epik EUROPEAN POLICY INSTITUTE IN KYIV

Keep up the pace of Ukraine’s EU accession

The EU has opened serious membership talks with Ukraine. The burden of proof now shifts to Kyiv, but Brussels cannot sit back.

Ivan Nagornyak

15 June 2026 10 min read

The European Union and Ukraine held their second intergovernmental conference and opened the first cluster of accession talks, known as “Fundamentals”, in Luxembourg on 15 June. The name seems mundane but the substance is anything but. This cluster is the spine of the whole process. It covers the rule of law, democratic institutions, public administration and economic criteria, and contains five negotiation chapters: judiciary and fundamental rights; justice, freedom and security; public procurement; statistics; and financial control. It is the first cluster to be opened and will be the last to be closed. From this moment Ukraine's membership has ceased to be a geopolitical promise. It has become a structured negotiation with benchmarks, roadmaps, deadlines and the discomfort of being judged.

The first such conference, two years ago, launched the talks and fixed the EU's negotiating framework. Little has moved on since, and the usual explanation – Hungarian obstruction – is largely correct. However, the blockage was not removed because Brussels found new resolve. It shifted because Viktor Orban's government lost the April election. The unanimity rule that Orban exploited, and the ease with which one capital can hold enlargement hostage, has not been fixed. It has just gone quiet. The lesson should be to make up for lost time while the window is open. The five remaining clusters should be opened in July. This would not lower the bar as a normal rhythm would have taken about as long. It would simply demonstrate that political blockages can delay accession but cannot define it, so long as both sides are ready to move.

The opening also changes who carries most weight. Until now, Ukraine could blame Hungary or a slow decision process in the EU for the delays. That excuse has now gone. Kyiv has pushed hard for a 2027 target and now that the clusters are open, the EU can pass the ball back. The question is no longer whether Ukraine wants to join, but whether it is ready to deliver at the agreed pace.

The scale of the task is easy to underestimate. The Association Agreement contained a little over 600 EU legal acts and, after more than a decade, Ukraine has implemented about 84 percent of them. Accession is a different order of magnitude. It requires the adoption of several thousand acts, and not just on paper. Brussels will ask not whether a law has been passed, but whether it is working in practice. Ukraine must move from the logic of approximation to the logic of full membership, which is harder in terms of both quality and quantity. The first real test will come in late October, when the European Commission's Enlargement 2026 Report shows whether the Fundamentals cluster is being implemented or merely opened. Doing all this while fighting a full-scale war of Russian aggression, with a strained budget, weak public administration and occupied territory, is harder still – a difficulty the optimists tend to ignore.

Some of the groundwork has been laid. In April, Ukraine adopted a National Programme to align its laws with the EU's. It has also prepared negotiating positions for all six clusters – but documents do not implement themselves. Ukraine's institutions for European integration now need more weight. Taras Kachka, Deputy Prime Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic integration since July 2025, and the government's coordination body should do more than monitor and coordinate progress; they need to be politically empowered to sanction ministries that stall or draft weak laws. Parliament has spent four years failing to create a fast track for EU-related bills. A recent resolution moves in the wrong direction, demanding more reporting and a bigger parliamentary role in the talks. Oversight is healthy, but a candidate does not debate whether to adopt EU law – that argument belongs to members. Its task is to apply the rules, and rapidly where no transition period exists.

The burden is not Kyiv's alone, however, and here Brussels too often escapes scrutiny. Benchmarks without incentives are just wishes. The EU should link the payments from its next long-term budget – the 2028–34 financial framework – to the closing of negotiating chapters, and give priority to the benchmarks that bring Ukraine into the Single Market. That would turn money into an engine of reform, give Ukrainians a genuine prize well before full membership and force the EU to put in place long needed pre-enlargement reforms. Because an enlargement the EU cannot afford or absorb is no more credible than reforms Ukraine cannot deliver.

The door has opened wider, and that is good news. A door is only useful, however, if both sides keep moving through it at pace. Kyiv must build a state that is fit for membership, not just a foreign policy that wants it. That means increasing the authority of the Chief Negotiator and the coordinating bodies, and putting politics aside where Ukraine has no transition periods to gain. Brussels, for its part, must prove that it is ready to admit Ukraine, and willing to pay for the journey. The next six months will not settle accession, but it is Ukraine's best chance to prove by its actions that it is serious.