



By: TA | AP Insight

EU's 'Super Tuesday' – the bloc accelerates admission of new members



Four countries hoping to join the European Union took important steps forward on their membership quests Tuesday, in one of the bloc's **biggest enlargement** moves in more than 20 years.

Intergovernmental conferences were being held in Brussels to ceremonially open or close negotiating tracks for the top four candidates to join the 27-nation EU: Albania, Montenegro, Moldova and war-ravaged Ukraine. But it could still be years before any of them join.

"We have not seen this in more than two decades. The last time, it was in 2002. This is a Super Tuesday for EU enlargement and Ukraine is part of it," Enlargement Commissioner Marta Kos told reporters.

While holding four meetings in one day is a rarity, 10 countries — most of them from central Europe — joined the EU in 2004. Croatia, the last country to be welcomed into the world's biggest trading bloc, joined in 2013.

Changing times force a change of policy

Tuesday's move is a sign of the important political and geostrategic changes happening in Europe. In 2019, French President **Emmanuel Macron** insisted that he would block any attempt at enlargement until the EU itself had undergone deep reforms.

But Europe's biggest land war in decades and its fallout have altered that calculus. The EU has sought to encourage reform in the candidate nations, fearing the growing influence of Russia and China.

Ukraine's progress has been impressive. It only applied for membership in 2022, four days after Russia launched a full-scale invasion. Moldova too has been under heavy **Russian pressure**.

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Ukraine sees EU membership as one "security guarantee" for a stable future once the war ends. Its best guarantee would be **NATO membership**, but the Trump administration insists that cannot happen, and other NATO members are wary of it joining while fighting continues.

European countries see the war as an existential threat, and fear that Russian President Vladimir Putin could target them in coming years, especially if he wins in Ukraine.

"The case for Ukraine's EU membership is very strong," Kos said.

"The future security architecture of our continent is unimaginable without Ukraine," she said. "Ukrainians have turned their country into a military powerhouse with capabilities few other nations can match, especially with its rapidly evolving drone technologies."

The benefits of EU membership

The prospect of EU membership is a powerful driver for pro-democratic reform, and joining has boosted trade and creates jobs, notably in the volatile Balkans region, where a series of wars in the 1990s tore apart the former nation of Yugoslavia. Most candidates for EU member are Balkan states.

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Countries hoping to join the EU must complete negotiations in 35 policy areas, known as chapters, from agriculture to taxation and energy to trade. That process can take years.

Last month, Ukraine and Moldova opened negotiations on a cluster of five chapters linked to the values and principles on which the EU was founded, such as the rule of law, respect for fundamental rights and the

functioning of democratic institutions.

They each opened a second cluster on Tuesday focused on foreign relations, security and defense policies, as well as trade policy, development cooperation and humanitarian aid.

Albania's meeting will serve to provisionally close negotiating tracks on science and research, education and culture, and external relations. Montenegro – which hopes to join in 2028 – is doing the same with competition policy and customs rules.

Hungary's Orbán leaves and things start moving

An important factor that has led to the EU's new-found speed is a change of government in Hungary.



Viktor Orbán routinely exploited voting rules that require all 27 member countries to agree on certain rules, sanctions and even political statements

Ukraine's accession process was long stymied by **Hungary's** stridently nationalist former prime minister Viktor Orbán, who was considered Russia's strongest ally in Europe and possible threat to the EU project. The candidacies of Ukraine and Moldova were linked and neither could progress.

But U.S. President Donald Trump's friend was ejected by **voters in April** in spectacular fashion after 16 years in power.

Orbán routinely exploited voting rules that

require all 27 member countries to agree on certain rules, sanctions and even political statements.

Unanimous agreement is required for each negotiating chapter to be opened, and then again for it to be closed.

Nine countries are officially candidates to join the EU: Albania, Bosnia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine and Turkey.

Accession talks for Georgia and Turkey are on hold due to concerns about democratic standards. Kosovo has also applied to join but has not been granted candidate status.