




Moldova and Ukraine's EU path for membership: a new strategy for Europeanization or integration?*

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Abstract: The European Union has engaged proactively with its neighbourhood since the early 2000s, combining the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership with incentive-based conditionality as to export its values and, in selected cases, the prospect of membership. Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine marked a critical juncture, accelerating Moldova and Ukraine's EU accession processes at an unprecedented pace. This article examines their accelerated progression from application to the opening of accession negotiations within less than two years. It explores whether this shift reflects a recalibration of conditionality and the emergence of a 'candidate-without-deadline' status; a differentiation of pre-accession as a strategic distancing from Russia; or continuity in formal methodology with exceptional political sequencing. Methodologically, the article is conceptual and documentary. Using a conceptual and documentary approach, it reviews EU primary documents and academic literature on Europeanization, differentiated integration, conditionality, and historical institutionalism, covering the period from 2004 to 2025.

Keywords: enlargement, Moldova, Ukraine, Europeanization

Introduction

The war in Ukraine, which began in 2022, brought a geopolitical turn in the world order, and, more specifically, in the case of the European Union (EU), the urgency in reviewing its foreign policy towards its borders. Geographically located close to the EU, the Eastern neighbours have been on the EU's radar in its search for cooperation or development promotion initiatives, and the Union has been engaged in supporting their development since the transition towards democracy.

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Concomitantly, the region is also under Russia's attention, and demographic issues stem from the reorganisation at the end of the Cold War, as the Russian diaspora living on the borders of the new countries founded as new liberal democracies oriented toward the EU influence. Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova are two multi-ethnic countries having unsolved separatism issues, and that have recently become a focus of territorial disputes, even before the invasion of Ukraine by Russia.

The Union has proactively had policies to engage and relate with countries outside of its borders, especially to the East and South. Considering the limits of EU enlargement, as well as the lack of projections for the membership of several third countries, the EU external governance can be noted from EU efforts to generate actions and promote its norms abroad, reinforcing European values of democracy, liberal economy and democratic institutions. Policies for the neighbourhood were essential strategies to maintain a radius of institutional security and cooperation with the region, seen as a zone of Russian influence, with more or less proximity to the European liberal model. The recent geopolitical crises have brought about a critical juncture (Collier & Munck, 2024; Pierson, 2000; 2004) and a shift in strategy towards the Eastern borders. The war in Europe appeared as a critical juncture, bringing uncertainties that required choices in a short time, a few unanticipated and provoking consequences with no return.

In the article, we consider one of the most relevant characteristics of the concept of a critical juncture, which is the fact that it „may involve a relatively brief period in which one direction or another is taken or an extended period” (Collier & Collier, 2002, p.27). The EU political authorities have made choices that affect „the outcome of interests” (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007, p. 348) and should have lasting effects. In short, the decision to create differentiated accession negotiations appeared as a new trajectory in the EU's history of candidacies.

Ukraine and Moldova are two of the EU's neighbours that hold frozen conflicts, influencing the countries' political stability (Tostes, 2022). Although there is no clear term for Ukraine and Moldova to meet the Copenhagen criteria for EU accession, the European Council of June 2022 has decided to grant Ukraine and Moldova candidate status, just a few months after the start of the war. Why and how did the European Council conduct it? Has the EU created new criteria for accepting membership applications? Or should we consider the accession negotiations period as a new strategy for EU influence by granting pre-accession benefits without any rigorous pressure to speed up compliance with the sectors and chapters of the negotiations?

In examining the dynamics of membership within the EU, Fromage (2024) focuses on the 'uniqueness' of membership conditions, or the 'unitary status' of Member States. She suggests there is diversity and, to some extent, differentiation in conditions that can be analysed around four aspects of the 'tensions facing the concept of a unitary and formal EU membership'. These analyses are complemented by a reflection on the concept of membership itself (Fromage, 2024).

Since the classical Stubb (1996) contribution on Differentiated Integration (DI), we have seen the foundation of research and debates on DI associated with the protection of diversity, or the combination of political, geographic and geopolitical particularities by states that would not like to be tied to EU-level measures or policies. Historical examples of DI include the opt-outs accepted by some members regarding the adoption of the euro or entry into the Schengen area. The categorisation of DI, as the risks and benefits (Kroger & Loughran, 2021; Schimmelfennig, 2019) of it are valuable reflections on the current and future EU scenario, conducted through a diversity of policy implementation (Bellamy & Kröger, 2017; Bellamy et al., 2022).

Despite the inspiring and current debate on DI, the article proposes that there is a novelty concerning the function and status of candidacies without a deadline for their completion. This article argues that these new candidacies of Eastern countries, former members of the USSR, are part of a strategy to bring countries that hold frozen conflicts (Coyle, 2019; European Parliament, 2016) within their territory closer to the EU and farther away from Russia.

This paper is divided into four parts, in addition to this introduction and the final considerations. Firstly, we highlight the importance of neighbourhood policies to the EU. With that in mind, we ground our research in the Europeanization literature and explain how the phenomenon of Europeanization can also be applied to countries outside the Union. The new geopolitical juncture affected the Eastern Partnership Policy (EaP), which was once launched to make the six neighbouring countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, The Republic of Moldova and Ukraine) closer to the EU. New candidacies to EU membership and the rise in intentions from others appeared as a non-anticipated consequence of the war in Ukraine. In this research, we focus on the cases of Moldova and Ukraine. Both of which were granted their candidatures shortly after the start of the war, while simultaneously being countries directly affected by it.

The second section aims to illuminate the internal socio-political complexity in Ukraine and Moldova, which has affected their interaction with the EU since the beginning of the EaP and the meaning of the change of status of the countries when they become candidates for membership in the EU. Following this, we analyse the shift from neighbourhood Europeanization relationship to candidate status and accession countries, conceptualising the war event as a critical juncture for the change (Collier & Munck, 2024; Pierson, 2000; 2004). The final section presents the preliminary findings of this research agenda. It draws on possibilities for the paths these candidacy processes might take, considering the limits of the research because of the developments so far.

1. Methodology and contribution

This paper is conceptual and documentary. A structured, focused review is applied to investigate the cases of Moldova and Ukraine. These two countries have

been selected because they (a) belong to the EaP, (b) face active or frozen conflicts, and (c) advanced from application to opened negotiations at a record pace (2022–2024). The temporal scope is 2004–2025, spanning the ENP’s launch, the EaP, and the post-2022 wartime context. In order to assess it, both primary and secondary sources are used. Primary sources include European Council/Council conclusions; Commission Opinions and Enlargement Packages; factsheets on the accession methodology and chapters/clusters; and documents on Global Gateway and NDICI-Global Europe. Secondary sources include peer-reviewed literature on Europeanization, DI, conditionality, and historical institutionalism. Recent, authoritative documents and classic theoretical references have been prioritised, and where multiple official versions exist, the choice was to rely on the most recent.

A process-tracing logic is used to map key decisions and their sequencing (application → candidacy → negotiations), triangulating official texts with scholarly interpretations. As for this work, the 2022 invasion is interpreted as a critical juncture that altered the EU’s choice set and payoffs, and it assesses whether observed choices imply a methodological change or a political reprioritisation.

This article aims to contribute in three ways. First, conceptually, it proposes the notion of a ‘candidate-without-deadline’ configuration to capture situations in which candidacy and negotiation openings are granted for strategic reasons. At the same time, credible accession timelines remain open-ended pending security and fundamentals – an unprecedented situation until recent years. This adds precision to debates on Europeanization outside membership and to DI within an enlarged Union.

Second, empirically, it offers a structured mapping of Moldova’s and Ukraine’s status evolution over time (application → candidacy → opened negotiations) and situates it in a comparative perspective, clarifying in what ways the acceleration departs from or aligns with earlier enlargement cycles. Third, methodologically, it articulates a transparent documentary approach—sources, selection, and limitations—that can be replicated or extended to other cases (e.g., Georgia, Western Balkans).

It is noted that the ongoing negotiations limit the availability of granular, comparable indicators of chapter-level progress. The articles’ inferences are therefore bounded and subject to revision as events unfold. This work does not attempt quantitative measurement of compliance; instead, it focuses on conceptual clarity and causal narratives consistent with historical institutionalism.

2. The Neighbourhood has always mattered - Europeanization then and now

In addition to the EU’s eastward expansion, since 2004, the former Soviet republics have been challenged by the influences of two different models of institutions and norms. A historical example is the Baltic Republics, which, upon joining the EU in 2004, became part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

(NATO), consolidating their adherence to the political model and international coalitions that distanced the countries from Russia after the end of the USSR.

However, not only did membership become an instrument of EU influence, but other mechanisms of Europeanization and specific policies for the EU's eastern borders gained prominence from the 2000s onwards.

There is a broad debate on the EU's effects and influence on its member States and vice versa. Radaelli (2000) and Exadaktylos and Radaelli (2009; 2012) drew on the debate on research design and causal analysis in European integration by acknowledging Europeanization as a sub-field to be considered.

As European integration advanced, the EU has developed a special interest not only in influencing and creating a governance model for its member states, but also for third countries close to it. It was even more so after the 2004 enlargement. In this sense, it is not wrong to say that even „countries outside the EU are also going through the same process of change—for example, because they are part of the global process of diffusion” (Levi-Faur, 2004, as cited in Radaelli, 2000; Saurugger, 2005). Gawrich et al. (2010) understand there are three distinct phases and dimensions of Europeanization research, each new dimension drawing on and adding to the previous one. These are Membership Europeanization (the impact of the EU on member States); Enlargement Europeanization (the impact of the EU on countries with a clear EU-membership perspective); Neighbourhood Europeanization (the impact of the EU on „outsiders”, countries with no immediate accession perspective) (Gawrich et al., 2010).

This enlargement context changed the geopolitical dynamics in the region, when many of the recent democratic Eastern European countries from the former Soviet Union joined the integrated region, creating new foreign policy objectives for the EU. A new EU foreign policy toward its borders included the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) as a EU programme for EU's South and Eastern neighbours to foster development, political stability, and democracy launched in 2004. Soon after, the EaP appeared as a pragmatic EU foreign policy orientation for a region in geopolitical struggle between European and Russian influence (Tostes & Renni, 2021). Greater market integration under the ENP and enhanced political dialogue with the EU was seen by Eastern neighbours as a positive alternative for partnerships and cooperation.

In Europeanization literature, Börzel and Risse (2003) propose a theoretical framework with two types of research design, known as top-down and bottom-up models of the EU spreading its values, norms, institutions, policies, and ideas. In this article we consider the ENP, the EaP and the agreements within its framework as an example of top-down Europeanization process. Europeanization processes do not occur exclusively with EU members, there is also a process of influencing countries at the borders of the EU. The EU aspired to create a „ring of well governed, stable, democratic and prosperous states in the neighbourhood, while avoiding talks over EU accession for countries like Ukraine or Moldova” (Batt et al. 2003, as cited in

Popescu, 2005). The ENP is an instrument the EU has for developing countries in its neighbourhood that are willing to be closer to the EU. Under the ENP umbrella, the Union proposes to its neighbours strengthened political partnership (Popescu 2005, p. 35).

The ENP process is supported by an Action Plan (AP) prepared for neighbouring countries that are not in the EU's enlargement agenda. The APs introduced specific degrees of goals in different countries in order to implement ENP's policies. The APs would draw on a common set of principles and bilateral relations to contribute for regional and sub-regional cooperation to reinforce efforts to meet the objectives of the ESS.

3. Understanding Moldova and Ukraine as *near abroad* countries

Both Ukraine and Moldova are non-EU member countries in Eastern Europe that retain part of their population culturally and ethnically aligned with Russia. They have been referred to as *near abroad* countries (Charillon, 2004). The author highlights the use of the term *near abroad* to indicate the border zone, in designation of countries located in a sphere of influence relevant to guaranteeing security and achieving conditions for implementing European Community policy. EU's incentive policies, trade concessions and aid for *near abroad* countries are usually conditional on progress towards democratic consolidation and protection of human rights, as well as the establishment of a free trade system and standards aligned with the liberal democratic model (Charillon, 2004, pp. 257-258). Nonetheless, the concept was first coined to refer to the foreign policy of the USSR (Hopf, 1999; Skak, 1996), seeking to describe the Soviet position on its geographic neighbourhood, considered a priority for security and for key sectors of domestic policy, and not just for its foreign policy.

The two countries have not represented a strong or stable economy since their formation. Ukraine is one of the top three grain exporters in the world (OECD, 2021). Geographically, it guards the passage from the Black Sea to the Azov Sea, with an exit to the Mediterranean (through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits), which is why we have seen historically disputed events in the region since before the Russian imperial period. In turn, Moldova's economy has struggled since the country's independence. Its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has fallen by over 70 per cent within a decade of independence, and the country lacks domestic sources of energy (Ronnas & Orlova, 2000).

As different national projects in Ukraine had to coexist since its foundation in 1991, political leaders alternated between pro-Russian and pro-EU governments. In 2014, a sequence of tensions and domestic events that had been ongoing for nearly a decade, since the Orange Revolution of 2004 (D'Anieri, 2005; Dickinson, 2020), culminated in a territorial split with regional and global consequences. The Orange Revolution of 2004, which occurred in the same year as the EU's enlargement, understood in its complexity, contributes to the understanding of the motivators and

consequences of the Revolution of February 2014, designated as Euromaidan Revolution. Both of Ukraine's recent revolutions have been marked by social divisions and political alignments by the contending influences of Russia and the West, initially more represented by the rapprochement with Europe than with the United States of America (USA).

Although the 2014 Revolution culminated in the electoral victory of Petro Poroshenko, from the party European Solidarity, it left a legacy of territorial conflicts with the annexation of Crimea by Russia and the self-proclamation of autonomous Russian republics in the east of the country. In 2016, a new Global Strategy (EUGS) was launched, replacing the former 2003 Security Strategy. Among other issues, the document noted EU-Russia relations in the context of a weaker balance among interests, interdependence, and ambitions to influence countries bordering the EU. Incompatible interests became clear (Danilov, 2017), and an escalation of tensions culminated in conflicts in Ukraine and, finally, the invasion of the country in February 2022.

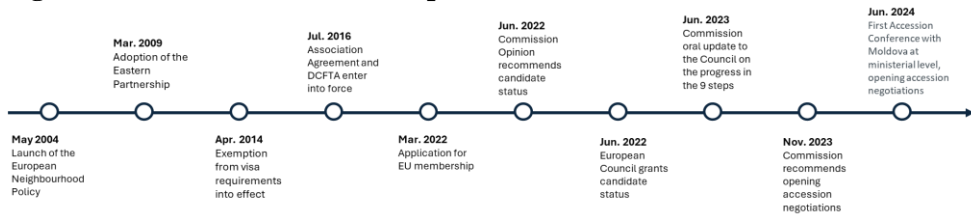
Moldova also faced internal contradictions on its national project, with a frozen conflict to date. Moldova declared its independence in 1991 while facing internal conflicts in the left-bank areas and south of the country. With cultural and ethnic foundations, opinions diverged between an approximation to the West and Romania and the identification with Russia. From the civil war emerged a devise in the country, with the Transnistria region governed as the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (PMR) and keeping close ties with Russia since the ceasefire in 1992¹.

The Republic of Moldova has alternated between governments more aligned with the West and those more aligned with Russia. Nevertheless, the country has maintained its neutral position, as outlined in its 1994 Constitution. The breakout of the war in Ukraine also posed risks for the neighbouring country with its own unsolved internal issues. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has increased concerns about the possibility of neighbouring Moldova being next on the Kremlin's incursion, fuelling Transnistria's expectation and highlighting the country's potential vulnerability to Moscow (Lutsevych & Pasha, 2024). Since the beginning of the war, Moldova has also faced national elections and a referendum about its future membership of the EU. In this sense, we understand that Moldova and Ukraine are both in a peculiar condition under the new geopolitical scenario, hence our interest in focusing on these cases. Lutsevych and Pasha (2024) consider Moldova's internal conditions as opportunities for Russia to strengthen its influence over the country and to undermine its possible EU integration. In another parallel to Ukraine, the EU decided to open accession negotiations with Moldova in December 2023, and

¹ The ceasefire was signed in July 1992 and established the trilateral control of a joint Moldovan, Russian and Transnistrian peacekeeping mission of the border area and ensured the *de facto* independence of the PMR which it enjoys until today (Walters, 1997, as cited in Orbán, 2002).

so far, both countries have advanced at a similar pace on this membership path. The figures below summarise the main milestones in this path, where it is possible to identify parallels between the two countries.

Figure 1. Moldova-EU relationship timeline



Source: authors' representation

Figure 2. Ukraine-EU relationship timeline



Source: authors' representation

Since 2022, Ukraine and Moldova have opened exceptional conditions for candidacy and accession negotiations. This is because the criteria for fulfilling reforms in sectors and chapters of the accession negotiations are not expected to be met without the end of the war. The figures above show the timeline of the steps completed for the start of receiving pre-accession benefits. However, there is no progress on fulfilling the fundamental criteria for EU membership.

4. Critical junctures and responses

Arguments about the concept of critical junctures have become increasingly relevant in foreign policy studies. The concept's application can vary in comparative studies, helping to trace choices and different trajectories and consequences (Blyth, 2002; Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007; Capoccia, 2016). The EU has answered a few critical junctures over the last years, which help explain the exceptionalities this article introduces.

The EU Commission President von der Leyen launched a value-based strategy in December 2021, entitled the „Global Gateway Strategy”, at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic also represented a critical juncture for the configuration of the

geopolitical landscape. Under that scenario, the overall objectives of the Global Gateway were to maintain and expand political and economic cooperation, support partners, and improve infrastructure and connectivity in regional and international contexts undergoing a green and digital transition. Among other instruments designed to meet the objectives of the global gateway was the new Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI-Global Europe) (European Commission, 2021). The NDICI-Global Europe was also a response to the COVID-19 crisis to contribute to the achievement of the international commitments of the 2030 Agenda and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and the Paris Agreement. According to the Commission, the NDICI-Global Europe „is based on the ENP objectives and priorities outlined in the regional strategies, such as the renewed Eastern Partnership and the new Agenda for the Mediterranean” (European Commission, 2021). Currently, it is considered the EU's main financing instrument for external cooperation aimed at eradicating poverty and promoting sustainable development, prosperity, peace, and stability in third countries.

The war has presented a new challenge to be addressed under the NDICI-Global Europe and the increased international pressure for full support for Ukraine. Initially, expectations for a quicker war led to discussions on the candidacy of EaP countries, such as Ukraine, being postponed. However, time has led European leaders to recalculate their ability and urgency to have more influence on Ukraine's current and future political status, which has been followed by the candidacy requests of Moldova and Georgia.

However, there are no clear deadlines on the horizon of the accession process, considering the atypical timings this enlargement process is taking. In order to become an EU member, countries must submit a membership application to the Council of the EU for the yearly review and be granted candidate status, with the agreement of all member States, to begin formal negotiations for accession. Then, membership negotiations begin, a process in which the country prepares to adapt its internal functions and implement EU laws and regulations. The negotiations follow chapters to implement the *acquis communautaire* in six thematic clusters: fundamental thematic, which requires the accomplishment of economic criteria, the functioning of democratic institutions, and public administration reforms. Negotiations on each cluster open as a whole; however, „progress under the Fundamentals' cluster determines the overall pace of negotiations” (EU NeighboursEast, 2024), as shown in Figure 3. The others are considered associated with internal market, competitiveness and inclusive growth, green agenda and sustainable connectivity, resources, agriculture, cohesion and external relations.

Figure 3. Sectors and chapters of accession negotiations

Source: EU Factsheet, EU NeighboursEast (2024)

Ukraine and Moldova were granted candidate status in June 2022 and received the recommendation to open accession negotiations in November 2023. This marks a record pace in moving forward on negotiations compared to existing cases, where, on average, it took nine years overall, and the beginning of negotiations, on average, took three years to start (Leppert, 2022). However, Figure 3 illustrates how far the countries' candidacy status is from accomplishing, within a predictable period of time, the four fundamental (the opening and the last to be closed) criteria for accession negotiation.

In line with the reflection on the need to expand and introduce different experiences of EU membership, the exceptional consideration of admitting countries previously outside the association forecast leads us to examine which kind of status will be revealed by the condition of being candidate without clear previsions for accomplishing the following stages of association: to complete formal negotiations and implement reforms to meet the EU criteria for a full membership. There are advanced debates on DI, due to divergences in policies between member states, recognising the conditions and capacities of countries to coordinate with regional standards. The coordination of non-supranational standards is an ongoing effort that occurs in parallel with the construction of European law. The impacts of differentiation on the Union can be debated (Leruth et al., 2022), even considering previous membership paths. With the expectation of exceptions for new members from the East, the problem of DI may worsen.

The EU's opening statement at the Ministerial meeting on the first Intergovernmental Conference on the Accession of the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine states that the negotiations aim at both countries „integrally adopting the EU *acquis* and ensuring its full implementation and enforcement” with a revised enlargement methodology and focusing on the fundamental reforms (Council of the European Union, 2024a; 2024b). At the current stage, it is expected that Moldova and Ukraine will start preparing to implement EU laws and standards in the areas of judiciary & fundamental rights, justice, freedom & security, public procurement, financial control, and statistics.

Considering the average time to complete the membership process so far has been nine years. For countries without active or frozen conflicts, it is not expected that Moldova's and Ukraine's membership processes will take less time. The swift advance from candidate status to the start of accession negotiations does not necessarily indicate a change in the EU's methodology – it is on the accession process that the candidate countries need to align with the *acquis Communautaire* by implementing changes in their laws and regulations as to align with the EU, as well as to achieve minimum economy thresholds.

However, the accession process can be understood as not purely technical, but also political (Plesca, 2024). Depending on how the negotiations unfold, the current situation of Moldova and Ukraine can be considered a new EU strategy for Europeanization. This enlargement process is not comparable to either other candidacy experiences or norms export dynamics, although it signals a different degree of approximation with EU norms and values.

Final considerations: from neighbourhood Europeanization to accession

The EU has long sought to extend its influence beyond its borders through the diffusion of values, norms, institutions, and policies. This process, often referred to as Europeanization, encompasses a wide range of mechanisms through which the

EU shapes the political and institutional landscapes of neighboring countries. As Montesano et al. (2016) emphasize, within the framework of the ENP, Europeanization is closely tied to the EU's normative power—its ability to promote stability, development, and democratic governance in countries of strategic interest.

The EU's ambition to foster a ring of stable, democratic states along its eastern and southern borders has been a consistent theme in its external relations. Moldova and Ukraine, situated at the geopolitical crossroads between the EU and Russia, have become focal points of this strategy. Their location, combined with internal vulnerabilities and external pressures, has made them particularly relevant to the EU's broader goals of regional stability and security. Montesano et al. (2016) remark that the inclusion of Moldova in the ENP in 2003 and the EU-Moldova AP from 2005 can be considered evidence of the EU's aim to invest in countries with separatist movements and demographic issues. These initiatives were further developed with the EaP policies from 2009, leading to the signature of an AA and a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). Of the six EaP countries, only Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine have such type agreements with the EU.

Since the establishment of dedicated policies, the EU's relationship with both Ukraine and Moldova has deepened and widened in scope, even though there were periods in which the political leadership were less aligned with the West. Despite their proximity to the EU, the relationship between the two countries was primarily one of cooperation. With actions and funds invested to align regulatory frameworks, commercial standards, and to approximate Moldova and Ukraine to the EU's minimal standards and promote cooperation in security and home affairs, the relationship followed a track of foreign policy under the ENP and EaP policies, which have been revisited over time to adapt to this evolving relationship.

However, membership was not on the table for either. Both countries faced a delicate scenario regarding political stability. There has been a constant dispute of influences in the region, alternating periods of more significant Russian or European influence. The period from 2014 to 2019, despite the annexation of Crimea by Russia, was marked by oscillations between actions of cooperation and tensions between Western supporters in Ukraine and pro-Russia politics and defenders of a closer alignment of the country with Putin's Administration and protection. The status of frozen conflicts regarding territorial rights in Ukraine, particularly to the south and east, as well as diplomatic relations between the EU and Russia, may have impacted the country's political stability. As for Moldova, in addition to maintaining the frozen conflict situation in the Transnistria region, the country faced internal political issues related to corruption and bank fraud that became public (Mukherjee, 2018).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked a dramatic shift in the geopolitical landscape. For the first time, the EU was confronted with a full-scale war on its borders, prompting a reassessment of its enlargement strategy and neighborhood policies. The invasion underscored the urgency of reinforcing the EU's eastern frontier and supporting countries that share its values and aspirations.

In this context, Moldova and Ukraine were granted candidate status in June 2022—a decision that would have been unthinkable just a few years earlier. This moment represents a critical juncture in EU external action, where geopolitical imperatives have accelerated processes that were previously stalled or deprioritized.

Since 2022 and with no prospects for the end of the war in Ukraine, the debate on accession negotiations for previously blocked candidates, such as some Western Balkan countries, has been reopened, and enlargement has reached the top of the EU agenda as it is expected to discuss new paths for accession negotiations. As a result of the new European agenda on enlargement, motivated by the decision of the European Council to grant Ukraine and Moldova candidate status, a report entitled „Fit for 35? Reforming the Politics and Institutions of the EU for an Enlarged Union” (Börzel et al., 2023) was published after bringing together some of the leading European researchers on European integration, who reflect on Europeanization and DI and inspired by the debates within the framework of the European Council in Granada in 2023.

In this article, we asked whether the accelerated candidacies of Moldova and Ukraine represent a fundamentally new status within the EU enlargement framework or a strategic deployment of existing tools in response to extraordinary circumstances. Our analysis suggests that while the legal and methodological foundations of enlargement remain consistent — particularly the *acquis communautaire* and conditionality principles — there has been a significant innovation in sequencing. The granting of candidate status and the opening of negotiations were used not merely as technical steps but as geopolitical instruments to stabilize the region and signal commitment to democratic partners under threat.

This approach has resulted in what we term a „candidate-without-deadline” configuration. Unlike traditional candidates, Moldova and Ukraine have entered a prolonged pre-accession phase characterized by deep engagement but without clear timelines for membership. This model blends conditionality with security-driven differentiation, allowing the EU to maintain its standards while responding flexibly to geopolitical realities. The emerging evidence suggests that this de facto status may become a more common feature of EU enlargement, particularly in cases where strategic interests outweigh immediate institutional readiness.

The experience of Moldova and Ukraine is broadly compatible with existing theories of Europeanization and DI, but it also stretches their conceptual boundaries. Europeanization, traditionally understood as the domestic adaptation to EU norms and rules, must now account for the role of geopolitical urgency and external threats in shaping accession dynamics. Similarly, DI, which focuses on the coexistence of multiple levels of integration within the EU, must consider how pre-accession differentiation can serve both functional and strategic purposes. The cases of Moldova and Ukraine foreground geopolitical logics within a conditionality framework, pointing to a more layered and flexible Union.

This article contributes to the literature by offering a complementary reflection on differentiation in the EU. Beyond the expected forms of DI within the Union, the candidacies of Moldova and Ukraine illustrate a new type of differentiation at the accession stage. This status fulfills a distinct objective: it grants candidacy not solely based on technical readiness but as a strategic gesture of support and alignment. It also demonstrates how the accession process itself can be a tool of European influence and Europeanization, even in the absence of immediate membership prospects.

Importantly, neither the existing literature on DI nor on Europeanization provides a comprehensive analytical model for understanding this new form of candidacy. The impacts of the accession negotiation period, particularly in the context of active conflict and geopolitical competition, require new categories and frameworks. Moldova and Ukraine's experiences signal the emergence of a potentially new niche in Europeanization studies — one that integrates security considerations, strategic sequencing, and differentiated engagement. This niche warrants further investigation, both to refine theoretical models and to inform policy decisions in an increasingly complex and contested European neighborhood.

In conclusion, the EU's response to the war in Ukraine and its engagement with Moldova and Ukraine reflect a significant evolution in its external action. While rooted in established principles, the Union has demonstrated a capacity for strategic adaptation, using enlargement tools to advance geopolitical stability and democratic resilience. The „candidate-without-deadline” model may become a template for future engagements, offering a flexible yet principled approach to accession in uncertain times. As the EU continues to navigate the challenges of enlargement, institutional reform, and global competition, the experiences of Moldova and Ukraine will remain central to understanding the future of European integration.

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