

Diversity in Enlargement:

Women as Agents on
Fast-track to the EU

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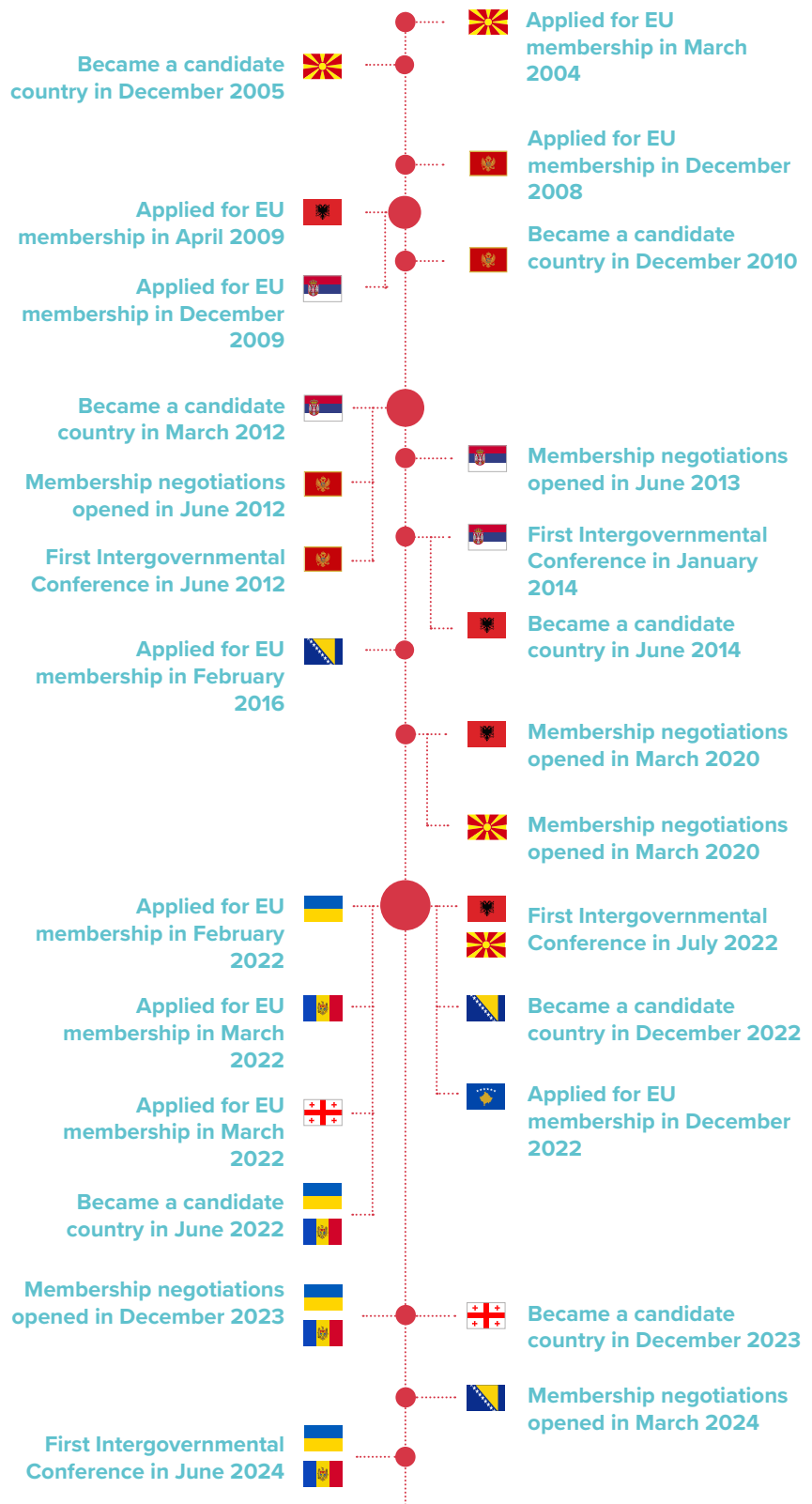


Executive summary

European Union enlargement talks are enjoying a political revival, triggered by Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine. In June 2022, nearly ten years after Croatia became an EU member (the last country to do so), the European Council launched a new enlargement process for the East, granting candidate status to Moldova and Ukraine. This move raised hopes that the EU was finally ready to take in new members once more. The revitalised drive for EU enlargement extends to the Western Balkans as well, where accession has languished for many years, affecting numerous countries. However, now in the short span of two years, fifteen tangible steps have been taken, from the submission of formal accession applications and the granting of candidacy status to aspiring countries to the opening of negotiations and the organisation of inaugural intergovernmental conferences.

According to survey data, support for joining the EU in candidate countries is generally robust, with most publics in favour of membership—ranging from resounding support in Albania (92%), Kosovo (89%), and Ukraine (81%) to moderate backing in Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Moldova¹ (63-68%). Serbia stands out as a notable exception, with only 40% espousing support for EU membership. However, this overall positive outlook cannot be taken for granted, especially amid trends revealing declining support for EU membership in the Western Balkans over the years. New channels for foreign malign influence, (hybrid) warfare, and shifts in the geopolitical environment have exposed the citizens of the candidate and aspiring countries to a variety of vulnerabilities. Therefore, turning the public impetus for enlargement into reality is imperative.

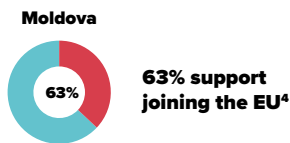
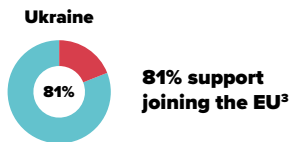
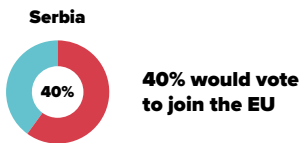
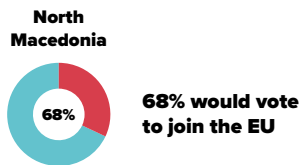
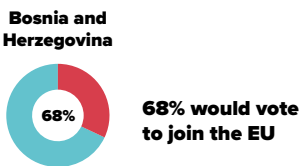
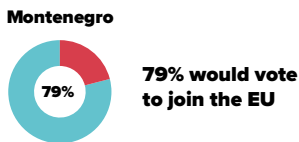
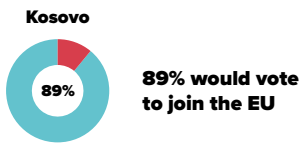
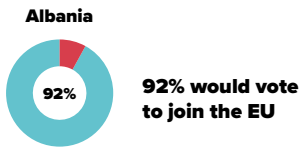
Timeline



1 In a referendum on 20 October 2024 Moldovan citizens narrowly voted in favor (50.35%) for constitutional amendment stating EU membership as their goal.

Public support for joining the EU

*If a referendum were held today on our country joining the European Union, how would you vote?*²



Against the backdrop of a rejuvenated sense of urgency to work towards further EU enlargement, both the EU and the candidate and aspiring countries are expected to take firm action. However, achieving successful accession demands not only political and societal commitment but also a multifaceted approach to the transformation process. To this end, women leaders, both in politics and civil society, have proven to be uniquely positioned to drive change due to their diverse perspectives and inclusive approaches to leadership.

Despite their growing presence in leadership roles, women still face significant barriers to political participation, particularly in formal politics. The overall representation of women in the governments of EU candidate and aspiring countries remains relatively low, with women making up just 25% of ministers⁵. Countries like North Macedonia (13%) and Moldova (18%) display particularly low levels of female participation in ministerial roles; only Albania stands out with equal representation (50%) between men and women in government.

While the overall number of women in government may be limited, women have taken on a disproportionately significant role in the enlargement process itself. In fact, **50% of the ministers responsible for enlargement across candidate and aspiring countries are women**, underscoring their essential contributions as decision-makers and strategic leaders as well as key drivers in the EU accession journey. Women's influence may very well be the engine that propels these countries closer to membership, ensuring a more inclusive and equitable future.

This collaborative report, built on the expertise of successful women from

candidate countries, offers a unique lens on how diversity can fast-track the EU enlargement process. Drawing on a series of interviews conducted with women leaders, this report captures their perspectives on the urgent reforms and policy changes necessary to advance their countries' EU accession. It also examines their expectations from EU leadership and member states, as well as the role women play in policy and societal transformations. The report argues that women, through their roles as professionals and leaders, have the potential to accelerate this preparatory work and bolster its quality.

50%
Percentage of women in ministerial positions focused on enlargement

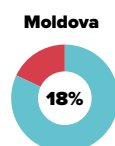
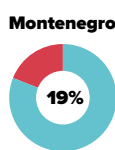
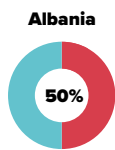
² <https://www.iri.org/resources/western-balkans-regional-poll-february-march-2024-full/>

³ <https://www.iri.org/resources/national-survey-of-ukraine-september-2023/>

⁴ <https://www.iri.org/resources/national-poll-moldova-july-august-2023/>

⁵ The data on gender representation in governments was collected from official websites of national governments and available lists of ministers, as of October 2024. Data collection targeted Cabinets of Ministers or equivalent governing bodies (in the case of BiH, members of the Council of Ministers were counted).

Women in Government / Cabinet of Ministers:



25%

Percentage of women in government

Source: Own data collection

Key Takeaways

Main reforms and policy changes

- Judicial and governance reforms are most critical to advancing the EU accession process, especially pertaining to the rule of law, public administration, the fight against corruption, and the protection of fundamental human rights;
- Ensuring political and social stability is fundamental to driving political dialogue and needed reforms;
- Further strengthening and supporting civil society continues to be a key necessity.

Expectations from EU leadership and member states

- Continued prioritisation of enlargement as stated in the EU's Strategic Agenda;
- Concrete support, especially in terms of financial and technical assistance;
- Careful consideration of each country's unique geopolitical situation;
- Two-way communication on countries' progress as well as the mutual benefits of enlargement;
- An anticipatory approach towards the gradual inclusion of countries in the EU single market;
- Meaningful participation in relevant EU policy discussions, programmes, and institutions;
- Stronger security commitments and support for territorial integrity.

Women in enlargement

- Women bring their long-term visions and amplify strategic thinking with respect to the enlargement process;
- Women are uniquely positioned to drive societal transformation, as they often bring diverse perspectives and inclusive approaches to policy developments;
- Women contribute towards advancing gender equality and ensuring that marginalised voices are represented;
- Women leaders act as advocates for the EU enlargement process, ensuring it is driven by both top-down reforms and grassroots engagement, thereby contributing to a more robust and democratic society;
- Women in leadership are better placed to preserve peace and stability in the current volatile geopolitical context.



Bosnia and Herzegovina

Elvira Habota

Director of the Directorate for European Integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina

What are the next necessary and even urgent processes that would need to be implemented in driving your country's accession closer to fruition? Any examples from your line of work?

Across every phase of the accession process, the answer to this question will be twofold. It is necessary to firstly address issues that the European Commission has identified as urgent and to secondly more broadly improve our own capacities and effectiveness in doing so. In other words, we must better equip ourselves to cope with reforms to be undertaken later in the process. At present, following the decision of the European Council to open accession negotiations with BiH, we need to take all relevant steps set out in the Commission's recommendation from 2022. This is a precondition for the European Commission to prepare the negotiating framework and is related to the eight steps the European Commission laid out when it recommended granting candidate country status to Bosnia and Herzegovina.

As many of the tasks have already been completed, urgent efforts now need to be invested in the remaining eight steps. This includes the adoption of the law on courts in BiH and the new law on HJPC⁶, the law on personal data protection, the law on border control, and adoption of the new border management

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strategy. Meanwhile, an additional focus must be placed on tackling the finalisation and adoption of the BiH's first strategic planning document, comprising a plan for approximation with the EU Acquis. This step will facilitate screening exercises and streamline the coordination of the transposition of the EU acquis in general. Moreover, BiH urgently needs to set up necessary negotiating structures that will properly address all requirements from the process.

My role as head of the Directorate for European Integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina puts me and my institution directly at the centre of all these coordinating activities which we plan and engage with every day. It is not an easy task but if efficient accession negotiations with the EU are the reward, it will pay off.

What are your expectations from the new EU leadership and the member states in finding beneficial meeting points towards successful enlargement?

My expectation is that all actors will keep up their end of the bargain in relation to future EU enlargement. For us, that means delivering what we have promised - and what I discussed earlier. As regards to our friends in the EU and the member states, it means keeping the enlargement process among their priorities. And they plan to do so, as stated in EU Strategic Agenda 2024-2029, adopted by the European Council in June. Under the pillar 'A strong and secure Europe', the EU has prioritised a merit-based EU enlargement process with incentives, to run in parallel with necessary internal reforms. This represents a strong and important message for candidate countries and a powerful incentive to continue reforms. The initiative also provides an opportunity both for the EU and the candidate states to prove their credibility in this process.

Women are inclined to demonstrate that, by being professional, results-oriented, and passionate about their work, they can foster positive change. And these constructive developments, as part of the accession process, include ensuring that everyone keeps their end of the bargain.

How can women in leadership roles drive societal and policy developments to enhance the accession process?

The accession process is defined by rules and procedures, and we generally know what to expect in terms of operational, technical, and expert aspects, even when new initiatives are introduced. For example, the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans requires the implementation of new tasks and procedures within specified deadlines. We also know that this is a highly political process both in

the EU and in aspiring countries. That said, I believe that a majority of women in leadership roles, be it in politics or the civil service, can and do make a difference. This is because women are inclined to demonstrate that, by being professional, results-oriented, and passionate about their work, they can foster positive change. And these constructive developments, as part of the accession process, include ensuring that everyone keeps their end of the bargain.

Elvira Habota



Born in Sarajevo, Ms Habota graduated and obtained a master's degree in international relations and diplomacy from the Faculty of Political Sciences of the University of Sarajevo. She has been actively and directly engaged in extremely important reform processes in BiH since 1996, starting with the first post-war multi-party elections as a member of the European Committee Monitoring Mission (ECMM).

Subsequently, she worked in international institutions for almost 13 years in the field of Euro-Atlantic integration. She was directly involved in BiH defence reform implementation in the main team for assistance and support to the programmes based on NATO standards, and in development and implementation of the Planning and Revision Process (PARP), Individual Partnership Programme (IPP), and Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP).

For nearly three years, she was employed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of BiH as first secretary. Between 2013 and 2020, she served in the Parliament of the Federation of BiH as

speaker's advisor for European integration and international cooperation. At that time, she was also the main coordinator of the FBiH Parliament for EU Twinning projects. Ms Habota was also a member of the Editorial Board for the Bulletin on European Integration of parliaments in BiH and a coordinator of the FBiH Parliament for the Parliamentary forum for European integration of BiH.

From January 2020 until October 2023, she was head of the Section for European Integration of the House of Representatives of the FBiH Parliament and secretary of the Committee for European Integration of this parliamentary chamber. As an expert on European integration, Ms Habota is on the list of the FBiH Civil Service Agency for recruitment of civil servants. In October 2023, Ms Habota was appointed Director of the Directorate for European Integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Ms Habota has also participated in numerous international educational processes related to the civil, military, and diplomatic sector. She speaks English fluently.

Zarja Marković

Executive Director of Humanity in Action Bosnia and Herzegovina

What are the next necessary and even urgent processes that would need to be implemented in driving your country's accession closer to fruition? Any examples from your line of work?

For Bosnia and Herzegovina, the road to EU accession remains long and complex, primarily due to the need for the country to fulfil the 14 key priorities (and subsequently 8 steps) set by the European Commission. These priorities include essential reforms to the judiciary and public administration, the introduction of anti-corruption and electoral integrity measures, and the protection of fundamental human rights. However, progress has been slow, largely on account of a lack of political will among certain factions that have rather decided to focus on ethnic divisions, prioritising short-term political gains over the long-term benefits of EU integration.

Even though a majority of Bosnian citizens strongly support EU membership and perceive it as a pathway to stability, economic growth, and greater democratic governance, the political elite has often delayed or resisted necessary reforms. The constitutional changes that are a prerequisite to guaranteeing full equality for all citizens and depoliticising public institutions are still far from being realised. This has created a frustrating disconnect between the aspirations of the people and the actions of their leaders.

In my role as Executive Director of Humanity in Action Bosnia and Herzegovina, we work to educate and equip youth with the knowledge and skills directly related to some of the areas connected to these priorities. For example, through our year-long educational and

participatory Fellowship program “Encouraging Democratic Values and Active Citizenship Among Youth” and a recent civic campaign implemented by participants of the Fellowship - “Osnaži svoj glas” (Empower your Vote) project - we’re building political literacy among young people, encouraging them to become more active in civic life and to demand transparency and accountability from those in power. By challenging participants to become active citizens, we are helping cultivate a generation ready to demand reforms necessary for EU accession. Another example is the “Youth Policy Camp” programme which provided first-time voters and youth aged 18-25 with essential information about election processes and political activism, equipping them to understand and engage with the democratic system more effectively. This is all part of a larger effort to foster civic engagement, ensuring that youth play a role in shaping the future of the country and demanding reforms needed for EU integration.

By challenging young people to become active citizens, we are helping cultivate a generation ready to demand reforms necessary for EU accession.

Additionally, we’ve launched a unique initiative, “Gamifying EU Realities in BiH”, which uses board games, created by youth for youth, as an educational tool to teach young people about the European Union and Bosnia’s EU integration process. This project encourages

youth engagement in EU-related matters through interactive learning.

Through these activities and others, we are creating spaces where young people can engage meaningfully in EU-related discussions and civic life, applying bottom-up pressure on the political establishment to prioritise reforms necessary for accession. Without stronger and more unified political leadership, however, Bosnia and Herzegovina’s EU future remains distant, despite the overwhelming support of its citizens.

What are your expectations from the new EU leadership and the member states in finding beneficial meeting points towards successful enlargement?

My expectations from the new EU leadership and member states remain measured. While some steps in the right direction have occurred - the granting of candidate status to Bosnia - substantial progress has been lacking on key reforms necessary for Bosnia and Herzegovina’s path to EU accession ever since. The responsibility here largely lies with our political leaders, who have often failed to find common ground on implementing the required reforms.

That said, the EU has provided considerable support for Bosnia and Herzegovina’s accession process, even deciding a year after granting candidate status that it would open accession negotiations once the necessary degree of compliance with the membership criteria is achieved. However, we cannot expect further significant steps on the EU’s part until there is a stronger commitment from our own national leadership to implement necessary reforms. While the EU can guide

and assist the process, real progress must come from within.

Continued EU support for civil society initiatives and democratic engagement remains crucial. Bosnia and Herzegovina's future in the EU will ultimately depend on aligning local efforts with EU standards. Yet, until our political leaders take the required steps, enlargement progress may remain limited.

How can women in leadership roles drive societal and policy developments to enhance the accession process?

Women in leadership positions are uniquely positioned to drive societal transformation, as they often bring diverse perspectives and inclusive approaches to policy development. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, women leaders play a crucial role in advancing gender equality and ensuring that marginalised voices are represented in the broader democratic process.

However, the political landscape in Bosnia and Herzegovina remains male-dominated, and women face

significant barriers to participation, including pervasive sexism and violence. According to the Council of Europe, violence against women in politics is a serious issue in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which deters many women from entering or remaining in political roles. This issue is compounded by a lack of support and institutional mechanisms to address and prevent such violence. Despite these challenges, women in civil society organisations (CSOs) are making significant contributions and demonstrating their potential for transformative leadership. Their involvement in post-conflict recovery processes and civic engagement has highlighted the critical role of gender perspectives in building inclusive and effective governance.

To enhance the accession process, it is essential to support and encourage greater female participation in politics. This includes implementing measures to combat sexism and violence, providing platforms for women to engage in political life, and promoting policies that reflect diverse viewpoints. By fostering a more inclusive

Women leaders can act as advocates for the EU enlargement process, ensuring it is driven by both top-down reforms and grassroots engagement, thereby contributing to a more robust and democratic society.

political environment, we not only address gender disparities but also improve the overall quality of leadership. Women leaders can act as advocates for the EU enlargement process, ensuring it is driven by both top-down reforms and grassroots engagement, thereby contributing to a more robust and democratic society.

Zarja Marković

As of April 2024, Zarja Marković serves as the Executive Director of Humanity in Action Bosnia and Herzegovina. With extensive experience in project management and community development, she has held roles as Project Coordinator, Program Manager, and Program Director within the organisation. She holds a Master's degree in Media Studies and Journalism from the University of Sarajevo and a Bachelor's degree in Art History and Russian Language and Literature from the University of Sarajevo Faculty of Philosophy. In addition to her work with Humanity in Action, Zarja has contributed as a research assistant on a UNODC-related project, created content for a diplomatic magazine, and worked as an outside correspondent for TRIAL Bosnia and Herzegovina. Her role involves strategic planning, stakeholder management, and overseeing major programs and events, including the Humanity in Action Fellowship.





Kosovo

Ariana Qosaj Mustafa

Chair of Board of Kosovo Women's Network

What are the next necessary and even urgent processes that would need to be implemented in driving your country's accession closer to fruition? Any examples from your line of work?

The most critical issue at the moment is ensuring stability and security. Unfortunately, we are currently lacking both, especially with political dialogue mired in disputes. There has been little movement in recent years, and this stagnation is holding the country's accession prospects back. And at the end of the day, it is going to be women who suffer the most from this process because they feel excluded. Furthermore, insecurity and a lack of safety impacts women differently than men. For example, instability in the country has impacted women's access to justice in Kosovo's northern regions. Moreover, women must grapple with the extreme politicisation of the judiciary and police institutions.

Consequently, in embarking on an EU path, we first need to achieve lasting stability and security. This includes securing funding for women's NGOs and women's groups and civil society. For example, there is palpable fear that the current EU sanctions on Kosovo could impact women disproportionately. Notably, women could find themselves further

For Kosovo, EU integration is synonymous with stability.

distanced or excluded from political or EU accession processes.

All told, more women need to be involved in high level political discussions and decision-making processes. And in communicating with EU institutions, it is further important to stress the strategic necessity for supporting women in Kosovo as an integral part of meaningful debates and decision-making processes.

What are your expectations from the new EU leadership and the member states in finding beneficial meeting points towards successful enlargement?

For Kosovo, EU integration is synonymous with stability. And across south and north, women in Kosovo, indeed, want this stability. In discussions with women from both the Albanian and Serbian communities, the common desire is for the EU to embrace a swifter and more inclusive enlargement process. For instance, one activist from Mitrovica mentioned how the inclusion of Kosovo into the Council of Europe would have made a real difference for women in her community. It would have symbolised that they are finally a part of Kosovo rather than being merely a part of ongoing political discussions that fail to give any real hope for these vulnerable groups.

These processes must be accelerated, and we need a commitment to move forward. For example, the recent visa liberalisation for Kosovo in January 2024 marked a positive step, signalling that we are part of the EU and should aim for full membership. But if the process is prolonged any

Women bring a different approach to leadership, one that is often more focused on long-term stability and practical solutions.

further, external actors could quickly exploit the situation, delaying Kosovo's progress. The inclusion of Kosovo in the EU market, freedom of movement, and other measures outlined by the Berlin process are crucial. Financial support for countries that meet the required criteria is also important. Advancing the regional Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), which has already reached some promising decisions, will further integrate Kosovo and prepare it for EU membership in the future.

However, women should not be overlooked in this process. Small businesses, often run by women, will be impacted, and we need to pay attention to their needs in drafting any strategies and policies. Engaging with women and including them in these discussions will make these processes more understandable and accessible to citizens overall.

How can women in leadership roles drive societal and policy developments to enhance the accession process?

Despite having women in prominent positions (including the current president), key decision-making processes, such as political negotiations, are still dominated

by men. We need to see more women in executive roles, not just in parliament but in ministries and other leadership positions. This inclusion would create a more stable, safe, and secure environment for everyone. Women bring a different approach to leadership, one that is often more focused on long-term stability and practical solutions. They are less likely to be driven by short-term political gains, nationalism, or populism.

One area where we are advocating for change is in the enforcement of gender quotas. Currently, Kosovo

has a 30% quota for women in politics, which has helped to increase female representation in parliament and other governmental bodies. However, this quota is not enough. We need to move towards equal representation to ensure true gender parity. Since we have equal percentages of men and women in our population and a law providing for gender equality, it is both common sense and a legally sensible course. There is a case currently before the Constitutional Court, brought by the Ombudsperson, which calls for political parties to fully

comply with this parity system. This would be a significant step forward, ensuring that women are not just token representatives, but active participants in decision-making processes. We hope the EU can include these types of requirements into the accession framework itself, to make it more conditional. At the end of the day, it is about equality of opportunity.



Ariana Qosaj Mustafa

Adjunct Lecturer on Women, Work and Culture subject at American University in Kosovo/Rochester Institute of Technology and Chair of Board of Kosovo Women's Network.

Dr. Qosaj-Mustafa has over 20 years of experience in the field of policy and legal review, research, and capacity building of institutions focused on work related to gender, the rule of law, and human rights in Kosovo.

She holds a PHD in Law from the Faculty of Law "Justinianus Primus" in Skopje, University Kiril and Metodij of North Macedonia. She also holds a Master of Science degree in Gender, Development and Globalization from the London School of Economics and Political Science in UK and a bachelor's degree in law from the Law Faculty at the

University of Prishtina. She was awarded a professional certificate with high honours, from the Gender Studies Centre of Dartmouth College, US, September-November 2017. She has recently been awarded by the US State Department Educational and Cultural Affairs with the professional certificate from the International Visitor Leadership Program, November-December 2021 in the theme of Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Accessibility.



Moldova

Olesea Stamate

Member of Parliament of Moldova

What are the next necessary and even urgent processes that would need to be implemented in driving your country's accession closer to fruition? Any examples from your line of work?

Justice reform is by far the most important and necessary process that needs to be carried out for Moldova to advance in its EU accession. While the justice-related accession chapters were previously negotiated and closed at the end of the negotiation process, now they both open and close the process for candidate countries, ensuring that the most essential components of the rule of law in candidate states are fully in line with EU standards.

Moldova, since 2021, has introduced comprehensive and complex justice reforms. A main component includes the vetting of judges and prosecutors to forge a judiciary without corruption. This process, now at full pace, needs to be carried through to the end, regardless of all the challenges and resistance from within the justice system. At the same time, newly reformed anti-corruption institutions must deliver tangible results in investigating and prosecuting high-level corruption schemes, so that we, as a country, can guarantee that EU funds, among other expenditures, are disbursed responsibly.

What are your expectations from the new EU leadership and the member states in finding beneficial meeting points towards successful enlargement?

Moldova boasts several comparative advantages at this stage of its

economic development. For one, it is a small country, with around one-third of its population either already in the EU (as labour migrants) and/or EU citizens (having dual citizenship of Moldova and Romania). Moreover, Romania, its neighbour and good friend, succeeded in the negotiation process. The shared language between the two countries could facilitate a swifter and smoother integration process for Moldova. Thus, our expectations are that EU leadership and member states will continue supporting Moldova in its integration efforts, believing in the genuine will of Moldovan citizens to join the EU and taking into account the specific circumstances of Moldova (proximity to the war in Ukraine, a frozen conflict within Moldova, and extremely volatile political scene, given the persistent propaganda and destabilisation efforts of Russia), which deserve particular attention.

How can women in leadership roles drive societal and policy developments to enhance the accession process?

Moldova has already set an example when it comes to engaging women in political and social life. The double election quota (at least 40% must come from each gender and at least 4 in 10 from each gender for every ten candidates on party lists across all types of elections) has demonstrated excellent results. A total of 40% of MPs in the Moldovan parliament are women. Moreover, the country has a female president as well as women as the national bank governor, chair of the broadcasting council, vice-chair of parliament, and justice minister, with many women also serving as local

Our expectations are that EU leadership and member states will continue supporting Moldova in its integration efforts, believing in the genuine will of Moldovan citizens to join the EU and taking into account the specific circumstances of Moldova, which deserve particular attention.

mayors throughout the country. Engaging women more actively in politics has yielded remarkable results thus far. Legislation and policies, notably, have become more gender sensitive and oriented towards addressing societal needs. The activism of women mayors has received plaudits from citizens across many villages throughout Moldova. This interest and motivation will be essential for Moldova to efficiently access EU funds (especially pre-accession funds, where administrative capacity is an indisputable pre-condition). Finally, women in leadership roles are better placed to preserve peace and stability in this extremely volatile geopolitical context. Hence, the mission is clear: professional women are fully engaged towards steering the country into the EU.

Olesea Stamate

Olesea Stamate is a Moldovan MP, former chair of the legal committee (2021-2024) as well as former justice minister (2019). She is vice-president of the Action and Solidarity Party in Moldova. She is a lawyer by profession and holds an MA in European studies from European College in Natolin (Warsaw). Before joining politics, she was active in civil society; she acted as a program director at Soros Foundation in Moldova and later ran an NGO focused on enhancing the transparency and accountability of public authorities and policies.





Montenegro

Maida Gorčević

Minister of European Affairs

What are the next necessary and even urgent processes that would need to be implemented in driving your country's accession closer to fruition? Any examples from your line of work?

Montenegro is a front-runner in the EU accession process today even though it has endured 12 years of ups and downs to get there. Highly motivated, the country has progressed by taking numerous practical steps, with all segments of society, from government to public administration, parliament, and the private sector, committed towards achieving one common goal—becoming an EU member. Indeed, the public remains broadly supportive of EU accession at 80% backing. Montenegro is in 'flying mode' with a roadmap prepared to achieve '28 in 28', where the country would become the 28th member of the EU by 2028.

Challenges remain that must be tackled, including a lack of accession process experts as well as the need for technical assistance in completing complex reforms, the alignment of standards and regulations, and financial support for finalising all processes.

Aside from technical challenges that Montenegro needs to overcome, the promotion of EU values is another essential component the country must press ahead on. The development of effective strategic communication towards Montenegrin citizens and EU member states is a priority. On the one hand, citizens should be made aware of the benefits that membership will bring. On the other, member states should be

Empower women in leadership so we have better EU future.

cognisant of how new members like Montenegro will contribute to the Union (a NATO ally that is strategically best positioned in the Balkans, a country without 'open issues', and a state 100% aligned to the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy).

In short, Montenegro is moving rapidly towards accession, an achievement that could serve as a source of motivation and an example to others, enabling EU enlargement to succeed.

What are your expectations from the new EU leadership and the member states in finding beneficial meeting points towards successful enlargement?

The appointment of a commissioner solely dedicated to enlargement is a strong signal concerning how the second von der Leyen Commission will approach the accession process. In her first term, the Commission President already demonstrated clear support for the process, defending the interests of both the EU and the candidate countries. This continuity is important and a source of motivation for Montenegro, especially in light of the makeup of the new European Parliament. Ensuring two-way communication and informing EU leadership and member states on the country's progress and future contributions to the Union will be a priority for securing strong support.

How can women in leadership roles drive societal and policy developments to enhance the accession process?

There are now more women in higher leadership positions working on enlargement and supporting these processes, both in candidate countries and in the EU institutions. This allows us to together shape political messaging, to assert ourselves on enlargement, and ensure attentiveness to EU values, including gender equality. It further enables us to change necessary policies, solve complex challenges, and serve as role models for others.

Montenegro is moving rapidly towards accession, an achievement that could serve as a source of motivation and an example to others, enabling EU enlargement to succeed.



Maida Gorčević

Minister of European Affairs of Montenegro.

Maida Gorčević was born on December 28, 1987, in Bijelo Polje.

She graduated from the University of Montenegro – Faculty of Law and is a specialist in civil law. She is currently working on a Master's thesis.

From 2012 – 2020, she worked at the Publishing House “Nova knjiga”, where she played an active role in creating strategies for book promotions, represented the publishing house in the media, coordinated the organisation of the International Podgorica Book Fair, managed international projects, etc.

Within the 42nd Government of Montenegro, she was an Advisor to the Prime Minister for Minorities and performed complex tasks in the field of human and minority rights, as well as other tasks for the Prime Minister.

She was the President of the Management Board of the “Official Gazette of Montenegro”, as well as a member of numerous government commissions in the field of human and minority rights, as well as the Commission for Examinations for Work in the State Administration and the Commission for Personnel and Administrative Issues.

Subsequently, in 2023, she was elected as a Member of Parliament of Montenegro. On 31 October 2023, Maida Gorčević was elected as Minister of European Affairs.

She is a participant of the International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP) on “Women, Peace and Security” and an alumna of the U.S. State Department.

Maja Raičević

Executive Director at Women's Rights Center

What are the next necessary and even urgent processes that would need to be implemented in driving your country's accession closer to fruition? Any examples from your line of work?

In June 2024, during the Intergovernmental Conference in Brussels, Montenegro received a positive report on the fulfilment of the interim benchmarks in Chapters 23 and 24 and received the Final Benchmarks for these chapters. This means that, in the next few

years, Montenegro needs to pursue critical reforms on the rule of law, judiciary, and fundamental rights. An important element of the final benchmarks concerns the issue of gender equality and the fight against gender-based violence, which we influenced through our advocacy activities and regular communication with European institutions, both via the EU Delegation in Montenegro and the European Commission. We also regularly communicate with European Parliament members.

The Women's Rights Center closely monitors these processes

and proactively influences them through reports, participation in the national Working Group for Chapter 23, and other available advocacy mechanisms. We also used the public consultations process to submit our comments on the Montenegrin Growth Plan and shape the Reform Agenda of Montenegro. In our comments sent to the Ministry of European Affairs, we insisted on concrete measures and measurable indicators to achieve gender equality and fight gender-based violence. The measures we proposed are now formally part of the Reform Agenda of Montenegro

pivotal to influencing the success of Montenegro's accession to the EU.

As a part of the regional Western Balkans Coalition, we are shaping regional processes as well. Our common efforts resulted in the improved gender mainstreaming of the Berlin Process.

What are your expectations from the new EU leadership and the member states in finding beneficial meeting points towards successful enlargement?

We expect support in achieving the critical reforms that I mentioned and a realistic assessment of results, meaning that EU leadership should insist on substantial reforms rather than merely cosmetic ones. The sluggish pace here has largely slowed down the integration of Montenegro into the EU. Indeed, the insistence on progress and respect for human rights in the country is welcomed, without which there could be neither progress nor social cohesion, which are necessary preconditions for stability and economic growth.

I also expect support measures for civil society, especially organisations

that advocate for human rights as well as the protection of victims' rights and their access to justice. This is a litmus test for substantial reforms of the judiciary and the establishment of the rule of law in its full meaning. The role of non-governmental organisations in monitoring these reforms is immeasurable and needs to be further strengthened.

How can women in leadership roles drive societal and policy developments to enhance the accession process?

Women's leadership in the civil sector has proven to be critical to reforming society and improving the work of the state administration. Namely, the most influential non-governmental organisations in Montenegro are led by women who have achieved significant results in the fight against corruption, the field of judicial reform and human rights, and environmental issues, thus proving female leadership is uncompromising in the fight for a better society.

While women dominate the civil sector, this is not true for elected offices - the strong resistance of

The most influential non-governmental organisations in Montenegro are led by women who have achieved significant results in the fight against corruption, the field of judicial reform and human rights, and environmental issues, thus proving female leadership is uncompromising in the fight for a better society.

conservative party leaders still hinders women's participation in decision-making processes. Therefore, through our engagement, we influence legislation and support progressive women politicians to associate with each other and cooperate with other actors, especially civil society leaders.



Maja Raičević

Maja Raičević has been active in Montenegrin civil society for more than 20 years, advocating women's access to justice and judicial reform related to gender-based violence and victim protection. She is currently executive director of the NGO, Women's Rights Center.

Maja is actively engaged in the EU Accession of Montenegro and was one of the faces of the 2020 EEAS campaign "Europeans making a difference - Women leading the way in the Western Balkans".

She's a Fellow at the Open University's Gendered Organizational Practice Research Cluster, where WRC enjoys partner status.

In her TEDx Talk, Maja raised the issue of the 'unwanted daughters' in Montenegrin society and the associated abuse of prenatal tests, gender-biased sex selection, and other forms of discrimination against girls.



North Macedonia

Simonida Kacarska

Director of the European Policy Institute in Skopje

What are the next necessary and even urgent processes that would need to be implemented in driving your country's accession closer to fruition? Any examples from your line of work?

North Macedonia's EU accession process is idiosyncratic in several aspects. First, it is a country that boasts the longest period of legislative alignment among candidate countries - its Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the EU was signed in 2001. Second, the country's accession process has been bogged down in bilateral disputes with neighbouring EU member states for nearly 15 years. As a result, more than a decade passed between the recommendation for the start of accession negotiations and the Council decision to endorse this recommendation in March 2020. Nevertheless, due to its early start, North Macedonia has achieved significant alignment despite formally stagnating in the accession process. In view of this rather distinct path to the

In view of its rather distinct path to the EU, the country urgently needs to provide tangible benefits to its citizens stemming from the two-decade long EU integration process.

EU, the country urgently needs to provide tangible benefits to its citizens stemming from the two-decade long EU integration process. This includes the recently proposed closer association of all candidates to different areas of the single market, respecting strict rule of law conditionality.

What are your expectations from the new EU leadership and the member states in finding beneficial meeting points towards successful enlargement?

The new geopolitical context in Europe after the Russian invasion of Ukraine has undoubtedly raised candidates' expectations of the EU's new leadership and its member states. Notably, the EU's newfound interest in enlargement policy has also led to major political changes such as the swift granting of candidate status for EU membership to Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. Still, at the same time, despite the Union's evident geopolitical prioritisation of the new candidates, progress towards enlargement has been slow in the Western Balkans. In view of this geopolitical reemergence of enlargement and the need to deliver in this area, my expectations are that the new EU leadership and the member states will allocate sufficient resources for supporting candidates both financially and technically to fulfil the requirements of the acquis. Strengthening the capacity and position of the Commission, including through the EU DG on enlargement as well as the line directorates, is essential towards successfully managing the enlargement process in the upcoming institutional term.

It is essential that the policymaking aspects of the accession process across all candidates incorporates an intersectional approach, recognising the various dimensions of inequality that individuals face.

How can women in leadership roles drive societal and policy developments to enhance the accession process?

Women in leadership roles can steer societal and policy developments that advance the EU accession process through a variety of venues. In fact, the EU accession process in candidate countries can be a significant driver towards advancing the gender equality agenda overall by achieving alignment with EU strategic documents and legislation. From this perspective, women in leadership roles often serve as key actors in advancing and supporting progressive economic and social policies. Based on my experience during the accession process, women in leadership positions have often proven to be

a voice for vulnerable groups and supported policy interventions aimed at addressing various societal challenges. Having said this, it is essential that the policymaking aspects of the accession process

across all candidates incorporates an intersectional approach, recognising the various dimensions of inequality that individuals face. Only with such an approach, supported by the standards and

policies of the Union, can the candidate countries counter the regressive trends, associated with anti-gender ideology, apparent also in some member states and other developed countries.



Simonida Kacarska, PhD

Simonida Kacarska is Director of the European Policy Institute (EPI), a think tank based in Skopje, North Macedonia. She holds a PhD in Politics and International Studies from the University of Leeds and an MA in European Politics from the Sussex European Institute, both in the UK.

She has 20 years of experience related to the political transformation and European integration of the Balkans in the government, academia, and think tank sector. Her publication record includes both academic and policy related research. Simonida is a regular media contributor and provides consultancy services to international organisations. In 2017/2018, she was a Memorial fellow of the German Marshall

Fund of the United States and a Policy Leader Fellow at the European University Institute in Florence. Since the beginning of 2024, she has also served as an enlargement candidate member of the European Economic and Social Committee.

Radmila Shekerinska

Vice-President, Party of European Socialists (PES)

What are the next necessary and even urgent processes that would need to be implemented in driving your country's accession closer to fruition? Any examples from your line of work?

Accession represents change and change demands priorities. While the accession process is multi-faceted and complex, influencing everything and everyone eventually – certain “mountains are more important and difficult to climb”. Allow me to focus on two of them.

In the case of North Macedonia, the trickiest “rocky mountains” were two bilateral disputes (first with

Greece and then Bulgaria) that in the course of 15 years have blocked or hindered its EU path. Hence, the present stalemate can be surmounted through the adoption of a constitutional amendment (defined in the so-called “French proposal”) adding the Bulgarian minority into its preamble. Easier said than done, recognising the difficulty of producing a two-thirds parliamentary majority, especially after heightened tensions between the two countries.

The first and most damaging victim of such bilateral disputes are domestic reforms that become fully overshadowed by them. This is the second priority – for successful EU enlargement, the country needs to

deliver on meaningful reforms in the fundamentals cluster. The reforms need to go beyond the perpetual law amending, action plans, and training (which are important but do not suffice) – they need to display political will and decisive action, for example, against partisan and corrupt influence on the judicial system. If we are honest, we will admit that no European process should substitute for the national “hunger” for credible reforms. All key stakeholders need to show genuine political passion towards pushing the country forward. If national politicians, experts, the media, and citizens do not insist on having legal security and fair

The key argument for women's involvement in the EU accession process lies in their strong focus on long-term objectives. Accession is a marathon, even under the best circumstances, and success requires careful pacing and strategic foresight.

courts, chances are they will never have them irrespective of the support or the behaviour of the European Union.

Both challenges require commitment and knowledge - not just expecting geopolitics to do the trick. Both also need ambition and drive; raising the bar high enough and then jumping even beyond. This is how we can elevate and maintain the attention of Brussels and the capitals.

When North Macedonia started its EU accession process, it was a country recovering from the consequences of wars in former Yugoslavia and its own internal ethnic conflict. The EU emphasised peace and stability, which translated into political reforms, minority rights, and decentralised government. Based on their Balkan experience, expectations were running low. Therefore, no one really welcomed our EU membership application. It took three years of political and organisational commitment, high motivation, and teamwork to convince EU officials and experts that we are serious and ready. North Macedonia was the first among the Western Balkan countries to become an EU candidate, solely because we did not “put all our eggs” in the geopolitical “basket” but delivered beyond expectations on several reform fronts.

What are your expectations from the new EU leadership and the member states in finding beneficial meeting points towards successful enlargement?

The European Union must continue its successful enlargement process, which has brought 70 years of peace and prosperity. This round of enlargement should address old challenges like democratic progress and economic convergence, while tackling new ones such as geopolitical competition and the rise of autocracy and populism.

A fresh incentive is needed—an “Agenda 2030” to outline clear steps and realistic offers for aspiring countries. Research shows that without a concrete accession perspective, conditionality fails to drive systemic reforms. While 2030 should not be a promise, it should be a credible, honest goal that rewards progress and penalises setbacks.

The European Commission should conduct a review in 2026 to assess which countries are on track to meet the criteria by 2030. Those progressing will move forward faster, while others will need extra effort.

Within this process, the EU should remain firm on core values, especially media freedom, and reward rule-of-law progress by involving acceding countries in European institutions. Gradual access to Cohesion Funds during negotiations will ensure real preparation for membership, with progress rewarded and regression penalised.

How can women in leadership roles drive societal and policy developments to enhance the accession process?

Interestingly enough, women have always played a prominent role in North Macedonia's EU path. As Deputy Prime Minister in charge of EU accession in probably the most successful and

optimistic period for the process (2002-2006), I have witnessed the abundance of knowledge and enthusiasm that women have infused into the process – as vocal political leaders, hard-working civil servants, and selfless experts.

When North Macedonia began investing in its EU experts in 2003 by sending young civil servants to pursue master's degrees in EU-related fields at top European universities and promoting them within the public administration, I was not surprised that the majority were young women. They worked tirelessly, prioritised teamwork, and stayed committed through setbacks and delays. This network of highly educated and dedicated individuals became the driving force behind the accession process, enhancing the country's reputation both domestically and with EU counterparts. Notably, until recently, North Macedonia's Deputy Chief EU negotiator—a respected and highly efficient young woman—was instrumental in coordinating the entire screening process.

The key argument for women's involvement in the EU accession process lies in their strong focus

For successful EU enlargement, the country needs to deliver on meaningful reforms in the fundamentals cluster. The reforms need to go beyond the perpetual law amending, action plans, and training (which are important but do not suffice) – they need to display political will and decisive action.

on long-term objectives. Accession is a marathon, even under the best circumstances, and success requires careful pacing and strategic foresight. Those who approach it as a sprint risk burnout, potentially turning from passionate advocates into disillusioned sceptics. The journey is far from smooth, marked

by both triumphs and setbacks, but for acceding countries, staying the course, sustaining focus, and preserving internal unity is vital. Women's ability to remain committed to long-term goals makes them ideally suited to lead these challenging processes.



Radmila Shekerinska

Vice-President, Party of European Socialists (PES).

Radmila Shekerinska has served two terms as Minister of Defence of North Macedonia, becoming the first woman in that role and overseeing North Macedonia's accession to NATO.

She also held the position of Deputy Prime Minister twice, where she played a pivotal role in securing EU candidate status for the country. A four-term Member of the Parliament, Shekerinska chaired its National Council for European Integration.

Shekerinska was awarded the Order "Commander of the National Order for Merit of France" and named a Young Global Leader by the World Economic Forum. She led two OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Missions.

She is a member of the European Council for Foreign Relations, the Munich Young Leaders Group and the Med-Or Foundation International Board. Shekerinska has joined the Task Force on Building a European Pillar within the Transatlantic Relationship of the Belfer Center at Harvard's Kennedy School and the Group of Experts of LSE IDEAS project on non-nuclear deterrence.

Shekerinska holds an MA in International Relations from Tufts University's Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy.



Ukraine

Olha Vasylevska-Smahliuk

Member of Parliament of Ukraine

What are the next necessary and even urgent processes that would need to be implemented in driving your country's accession closer to fruition? Any examples from your line of work?

Ukraine's accession to the European Community will guarantee security for all its members. Yes, our country is at war, but it is not a war for territory or resources. It is a war for democratic values, for the right to freedom. In this regard, Ukraine is an outpost for all of Europe. If Ukraine loses this conflict, the next war will be fought in the countries of the Baltic Sea Region and Eastern Europe. Therefore, the most urgently needed steps involve helping Ukraine win this war. We cannot do this alone. We need the help of our partners, and we need to apply pressure on Russia's proxies in Europe to prevent them from undermining these efforts.

A second important step concerns strengthening trust between Ukraine and the European Union. This trust must be fostered not only through words - but also deeds. Despite the war, Ukraine is now a country of opportunity, investment, and business development. Ukraine sorely needs European investments in our security, energy, education, and science sectors.

Ukraine, in turn, is ready to play by the rules of the EU community. During my parliamentary term, we adopted all the necessary legislation to combat money laundering, terrorist financing, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. We abolished the corrupt tax police and created a single body to fight financial

The desire to join the European Union is enshrined in our Constitution.

and economic crime. We have ensured the independence of the National Bank of Ukraine and created the conditions for one of the most effective markets for payment services and fintech markets in the world.

As for my constituency (Borodyanka, Bucha) - it was completely destroyed during the Russian occupation of the Kyiv region. Billions of dollars are currently being invested by international partners to make these settlements better than they were before the full-scale invasion. Thanks to openness and dialogue, partners are willing to invest in these areas.

What are your expectations from the new EU leadership and the member states in finding beneficial meeting points towards successful enlargement?

The desire to join the European Union is enshrined in our Constitution. For this aspiration, our citizens are fighting on the battlefield, sacrificing their lives, and enduring wounds inflicted by Russian missiles. Ukraine is tired of the demands of its eastern "neighbour" and yearns for freedom among equals. As Ukraine continues to face Russian aggression, we look to the EU for stronger security commitments and support for our territorial integrity. One component of that commitment pertains to a partnership in developing

sustainable energy solutions and reducing the dependence on Russian resources both in the EU and Ukraine. Any dime given to the Russian economy through energy trade fuels devastation in my home country. We need to devise ways to curtail European pipelines transferring money directly into the Russian budget and consequently funding its military machine.

We welcome the new reports by Draghi and Letta, which acknowledge these problems and express a desire to solve the issues through single market innovations and integration into the single energy, defence, and science sectors. The gradual inclusion of Ukraine in the EU single market and support for Ukrainian businesses to adapt to EU standards promises to create a mutually beneficial path forward, strengthening both Ukraine and the EU in the process. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the EU's economy is over-regulated and the entire system is somewhat overwhelmingly bureaucratic, presenting a challenge not only for Ukraine but for the entire

Women in leadership roles can significantly contribute to Ukraine's EU accession process. Their involvement can help ensure that the reforms and policies implemented are inclusive, comprehensive, and aligned with EU values and standards.

European community. Even before full membership, we hope for meaningful participation in relevant EU policy discussions and programmes. Ukraine can share its digital solutions towards reducing bureaucracy as one of the world's leaders in e-governance and on the digitalisation of government processes. To this end, we can serve as a platform for testing simplified or de-regulated systems that will help retain human capital and prevent its migration to overseas markets.

Given Ukraine's extraordinary circumstances, we hope for a streamlined, expedited pathway to membership that acknowledges our rapid reforms and sacrifices in defending European values.

How can women in leadership roles drive societal and policy developments to enhance the accession process?

From personal experience, I witnessed women compete with one another for many years until

they realised that they could achieve more together. Now, during war, when men are mostly on the front lines, women have started to form support groups. In Ukraine, the number of women in power has increased, not only at the local level, but also at the national level. A greater degree of empathy among women is leading them into areas traditionally unpopular with men - issues related to the needy, orphans, social welfare, and culture. Women in leadership roles bring diverse perspectives, innovative approaches, and a focus on inclusive policies, for example, by advocating for improved childcare and elderly care services to support working families, promoting policies that support women's entrepreneurship and access to finance, and supporting women's involvement in peace negotiations and post-conflict reconstruction (mainly by addressing the specific impacts of conflict on women and girls). Our women have delivered progress and tangible results for civil society in these areas. Ukrainian women are also fighting on the front

lines and have proved that they can defend the state equally well.

It is an immense tragedy that many Ukrainian women, including volunteers, medics, and police officers, are being held captive by Russia and they are not being released. Recently the Ukrainian journalist Viktoriya Roshchyna died while being transferred between colonies in Russia. It is imperative to speak out against the sexual violence, torture, starvation, and suffering these women are enduring simply because they are Ukrainian. No process of Ukrainian integration can be successful until we bring those captured back home.

By focusing on the aforementioned areas, women in leadership roles can significantly contribute to Ukraine's EU accession process. Their involvement can help ensure that the reforms and policies implemented are inclusive, comprehensive, and aligned with EU values and standards.



Olha Vasylevska-Smahliuk

Member of Parliament of Ukraine, elected from Bucha and Borodyanka, Deputy Chair of the Committee on Finance, Taxation and Customs Policy, Servant of the People faction. Former Ukrainian journalist, specialising in investigations on economic and political corruption.

She was one of the authors of the law that in 2021 abolished the outdated and corrupt Tax Police and established the Bureau of Economic Security of Ukraine. She was responsible for legislation on preventive mechanisms for the legalisation of illegally obtained funds by public officials, mechanisms for validating information on the ultimate beneficial owners and ownership structure of legal entities, regulation of the work of debt collection companies in the settlement of overdue debts, and placing a legal cap on consumer loan interest rates (of 1% per day).

Former Deputy Chair of the Temporary Investigative Commission to investigate potential violations of Ukrainian law by the Bureau of Economic Security of Ukraine.



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