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Ukraine wants a fast pass to E.U. membership. It's not that easy.

Here's what the European Union might offer instead

By Joshua C. Fjelstul

On Feb. 28, four days after [Russia invaded Ukraine](#), Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky formally [submitted an application](#) for E.U. membership. On March 1, Zelensky [reiterated his appeal](#), in an emotional address from a bunker in Kyiv to an extraordinary session of the [European Parliament](#). He asked the E.U. to “prove that you are with us.”

The president of the [European Commission](#) — the E.U.'s executive body — [has endorsed Ukraine's membership](#), and a number of E.U. members [have called on the E.U.](#) to immediately make Ukraine a candidate for membership. Seeing this positive reaction, Georgia and Moldova also formally applied to join.

But becoming an E.U. member involves more than encouragement from key officials. Here's what you need to know about the European Union — and the membership process.

Ukraine thinks it would be more secure and prosperous in the E.U.

Joining the E.U. provides security. Like NATO, the E.U. has a defense pact. [Article 42\(7\) of the Treaty on European Union](#) is the E.U.'s version of [Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty](#). In short, an attack against one E.U. member is an attack against all of the E.U. If Ukraine becomes a member, the European Union would be committed to taking all necessary action to defend Ukraine against Russia's unprovoked aggression.

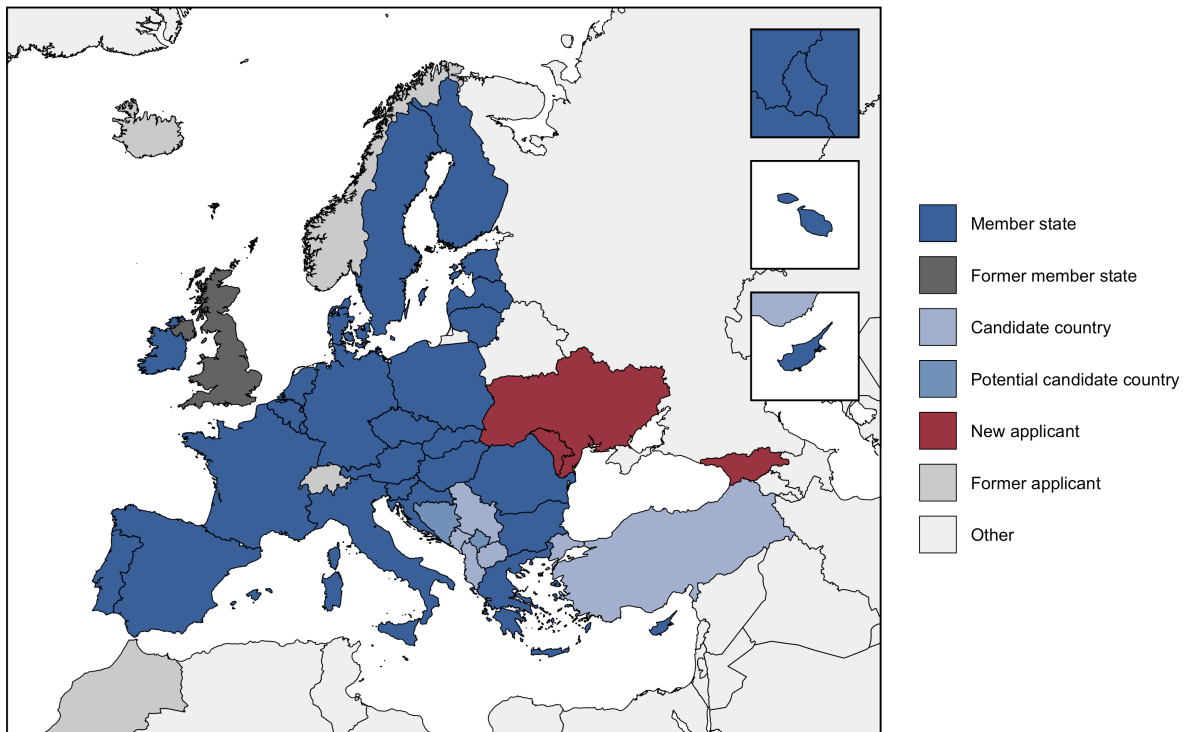
Ukraine also sees E.U. membership as a long-term path to economic prosperity. In 2014, it signed an [Association Agreement](#) with the E.U. to deepen economic ties — a first step toward membership.

E.U. membership comes with access to the [European Single Market](#) — one of the world's largest economies — and the prospect of membership in the [Eurozone](#), the group of E.U. members that use the euro. Adopting the euro would boost economic growth and facilitate post-war recovery. But it would also require Ukraine [to comply with E.U. spending rules](#) designed to prevent economic crises.

Actually joining the E.U. is hard

However, “[accession](#)” (the E.U.'s term for becoming a member) could take years. The rules laid out in the E.U.'s [governing treaties](#) are quite demanding. First, a country has to [submit an application](#) to the [Council of](#)

The current status of E.U. enlargement

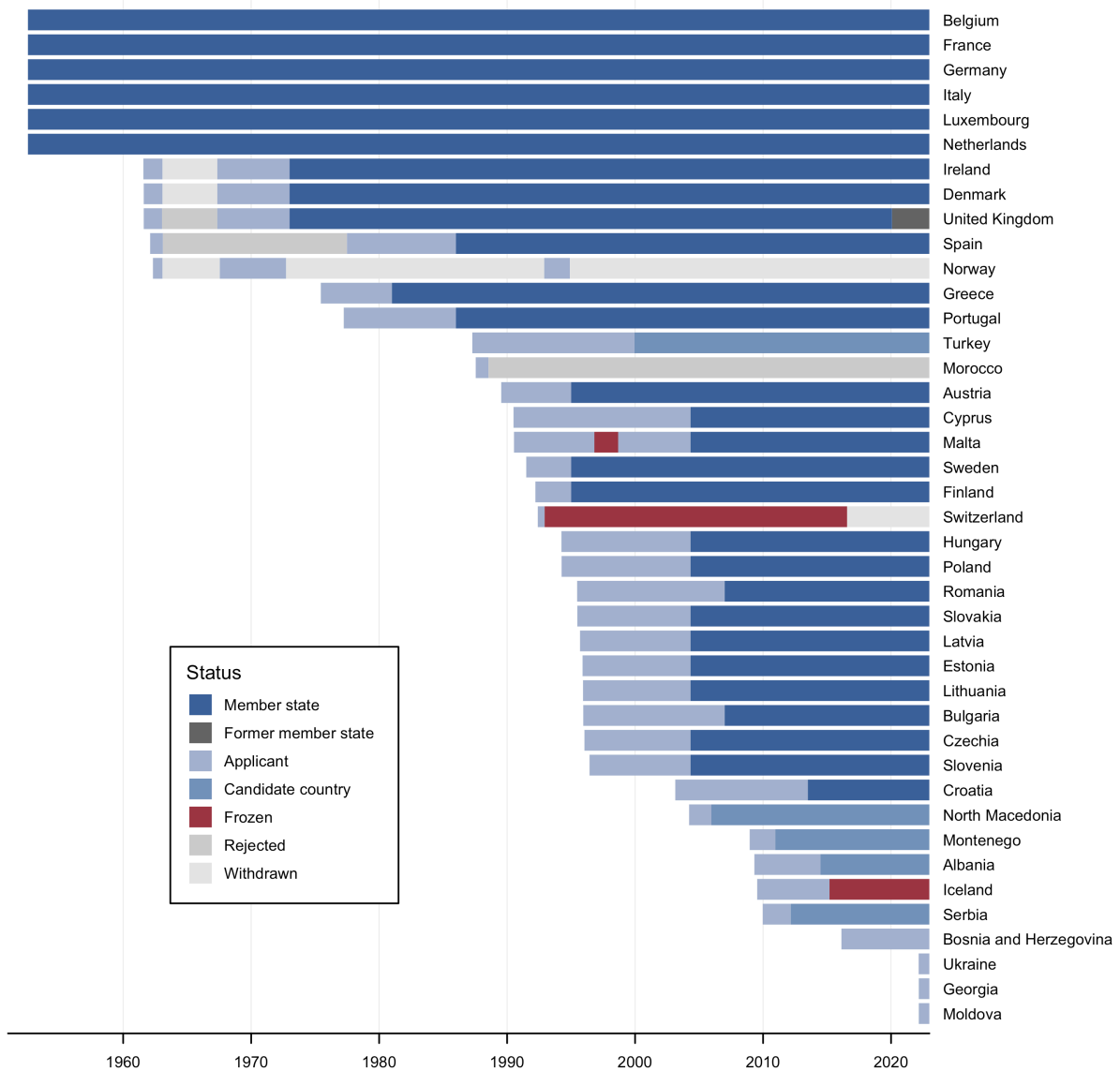


the European Union — one of the E.U.'s legislative bodies. After hearing the Commission's opinion, the Council can decide to grant the country **candidate status**, but every E.U. member has to agree.

Then the candidate country **enters into negotiations** with the E.U., during which time it has to satisfy **the E.U's membership criteria**, known as the Copenhagen Criteria. This includes implementing the ***acquis communautaire***, a formidable body of **tens of thousands** of laws and court rulings issued by **Court of Justice of the E.U.**

Once the Commission certifies that the candidate country has fully adopted the ***acquis***, the Council can close negotiations — again, every E.U. member

A timeline of E.U. enlargement



has to be in agreement. At this point, the directly elected European Parliament — the E.U.’s other legislative body — has to give its consent.

If it passes all these hurdles, the candidate country can [sign an accession treaty](#) with the E.U., which has to be signed and ratified by [all 27 E.U. members](#).

It's not easy to speed up the process

[Zelensky has asked](#) the E.U. to fast-track Ukraine's accession by creating a "new special procedure." That's a big ask. Creating a new, faster procedure would require the E.U. to [change its governing treaties](#). All E.U. members would all have to sign and ratify a new treaty that amends the current treaties.

A somewhat easier path might be for the E.U. to relax the Copenhagen Criteria, so that Ukraine wouldn't have to implement the *acquis* all at once. But that would carry its own political challenges.

Would E.U. members agree to fast-track Ukraine?

Even if the E.U. could agree on a procedure to fast-track Ukrainian membership, there would still be two major political obstacles to Ukraine's accession.

First, fast-tracking Ukraine's accession would undermine the E.U.'s long-standing policy of requiring candidate countries to fully implement the *acquis* before joining. Ukraine would become a member before the Commission has signed off on its ability to implement E.U. law.

This would be politically controversial for many current members. The E.U. has leverage when it's negotiating with countries over membership. Once a country becomes a member, it's harder for the E.U. to incentivize it to

implement E.U. law correctly. The Commission, which is responsible for enforcing E.U. law, **is often hesitant** to pick a political fight.

At the moment, the E.U. faces a **rule of law crisis** because of the willingness of Poland and Hungary, which **have experienced democratic backsliding** since they joined in 2004, to **openly violate E.U. law**. This crisis may make some E.U. members nervous about bringing Ukraine in too quickly. Other **candidate countries** might also demand that the E.U. bend the rules.

Second, Ukraine's accession would immediately trigger the E.U.'s defense pact. This provision greatly increases the risk of a full-scale war between NATO and Russia, as **21 E.U. member countries** are also in NATO. To prevent this, the E.U. would have to exclude Ukraine from the defense pact — but that's a key reason Zelensky is pushing to join quickly.

The E.U. will likely just make Ukraine a candidate

All this means that the E.U. isn't likely to fast-track Ukraine's accession. What's more likely is that the E.U. would grant Ukraine candidate status — something it can do almost immediately — and then postpone further negotiations. This would signal to Russia that the E.U. has a strong, long-term commitment to Ukraine's independence. It's hard to know if that would deter Putin from further aggression, or just provoke him.

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