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Stitching laws with golden thread

It is not political opposition from Brussels that risks delaying Ukraine's accession, but bureaucratic inertia within its own institutions

For Kyiv, it's not high-level politics but everyday policy delivery that will determine its EU future. Rule of law reforms and the fight against corruption have long stood as yardsticks for Ukraine's European aspirations, receiving robust scrutiny from both Kyiv and Brussels. But while legal integrity remains essential, the true challenge of Ukraine's EU accession now lies elsewhere: in the quiet machinery of government that must operationalise European law.

The start of accession negotiations in June 2024 has shifted the process from a declarative to an operational phase. Ukraine must now go beyond aligning its legislation in theory. It must translate the *acquis communautaire* into day-to-day practice, across sectors as diverse as food safety, competition law, and environmental protection. This requires not just new laws but functioning institutions that can draft, implement, and monitor those laws. And therein lies the rub.

Keeping the high level of support

Ukraine's ministries and sectoral agencies, the backbone of policy implementation, are not yet fit for this task. As noted in the SIGMA Monitoring Report, most ministries lack in-house capacity to draft legislation in alignment with complex EU directives. Legal texts are often produced externally, by civil society organisations, consultants, or donor-funded experts, leaving reforms fragmented and without lasting ownership. This has led to slow, uneven reform with limited impact on citizens' daily lives.

This administrative gap has broader consequences. When EU alignment is reduced to checking boxes on legal harmonisation, it ceases to deliver results that people can feel. Wartime sacrifices have raised expectations, and if tangible improvements to public services, consumer protections, or environmental quality do not materialise, public support for EU

membership could erode. That support remains strong, but it should not be taken for granted.

Recent screening rounds, including for the 'Internal Market' and 'External Relations' clusters, have made the need for horizontal coordination urgent. Legal approximation is no longer theoretical; it must happen in real-time. Ministries need to develop multidisciplinary teams that combine legal, policy and technical expertise. These teams should be embedded across government, not siloed in the Ministry of Justice or the Ministry for European Integration.

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Their role would be twofold: draft EU-compliant legislation and guide its implementation. This includes training civil servants, overseeing compliance and linking legislative reforms to practical deliverables. The goal is to make EU integration a whole-of-government project.

There are models to draw from. According to KAS/UCEP Policy Brief, Poland and Croatia, for instance, created legislative academies and public administration schools to professionalise the drafting and implementation of EU law. Ukraine should adapt and expand existing reform initiatives. Legal clinics, universities and public institutions must serve as talent pipelines — not just for lawyers and judges, but for policy drafters and EU specialists.

Encouragingly, momentum is building. At the July 2025 Ukraine Recovery Conference in Rome, the EU announced a new support package that included practical measures for integration and expanded Ukraine's participation in the Erasmus+ programme. This points to a shift from political signalling toward operational alignment. With nearly €147 billion in financial and military support committed, the EU is invested in Ukraine's success. It must now ensure that support strengthens the state apparatus, not just its laws.

Incentives need recalibrating. Ministries should be evaluated not only on their outputs but on their contribution to EU alignment. Parliamentary oversight bodies must monitor sectoral legislation, not just flagship reforms. Civil society must be empowered to track implementation across sectors, well beyond the judiciary.

The cost of inaction is high. It is not political opposition from Brussels that risks delaying Ukraine's accession, but bureaucratic inertia within its own institutions. A growing gap between paper laws and real-world

capacity could breed disillusionment and open the door to populist backlash.

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But the foundations are promising. Ukraine's civil servants are eager to build new skills. Its civil society is among Europe's most active. And public support for the EU remains resilient. What is missing are the systems to connect this ambition to concrete implementation.

The war has accelerated some reforms. Now is the time to institutionalise them. Ukraine must build the institutional integrity necessary for EU membership while continuing to defend its borders. For its part, the EU must look beyond the courtroom. It is not only judges who will determine Ukraine's European future, but the mid-level civil servants in ministries who must apply EU law.

The hard work of alignment does not happen at press conferences. It happens in government offices, through meticulous drafting, inter-agency coordination and daily policy delivery. If the EU wants Ukraine to succeed, that's where it must direct its attention.

The future of Europe depends not only on political declarations but also on effective governance. Ukraine is ready to move forward. The question is whether the EU will help it build the engine room needed to stay the course.



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