefits tied to verified reform progress, without requiring premature full membership.

The Proposal

Progressive Accession is a formal pre-accession status with three elements.

Graduated Single Market Access

The Common Agricultural Policy would be excluded from this status. Given Ukraine's agricultural scale, CAP inclusion is not feasible within a pre-accession framework. A comparable exclusion already exists in the European Economic Area, where agriculture is excluded without impairing Single Market functioning.

Institutional Participation

Progressive Accession would include a graduated institutional presence tied to negotiation progress. Ukraine would gain observer status in the European Parliament, a step currently under discussion but not yet adopted. As relevant clusters advance, Ukraine would participate in informal Council

working group meetings in corresponding policy areas, and its participation in relevant EU agencies would be expanded. As Lippert et al. (2026) note, there are already numerous proposals to this end, and Progressive Accession would formalise them within a coherent framework linked to reform progress.

Security and Defence Partnership

Progressive Accession would include a security and defence dimension. Ukraine would be formally involved in the development of the Common Security and Defence Policy, particularly in programmes to strengthen the defence industry. The EU stands to benefit from Ukraine's experience and industrial base, making this a mutually beneficial partnership. This dimension would also contribute to deliberations on operationalising the mutual assistance clause under Article 42(7) TEU.

The Question of Unanimity

The EU is currently engaged in a broader debate about extending qualified majority voting in areas where the unanimity requirement has created institutional difficulties, including situations where a single member state has been in a position to prevent collective action. In this context, it is worth considering whether decisions related to the granting and expansion of Progressive Accession status could fall within the scope of this reform, rather than remaining subject to unanimity.

Conclusion

Progressive Accession, by making integration gradual, conditional, and tied to verified reform progress, provides Ukraine with concrete benefits linked to its reform commitments, while preserving the standards necessary for sustainable integration. It offers the EU a way to demonstrate its commitment to Ukraine's European perspective in a manner that is both geopolitically relevant and institutionally sound.