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Does Ukraine have the strength to enter the EU by 2030?



Two years ago, **Rava-Ruska** (nearly 8,000 residents) in Western Ukraine celebrated a huge event: the launch of a direct train to Warsaw. This event was called historic, with the route running at around 90% capacity since the launch.

To EU citizens, the excitement might seem overstated, but Ukraine overcame decades of corruption and bureaucratic hurdles to align with EU rail standards, complicated by wider Ukrainian tracks.

By 2023, despite the war, **European gauge tracks** connected Ukrainian Mukachevo to Hungary and Slovakia, Rava-Ruska to Poland, and extended 22 km from Chop to Uzhhorod (both towns in Ukraine).

Plans to reach Lviv by 2027 will enable routes to Vienna, Krakow, and Warsaw. This subtle milestone is not just about average railway reforms, it symbolises Ukraine's EU integration, ironically linking it first to Slovakia and Hungary, today part of a push back power on further aid and integration of Ukraine.

Ukraine's irreversible course

In 2019, Ukraine cemented in its Constitution an irreversible course towards full membership in the European Union. It legally bound Kyiv to pursue integration with the EU and opened a path to develop its economy within a single market of half a billion consumers.

Before Russia's 2014 invasion of Crimea and Donbas, Ukraine's economy was deeply tied to Moscow. In 2011, Russia accounted for roughly 29% of **Ukraine's exports** and 35% of its imports.

Over a decade later, the tables had turned — in 2024, the **EU** had turned into Ukraine's largest trading partner, with over 50% of Ukraine's total trade.

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Last week, after nearly two years of negotiations, the upgraded EU-Ukraine trade deal came into force. Unlike the previous temporary trade preferences, the new agreement sets up long-term rules: the deal gradually cuts tariffs, requires Ukraine to align with EU production standards, and introduces a safeguard clause for sensitive European farm sectors such as sugar, poultry, and grains.

Yet even as Brussels celebrates the deal as a milestone, **Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia** are forming an informal Ukraine-sceptic alliance in the EU, keeping their bans on Ukrainian grain and other agricultural imports.

The three governments argue that cheap Ukrainian goods undercut local farmers, while the European Commission insists the revised accord already contains protections for domestic producers.

From energy dependence to European integration

Meanwhile, another achievement holds strong despite geopolitical storms and challenges of the war: In 2017, Ukraine embarked on a historic journey to disconnect its **power system** from Russia and Belarus, aligning instead with continental Europe's grid, a process mirrored by neighbouring **Moldova**, another Eastern European nation moving towards EU integration.

Over five years, Ukraine had been meticulously preparing for this shift, culminating in plans to test the power system in isolated mode starting 24 February 2022, alongside Moldova.

However, just hours after Ukraine's grid disconnected for the scheduled three-day test, Russia launched its **military invasion** at 03:40, likely banking on Ukraine's energy

vulnerabilities to cripple the nation.

Moscow, long accustomed to wielding energy as a tool of influence and blackmail across post-Soviet states, underestimated Ukraine's resilience and Western support, expecting blackouts and disrupted communications to pave the way for a swift Russian advance.

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Defying these expectations, Ukraine's power system not only endured the initial autonomous operation but also, alongside **Moldova's Moldelectrica**, successfully requested emergency synchronisation with the ENTSO-E Continental Europe grid on 26 February.

By 16 March 2022, after 21 days of isolated operation—far exceeding the planned three—both nations physically connected to Europe's grid, a move endorsed by the EU Council and ENTSO-E.

This decoupling from Russian energy influence extended beyond electricity: in 2024, Moldova survived its first winter without Russian gas, exposing vulnerabilities in Russian-occupied Transnistria, where dysfunction grew. Ukraine abandoned Russian gas transit after its contract was over at the end of 2024.

These painful steps away from cheap energy dependence on Russia demonstrate Ukraine's commitment to the EU, despite the fact that the political side of the issue remains quite complex.

The full-scale invasion in 2022 seemed to accelerate the tendency, with Ukraine and Moldova being granted EU candidate status.

But the next phase — opening and, crucially, closing **negotiation clusters** in 35 chapters of EU accession — has proven far more difficult. For now, Ukraine's progress is stuck in the

machinery of reform.

The future of Ukraine and Moldova's EU aspirations

Under the EU's updated enlargement framework, Ukraine's accession talks are divided into six negotiation clusters — from "Fundamentals" like rule of law and democratic institutions to "Green Agenda," "Agriculture," and "External Relations."



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Each cluster has to first undergo a technical "screening" process to assess how closely Ukraine's laws align with EU standards before formal negotiations can begin.

Since receiving candidate status in 2022, **Kyiv** has completed screening in several areas, including energy, transport, and competition policy, and opened preliminary talks on internal market reforms.

Yet the first cluster — focused on judiciary independence and public administration — remains blocked by **Hungary's veto**, stalling further progress.

Amid these delays, Moldovan President **Maia Sandu** has urged the EU to maintain "clarity and sustained commitment" to enlargement, warning against the risk of stagnation while Hungary continues to obstruct talks with Ukraine.

She emphasised that Moldova, which applied for membership alongside Ukraine in 2022, has met all of its obligations.

Optimism about Ukraine's accession to the EU by 2030 is gradually fading – with growing talk of a possible entry no earlier than 2040, alongside Moldova. Everything, however, will depend on how events unfold.

As long as the war continues, achieving membership will be difficult: the process requires a stable democracy, rule of law, respect for human rights, and above all, a functioning market economy – all of which have been severely strained by Russia's full-scale invasion.