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Development Day 2024: Integrating Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia into the European Union

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has placed the spotlight on European enlargement as an urgent geopolitical reality. For Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, integration into the European Union (EU) is a pathway to modernization, economic development, and increased resilience against authoritarianism. At this year's Development Day Conference, hosted by the Stockholm Institute of Transition Economics (SITE), policymakers, researchers, and experts convened to discuss the shared challenges, opportunities, and reforms required for these countries' successful EU accession. This policy brief draws on the insights from the conference, briefly outlining the discussions across panels and presentations on governance reforms, hybrid threats, economic transformation, and security challenges.

The Geopolitical Context for Enlargement

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has intensified the European Union's strategic focus on enlargement. Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia find themselves at a crossroads, where integration into the EU is not merely aspirational but essential for safeguarding sovereignty and ensuring economic and political stability. The urgency of this enlargement stems from the need to counteract Russian aggression and bolster the EU's geopolitical standing.

At the opening sessions of the Development Day Conference, three special guests offered their respective countries' perspective. **Yevhen Perebyinis**, Ukraine's Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, underscored how Ukraine's integration process aligns with its defense of European values against Russia's aggression. **Cristina Gherasimov**, Moldova's Deputy Prime Minister for European Integration, highlighted Moldova's efforts to advance reforms while countering persistent Russian hybrid threats, including systematic election interference. **Christian Danielsson**, Sweden's State Secretary to the Minister for EU Affairs, accentuated the necessity of ensuring that the EU is ready for enlargement, something political leaders now see as an imperative in the shadow of Russia's war on Ukraine. Similarly, discussions emphasized Georgia's historical and policy-oriented commitment to Europe, despite recent democratic backsliding and a recent pivot toward Russia.

Challenges on the Pathway to EU Accession

The integration paths of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia face numerous challenges. Critical areas for alignment with EU standards include governance reforms, anti-corruption efforts, and institutional capacity building. Moldova has made strides in public administration reform and

jumped significantly on the Corruption Perceptions Index from 120th place in 2019 to 76th in 2023. However, persistent gaps in judicial independence and public procurement transparency remain hurdles. Similarly, Ukraine has enacted sweeping reforms under extraordinary wartime circumstances, reflecting a persistent and widespread commitment to European values. Yet, continued progress in judicial and financial oversight is essential, with the administrative framework in these areas needing improvement in both countries.

Russia's hybrid warfare poses a persistent and evolving threat to democratic resilience across the region. Moldova's elections in 2024 showcased large-scale, sophisticated interference by Russian actors. This interference began well before election day and continues in the form of disinformation campaigns and energy blackmailing in the Transnistria region. In Georgia, Russian influence compounds the challenges of domestic political unrest, particularly as the ruling party engaged in substantial electoral fraud and manipulation to secure its position in the 2024 October elections. These challenges highlight the need for robust countermeasures, including enhanced cybersecurity and strengthened democratic institutions across the candidate countries. It also points to the need for support from the international community, especially in the case of Georgia, where protesters are currently taking to the streets to challenge the widely recognized electoral fraud.

Economic transformation and alignment also remain a critical challenge. Ukraine's economy, suffering wartime devastation, requires extensive reconstruction, with the cost of infrastructural damage alone nearing its annual GDP. Ukraine's vast agricultural sector, a major player in global markets, will require careful integration into the EU to address compliance costs and alignment with the Common Agricultural Policy, while maintaining its competitive edge. Moldova faces significant challenges in effectively communicating the benefits of EU integration to



its population, a critical issue in countering Russian influence and maintaining public support for reforms. Despite clear economic progress, such as the increase in Moldovan exports to the EU, many Moldovans remain skeptical about the long-term benefits of EU alignment. This skepticism is particularly pronounced in regions like Gagauzia, where pro-Russian sentiment is strong and local populations are vulnerable to disinformation and propaganda.

As emphasized by multiple panelists, targeted communication strategies are vital to ensuring that the benefits of EU integration are understood across populations. Concrete examples—such as enhanced economic opportunities, improved infrastructure, and access to EU funding—must be clearly communicated to counteract Russian narratives and build broad-based support for EU accession.

In this regard, pre-accession funding offers a potentially transformative tool. The successful use of pre-accession funding in Poland in the 1990s and early 2000s demonstrates the potential for such resources to modernize infrastructure, connect markets, and build institutional capacity, capacity that has later proved pivotal to overcome democratic backsliding. Poland serves as a reminder that alignment and integration may take time, but also clearly showcases the economic and social benefits it can yield.

During the conference, security concerns were at the core of the enlargement discussion, with several panelists emphasizing NATO's historical role as a critical security complement for EU member states. However, Ukraine's potential EU accession may advance without parallel NATO membership. This raises significant challenges, as the absence of NATO guarantees leaves Ukraine vulnerable to further Russian aggression. Panelists highlighted the urgent need for the EU to adopt concrete security measures, such as strengthened hybrid defense capabilities, cybersecurity frameworks, and coordinated responses to disinformation—threats already witnessed in Moldova and Georgia. Additionally, ensuring

Ukraine's security would require increased military and financial support from EU member states to safeguard territorial integrity and maintain resilience against Russia, argued a necessity by several panelists.

The Opportunities of Enlargement

The integration of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia into the European Union offers profound opportunities for these states. It represents access to the single market, pre- and post-accession funding, and vital structural support that can accelerate modernization efforts. Overall, this can reduce the countries' infrastructure gaps and cause an increase in foreign direct investment. Beyond economic gains, EU support drives crucial institutional reforms, enhances public administration capacity, and provides a framework for addressing corruption and strengthening the rule of law—key challenges across all three countries.

For the EU, enlargement would entail strategic benefits aligned with its new geopolitical focus and long-term economic goals. Ukraine's reserves of critical raw materials, including lithium and titanium, are essential for Europe's green transition. Furthermore, Ukraine and its defense industry, offers strategic benefits to Europe by bolstering collective security. Its agricultural capacity remains pivotal not only for the EU but for global food security, and its IT sector provides additional growth potential. Moldova and Georgia, on the other hand, offer untapped market potential and workforce integration opportunities, which could strengthen the EU's competitive edge. Enlargement also represents a critical opportunity to counter the threat from Russia, manifesting the Union as a geopolitical leader committed to stability, democracy, and shared values.

However, as voiced throughout the conference, the EU must prioritize clear communication of these benefits. Concerns about increased



competition in existing member states need to be met with transparency, while communicating the long-term economic and security advantages of enlargement. Involving the business perspective in the enlargement process and ensuring that both candidate countries and current EU citizens and businesses see tangible benefits early in the process will be key to sustaining both momentum and public support. Such messaging could include the fact that the EU is originally a peace project and that the counterfactual scenario to the current enlargement ambitions is Russia and its wars creeping even closer to the Union's border. In regard to the business sector, it could be emphasized that enlargement associated risks can be met with risk sharing instruments and credit guarantees.

As emphasized by several speakers, the EU also needs to ensure that it is ready for enlargement in terms of capacity. As the EU was not initially built to be this large, a further expansion requires the Union to critically reflect on how to ensure it will stand up for the rule of law and all member states' adhesion to EU principles in the years to come.

Concluding Remarks

How to facilitate the accession of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia into the European Union was the topic for discussion at the 2024 Development Day. The discussions highlighted the substantial early progress and rapid reforms undertaken by Ukraine, while being a country at war. Moldova's steady progress toward its ambitious 2030 accession target underscores its commitment to reform, though challenges remain in securing public trust and countering Russian interference. Georgia, meanwhile, serves as a warning of how quickly democratic gains can erode, with political turmoil and Russian influence threatening its European path. These examples underscore the need for sustained

support, and clear communication of the benefits of EU integration. Panelists and participants also underscored that integrating these nations is not merely about expanding the EU—it is a vital response to ongoing geopolitical threats, in particular from Russia, and an affirmation of the EU's foundational values.

Ultimately, the enlargement of the EU to include Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine holds significant potential, both for the aspiring members and the EU itself. However, as the discussions at Development Day 2024 showcased, such enlargement requires robust partnerships, unwavering and early support, and a recognition that integration strengthens the EU as a whole, ultimately positioning the EU as a much-needed major democratic geopolitical actor.

List of Participants

Tinatín Akhvediani, Research Fellow in the EU Foreign Policy Unit at CEPS
Katarina Areskoug, The High-Level Advisory Group of the Nordic-Baltic Eight (NB8) on Ukraine's accession to the EU
Torbjörn Becker, Director SITE
Christian Danielsson, State Secretary to the Minister for EU Affairs
Cristina Gherasimov, Deputy Prime Minister for European Integration of Moldova
Liliana Gutan, Moldova's Ambassador to the Nordic Countries
Fredrik Löjdquist, Director of the Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies
Stas Madan, Program Director Expert Group Moldova
Michał Myck, Director CenEA Poland
Tymofiy Mylovanov, President Kyiv School of Economics
Oleg Nivievskiy, Professor Kyiv School of Economics and Freie Universität Berlin
Anders Olofsgård, Deputy Director Stockholm Institute of Transition Economics (SITE)
Yevhen Perebyinis, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine
Fredrik Sjögren, Director EU Affairs The Confederation of Swedish Enterprise
Tamar Sulukhia, Director ISET and ISET Policy Institute Georgia
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