



Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions – Enlargement package 2024 – Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia

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Rapporteur:	Aleksandra DULKIEWICZ (PL/EPP), President of the City of Gdańsk
Reference document(s):	Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions Communication on the Moldova Growth Plan COM(2024) 470 Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions Communication on EU enlargement policy COM(2024) 690 Commission Staff Working document Georgia 2024 Report SWD(2024) 697 Commission Staff Working document Moldova 2024 Report SWD(2024) 698 Commission Staff Working document Ukraine 2024 Report SWD(2024) 699

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS (CoR),

General remarks

1. reaffirms its unequivocal support for the European Union (EU) enlargement process and its strong commitment to continue providing support to regions and cities of the enlargement countries based on the shared conviction expressed by the European Commission, that EU accession remains a key driver of long-term security, peace, stability and prosperity in Europe;
2. recalls that a well-managed enlargement has the potential to benefit not only the candidate states but also its current Member States, its citizens, municipalities, cities, and regions;
3. affirms that the process of EU accession is intrinsically linked to complying with the Copenhagen criteria, especially the respect for fundamental values, which serve as the cornerstone for membership. These values encompass: a social market economy, rule of law, representative democracy based on elections held in accordance with Council of Europe standards, an independent judiciary, decentralisation and the principles of multilevel governance, subsidiarity and proportionality. Furthermore, it underscores the importance of transparency in decision-making, which is supported by public administration reform, the fight against corruption at all levels, the prevention of undue political and economic influence by oligarchs, the tackling of organised crime, and the safeguarding of media freedom;
4. underlines that EU enlargement is a process that aims at the alignment with and accession of new Member States to our Union. Making our neighbourhood safer, stronger and more prosperous also promotes European shared values and contributes to a stronger and growing Union;
5. recognises the urgency for the EU to enhance its influence and foster stability in neighbouring regions, while upholding stringent membership conditionality. Stresses that the EU must actively engage in developments and processes taking place across the European continent and exert a decisive influence on related decisions;

6. notes that the current geopolitical context could influence the enlargement process much more than ever before. The uncertainty related to the new foreign policy of the United States which is characterised by a radical reorientation of its strategic priorities and a reduction in the external support it provides, could have a negative impact on the enlargement process, including in light of election results in the EU Member States and ongoing conflicts in other parts of the world;
7. strongly condemns the violation of the national sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine by the Russian Federation and underlines that any peace negotiations must include Ukraine, as a free Ukraine is essential for a truly free Europe. Expresses, at the same time, its deep conviction that the EU is an indispensable factor in ensuring freedom, stability, and security in the region;
8. stresses the destructive and destabilising role of the Russian Federation which, since the 2008 war in Georgia, has been trampling over the most basic norms of the international order, starting with the principle of respect for independent states' sovereignty and territorial integrity. While waging a full-scale war in Ukraine, Russia has also intensified efforts in hybrid warfare and has been expanding cognitive warfare methods on the European continent;
9. notes that climate change and environmental degradation increasingly act as risk multipliers in geopolitical instability, making sustainable development a key priority in the enlargement process. Candidate countries must integrate climate adaptation and mitigation strategies to ensure long-term stability. Emphasises the need for strong EU support to ensure a sustainable, resilient, and green recovery;
10. notes that the current instrumentalised migration movements, which are politically exploited by Russia and Belarus, as well as other third countries, could also be used to manipulate public opinion in order to undermine future enlargements;
11. draws attention to the growing coalescence of the BRICS states (Russian and Chinese presence is already visible in candidate countries) whose growing influence may compete with that of the European Union and negatively impact the progress of the enlargement process;
12. is concerned about the effectiveness of today's methods of countering disinformation, seeing the challenges posed by Russia which exploits social media platforms that are openly no longer committed to the elimination of disinformation, fake news and hate speech;
13. stresses that despite serious challenges, the Enlargement process gained new momentum throughout 2023 and 2024 but that it continues to depend on the progress achieved by some candidate states, which requires that they implement reforms in all areas of EU law, and agrees with the European Commission that enlargement should remain a merit-based process. At the same time, recognises the efforts made by the societies of the candidate countries to join the EU;
14. underscores the significance of the EU enlargement policy in addressing current geopolitical challenges, especially in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova;
15. welcomes that accession negotiations were opened with Ukraine and Moldova in June 2024 and regrets that Georgia has moved away from the standards of rule of law and democracy and has taken a political decision under Russian pressure to pause its accession negotiations to the European Union; underlines the importance to respect democratic forms of civil expression as part of a functioning democratic system and calls on Georgian political leaders and police forces to stop any form of police brutality;
16. emphasises the fundamental role of the decentralisation process, including fiscal decentralisation, as a condition for a successful enlargement;
17. notes that effective local and regional self-governance and a flourishing local democracy are essential components of the checks and balances to the rule of law system and keys to the consolidation of a rule of law culture for both EU Member States and enlargement countries alike;
18. underlines the role of local and regional authorities (LRAs) for future enlargement steps in the three candidate countries and acknowledges the importance of strengthening their public administrations' capacities to adapt to EU standards at local level and thereby make the impact of EU integration visible to members of the public;

19. recalls that LRAs are responsible for the implementation of up to 70 % of EU legislation; therefore stresses the importance of involving them in future negotiations on key chapters as well as in consultations on the alignment of national legislation with the EU acquis; considers that the EU has an important role to play in facilitating such inclusion, by setting expectations at the national level in the candidate countries;

20. underlines the indispensable functions which LRAs need to play for the effectiveness of the EU's pre-accession funding on the ground; also stresses the importance of consulting local and regional authorities regarding funding priorities and projects linked to investment frameworks (Ukraine Investment Framework, Neighbourhood Investment Platform);

21. welcomes the Commission's decision to extend the Annual Rule of Law Report to Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, and looks forward to its further extension to all candidate countries;

UKRAINE

22. reiterates its resolute condemnation of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and recognises that the strategic choice of the Ukrainian government to apply for EU membership is of geopolitical importance and in the interest of the EU itself;

23. recognises Ukraine's high degree of alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy, and the significant progress the country has made in reforms, including judicial integrity, anti-corruption measures, and minority rights protections, despite the war; urges Ukraine to maintain its reform momentum with a view to complying fully with the EU acquis;

24. acknowledges progress in local governance, reconstruction and decentralisation, emphasising the need for continued efforts to increase the administrative capacity and fiscal autonomy of local government units, to establish a formal coordination mechanism for the participation of LRAs and their associations in the recovery planning and to finance the recovery, reconstruction and modernisation of LRAs, also under the Ukraine Plan;

25. notes that there are still areas that require reforms, including fighting corruption, quality of governance and public administration. Adds its voice to the Commission in calling on the Ukrainian government to resume the decentralisation process, adopting and implementing reforms in line with the European Charter of Local Self-Government, and calls on the European Commission to monitor and report on the developments;

26. urges the EU-Ukraine Association Council to progress on the Ukrainian request to establish a Joint Consultative Committee to intensify cooperation between Ukraine's local and regional authorities and those represented in the European Committee of the Regions;

27. expresses concern that the war and martial law have limited democratic practices in areas such as: elections and media freedom in particular, and encourages the Ukrainian government to follow the recommendations of the EU Commission and the Venice Commission in this respect;

28. recognises that Ukraine's economic development is affected by war damage, limited resources, weak public investment management, and delays in key infrastructure reform, particularly in agriculture and transportation, while the energy sector remains monopolised and under state control;

29. points out that Ukraine's social policies and employment strategies lag behind EU standards, which negatively affects productivity and contributes to emigration;

30. welcomes Ukraine's efforts on gender equality by putting in place several laws to improve gender equality. Underlines, however, that gender-based violence remains a critical issue and more decisive measures are needed to tackle it. Furthermore, stresses the gender imbalance in the civil service where senior management was composed of 70 % men and 30 % women, while non-managerial civil servants were 22 % men and 78 % women ⁽¹⁾. Calls on Ukraine to put measures in place to aim at reaching gender parity at all levels of civil service;

⁽¹⁾ European Commission's Ukraine Report 2024 (SWD(2024) 699 final Commission Staff Working Document Ukraine 2024 Report) available here: Ukraine Report 2024 - European Commission.

31. recognises that the enlargement process will likely overlap with Ukraine's post-war reconstruction, supported by its partners in the European Alliance of Cities and Regions for the Reconstruction of Ukraine and by the European Commission's Ukraine Facility. Funds obtained through this scheme will thus be used for accession-related reforms and recovery needs which, if monitored properly, could have positive impact on reducing corruption and improving the quality of governance, including local governance;

32. reiterates its availability to work with its partners to offer capacity-building opportunities for Ukrainian LRAs through the 2025 pilot project of the Training and Internship Programme Support for Ukrainian Municipalities (TIPS4UA);

33. underlines the importance of ensuring timely and transparent allocation of up to 20 % of the non-repayable financial support under Pillar I of the Ukraine Facility for the recovery, reconstruction and modernisation needs of Ukraine's sub-national authorities, in particular local self-government;

MOLDOVA

34. highlights that, for Moldova, EU membership is a strategic choice and commends the Moldovan society for its vote in a referendum which will amend its constitution to include European Union membership;

35. recognises that, with a breakaway territory within its borders, Moldova feels the pressure of Russia's revisionist foreign policy and experiences the consequences of Russia's hybrid activities aimed at influencing political processes in the country;

36. expresses serious concern over evidence of foreign interference into Moldova's democratic processes such as the most recent October 2024 presidential election;

37. recognises Moldova's high degree of alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy, as well as the country's advancements in judicial reform; urges Moldova to maintain its reform momentum with a view to complying fully with the EU *acquis*;

38. welcomes the political agreement reached on the Reform and Growth Facility for Moldova worth EUR 1.9 billion, as a key element of the Growth Plan for Moldova, and calls on the Moldovan Government to ensure consultation with and active participation of Moldovan local and regional authorities in its implementation, which could help to boost local economies and translate into measures to mitigate challenges such as demographic decline and corruption;

39. recognises challenges in media freedom and transparency of media ownership, especially as disinformation and manipulation remain serious problems;

40. welcomes and supports Moldova's local government reforms, including voluntary amalgamation, and calls for its implementation while including local authorities in it;

41. urges the EU-Moldova Association Council to progress on the Moldovan request to establish a Joint Consultative Committee to intensify cooperation between Moldova's local and regional authorities and those represented in the European Committee of the Regions;

42. draws attention to the parliamentary elections in Moldova in 2025 which will be crucial for the future of the country and therefore underlines the need to guarantee free, independent and transparent elections;

GEORGIA

43. recognises that Georgia's decision to begin integration with the European Union was a choice of geopolitical significance. Since 2008, Georgia has been experiencing the occupation of 20 % of its territory by the Russian Federation, which is recognised as the biggest security threat to the country and the region;

44. supports the people of Georgia to demonstrate their attachment to democratic values and their country advancing on the EU path;

45. expresses grave concern over the announcement by the Georgian Prime Minister to suspend EU membership talks until the end of 2028;

46. regrets that the year 2024 was a period of democratic backsliding in Georgia; first with the introduction of legal instruments, such as the Russian-style 'transparency of foreign influence' law and the anti-LGBT 'Family Values and Protection of Minors' law, that should be repealed by the Government and Parliament of Georgia, second with disputable results of parliamentary elections in October 2024, which, according to international observers, were marked by violations of the electoral process;

47. strongly condemns the persistent and increasing use of force against peaceful protesters by the police as well as politically motivated arrests and harassment against peaceful protesters, media representatives and politicians, particularly those with local democratic mandates;

48. criticises the repeal of the law on gender quotas and calls for legislative changes to encourage gender equality at all levels of politics and society;

49. notes that corruption, including political corruption, and manipulation of information remain significant challenges to transparent political and economic developments in Georgia;

50. is determined to continue its communication and cooperation with local and regional authorities of Georgia and the National Association of Local Authorities of Georgia (NALAG), including through the work of the Conference of Regional and Local Authorities for the Eastern Partnership (CORLEAP), and bilaterally building on the many fruitful cooperation agreements established between the EU's cities, towns and municipalities with their Georgian peers;

Policy recommendations

51. notes that Enlargement should contribute not only to strengthening European solidarity but also carry out necessary reforms which will lead to the optimisation of the functioning of the EU itself;

52. looks forward to providing input on the upcoming pre-enlargement reforms and policy reviews planned by the European Commission, especially by reflecting on the regional and local perspective of EU policies in areas where a strong territorial dimension is present – Cohesion, CAP, the completion of the TEN-T core and extended network;

53. recognises that next elections in Ukraine will require international observation, at all levels, and supports the electoral observation activities of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, as well as those of the OSCE and the EU, in ensuring free, fair, and transparent elections, while acknowledging the challenges in monitoring certain regions due to ongoing occupation and security concerns;

54. underlines the need to provide substantial EU financial and technical assistance to Ukraine and commits to continue implementing its own 10-point support package for Ukrainian local and regional authorities and supporting the European Alliance of Cities and Regions for the Reconstruction of Ukraine;

55. emphasises the Eastern Partnership (EaP) programme, which was established after the successful integration of Central European countries with the EU but also in the wake of Russia's war with Georgia in 2008, and in particular CORLEAP, as its main form of activity at the local and regional level, with its viable mechanisms for supporting democratisation (development of local democracy in particular), decentralisation, respect for human rights, good governance, and economic development in the countries of the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood;

56. urges that the European Commission strengthens, politically and financially, the mechanisms and activities of the Eastern Partnership programme to support the EaP's objectives, and in particular the EU accession process of Ukraine and Moldova;

57. stresses that the EU financial support should anticipate active engagement of local and regional representatives in the preparations for the accession process at the national level. This aspect could be included in a revised enlargement methodology and evaluated as part of the annual country reports in the enlargement package, which already addresses such issues as local public administration reform and fiscal decentralisation;

58. calls on the European Commission to recognise the potential of LRAs in the enlargement process, make use of them, and strengthen programme and financial support to such projects and programmes at the local and regional level, especially through capacity building and exchange programmes, encouraged decentralised cooperation through knowledge exchange, mentoring and peer reviews, implementing this in cooperation with the Committee of Regions;

59. reaffirms the Committee of Regions' intention to increase concrete actions in terms of peer-to-peer and cross-border cooperation projects in the EaP countries, especially in those whose governments and LRAs aspire to further integration with the EU;

60. encourages cooperation between local communities in candidate countries and Member States. Draws attention to the strong potential of its members and is able to support the process both in the candidate countries (through training projects, exchange of knowledge and experience, training of civil servants, raising awareness and competences of local government politicians, supporting the process of implementing necessary reforms and legal solutions^(?)) but also by playing a role of an ambassador and ally in the EU institutional context (helping to make the voices of the LRA candidate countries heard in Brussels, liaising with other EU actors, providing political support, inviting and involving LRAs in Committee of Region's work and more generally in EU affairs);

61. draws attention to the need to ensure a path of consultative contacts in candidate countries between central government and LRAs in the scope of decentralisation and the use of EU financial instruments (including Ukraine Facility). The principle of multi-level governance should be upheld, ensuring that LRAs are actively involved in the decision-making processes. In this context, associations of local and regional authorities should be given a formal role in order to facilitate dialogue between levels;

62. sees the need to create strong human capital to strengthen pro-European sentiment, leveraging the potential of civil society, local democracy and LRAs in Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia;

63. requests that the next cycle of reporting on the candidate countries progress towards accession focuses more on specific challenges faced by LRAs;

64. draws attention to the need to apply the principles of transparency and subsidiarity in the allocation and spending of EU funds which should largely get directed to local governments and not be subject to instrumental use by central authorities;

65. recommends engaging the EU Councillors network in communication efforts and to open the network to potential Councillors from Enlargement countries;

66. underlines that all EU projects in the candidate countries should be accompanied by solid communication strategies to increase the EU's visibility on the ground with local stories and local successes. Considerable communication efforts are also needed in the EU's regions to stimulate solidarity for future work on enlargement and to dispel 'enlargement fatigue';

67. highlights the great role that the civil societies of candidate countries have to play in the process of implementing enlargement and, in this context, emphasises the need to create an additional source of financing for projects and actions aimed at supporting the idea of EU enlargement, fundamental rights and values (also in the context of the suspension of USAID);

(?) It is worth mentioning here the CORLEAP initiative to create the Eastern Partnership School of Public Administration and the 2025 pilot project of the Training and Internship Programme Support for Ukrainian Municipalities (TIPS4UA).

68. urges the European Commission to continue promoting democratic values and continue cooperation also with societies from the states which are no longer on the EU integration path but which were included in Eastern Partnership programme. This includes cooperation with the democratic opposition forces in Belarus.

Brussels, 2 April 2025.

The President
of the European Committee of the Regions
Kata TÜTTŐ
