

POLITICAL SYSTEM AND DEFENCE ANALYSIS OF THE UKRAINE IN THE LIGHT OF COPENHAGEN CRITERIA AND COOPERATION FOR SECURITY AND DEFENCE: WORKSHOP-BASED ANALYSIS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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Political system and defence analysis of the Ukraine in the light of Copenhagen criteria and Cooperation for Security and Defence

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Executive summary

Identification of key problems

Ongoing war and security uncertainty: The conflict creates risks related to border security, migration, hybrid threats, post-war reconstruction and institutional stability.

Incomplete fulfilment of the Copenhagen criteria: Corruption, weaknesses in the rule of law, judicial independence and democratic accountability remain major challenges.

Minority rights and human rights concerns: These issues are particularly important for Hungary and Slovakia and require continued monitoring during the accession process.

Economic and financial adjustment: Ukrainian accession could create pressure in agriculture, EU budget financing and selected industrial sectors, despite significant reconstruction and investment opportunities.

Divergent V4 positions: Poland and the Czech Republic emphasise geopolitical and security benefits, while Hungary and Slovakia focus more strongly on economic, energy and institutional risks.

Policy recommendations

Maintain a merit-based accession process with measurable and verifiable reform benchmarks.

Prioritise rule of law and anti-corruption reforms, focusing on effective implementation rather than legislative adoption alone.

Strengthen minority rights protection in line with European standards.

Expand V4 support for institutional capacity building through technical assistance, twinning and educational cooperation.

Develop security cooperation in cybersecurity, counter-disinformation, border management and hybrid threat resilience.

Accelerate energy integration and infrastructure investment between Ukraine and the EU.

Promote greater V4 coordination around a common principle: support Ukraine's accession while maintaining credible conditionality and managing economic and security risks.

The V4 should pursue constructive and principled engagement—actively supporting Ukraine's European integration while ensuring that accession is based on genuine reforms and strengthens the security and institutional resilience of the European Union.

The security and political stability of Visegrad region in the light of the Ukraine's position

Ukraine's European integration is not merely a geopolitical issue but also raises important political, institutional and security challenges. The Copenhagen criteria provide the main framework for assessing Ukraine's readiness for EU membership, but the ongoing war with Russia has made security an increasingly important part of the debate. Ukraine's potential accession must therefore also be considered in light of the different interests and positions of the Visegrad Four (V4) countries.

The Copenhagen criteria require stable democratic institutions, the rule of law, respect for human and minority rights, a functioning market economy and the administrative capacity to implement EU law. Ukraine has made some progress towards European integration, but significant challenges remain, particularly judicial reform, combating corruption, reducing oligarchic influence, minority rights and aligning legislation with EU law. The main difficulty is not only adopting legislation but also ensuring its effective implementation and enforcement. The war affects democratic institutions, the economy and anti-corruption efforts, while Ukraine remains heavily dependent on foreign financial assistance.

The war has also highlighted differences between the V4 countries. Poland has generally regarded Russian expansion as a direct security threat and has therefore been one of the strongest supporters of Ukraine. From the Polish perspective, closer integration with the EU and NATO could strengthen Central European security and limit further Russian influence. The Czech Republic has broadly followed a similar approach, although recent domestic political developments have made its position less consistent. Hungary and Slovakia have taken a more cautious approach, placing greater emphasis on the immediate economic and security consequences of the war. Energy security is particularly important because of their historical dependence on Russian energy supplies. Consequently, Ukrainian EU membership is closely connected to energy prices, economic stability and national interests. In Hungary, relations with Ukraine have also deteriorated over energy policy and the situation of the Hungarian minority in Transcarpathia. These differences show that, despite shared regional security interests, the V4 countries do not have a unified approach to Ukraine's European integration.

The economic consequences of accession may also create difficulties for some member states. Ukraine is a major agricultural producer, and integration into the EU market could increase competition and put additional pressure on European farmers. Poland tends to emphasise the long-term strategic threat posed by Russian expansion, while Hungary and Slovakia focus more strongly on short-term market stability and security consequences, including energy security and the potential costs of integration. The Czech Republic generally remains closer to the Polish position, although domestic politics also influence its approach. In Hungary, these differences may be affected by the outcome of parliamentary elections, although a change in government would not necessarily imply a fundamental change in the country's long-term interests concerning Ukraine.

The workshop showed that Ukraine's EU integration will depend on several factors. Meeting the Copenhagen criteria and continuing reforms remain essential, but the development of the war, the economic consequences of accession and the different security interests of EU member states will also play an important role. The V4 positions demonstrate that Ukraine's European integration is security question, too, for V4 and the EU.

Positions and attitudes of V4 countries

Poland's perspective

Poland's position on Security Dynamics and Copenhagen Criteria Compliance

Question 1: How would Ukraine's accession to the European Union affect the security situation of your country?

From the Polish perspective, Ukraine's EU accession would significantly shift the bloc's geopolitical focus eastward, strengthening a long-term defensive position against Russian revisionism. (Raik and Blockmans, 2023) While this integration will deeply influence regional stability, Polish strategic planning must account for potential reactions from Moscow. To ensure regional stability, Poland views EU accession as a necessary addition to NATO's hard security guarantees. This dual integration would strengthen coordination between EU policies and NATO military planning, contributing to a more coherent security architecture on the eastern flank. Regarding border and internal security, a major post-conflict risk involves demobilization and the potential cross-border smuggling of small arms and light weapons (SALW), which could compromise the Schengen border if not systematically intercepted. Poland must also prepare for migration-related challenges resulting from the post-war situation.

In the energy sector, integrating Ukraine requires extensive infrastructure repairs and alignment with the EU's climate and regulatory frameworks, such as the Emissions Trading System (ETS) and Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), creating unavoidable short-term costs. (Darvas, Dabrowski and Grabbe, 2024) Crucially, however, Ukraine represents a valuable asset in terms of hybrid resilience. The country has unique, practical experience in neutralizing advanced cyberattacks, disrupting disinformation campaigns, and executing asymmetric defense strategies. (Raik and Blockmans, 2023) Integrating this battle-tested expertise directly into the EU's security frameworks will clearly improve the collective defensive capabilities of both Poland and the wider European Union.

Question 2: From the perspective of the Copenhagen criteria, what opportunities or risks could the current state of Ukrainian democracy, rule of law, corruption, and human rights represent for your country?

The domestic state of Ukraine's political and social institutions presents a complex mix of practical opportunities and structural risks for Poland under the Copenhagen framework. Economically, achieving legal alignment with the *acquis communautaire* – specifically within commercial, property, and construction law – opens up great potential for Polish enterprises to securely participate in large-scale national reconstruction projects. Furthermore, another important opportunity is the integration of Ukraine's defense industry into the European Defense Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB). (Raik and Blockmans, 2023) A primary concern for Poland is the legacy of oligarchic networks and corruption, which threaten the transparent use of EU Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) resources and require the strict application of the EU's Revised Enlargement Methodology. (European Commission, 2023) On a social and internal security level, the conflict introduces long-term challenges, including the psychological trauma of a heavily mobilized population and compounding of the SALW-related border risks already noted in

Question 3: Which key areas of the Copenhagen criteria should be fulfilled as essential conditions for your country to support Ukraine's accession to the European Union?

Poland maintains that supporting Ukraine's integration must be strictly conditional upon fulfilling the core pillars of the Copenhagen criteria, ensuring that accession strengthens rather than destabilizes the EU's internal mechanisms. (1) Political Criteria and Rule of Law ("Fundamentals First"): Ukraine must establish verifiable judicial independence and robust, independent anti-corruption frameworks. (2) Legal Harmonization (Acquis Unification): Full alignment with the *acquis communautaire* is non-negotiable to eliminate regulatory fragmentation. This uniformity ensures that Polish businesses do not face confusing or inconsistent legal environments. (3) Economic and Financial Stability: Given Ukraine's wartime wealth depletion, its future financial commitments present a practical risk for the EU budget. (4) Under these conditions, Ukraine would become one of the largest agricultural actors within the EU, creating important implications for the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). This redistribution of CAP funds is also a genuine domestic political risk for Poland, where competition from Ukrainian agricultural producers has already triggered farmer protests and border blockades. (5) Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) Alignment: Ukraine must fully synchronize its positions with the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) of the European Union. This alignment is particularly important for Poland because divergent Ukrainian positions on sanctions or defense cooperation with third countries could fracture EU unity toward Russia, directly weakening the coherence of the security architecture Poland relies on.

Question 4: What can your country do to help Ukraine meet the Copenhagen criteria?

To maximize efficiency while respecting domestic fiscal constraints and public spending fatigue, Poland must prioritize institutional, legal, and security mentorship over direct financial transfers. Geographically and historically, Poland is uniquely positioned to deploy specialized legal task forces and administrative experts to guide Ukrainian regulatory bodies through the complex process of *acquis* harmonization, sharing the vital "know-how" gained during Warsaw's own pre-2004 accession period. Poland can support this process through EU technical assistance instruments such as TAIEX, which facilitate the transfer of administrative and regulatory expertise. At the political level, regional initiatives such as the Lublin Triangle can further strengthen coordination and dialogue between Poland and Ukraine. To strengthen EU security directly, Poland can lead bilateral and Frontex-supported initiatives to secure border perimeters, establishing rigorous tracking systems to counter the post-war proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW). In the defense sector, Poland can foster joint ventures between Polish defense firms and Ukrainian enterprises, accelerating the practical integration of Ukrainian military innovations into Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) frameworks. Finally, Warsaw can act as an essential diplomatic bridge, helping Ukraine align its diplomatic initiatives with the broader strategic objectives of the EU and NATO.

Takeaways:

While Ukraine's integration requires careful management of energy infrastructure costs, regional migration flows, and post-war border vulnerabilities, it enhances EU security by shifting the geopolitical balance eastward and adding valuable hybrid defense capabilities to European frameworks.

Ukraine's accession offers major reconstruction and defense-industrial integration opportunities for Poland, but poses serious risks regarding corruption and post-conflict societal strains that require strict pre-accession oversight.

Poland's endorsement is strictly conditional upon Ukraine's rigorous compliance with the "Fundamentals" cluster, complete legal harmonization, and strict macroeconomic benchmarks to safeguard the EU budget and internal market stability.

Poland can best accelerate compliance and bolster European security by serving as an institutional and legal mentor for regulatory harmonization while leading defense-industrial and border-security partnerships to reduce post-conflict risks.

Czech Republic's perspective

Czech Position on Security Dynamics and Copenhagen Criteria Compliance

Question 1: How would Ukraine's accession to the European Union affect the security situation of your country?

From a Czech perspective, security is no longer just about military defense; it is deeply tied to a stable economy and reliable trade routes. Currently, Czechia is relatively close to the eastern edge of the EU. Ukraine joining would effectively push the EU zone of stability and democratic rules further east, creating a massive geographical and protective barrier between Central Europe and an unpredictable Russia.

As economics students, we view this through the lens of investment fears. A troubled neighborhood makes foreign companies afraid to invest in the Central and Eastern European region. If Ukraine becomes part of the EU system of rules, it calms down the whole business environment in our region. This means cheaper loans and more predictable conditions for Czech companies to grow. Furthermore, the post-war rebuilding of Ukraine represents a huge chance for economic growth. Integrating Ukraine means Czech firms can participate in this rebuilding process under the protective umbrella of EU market rules. Ultimately, a prosperous, EU-integrated Ukraine is the cheapest and most effective security guarantee for Czechia, as democratic, economically connected neighbors rarely pose threats.

The joining process will act as a strong push for peace in the region by permanently shifting Ukraine out of the Russian sphere of influence. For NATO and EU cooperation, this is a massive win. With Ukraine in the EU, the overlap between the eastern edge of NATO and the eastern border of the EU becomes almost identical. This leads to much better coordination in buying equipment, funding defense, and moving troops across borders.

From a resource perspective, energy security is the standout benefit for Czechia. Before the conflict, Czechia relied heavily on Russian fossil fuels. Ukraine possesses some of the largest underground gas storage facilities in Europe and massive potential for renewable energy. Connecting these assets to the European network would permanently secure Central Europe's energy independence and smooth out the sudden price jumps that have recently hurt Czech businesses.

However, hidden dangers like online attacks and the spread of fake news present a big challenge. As the EU border moves eastward, we will be more exposed to campaigns aimed at breaking European unity. The migration pressure needs to be managed mostly with the job market in mind. If managed correctly, it can bring in much-needed workers for our aging population without overloading public services.

Question 2: From the perspective of the Copenhagen criteria, what opportunities or risks could the current state of Ukrainian democracy, rule of law, corruption, and human rights represent for your country?

Looking at this through the lens of how rules shape the economy, the current state of the legal system and corruption in Ukraine represents the highest risk factor for the Czech Republic. The EU operates on a massive system of shared money and support funds. If Ukraine joins without entirely removing deep-rooted corruption and systems where a few rich people control the markets, there is a severe risk of money being stolen or misused. Billions of euros, partially funded by Czech taxpayers as we shift toward paying more into the EU budget than we receive, could be wasted. Furthermore, a weak legal system creates unfair markets. Czech businesses cannot compete fairly in a country where court decisions can be bought or where ownership rights are not protected.

On the other hand, the huge opportunity lies in the joining process itself. The Copenhagen criteria force Ukraine to match its rules with ours. If Ukraine successfully improves its courts and laws for fair competition, it becomes a predictable economy. For a highly industrial, export-focused country like Czechia, a modernized Ukraine functioning under strict rules is a great opportunity. It offers a huge new market for our engineering, technology, and defense sectors, protected by the same legal safety we enjoy when trading with Germany or Austria.

Question 3: Which key areas of the Copenhagen criteria should be fulfilled as essential conditions for your country to support Ukraine's accession to the EU, and what can your country do to help?

For Czechia to fully support Ukraine joining, two areas of the Copenhagen criteria are absolutely necessary: having a working market economy that can handle business competition, and having strong anti-corruption rules with independent courts. Why are these so important? Because bringing in a country with a broken, unfairly controlled economy would completely shake up the internal market of the EU. It would cause problems mainly in farming and heavy industry, directly threatening Czech producers with unfair competition. Legal safety is the absolute foundation for foreign investment and international trade. Without independent courts that can enforce contracts and punish corruption, the economic benefits of expanding the EU simply disappear.

Question 4: What can your country do to help Ukraine meet the Copenhagen criteria?

As a country that successfully changed from a strict state-controlled system to a fully connected EU market economy in the 1990s, Czechia has unique and very useful experience to help Ukraine meet these rules. First, we can send financial auditors, legal experts, and economists to help Ukrainian government offices adopt European laws. Our experts can guide them through the complex process of selling state-owned businesses, setting up rules for fair trade, and ensuring clean public spending.

Second, we should massively expand university exchange programs for Ukrainian economics and law students to study in Prague or Brno, building a new generation of experts who look toward the West. Finally, to ensure Ukraine strengthens EU security rather than weakening it, Czechia should lead joint online defense programs. By connecting Ukrainian IT talent with Czech internet security firms, we can build a strong digital shield for the whole EU market even before the joining process is formally finished.

Takeaways:

Integrating Ukraine into the EU acts as a vital protective barrier and economic stabilizer for Czechia, improving our safety by calming down the business environment and creating new opportunities for growth.

Joining the EU will solidify defense coordination and dramatically boost Czechia's energy independence, though it requires joint efforts to manage online threats, fake news, and migration.

While deep-rooted corruption in Ukraine poses a severe financial risk regarding the misuse of shared EU funds, successfully enforcing fair laws opens a massive, safe market for Czech goods and investments.

Strict adherence to anti-corruption measures and creating a fair market economy are absolute must-haves, and Czechia can help achieve this by sharing its 1990s economic transition experience, training students, and building joint online defense teams.

Slovakia's perspective

Slovakia's position on Security Dynamics and Copenhagen Criteria Compliance

Question 1: How would Ukraine's accession to the European Union affect the security situation of your country?

Ukraine's EU accession would have important security implications for Slovakia, particularly for regional stability, energy security, hybrid threats and NATO–EU cooperation. As a direct neighbour, Slovakia has a strong interest in a stable and predictable Ukraine. EU membership could strengthen Ukraine's institutional framework and reduce risks related to instability, organised crime and irregular migration.

The war has also exposed Slovakia's energy vulnerability. The 2025 gas transit dispute and the 2026 Druzhba pipeline crisis demonstrated that Slovakia's energy security remains closely linked to developments in Ukraine. EU membership could strengthen energy cooperation and diversification.

Regarding NATO–EU cooperation, Ukraine's EU accession — even without NATO membership, which remains a separate and contested question — would deepen the alignment of security interests between Brussels and Kyiv. An EU-member Ukraine would participate in PESCO, the European Defence Fund, and common crisis management frameworks, reinforcing collective resilience. For Slovakia, which lies at the intersection of Central European NATO commitments and a still-fragile eastern neighbourhood, this would represent a qualitative improvement in the overall European security architecture.

Hybrid threats represent a particular concern. Russia has intensified its hybrid operations across the CEE region — including disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks on critical infrastructure, and attempts to manipulate migration flows — in response to EU and NATO expansion. Slovakia has itself been a target, given its political divisions over the Ukraine conflict. Ukraine's EU accession would bring Ukrainian cyber and intelligence capacities more formally into EU information-sharing frameworks, potentially enhancing collective situational awareness. At the same time, Slovakia must be vigilant about the risk that accession negotiations themselves may become a vector for Russian interference, as has occurred with other candidate countries in the Western Balkans.

Question 2: From the perspective of the Copenhagen criteria, what opportunities or risks could the current state of Ukrainian democracy, rule of law, corruption, and human rights represent for your country?

Ukraine's current state of democratic governance, rule of law, anti-corruption efforts, and human rights protection presents Slovakia with a nuanced picture of genuine progress alongside persistent structural vulnerabilities. For Slovakia, both dimensions carry direct implications.

On the opportunity side, Ukraine has built a substantial institutional architecture for anti-corruption work since the Euromaidan revolution of 2014, establishing the National Anti-Corruption Bureau (NABU), the Specialised Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office (SAPO), and the High Anti-Corruption Court (HACC).

However, the risks are substantial and must be honestly acknowledged. The July 2025 episode — in which the Ukrainian parliament passed legislation dismantling key anti-corruption safeguards, only to reverse course under pressure — illustrates that political will for reform remains fragile and episodic rather than deeply institutionalised. More structurally, as independent analysts have noted, corruption in Ukraine is not merely a law enforcement problem but a symptom of a broader governance deficit in the separation of powers. Slovakia, which has itself faced GRECO scrutiny over rule-of-law deficiencies — including the dissolution of its Special Prosecutor's Office and attempts to weaken whistleblower protection — is not immune to such dynamics and should approach this issue with a degree of self-awareness.

On human rights, Ukraine faces specific challenges in areas including civil partnership recognition, hate crime criminalisation, and the protection of national minorities. The rights of minority communities, including the roughly 40,000–100,000 Ukrainians of Slovak descent living in Slovakia and the corresponding Slovak community in Ukraine, are a matter of bilateral sensitivity. Slovakia has a direct interest in ensuring that minority language rights and cultural protections are upheld in any accession framework. More broadly, the conduct of Ukrainian public life under conditions of martial law — with restrictions on civil liberties justified by wartime necessity — requires careful monitoring to ensure that temporary emergency measures do not become permanent features of the constitutional order.

Question 3: Which key areas of the Copenhagen criteria should be fulfilled as essential conditions for your country to support Ukraine's accession to the European Union?

First and foremost, the independence and effectiveness of anti-corruption institutions must be guaranteed. The structural integrity of NABU, SAPO, and HACC — insulated from presidential, parliamentary, or prosecutorial interference — is the most visible indicator of

whether Ukraine's reform trajectory is real. For Slovakia, which has already seen disputes over allegations that EU funds were misused in Ukraine, the risk that Ukrainian corruption would eventually become a burden on the EU budget is a legitimate concern.

Second, the functioning of the judiciary and the rule of law more broadly — beyond anti-corruption specifically — must be credibly reformed. This means a rebalancing of the separation of powers: strengthening parliamentary oversight, reducing executive dominance over judicial appointments, and ensuring that constitutional courts can operate free from political pressure. Slovakia's experience during its own democratic consolidation in the 1990s and early 2000s underscores that formal institutional design must be accompanied by genuine political culture change.

Third, the alignment with EU single market norms, state aid rules, and the protection of the competitive framework must be achieved at a meaningful level before accession. Slovakia has significant economic exposure to Ukraine through trade, reconstruction contracts, and shared energy infrastructure. Ukrainian accession would transform these bilateral relationships into intra-EU dynamics, governed by EU law. In particular, Slovak agricultural producers have already experienced the competitive pressures of liberalised Ukrainian imports; an orderly accession process that includes appropriate transitional periods and monitoring mechanisms would be essential to manage these pressures fairly.

Additionally, Slovakia places importance on the protection of national minorities, including Slovak and Hungarian minority communities in Ukraine's Transcarpathian region. While this concern has been more prominently associated with Hungary, Slovakia has its own legitimate interest in ensuring that minority language rights in education and public administration are robustly protected in line with Council of Europe standards and EU minority rights norms.

Question 4: What can your country do to help Ukraine meet the Copenhagen criteria?

Slovakia is positioned to make a meaningful and distinctive contribution to Ukraine's EU accession journey, both through bilateral engagement and through its role within EU institutions. Slovakia's own accession experience in 2004 — and the democratic consolidation challenges it navigated in the years preceding it — gives it practical credibility as a partner for Ukraine.

In the area of institutional capacity building, Slovakia can offer targeted expertise in judiciary reform, anti-corruption institution design, and public administration modernisation. Slovak institutions — including the judiciary, the public prosecution service, and civil service — have themselves undergone reform processes under EU conditionality. Twinning projects, secondments of Slovak officials to Ukrainian counterpart institutions, and joint training programmes could be formalised through bilateral agreements and co-financed under the EU's Ukraine Facility.

On energy security, Slovakia has both an interest and a capability to help Ukraine build energy infrastructure that strengthens EU-wide resilience. The electrical interconnection projects between Ukraine and Slovakia — Ukraine was already progressing electricity interconnection with Romania and Slovakia before the 2025–2026 energy disputes — represent a concrete area where bilateral technical cooperation can serve both countries. Slovakia can also contribute to cooperation on cybersecurity, disinformation resilience and border security by sharing relevant institutional experience and analytical tools.

Within the EU, Slovakia can advocate for a rigorous but credible accession process based on clear benchmarks, regular monitoring and financial conditionality. At the same time, it can support the return and reintegration of Ukrainian refugees as part of Ukraine's reconstruction and institutional recovery.

Takeaways:

Ukraine's EU membership could strengthen Slovakia's security through greater regional stability, energy diversification and deeper cooperation against hybrid threats.

Ukraine has made progress on reform, but Slovakia should focus on substantive rule-of-law, anti-corruption and human-rights implementation.

Key conditions include independent anti-corruption institutions, judicial reform, effective single-market integration and protection of national minorities.

Hungary's perspective

Hungary's position on Security Dynamics and Copenhagen Criteria Compliance

Question 1: How would Ukraine's accession to the European Union affect the security situation of your country?

Ukraine's accession to the European Union would have both positive and negative implications for Hungary's security. In the long term, EU membership could contribute to a more stable and predictable neighbourhood by encouraging democratic reforms, strengthening institutions, and reducing Russian influence in Eastern Europe. A stable Ukraine could improve regional security and enhance cooperation between the EU and NATO (European Commission, 2025).

Ukraine's membership could also strengthen regional stability, border security, and resilience against hybrid threats such as cyberattacks and disinformation. Ukraine has gained valuable experience in countering Russian hybrid warfare, which could benefit the EU as a whole. (Portfolio, 2026). In addition, accession could improve the EU's energy security by integrating a country with significant nuclear energy production, substantial natural gas reserves, and growing electricity interconnections with the European grid (IEA, 2026).

However, Hungary must also consider the risks associated with Ukraine's ongoing war with Russia. As highlighted during the expert discussion summarized by Portfolio (2026), Ukraine remains heavily dependent on external financial assistance, while a large proportion of public spending continues to be directed toward defence. The experts emphasized that, as long as the conflict remains unresolved, Ukraine's accession could create additional security and financial challenges for the European Union. Furthermore, the continuation of the war could maintain migration pressure and expose the region to further security risks (Portfolio, 2026).

Ukraine's EU accession could strengthen Hungary's long-term security and regional stability, provided that the ongoing war and related security risks are effectively managed.

Question 2: From the perspective of the Copenhagen criteria, what opportunities or risks could the current state of Ukrainian democracy, rule of law, corruption, and human rights represent for your country?

From the perspective of the Copenhagen criteria, Ukraine's accession presents both opportunities and risks for Hungary. The accession process has already encouraged reforms in democracy, public administration, anti-corruption policies, and the rule of law. If these reforms are successfully implemented, Hungary could benefit from having a more stable, democratic, and predictable neighbour, which would contribute to regional security, economic cooperation, and long-term stability in Central Europe (European Commission, 2025). In addition, Ukraine's accession could strengthen the EU's energy security by integrating a country with significant nuclear energy production, substantial natural gas reserves, and growing electricity interconnections with the European grid (IEA, 2026).

At the same time, significant challenges remain. Experts speaking at the V4 conference, whose views were reported by Portfolio (2026) and Mandiner (2026), argue that corruption, the influence of oligarchic networks, and weaknesses in the rule of law continue to be major obstacles to Ukraine's accession. They emphasize that adopting reforms is not sufficient; Ukraine must also demonstrate their effective implementation in practice. The ongoing war further complicates this process, as emergency measures and martial law can limit democratic oversight and institutional accountability.

From Hungary's perspective, human rights and minority protection are particularly important. The protection of the Hungarian minority in Transcarpathia remains a sensitive issue in bilateral relations and has repeatedly been raised by the Hungarian government during discussions on Ukraine's EU integration (European Commission, 2025). Therefore, Hungary has a strong interest in ensuring that Ukraine fully complies with EU standards regarding minority rights, the rule of law, and democratic governance before accession.

Ukraine's continued democratic and rule of law reforms could benefit Hungary, but persistent corruption, minority rights concerns, and wartime governance remain significant challenges.

Question 3: Which key areas of the Copenhagen criteria should be fulfilled as essential conditions for your country to support Ukraine's accession to the European Union?

From Hungary's perspective, the most important conditions for supporting Ukraine's accession to the European Union are the rule of law, anti-corruption reforms, minority rights protection, and the development of a functioning market economy.

First, Ukraine must demonstrate that judicial and anti-corruption reforms are effectively implemented in practice, rather than merely adopted in legislation. Participants at the V4 conference emphasized that corruption and weaknesses in the rule of law remain among the most significant challenges facing Ukraine's accession process (Mandiner, 2026).

Second, the protection of human and minority rights is of particular importance to Hungary. The rights of the Hungarian minority in Transcarpathia, especially regarding education and language use, should be fully aligned with European standards. Continued progress in this area would contribute both to Ukraine's compliance with EU values and to improving bilateral relations with Hungary (European Commission, 2025).

Finally, Ukraine must continue strengthening its market economy and improving its long-term economic resilience. While the economic consequences of the war remain substantial, further reforms aimed at enhancing competitiveness, attracting investment, and reducing dependence on external financial assistance will be essential for successful EU integration (Portfolio, 2026).

Question 4: What can your country do to help Ukraine meet the Copenhagen criteria?

Hungary can help Ukraine meet the Copenhagen criteria by supporting the practical implementation of reforms in areas where Ukraine still faces significant challenges, particularly the rule of law, anti-corruption policies, public administration, and minority rights protection. Technical assistance, educational exchanges, and cross-border cooperation programmes could strengthen Ukraine's institutional capacity and accelerate alignment with EU standards (European Commission, 2025).

At the same time, Hungary should continue to support a merit-based accession process. As highlighted by participants at the V4 conference reported by Portfolio (2026) and Mandiner (2026), reforms should not only be adopted but also effectively implemented. Therefore, Hungary should encourage continued progress in judicial independence, anti-corruption measures, and the protection of minority rights, including the rights of the Hungarian community in Transcarpathia. The European Commission has emphasized that minority protection remains an essential condition for EU enlargement and has encouraged Ukraine to fully implement its minority rights action plan (Reuters, 2025).

Beyond institutional reforms, Hungary can also contribute to ensuring that Ukraine strengthens rather than weakens the security of the European Union. In particular, Hungary should support Ukraine's energy sector reforms and its further integration into the European energy market. Ukraine possesses significant nuclear power generation capacity, substantial natural gas reserves, and an electricity system that is increasingly interconnected with the European grid. Strengthening these capabilities would not only facilitate Ukraine's accession process but also enhance the EU's long-term energy security and resilience (IEA, 2026).

Hungary should support Ukraine's accession process while insisting on continued progress in the areas of rule of law, anti-corruption reforms, minority rights protection, and economic resilience. A merit-based accession process would help ensure that Ukraine strengthens both the European Union and regional security.

Takeaways:

Ukraine's EU accession could strengthen Hungary's long-term security and regional stability, particularly through improved border security, resilience against hybrid threats, EU-NATO cooperation, and energy integration.

Accession should remain merit-based and conditional on concrete reforms, especially regarding the rule of law, corruption, democratic governance, minority rights, and economic resilience.

Hungary can play a constructive role by supporting Ukraine's reforms and energy integration, while ensuring that the protection of the Hungarian minority in Transcarpathia and measurable implementation of EU standards remain key conditions for accession.

Conclusion

Ukraine's potential accession to the European Union represents a major strategic challenge and opportunity for Central and Eastern Europe. As the analysis of the Visegrad Four demonstrates, Ukraine's membership cannot be assessed solely through the traditional framework of EU enlargement. While the Copenhagen criteria remain the fundamental benchmark for accession, the ongoing war, regional security concerns, energy vulnerability and economic adjustment costs have made Ukraine's European integration a broader geopolitical and security issue.

The V4 countries share a common interest in the long-term stabilisation and European transformation of Ukraine, although they differ in their assessment of the risks and benefits of accession. Poland and the Czech Republic place greater emphasis on the geopolitical advantages of anchoring Ukraine within Western institutions and reducing Russian influence. Hungary and Slovakia adopt a more cautious approach, focusing more strongly on immediate security, energy, economic and institutional risks. These differences nevertheless reflect varying national priorities rather than fundamentally opposing long-term interests.

A central conclusion of this policy paper is that Ukraine's accession should remain merit-based. Geopolitical urgency cannot substitute for the effective fulfilment of the Copenhagen criteria. Progress in the rule of law, judicial independence, anti-corruption policy, democratic governance, minority rights and market reforms must be measurable and implemented in practice rather than remaining formal legislative commitments.

The V4 countries should also play an active role in supporting Ukraine's transformation. Their own experience of democratic transition and EU accession provides valuable knowledge for institutional capacity building, technical assistance and administrative cooperation. At the same time, Ukraine's integration offers opportunities to strengthen European security through cooperation in cybersecurity, hybrid defence, energy infrastructure and defence capabilities.

The key policy challenge is therefore to combine strategic commitment with credible conditionality. Ukraine's European integration should be supported actively, but accession must proceed on the basis of genuine institutional progress and appropriate mechanisms for managing security and economic risks. A stable, democratic and economically resilient Ukraine would strengthen both the security of the V4 region and the long-term resilience of the European Union.

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