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Ukraine's EU Accession in Practice:

Sectoral Harmonisation,
Regional Implementation,
and Public Perceptions



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Methodology

This report applies a mixed analytical approach combining legal and policy analysis with sociological research. The purpose of this methodology is to assess not only the formal progress of Ukraine's alignment with the EU acquis, but also the extent to which EU-oriented reforms are visible, understood and implementable at the regional and local levels.

The report is based on the assumption that European integration cannot be measured only through the adoption of national legislation. Legal harmonisation is a necessary condition for accession, but it does not automatically guarantee practical implementation in territorial communities. Therefore, the study combines a juridical assessment of national reforms with sociological evidence from local actors who are directly involved in implementation.

1. Selection of Chapters

The report focuses on five negotiation chapters of the EU accession process:

- Chapter 15: Energy;
- Chapter 19: Social Policy and Employment;
- Chapter 20: Enterprise and Industrial Policy;
- Chapter 23: Judiciary and Fundamental Rights;
- Chapter 24: Justice, Freedom and Security.

These chapters were selected because of their particular importance for Ukraine's EU accession process and their direct relevance to regional and local implementation.

Chapter 15 on Energy is central to Ukraine's integration into the EU energy market and to the resilience of communities during wartime. Energy reforms affect not only national infrastructure and market rules, but also local heating systems, critical infrastructure, renewable generation, energy efficiency and emergency resilience.

Chapter 19 on Social Policy and Employment is essential for social cohesion, labour-market adaptation, inclusion of vulnerable groups and protection of human capital. Its implementation directly affects veterans, internally displaced persons, people with disabilities, women, workers, employers and local social-service systems.

Chapter 20 on Enterprise and Industrial Policy is important for economic recovery, SME development, regional competitiveness and integration into the EU internal market. It is especially relevant for communities trying to attract investment, support local business, develop industrial capacity and rebuild local economies.

Chapter 23 on Judiciary and Fundamental Rights belongs to the fundamentals cluster and is a core condition for accession. It concerns the rule of law, judicial independence, anti-corruption, human rights, non-discrimination and the protection of basic freedoms. Although many reforms in this area are led by national institutions, their impact is experienced locally through access to justice, protection of rights and public trust in institutions.

Chapter 24 on Justice, Freedom and Security is equally central to the accession process because it covers border management, migration, asylum, law-enforcement cooperation and internal security. These issues are particularly important for Ukraine because its borders will become part of the EU's external border after accession, while local communities already face challenges related to internally displaced persons, migration, policing and security.

Together, these chapters allow the report to assess both the formal legal alignment of Ukraine with the EU acquis and the practical capacity of regions and communities to implement EU-oriented reforms.

2. Legal and Policy Analysis

The legal part of the research evaluates Ukraine's progress in selected negotiation chapters, with particular attention to the relationship between national legal alignment and regional implementation capacity.

The analysis is based on a review of:

- EU directives, regulations, decisions and policy frameworks;
- European Commission Ukraine Reports and enlargement documents;
- Ukrainian laws and draft laws;
- government strategies, roadmaps and action plans;
- reports of Ukrainian public institutions;
- assessments by international organisations;
- expert and civil-society reports relevant to the selected chapters.

The legal part of the report also uses a qualitative harmonisation assessment. Where appropriate, chapters provide approximate assessments of alignment and implementation, such as “high,” “medium,” “low,” or percentage-based estimates. These assessments are not presented as official EU scores. They are analytical judgements based on the reviewed legislation, European Commission evaluations, institutional evidence and the observed gap between national rules and local implementation.

3. Sociological Research Component

The sociological part of the research was designed to test how EU-related reforms are perceived and implemented at the regional and community levels. It complements the legal analysis by showing whether formal reforms are known, understood and applied by local actors.

The sociological research was conducted between **February and April 2026** and consisted of two parallel components: qualitative research and a pilot quantitative survey.

Ukraine’s Wartime Energy Sector: Resilience, Reform, and EU Alignment

Chapter 15: Energy

Executive Summary

Ukraine demonstrates a high level of legislative alignment with the EU energy acquis, making Chapter 15 one of the more advanced areas of the country's EU accession process. This progress is particularly significant given the severe damage caused to Ukraine's energy infrastructure by Russia's continued military attacks. The European Commission's 2025 Ukraine Report confirms that energy remains a central part of Ukraine's accession agenda and of Cluster 4, which covers the Green Agenda and sustainable connectivity (European Commission, 2025).

A key achievement has been Ukraine's integration into the European electricity system. Ukrenergo became a full member of ENTSO-E on 1 January 2024, after the European network confirmed Ukraine's compliance with the requirements for permanent synchronisation (ENTSO-E, 2023, 2024). This step strengthened Ukraine's physical and regulatory connection with the EU internal electricity market.

Ukraine has also made progress in renewable energy regulation, particularly through the development of guarantees of origin, as well as in energy efficiency, nuclear-safety alignment, and electricity-market reform. However, implementation remains uneven. The main gaps include the continued use of Public Service Obligations, insufficient flexible generation and storage capacity, delays in creating strategic oil stocks, weak investment conditions for renewable energy, and the unresolved nuclear-safety threat caused by Russia's occupation of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant.

The key policy priority is to move from a vulnerable centralised energy model toward a decentralised, flexible and resilient system. This requires investment in distributed generation, cogeneration, renewable energy, storage, microgrids, energy efficiency, and protected strategic reserves. Ukraine's energy reform should also remain socially balanced by combining market liberalisation with targeted support for vulnerable consumers.

1. Internal Energy Market: Electricity and Gas

Ukraine has made substantial progress in aligning its electricity and gas markets with the EU acquis, especially the principles of Regulation (EU) 2019/943 and Directive (EU) 2019/944. These acts form part of the EU framework for competitive, transparent and non-discriminatory energy markets.

One of the most important areas of reform has been cross-border electricity trade. Ukraine has gradually developed the regulatory framework needed for capacity allocation with neighbouring EU member states, including Poland, Slovakia, Romania and Hungary. This supports Ukraine's deeper integration into the EU internal electricity market and strengthens the role of electricity imports during periods of domestic generation shortages.

A central element of market reform has been unbundling, meaning the separation of energy transmission from production, supply and commercial activities. Under the EU's Third Energy Package, the same company should not simultaneously control transmission infrastructure and sell or produce energy. Such concentration creates a risk of monopoly behaviour and may limit competitors' access to networks.

Ukraine completed the main stage of gas-sector unbundling in 2019-2020 through the establishment of the independent Gas Transmission System Operator of Ukraine. Further governance adjustments in 2024-2025 aimed to strengthen the operator's independence from Naftogaz and bring the sector closer to EU and Energy Community requirements.

In the electricity sector, unbundling has focused on Ukrenergo, Ukraine's transmission-system operator. Ukrenergo operates under the Independent System Operator model and manages Ukraine's high-voltage electricity grid. Its full membership in ENTSO-E from 1 January 2024 confirms Ukraine's progress in meeting European operational and governance standards (ENTSO-E, 2023, 2024).

However, energy-sector unbundling remains advanced but not fully complete. A key concern is that the state continues to play a major role in both transmission and generation assets. In particular, further clarification is needed regarding the governance separation between Ukrenergo and major state-owned generation companies, including Energoatom. For this reason, Ukraine's unbundling progress can be assessed as high, but still requiring additional institutional safeguards.

Another unresolved issue is the continued use of Public Service Obligations. The PSO model helps keep electricity and gas affordable for households, but it also creates market distortions, contributes to debt accumulation and weakens competition. Directive (EU) 2019/944 allows public intervention in electricity pricing only where it is clearly justified, proportionate and time-limited. In Ukraine, wartime social and economic conditions have slowed the transition away from regulated prices.

Ukraine's energy market operates under extraordinary wartime pressure. Attacks on generation and grid infrastructure have increased dependence on imports from the EU and made emergency balancing more difficult. Electricity imports have helped prevent deeper shortages, but imported electricity is usually more expensive than domestic production. This creates additional pressure on industrial consumers and complicates the financial position of the energy sector.

The central implementation challenge is therefore not only legal harmonisation, but also the restoration of market liquidity, financial discipline and physical resilience. Without reducing debt accumulation and improving investor confidence, formal alignment with EU rules will not fully translate into a functioning competitive market.

2. Renewable Energy

Ukraine has made important progress in implementing elements of Directive (EU) 2018/2001 on the promotion of renewable energy. One of the most significant steps has been the development of guarantees of origin, which certify that a given quantity of electricity was produced from renewable sources. Guarantees of origin are important because they allow producers to monetise the environmental value of renewable electricity and create stronger links with European green-energy markets.

The State Agency on Energy Efficiency and Energy Saving of Ukraine obtained observer status in the Association of Issuing Bodies from 1 January 2023. This is an important step toward compatibility with European certification systems, although AIB status should not be confused with full hub connection or full market integration (SAEE, 2023; Association of Issuing Bodies).

Ukraine has also introduced mechanisms to support active consumers, including net billing. This enables households and businesses that generate renewable electricity, especially from rooftop solar panels, to participate more actively in the energy system. In wartime conditions, the combination of solar panels and battery storage has become increasingly important for household and community resilience.

The renewable-energy sector has suffered serious damage due to Russian military aggression, particularly in southern and eastern regions where many large wind and solar assets were located. This has shifted Ukraine's strategic focus from large centralised renewable projects toward distributed generation, microgrids and local energy resilience.

Renewable energy is increasingly used to support critical infrastructure. Municipalities and communities are installing solar panels, batteries, biomass, biogas and hybrid systems to provide backup power for hospitals, water utilities, schools, district heating systems and administrative buildings.

The main barrier remains investment. Renewable-energy projects face war-risk premiums, uncertainty over grid access, physical-security concerns and regulatory risk. A fully operational and internationally compatible guarantees-of-origin system could help attract private investment by allowing Ukrainian producers to sell renewable-energy certificates to European consumers.

3. Energy Efficiency

Ukraine is gradually integrating the principles of Directive (EU) 2023/1791 on energy efficiency. The main emphasis is on applying energy-efficiency requirements to reconstruction, particularly damaged residential buildings and social infrastructure.

The Law of Ukraine "On Energy Efficiency" introduced obligations for large enterprises to carry out regular energy audits. This is broadly consistent with the EU approach, which treats energy efficiency as a tool for reducing energy demand, lowering emissions and improving industrial competitiveness.

Energy efficiency is especially important in the reconstruction process. If Ukraine rebuilds damaged housing and public buildings according to outdated standards, it will lock in high energy consumption for decades. Therefore, reconstruction should follow the principle of "build back better", meaning that restored buildings should be more efficient, safer and more resilient than before the war.

Implementation remains constrained by insufficient capital investment. The most visible progress has been achieved through grant-based programmes for multi-apartment buildings, including support for homeowner associations to improve insulation, heating systems and energy management.

However, Ukraine's housing stock remains old and energy inefficient. Many buildings were constructed during the Soviet period and require deep renovation. Current energy-efficiency requirements are easier to apply to new or reconstructed buildings, while the broader existing housing stock remains underfunded.

The long-term challenge is to move from fragmented grant programmes to a systemic renovation model. This should combine EU funding, municipal co-financing, private lending, energy-service companies and targeted support for low-income households.

4. Nuclear Energy and Safety

Nuclear energy remains one of the pillars of Ukraine's electricity system. Ukraine has significantly reduced its dependence on Russia in the nuclear sector, including through cooperation with non-Russian nuclear fuel suppliers such as Westinghouse. This diversification is important for both energy security and geopolitical independence.

Ukraine has also aligned key elements of its nuclear-safety framework with Euratom standards, including Directive 2014/87/Euratom. Further work is needed on the regulatory framework for new nuclear technologies, including small modular reactors. However, any future SMR deployment should be assessed carefully in terms of cost, safety, waste management, regulatory capacity and public accountability.

The most serious nuclear-safety issue remains the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant. The plant is under Russian occupation and has repeatedly faced risks related to external electricity supply, military activity and emergency preparedness. This creates a continuing nuclear-safety concern not only for Ukraine, but for Europe as a whole.

Ukraine is also advancing plans for new nuclear generation, including preparatory work for additional units at the Khmelnytskyi Nuclear Power Plant using AP1000 technology. Such projects could strengthen Ukraine's long-term generation capacity, but they require transparent procurement, environmental impact assessment, public consultation, transboundary consultations and full compliance with Euratom safety standards.

Nuclear expansion should also be accompanied by stronger public oversight and independent regulation. Given the high cost and strategic importance of nuclear projects, governance and transparency are essential conditions for EU-compatible development of the sector.

5. Energy Security and Oil Stocks

Ukraine's implementation of Directive 2009/119/EC on emergency oil stocks remains at an early stage. Under EU rules, countries must maintain emergency stocks of crude oil or petroleum products equivalent to at least 90 days of net imports or 61 days of consumption, whichever is higher (European Commission, n.d.).

Ukraine has adopted policy plans for minimum stocks of oil and petroleum products, but practical implementation has been delayed by wartime risks. Large storage facilities are vulnerable to missile and drone attacks, making traditional reserve models difficult to apply.

Ukraine's petroleum-products market has been substantially reoriented toward EU supply routes, especially through Poland, Romania and Bulgaria. This is a major energy-security achievement compared with the pre-war period.

However, physical stockpiling remains a challenge. Large oil depots are easy targets, so Ukraine has increasingly relied on dispersed storage, mobile reserves and diversified logistics routes. This model improves wartime survivability but complicates formal compliance with the EU emergency-stock framework.

A practical solution would be to combine domestic dispersed stocks with contractual storage arrangements in neighbouring EU member states. Poland and Romania could be particularly important partners for such arrangements because of their logistical connections with Ukraine.

Harmonisation Assessment Table

Sub-sector	Legislative harmonisation	Implementation level	Key challenge
Electricity market	High, approximately 85%	Medium, approximately 50%	Debt accumulation, PSO model, weak liquidity
Renewable energy	High, approximately 80-90%	Low to medium, approximately 30-40%	War damage, investment risk, grid constraints
Energy efficiency	Medium, approximately 65%	Medium, approximately 45%	Lack of funding, outdated housing stock
Nuclear safety	High, approximately 90-95%	Critical risk environment	Occupation of Zaporizhzhia NPP, governance risks
Oil stocks	Low to medium, approximately 20-30%	Initial, approximately 10-20%	Missile-strike risk, storage vulnerability, financing

Recommendations

1. Accelerate decentralised generation and flexible capacity

Ukraine should move from a vulnerable centralised energy model toward a decentralised and flexible system. This is both a wartime necessity and a long-term requirement for EU-compatible energy resilience.

The government should simplify permitting, land allocation and grid-connection procedures for small-scale generation facilities of up to 20 MW. Priority should be given to gas-piston units, gas turbines, biomass, biogas, cogeneration facilities and hybrid renewable systems.

Ukraine should also create a state-supported co-financing programme for municipalities to purchase cogeneration units. These units would allow cities to provide heat and electricity for critical infrastructure even when the main grid is damaged.

Industrial-scale energy storage should become a national priority. Storage is necessary for balancing renewable energy, reducing dependence on emergency imports and improving system stability.

2. Reform energy pricing while protecting vulnerable consumers

A gradual transition to cost-reflective electricity and gas prices is necessary for EU integration and market sustainability. However, this reform must be socially balanced and carefully communicated.

Ukraine should adopt a clear roadmap for phasing out broad PSO mechanisms. Instead of subsidising energy prices for all households, the state should provide direct financial support to vulnerable consumers.

Targeted support should be based on household income and energy burden. A practical model would be to provide assistance to households whose utility costs exceed a defined share of family income.

Tariff reform should be accompanied by a public information campaign explaining the structure of energy prices. Citizens should understand what part of the tariff covers generation, transmission, distribution, debt repayment and reconstruction of damaged infrastructure.

3. Establish strategic petroleum-product reserves

Ukraine should finalise and implement secondary legislation under Directive 2009/119/EC. It should clearly define the obligations of the state and private traders in creating and maintaining emergency oil stocks.

Instead of relying on large oil depots, Ukraine should develop a dispersed system of underground, mobile and small-scale storage facilities across the country. This would reduce the risk of destruction by missile and drone attacks.

Ukraine should also negotiate agreements with neighbouring EU countries on storing part of its strategic petroleum reserve abroad. Such arrangements would improve compliance with EU standards while reducing physical-security risks.

4. Promote green reconstruction and energy efficiency

Energy reconstruction should be fully aligned with EU green-transition principles. Damaged buildings and social infrastructure should be rebuilt according to high energy-performance standards.

Near-zero-energy-building principles should be applied wherever technically and financially feasible. This is especially important for schools, hospitals, municipal buildings and reconstructed residential districts.

Ukraine should strengthen monitoring of reconstruction projects financed by the state, international donors and EU instruments. Energy-efficiency requirements should not be treated as optional.

The guarantees-of-origin market should also become fully operational and compatible with European systems. This would help attract private investment into wind, solar, biomass and biogas projects.

5. Strengthen nuclear resilience and governance

Ukraine should continue diversifying nuclear fuel and technology partnerships away from Russia. At the same time, any new nuclear construction must meet strict requirements on safety, transparency and public accountability.

Preparatory work for new units at the Khmelnytskyi Nuclear Power Plant should proceed only with full environmental impact assessment, transboundary consultations and independent regulatory review.

The occupation of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant should remain a priority issue in EU-Ukraine energy-security dialogue. Ukraine and the EU should continue coordinating emergency preparedness, grid protection, nuclear-safety monitoring and international diplomatic pressure.

Conclusions

Ukraine has achieved substantial progress in aligning its energy sector with the EU acquis. Chapter 15 is therefore one of the strongest areas of Ukraine's accession preparation. The country has moved decisively toward integration with the European energy market, especially through synchronisation with the continental European electricity grid and Ukrenergo's full membership in ENTSO-E from 1 January 2024 (ENTSO-E, 2023, 2024).

At the same time, the gap between legal alignment and practical implementation remains significant. Russia's continued attacks on energy infrastructure have weakened generation capacity, increased dependence on imports and forced Ukraine to prioritise emergency resilience over long-term market reform. As a result, several EU-aligned reforms remain incomplete, including price liberalisation, full market liquidity, strategic oil-stock formation and large-scale energy-efficiency renovation.

The most urgent structural challenge is to transform Ukraine's energy system from a centralised and vulnerable model into a decentralised, flexible and resilient one. This requires rapid investment in distributed generation, cogeneration, renewable energy, energy storage, microgrids and municipal resilience. Such a shift is not only necessary for wartime survival but also consistent with the EU's wider energy-transition objectives.

Ukraine's energy transition must also remain socially balanced. A gradual move away from broad Public Service Obligations and regulated household tariffs is necessary for market sustainability. However, this should be accompanied by targeted support for vulnerable consumers, transparent communication and direct financial assistance for households most exposed to energy poverty.

Energy efficiency should become a central principle of reconstruction. Rebuilding damaged housing and public infrastructure to outdated standards would preserve high energy consumption for decades. Instead, reconstruction should be used to modernise the building stock, reduce household energy costs and align Ukraine with EU climate and energy-efficiency goals.

Nuclear energy will remain an important part of Ukraine's energy mix, but it must be developed under strict conditions of safety, transparency and independent regulation. The occupation of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant remains the most serious nuclear-safety risk in Europe and should continue to be treated as a priority issue in EU-Ukraine energy-security cooperation.

Overall, Ukraine's progress in Chapter 15 is strategically significant but uneven. The country has built a strong legal and institutional foundation for EU energy integration. Full compliance, however, will depend on implementation capacity, infrastructure protection, investment mobilisation and governance reform. The EU should therefore continue supporting Ukraine not only through regulatory guidance, but also through targeted financial instruments for decentralised generation, energy efficiency, emergency reserves and resilient infrastructure.

For regional and local authorities, Chapter 15 should be treated as a practical implementation agenda. Communities need to translate national EU-oriented reforms into investment-ready projects, reliable public services and measurable improvements in energy resilience. This regional dimension will be essential for Ukraine's successful accession process and for its long-term integration into the EU energy market.

Transformation of Ukraine's Social Policy and Labour Market in the Context of EU Accession

Chapter 19: Social Policy and Employment

Executive Summary

Chapter 19, Social Policy and Employment, concerns the practical capacity of the state, regions and territorial communities to protect workers, promote equality, maintain social dialogue and provide inclusive social services. Ukraine has made meaningful national-level progress. The government registered a new Draft Labour Code in January 2026, draft legislation on occupational safety and health remains under parliamentary consideration, the Law on Collective Agreements and Contracts modernised the legal framework for collective bargaining, and the Unified Information System of the Social Sphere has digitalised a growing number of benefits and services.

At the same time, the implementation gap remains substantial. The European Commission's 2025 Ukraine Report notes the need to strengthen labour inspection, social dialogue, gender equality, occupational safety and social protection in line with the EU acquis. War-related demographic pressure, displacement, labour shortages, increased unpaid care burdens, and regional inequality make implementation at community level as important as national legal reform.

The central finding of this chapter is that Ukraine is moving toward EU social policy standards, but real convergence will depend on whether national reforms produce measurable improvements in regions and communities. Local governments will be decisive in translating EU-oriented legislation into safer workplaces, inclusive employment, accessible services, targeted social support and effective social dialogue.

1. Labour Law

Ukrainian labour law is undergoing its most significant transformation since the adoption of the current Labour Code of 1971. The government-initiated Draft Labour Code of Ukraine, registration No. 14386, was registered in the Verkhovna Rada in January 2026. Its stated purpose is to modernise employment regulation, align Ukrainian labour rules with EU standards, and replace fragmented or outdated Soviet-era approaches with clearer contractual and rights-based regulation.

A central innovation is the proposed legal presumption of employment relations. The draft introduces criteria that allow courts and inspection bodies to identify disguised employment even where civil-law contracts are used. This approach is consistent with the EU direction in regulating platform work and preventing misclassification of workers, particularly in the context of Directive (EU) 2024/2831 on improving working conditions in platform work (Directive (EU) 2024/2831, 2024).

The working-time dimension is particularly important. Directive 2003/88/EC establishes minimum requirements on working time, rest periods and annual leave. During martial law, Ukraine has allowed exceptional flexibility in critical sectors, including extended working time under Law No. 2136-IX. This may be justified as a temporary wartime measure, but it should not become a permanent post-war model (Directive 2003/88/EC, 2003; European Commission, 2025).

Occupational safety and health is another priority area. Draft Law No. 10147, "On Safety and Health of Workers at Work," was registered in October 2023 and remains a key EU-integration bill. It is designed to move Ukraine from a reactive system focused on post-accident liability toward a preventive, risk-management model closer to Council Directive 89/391/EEC.

The main challenge is not only adoption of a new Labour Code, but implementation. Labour inspection capacity remains constrained by war, budget limitations and uneven regional administration. The spread of platform work, informal work and disguised employment also makes enforcement more complex. In addition, occupational safety

risks have intensified in sectors operating under emergency conditions, especially where temporary equipment, damaged infrastructure or long working hours are involved.

For EU convergence, Ukraine will need to ensure that labour reform does not reduce protections in the name of flexibility. EU-compatible labour modernisation should combine contractual clarity with enforceable rights, effective inspection, social dialogue and access to judicial remedies.

2. Equality and Non-Discrimination

Gender equality is a core element of EU social policy. For Ukraine, alignment requires continued implementation of the principles of Directive 2006/54/EC on equal treatment in employment and occupation, Directive 2010/41/EU on self-employed workers, and Directive (EU) 2023/970 on pay transparency (Directive (EU) 2023/970, 2023).

Ukraine has a formal legal basis for equality through the Law "On Ensuring Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men." However, the war has worsened practical inequalities. UN Women reported that by 2024 only 48% of displaced women were employed compared with 71% of displaced men, and women made up 72.5% of registered unemployed persons in 2023 (UN Women, 2025a). UN Women also reported that women earned 41.4% less than men on average in 2023, reversing pre-war progress (UN Women, 2025b).

The Government of Ukraine has adopted a National Strategy to reduce the gender pay gap from 18.6% to 13.6% by 2030. This objective is aligned with EU principles of equal pay for work of equal value and with the direction of the EU Pay Transparency Directive.

A major labour-market challenge is the inclusion of veterans, persons with disabilities, internally displaced persons and people facing multiple forms of vulnerability. Ukraine's future labour market will include a large number of demobilised persons, persons with war-related injuries, and families affected by displacement. The EU approach requires reasonable accommodation, accessibility, non-discrimination and support for independent living.

Local implementation is especially important. Employers may formally support inclusion but lack resources to adapt workplaces, redesign jobs, or introduce flexible work arrangements. Communities therefore need to connect employers with compensation mechanisms, vocational training, social services, transport accessibility and rehabilitation support.

Displaced women face particular barriers because gender, displacement status, care responsibilities and local labour-market conditions overlap. In host communities, employment support for displaced women should be linked to childcare, reskilling, psychological support and safe transport.

At the community level, equality policies often remain secondary to security and reconstruction priorities. Yet equality and inclusion are not optional add-ons. They directly affect labour-force participation, household resilience, social cohesion and local economic recovery. Communities that neglect childcare, accessibility, anti-discrimination and women's employment will face weaker labour-market recovery and higher long-term social costs.

3. Social Dialogue

Social dialogue is a core element of the European social model. It is also relevant for Ukraine's accession process because labour-market reforms, recovery planning and business adaptation require trust between public authorities, employers and workers. The European Pillar of Social Rights emphasises social dialogue and involvement of workers as essential principles of a fair and inclusive labour market.

Ukraine's social dialogue framework is based on the Constitution, the Law "On Social Dialogue in Ukraine" and the Law "On Collective Agreements and Contracts," No. 2937-IX. The 2023 law modernised collective bargaining and introduced a more flexible framework for agreements at national, sectoral, territorial and local level.

Level	Actors	Main instruments	Implementation issue
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National	Government, national trade unions, employer organisations	General agreement; National Tripartite Social and Economic Council	Needs stronger functionality and regular deliberation.
Sectoral	Ministries, sectoral unions, sectoral employer groups	Sectoral and inter-sectoral agreements	Private-sector coverage remains uneven.
Territorial	Regional/local authorities, local employers, unions	Territorial agreements and consultative platforms	Often formalistic and uneven across communities.
Local/company	Employer and workforce representatives	Collective agreements	Potentially strongest level if workers are organised and informed.

The formal structure of social dialogue exists, but wartime conditions have weakened its practical functioning. The National Tripartite Social and Economic Council's 2024 activity report shows institutional activity, but also highlights the need to restore more substantive dialogue and decision-making (National Tripartite Social and Economic Council, 2025).

At territorial level, social dialogue is particularly important for matching training programmes, employment policy and local business needs. Communities need structured platforms where employers, education providers, unions, civil society and local authorities can coordinate labour-market recovery, veteran employment, women's employment and skills development.

4. Social Protection and Inclusion

Ukraine's social protection reform is moving from a passive model of categorical benefits toward a more targeted, person-centred and service-based model. The Ministry of Social Policy has described the planned Social Code as a way to consolidate fragmented legislation and ensure that support reaches those who genuinely need it.

Digitalisation is a major achievement. The Unified Information System of the Social Sphere has been used to administer 17 types of assistance, and the Social Web Portal of electronic services was launched in 2024. This improves continuity of payments and reduces administrative burdens, but it also requires local staff capacity and digital inclusion for vulnerable groups.

Draft Law No. 12124 on social services introduced important concepts such as case management and multidisciplinary teams. These concepts are essential for EU-style social work because they shift the focus from isolated benefits to coordinated support for the person and family (Research Service of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2025).

A key structural problem remains the gap between legally established social standards and the real cost of living. The Council of Europe has supported discussion in Ukraine on turning the subsistence minimum into a real social guarantee and reducing its excessive use as a technical reference for many unrelated payments (Council of Europe, 2025).

The draft 2026 budget process also drew attention to the gap between the official subsistence minimum and the actual subsistence minimum calculated from real prices. This weakens the adequacy of benefits and contributes to the risk of working poverty, especially where wages, pensions and benefits remain below real subsistence needs (Interfax-Ukraine, 2025).

The practical success of social protection reform depends on territorial communities. Digital systems can process benefits, but communities must identify needs, provide services, coordinate case management, support vulnerable families and ensure that services are accessible to persons with disabilities, elderly persons, veterans and internally displaced persons.

The risk is that national digitalisation may improve administrative efficiency without solving local service gaps. Communities need trained social workers, accessible premises, social housing solutions, mobile services, psychosocial support, childcare and links with employment services.

Harmonisation Assessment Table

Sub-sector	Legislative harmonisation	Implementation level	Key challenge
Labour law	Advanced but incomplete; Draft Labour Code registered and EU-oriented	Uneven inspection and enforcement capacity	Disguised employment, working-time exceptions, weak inspection resources
Occupational safety and health	Draft Law No. 10147 aligns with EU preventive-risk model	High practical risk in damaged and emergency work environments	Need to move from post-accident control to risk prevention
Equality and non-discrimination	Formal legal basis and gender pay-gap strategy exist	Implementation uneven, especially for displaced women and vulnerable groups	Pay transparency, childcare, anti-discrimination practice, workplace adaptation
Social dialogue	Legal framework modernised by Law No. 2937-IX	Territorial dialogue remains inconsistent	Need for active local platforms tied to recovery and employment planning
Social protection and inclusion	Digitalisation and Social Code agenda progressing	Local service capacity remains limited	Case management, accessible services, social housing, outreach

Recommendations

1. Create local labour-market implementation plans

Each oblast and larger community should prepare a labour-market implementation plan linked to EU accession priorities. The plan should identify local shortages, informal employment risks, reskilling needs, veteran employment needs, childcare barriers and sectors with high occupational-safety risk. This will allow communities to treat Chapter 19 not as abstract law reform, but as a practical employment agenda.

2. Support compliance with the future Labour Code before adoption

Communities should begin informing local employers about likely changes in employment classification, working-time rules, written contracts, remote work and anti-discrimination duties. Small and medium-sized enterprises will need practical guidance, not only legal framework. Local business-support centres can prepare model policies, checklists and information sessions.

3. Build local occupational-safety prevention capacity

Regional and community authorities should prioritise prevention in workplaces affected by reconstruction, energy disruption and temporary infrastructure. Local action should include safety briefings for municipal contractors, risk-assessment templates for small businesses, cooperation with labour-safety inspectors, and targeted campaigns in construction, utilities, transport, energy and manufacturing.

4. Establish community-level equality and inclusion plans

Communities should adopt practical equality plans covering women, displaced persons, veterans, persons with disabilities and people facing multiple vulnerabilities. The plans should include employment support, childcare access, barrier-free infrastructure, anti-discrimination procedures, and cooperation with local employers.

5. Link women's employment support with childcare and care services

Women's economic participation cannot be improved only through job vacancies. Communities should expand childcare, after-school services, eldercare support and flexible training schedules. This is especially important for internally displaced women and single parents.

6. Help employers implement inclusive hiring

Local authorities should provide employers with clear information on state compensation mechanisms, workplace adaptation, reasonable accommodation and recruitment of veterans and persons with disabilities. Communities

should maintain a list of employers ready to hire inclusively and connect them with employment services, rehabilitation providers and vocational training programmes.

7. Activate territorial social dialogue platforms

Communities with significant labour-market needs should establish or revive territorial social dialogue platforms involving local authorities, employers, trade unions, civil society, education providers and employment services. These platforms should focus on concrete topics: reconstruction jobs, vocational training, local wage pressures, veteran employment, women's employment and occupational safety.

8. Implement case management locally

Every community should build capacity for case management and multidisciplinary teams. This requires trained staff, referral protocols, data protection procedures, cooperation with health and employment services, and accessible premises. Case management should prioritise veterans, displaced families, persons with disabilities, elderly persons living alone and families in crisis.

9. Use digital social systems without excluding vulnerable groups

Digital services improve efficiency, but not all residents can use them independently. Communities should provide assisted digital access through administrative service centres, social workers, mobile teams and public libraries. This is essential for elderly persons, persons with disabilities, rural residents and displaced people without stable documents or devices.

10. Track implementation with measurable local indicators

Regional authorities should monitor Chapter 19 implementation with simple indicators: number of inclusive employers, number of adapted workplaces, number of childcare places, number of active collective agreements, number of case-managed households, number of social workers trained, and number of public buildings accessible to persons with disabilities.

Conclusions

Ukraine's progress under Chapter 19 shows a clear movement toward the EU social-policy framework. At national level, Ukraine has advanced labour-law reform, social-service digitalisation, collective-bargaining modernisation, gender-equality policy and the transition toward person-centred social protection. These reforms are essential for accession because they support fair working conditions, social cohesion and inclusive economic recovery.

The current gap between legal alignment and local implementation remains significant, especially in occupational safety, gender equality, inclusive employment, social dialogue and access to social services.

Communities need to convert national EU-oriented reforms into practical services: safer workplaces, accessible public institutions, inclusive employment, childcare support, functioning social dialogue and case management for vulnerable residents. It is one of the conditions for sustainable recovery. Ukraine's ability to retain and rebuild human capital will depend on whether EU social standards are implemented not only in legislation, but also in everyday life at the local level.

Rebuilding Ukraine's Enterprise Base under Wartime Conditions

Chapter 20: Enterprise and Industrial Policy

Executive Summary

Chapter 20, Enterprise and Industrial Policy, is a horizontal accession chapter that assesses whether a candidate country can create a business-friendly, competitive and innovation-oriented economy compatible with the EU internal market. Ukraine's overall alignment with the EU approach in Chapter 20 can be assessed as moderate. The country has adopted strategic documents, expanded digital services for business, continued deregulation, participated in EU programmes and maintained enterprise-support instruments despite the full-scale war. At the same time, implementation remains uneven, especially at regional and local levels. The principles of the Small Business Act for Europe and "Think Small First" are only partially institutionalised, financial instruments remain fragmented, and many communities lack the capacity to convert national programmes into practical support for local firms.

The official EU bilateral screening meeting for Chapter 20 took place in April 2025. Ukraine presented progress in SME support, industrial policy, smart specialisation, green and digital transformation, deregulation, social economy, corporate sustainability and industrial recovery.

1. Overall Assessment

The EU acquis in Chapter 20 consists mainly of policy principles, communications, recommendations, financial instruments and good-governance practices rather than a single body of directly transposable legislation. Therefore, the key test is not only whether Ukraine has relevant strategies, but whether public authorities can implement them consistently across sectors and regions.

The main EU reference points are the Small Business Act for Europe, the Better Regulation Agenda, the European Industrial Strategy, Horizon Europe and InvestEU. Together, these instruments promote a business environment favourable to SME growth, structural industrial adjustment, innovation, investment, digital transformation and the green transition (European Commission, 2008, 2015, 2020, 2021; Regulation (EU) 2021/523; Regulation (EU) 2021/695).

Ukraine has made visible progress in several areas. Digital public services have simplified interaction between businesses and the state; the "Affordable Loans 5-7-9%" programme and processing-industry grants have supported firms during wartime; deregulation has removed outdated instruments; and regional smart-specialisation approaches have been included in policy discussions. However, many instruments are still programme-based rather than institutionally embedded. This creates the risk that progress depends on temporary political attention, donor support or emergency wartime measures rather than stable EU-compatible governance.

On 28-29 April 2025, Ukraine and the European Commission held the official bilateral screening meeting on Chapter 20, "Enterprise and Industrial Policy," in Brussels. The Ukrainian side presented the state of policy alignment and the main tools supporting business and industrial development. According to the Ministry of Economy, the preparation involved the Ministry of Economy, other central executive bodies and the Government Office for Coordination of European and Euro-Atlantic Integration (Ministry of Economy of Ukraine, 2025).

The Ukrainian delegation presented progress in the following areas: industrial policy and industrial ecosystems; SME support; participation in the EU Single Market Programme; cluster development; access to finance; light industry; circular economy; corporate sustainability; deregulation and digitalisation; social economy; and recovery of steel and other industrial capacities.

The screening result was positive because it confirmed that Ukraine has a policy foundation for approximation to EU enterprise and industrial-policy standards. However, the screening also highlighted the need for faster implementation of the EU Late Payment Directive. Late payments are a major problem for SMEs because delayed invoices reduce

liquidity, limit investment and increase dependence on expensive short-term credit. For Ukraine, this issue is especially important in wartime, when many SMEs already face damaged assets, disrupted logistics and unstable demand.

The screening should therefore be interpreted as a milestone in accession preparation, but not as evidence of full readiness. The next phase should focus on implementation: embedding EU principles in law and administrative practice, strengthening regional delivery mechanisms and creating measurable results for businesses.

3. SME Policy and the Small Business Act for Europe

The Small Business Act for Europe defines ten principles for SME policy, including entrepreneurship, a second chance for entrepreneurs, responsive public administration, access to finance, participation in the single market, innovation, skills and internationalisation (European Commission, 2008). The SBA is not a conventional directive, but it is a central policy framework for how EU institutions and member states approach SME development.

Ukraine has integrated elements of the SBA into economic-development strategies, SME support programmes and digital business services. The SME Policy Index 2024 notes that Ukraine improved its scores in all twelve dimensions of the assessment despite the disruption caused by the war (OECD et al., 2024). This demonstrates resilience and policy continuity.

However, SBA principles are not yet fully institutionalised as mandatory elements of regulatory policy. Ukrainian legislation does not contain a comprehensive mechanism requiring all ministries and local authorities to assess how new policies affect SMEs. This weakens predictability and leaves SMEs exposed to disproportionate administrative burdens.

At the national level, Ukraine has functioning instruments for SME support, including digital services, concessional lending, grants, export-promotion tools and advisory programmes. At regional and local levels, however, implementation capacity remains uneven. Many municipalities lack specialised staff, data on local business needs, project-preparation capacity and stable consultation mechanisms with entrepreneurs.

The key implementation gap is therefore not the absence of SME-support rhetoric, but the absence of a stable and measurable system that connects national policy tools with local business needs. For EU integration, Ukraine must demonstrate that SME policy works not only in central government programmes, but also in regions, hromadas and local economic ecosystems.

4. Better Regulation and the "Think Small First" Principle

The EU Better Regulation Agenda promotes evidence-based policymaking, impact assessment, simplification and stakeholder consultation (European Commission, 2015). Within SME policy, this is closely linked to the "Think Small First" principle, which requires policymakers to consider SME needs at the earliest stage of regulatory design.

Ukraine has procedures for regulatory impact analysis, but their practical application remains inconsistent. The SME test is not yet embedded as a mandatory and enforceable element of policymaking. As a result, new regulations may formally pass assessment procedures while still creating disproportionate compliance costs for small businesses.

Business surveys and policy reviews continue to identify administrative complexity, regulatory unpredictability and uneven enforcement as barriers to enterprise development. These barriers are especially serious for micro and small enterprises, which do not have legal departments or financial reserves to absorb frequent regulatory changes.

At local level, the challenge is even more practical. Entrepreneurs often face fragmented permit procedures, inconsistent interpretation of rules, duplication of documents and limited access to digital administrative services. For EU-compatible implementation, deregulation should be measured not only by the number of abolished instruments, but by the reduction of time and cost for businesses.

5. Industrial Competitiveness and the European Industrial Strategy

The European Industrial Strategy focuses on competitiveness, resilience, industrial ecosystems, digital transformation, decarbonisation and strategic autonomy (European Commission, 2020, 2021). For Ukraine, alignment with this strategy is especially important because industrial recovery is directly connected with reconstruction, export capacity and integration into EU value chains.

Ukraine's industrial policy partially reflects EU priorities, including green transformation, processing-industry development, smart specialisation and cluster initiatives. The Ukraine Facility Plan also identifies processing industries and higher value-added production as important for economic resilience and recovery.

Nevertheless, industrial policy remains fragmented. Ukraine does not yet have a fully integrated industrial-modernisation framework aligned with EU industrial ecosystems, quality infrastructure, green standards, digitalisation and regional smart specialisation. This limits the capacity of Ukrainian firms to move from raw-material exports to higher value-added production.

The main industrial challenges are outdated infrastructure, war damage, high energy costs, logistics disruptions, limited access to long-term finance, uneven adoption of EU standards and weak cluster coordination. Many firms want to enter EU supply chains but lack certification, equipment, working capital or support for product adaptation.

Regional and local authorities can play an important role in industrial competitiveness by identifying local specialisations, supporting industrial parks and clusters, coordinating workforce development and connecting firms with export-promotion and certification services. However, many local authorities lack the expertise and financial tools needed to perform this role effectively.

6. Financial and Innovation Instruments for SMEs

EU innovation policy is built around instruments such as Horizon Europe and InvestEU, which support research, development, innovation, start-ups, investment and risk-sharing (Regulation (EU) 2021/523; Regulation (EU) 2021/695). For Ukraine, deeper participation in these instruments is important for technological upgrading and integration into the European innovation space.

Ukraine has a developing innovation ecosystem, particularly in IT, defence technologies, digital services and start-ups. However, the legal and financial environment for venture capital, R&D investment and commercialisation of research is still underdeveloped. The gap between universities, research institutions and business remains significant.

The main barriers are limited venture capital, insufficient incentives for private R&D, weak protection of investors, low commercialisation of research and uneven awareness of EU funding opportunities. Many SMEs are formally eligible for EU programmes but lack the knowledge, language capacity, partnership networks or co-financing needed to apply successfully.

The practical task is therefore to improve not only access to funds, but also absorption capacity. National contact points, regional business-support centres, universities and chambers of commerce should help SMEs prepare applications, find EU partners and manage compliance requirements.

Harmonisation Assessment Table

Sub-area	Harmonisation level	Implementation level	Key challenge
SME policy / SBA	Medium	Medium	Partial integration of SBA principles; weak monitoring
Think Small First	Low to medium	Low	No mandatory SME test; disproportionate local regulatory burdens

Industrial policy	Medium	Medium to low	Outdated infrastructure, war damage, weak cluster implementation
Finance and innovation	Medium	Low to medium	Limited venture capital, weak R&D commercialisation
Regional implementation	Low to medium	Low	Uneven capacity of hromadas and regional institutions

Recommendations

1. Institutionalise the Small Business Act for Europe in national policy

Ukraine should embed the ten SBA principles into strategic documents, regulatory procedures and monitoring systems. This should include clear responsibility of central executive bodies for SME policy and regular assessment of SME support using EU-compatible indicators. The goal is to move from programme-based support to a stable governance framework for entrepreneurship.

2. Legally introduce the "Think Small First" principle and the SME test

The "Think Small First" principle should become a mandatory part of regulatory policy. Draft laws and regulations should include an SME test assessing administrative costs, reporting obligations, licensing requirements and compliance risks for micro, small and medium-sized firms. This would reduce disproportionate burdens and bring Ukrainian policymaking closer to EU better-regulation practice.

3. Turn deregulation into measurable cost reduction for business

Deregulation should be assessed by practical outcomes: fewer documents, shorter permit times, lower compliance costs and wider use of digital procedures. Local authorities should publish simple service standards for business-related administrative procedures and monitor whether they are actually met.

4. Strengthen the regional dimension of entrepreneurship policy

Regional and local authorities should develop business-support instruments linked to local economic specialisation. This includes business-support centres, industrial parks, cluster initiatives, advisory services for EU standards, and targeted support for enterprises in frontline, de-occupied and recovery regions. The regional level should become an implementation bridge between national EU-oriented policy and the real needs of firms.

5. Align industrial policy with the European Industrial Strategy

Ukraine should orient industrial recovery toward digitalisation, green transformation, energy efficiency, circular economy principles and integration into EU value chains. Industrial parks and clusters should be linked with workforce development, export support, certification services and technology transfer, rather than treated only as infrastructure projects.

6. Improve SME access to EU programmes and innovation finance

Ukraine should expand practical support for SME participation in Horizon Europe, InvestEU-related instruments, the Single Market Programme and other EU initiatives. Regional business-support centres should help firms identify calls, build partnerships, prepare applications and manage reporting obligations. This is particularly important for smaller firms outside Kyiv and major regional centres.

7. Support certification and compliance with EU market requirements

Many Ukrainian SMEs cannot enter EU supply chains because they lack certification, quality-management systems, product adaptation or knowledge of EU standards. Regional authorities, chambers of commerce and export-promotion institutions should create advisory tracks for conformity assessment, sustainability standards and export readiness.

8. Build practical consultation platforms with business

Consultation with entrepreneurs should become routine and evidence-based. Regions and municipalities should establish regular business councils or sectoral platforms where SMEs, business associations, local authorities, education institutions and development agencies jointly identify regulatory barriers, workforce needs and investment priorities.

Conclusions

Ukraine's progress in Chapter 20 confirms its movement toward the EU economic and industrial policy framework. The country has developed important instruments for SME support, deregulation, digitalisation and industrial recovery, and the successful 2025 screening showed that Ukraine is capable of presenting a coherent policy agenda to the European Commission.

At the same time, the level of harmonisation remains moderate because the main challenge is implementation. The EU approach to enterprise and industrial policy depends on predictable regulation, strong SME institutions, innovation capacity, competitive industrial ecosystems and effective regional delivery. Ukraine has made progress in all these areas, but the results remain uneven across sectors and territories.

The next phase of EU integration should therefore focus on embedding the Small Business Act and "Think Small First" into daily policymaking, reducing regulatory costs for SMEs, strengthening regional business-support systems, and aligning industrial recovery with the European Industrial Strategy. For communities and regional governments, Chapter 20 should become a practical agenda for local competitiveness: fewer administrative barriers, stronger SMEs, better access to EU programmes, modernised industrial infrastructure and deeper integration into European value chains.

Communities should prioritise investment-ready projects: industrial parks, business incubators with advisory capacity, export-readiness services, cluster initiatives linked to local specialisation, and SME support desks capable of helping entrepreneurs access national and EU programmes. Regions should also collect data on local business constraints, including permit delays, workforce shortages, access to finance and infrastructure bottlenecks.

Overall, Ukraine's movement toward the EU in Chapter 20 is strategically positive but still incomplete. Success will depend on whether national EU-oriented reforms produce visible results for firms, workers and communities across Ukraine. The defence industry should become a cornerstone of Ukraine's industrial recovery and future contribution to European security. Wartime production, military technology, drones, dual-use innovation and repair capacities have already demonstrated Ukraine's ability to develop industrial solutions under extreme pressure. In the EU accession context, this potential should be linked to European defence-industrial cooperation, innovation funding, standards alignment and integration into EU value chains. Strengthening the defence-industrial base would not only support Ukraine's security needs, but also position the country as an important partner in the emerging European defence ecosystem.

Ukraine's Rule of Law, Anti-Corruption and Fundamental Rights Alignment in the Context of EU Accession

Chapter 23: Judiciary and Fundamental Rights

Executive Summary

Chapter 23 is one of the most politically and institutionally important chapters for Ukraine because it covers the functioning of the judiciary, the fight against corruption, the protection of fundamental rights and the institutional safeguards that determine whether EU-aligned reforms are implemented in practice. The European Commission's 2025 Ukraine Report assesses Ukraine as having some level of preparation in the judiciary, anti-corruption and fundamental-rights areas, while stressing that reforms must continue and that institutional independence must be preserved.

Ukraine has made visible progress under wartime conditions. The High Council of Justice and the High Qualification Commission of Judges resumed work after earlier institutional blockages; the Service of Disciplinary Inspectors began operating in December 2024; the anti-corruption infrastructure continued to produce results; and the government approved the Rule of Law Roadmap as part of the EU accession framework in 2025.

However, the chapter remains marked by a gap between formal legal alignment and practical implementation. The judiciary continues to face a critical staffing deficit, especially in appellate courts and small local courts. Disciplinary practice remains uneven. Prosecutorial independence is vulnerable to excessive hierarchical control. Anti-corruption institutions remain exposed to political pressure, as demonstrated by the July 2025 attempt to weaken the autonomy of NABU and SAPO, followed by a corrective legislative response after domestic and international criticism (Reuters, 2025; Associated Press, 2025).

Fundamental-rights reforms also remain uneven. Ukraine has advanced important strategies on deinstitutionalisation, child rights and disability inclusion, but implementation at regional and community level is slow and resource-constrained. Long-standing gaps remain in personal-data protection, anti-discrimination law, civil partnerships, hate-crime recording, minority-rights implementation, peaceful assembly and anti-SLAPP protection. For Ukraine's EU integration, Chapter 23 will therefore be assessed not only through adopted laws, but through the credibility, independence and regional implementation of these reforms.

1. Judicial Independence

Judicial independence is a core component of the rule of law and a central condition of EU accession. Ukraine's constitutional framework formally protects the independence of judges, while the High Council of Justice (HCJ) and the High Qualification Commission of Judges (HQCJ) play the main institutional roles in judicial governance, selection, discipline and career procedures.

During 2024-2025, Ukraine achieved progress by restoring the functioning of judicial-governance bodies after earlier institutional blockages. The resumed operation of the HCJ and HQCJ, together with the participation of international experts in key selection procedures, helped rebuild the institutional basis for judicial reform. The start of the Service of Disciplinary Inspectors in December 2024 was also an important step toward processing the accumulated disciplinary caseload (High Council of Justice, 2024, 2026).

Nevertheless, the independence of the judiciary remains incomplete. Key risks include pressure on judicial-governance institutions, inconsistent disciplinary practice, weak institutional capacity, insufficient funding, and public distrust. The European Commission continues to emphasise the need to maintain transparent and merit-based judicial selection and to preserve the role of independent experts in judicial governance (European Commission, 2025).

Selection of Judges and the Role of International Experts

The selection of judges remains one of the most sensitive areas of reform. The HQCJ continued competitions for local and appellate courts in 2024-2025, but the process is slowed by insufficient staff, limited premises, reliance on paper-based procedures and significant external pressure. The continued use of non-digital workflows, including paper judicial dossiers, creates avoidable delays and weakens transparency.

The Public Integrity Council remains important for checking candidates against integrity and ethics criteria, but it also faces capacity constraints. The loss or reduction of donor support, delays in processing dossiers and underuse of panel-based decision-making reduce its ability to contribute effectively to the selection process.

International experts remain essential for maintaining credibility in high-stakes judicial selection. Their role in the selection of High Anti-Corruption Court judges and in the formation of judicial-governance bodies has been widely recognised as one of the strongest safeguards against capture. Any future formation of the HQCJ should therefore retain the participation of independent international experts with meaningful voting powers.

Disciplinary Accountability of Judges

Disciplinary accountability is necessary to protect both judicial integrity and judicial independence. In 2024, the HCJ reported thousands of disciplinary complaints and more than one hundred decisions imposing disciplinary liability. The creation and launch of the Service of Disciplinary Inspectors marked a new stage in addressing the backlog of complaints and improving the professionalism of disciplinary proceedings (High Council of Justice, 2025, 2026).

However, several weaknesses remain. The HCJ's reduced effective membership can delay review of disciplinary-chamber decisions. Different disciplinary chambers may apply inconsistent standards to similar conduct. Some judges avoid responsibility because of limitation periods or divergent interpretation of procedural rules. Civil-society organisations have also raised concerns that some proposed amendments to disciplinary procedures could weaken public oversight or make it harder to hold judges accountable.

Prosecution Service

The independence of the prosecution service is another core element of Chapter 23. Ukraine's Rule of Law Roadmap and the Prosecutor's Office reform agenda aim to strengthen merit-based promotion, prosecutorial self-governance, case allocation and digitalisation. However, GRECO recommendations on prosecutorial independence and self-governance remain only partially implemented (GRECO, 2017; Reform Delivery Office, 2025).

A key unresolved issue is the procedural independence of individual prosecutors. Ukrainian criminal procedure still gives senior prosecutors broad powers to replace or remove prosecutors from proceedings without sufficient safeguards. Legislative changes in 2025 that expanded the powers of the Prosecutor General over case materials and procedural decisions raised concerns about excessive centralisation and possible political influence. The appointment of the Prosecutor General also remains politically sensitive because there is no fully competitive appointment procedure involving prosecutorial self-governance and independent experts.

2. Efficiency of Justice

Efficiency of justice is a practical indicator of whether the right to a fair trial can be realised. In the EU accession context, this includes reasonable timeframes, manageable court workloads, accessible procedures, predictable case law and adequate staffing. Ukraine has maintained court operations despite the war, but statistical data reveal serious systemic weaknesses.

The most important structural cause of inefficiency is the shortage of judges. According to HQCJ vacancy data, appellate courts and specialised courts are particularly under-staffed. This directly affects the formation of panels, the length of proceedings and the ability of courts to comply with statutory deadlines.

Court level	Judicial posts	Judges in office	Vacancies	Staffing rate
Appeal courts	1,357	632	725	46.6%
Higher specialised courts	120	40	80	33.3%
Supreme Court	196	146	50	74.5%

Local courts	4,924	3,521	1,403	71.5%
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Source: High Qualification Commission of Judges of Ukraine, vacancy data as of January 2026.

The most severe shortages are concentrated in large cities and industrial regions, including Kyiv, Dnipro, Kharkiv and Odesa, and in small local courts where the absence of even one judge can stop the administration of justice. In appellate courts, vacancy rates above 50% make it technically difficult to form judicial panels, especially in criminal and administrative matters.

The Supreme Court remains overloaded. In 2024, it received more than 90,000 cases and processed approximately 87,000. In the first half of 2025, it continued to receive tens of thousands of procedural applications. This workload limits the Court's ability to focus on its constitutional role of ensuring the unity of case law (Supreme Court, 2025).

The main causes include weak cassation filters, excessive formalism, limited use of written proceedings and the absence of preliminary-reference mechanisms from appellate courts. Public authorities also continue to ignore settled Supreme Court case law, creating repetitive litigation in areas where legal positions are already clear.

3. Fight Against Corruption

Ukraine has built a specialised anti-corruption infrastructure consisting of NABU, SAPO, NACP and the High Anti-Corruption Court. According to the European Commission, the institutional framework has remained generally effective, but its independence and capacity must be protected.

The 2025 external independent audit of NABU was an important milestone. It found that NABU was substantially effective in investigations and international cooperation, while overall effectiveness was assessed as moderate and accompanied by recommendations on internal control, information security, strategic management and interagency cooperation.

The July 2025 attempt to weaken the autonomy of NABU and SAPO exposed the vulnerability of anti-corruption institutions to political interference. The subsequent restoration of their independence after public protests and international criticism was a positive correction, but the episode demonstrated that formal institutional design is insufficient without durable political and legal guarantees.

NABU indicator	2021	2022	2023	2024	H1 2025
Registered crime reports	633	456	641	671	370
Persons notified of suspicion	124	187	290	231	115
Indictments, persons	129	129	233	243	154
Final guilty verdicts	32	36	64	90	62

Source: NABU reporting and civil-society monitoring materials.

High Anti-Corruption Court

The High Anti-Corruption Court remains a key safeguard in the anti-corruption chain. The use of plea agreements after amendments adopted in 2024 has helped recover assets and accelerate some proceedings. However, the Court's workload continues to grow, while the number of judges and physical premises remain insufficient. Limitation periods, procedural abuse and the automatic closure of proceedings in some cases continue to undermine accountability.

Ukraine's anti-corruption policy is primarily centralised. This approach has been effective for high-level corruption, but it does not fully capture local corruption risks in land management, construction permits, local procurement, administrative services and regional budget allocation. The State Anti-Corruption Programme for 2023-2025 includes

several relevant priority areas, but local-government corruption is not treated as a separate policy pillar (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2023).

Regional anti-corruption programmes are required for oblast administrations and councils, but implementation and reporting are uneven. Some regional bodies fail to publish reports regularly; others report implausibly high rates of implementation without evidence of real impact. The use of martial law as a general justification for non-implementation is also problematic, especially when some frontline or high-risk regions still show progress in executing anti-corruption measures.

4. Fundamental Rights

Fundamental rights are central to Chapter 23 and to Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union, which defines respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and human rights, including minority rights, as core EU values. For Ukraine, the challenge is to ensure that these standards are not only reflected in national law but implemented consistently across regions during wartime.

The Ukrainian Parliament Commissioner for Human Rights plays a cross-cutting role in the EU accession process. The 2024 Annual Report of the Ombudsman emphasised that the institution's mandate is relevant across negotiating clusters and chapters (Ukrainian Parliament Commissioner for Human Rights, 2025).

The draft law on the Ombudsman registered in April 2025 aims to approximate Ukrainian law to the Paris Principles and Council of Europe Venice Principles. However, civil-society analysis indicates that the draft requires further revision, especially regarding the transparency of the selection procedure, public participation and the scope of the Ombudsman's control powers (ZMINA Human Rights Centre, 2025).

Financial and human resources remain a major concern. Adequate funding is necessary for regional representatives and the National Preventive Mechanism to operate effectively, especially for monitoring places of detention and institutions in regions affected by the war (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2021).

Deinstitutionalisation, Disability Rights and Child Protection

Deinstitutionalisation is a central EU-compatible reform. Ukraine adopted strategies concerning adults with disabilities and older people, as well as the right of every child to grow up in a family environment. These documents are broadly aligned with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the European Pillar of Social Rights, the EU Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the European Child Guarantee (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2024a, 2024b; European Commission, 2021a, 2021b).

Implementation remains the main weakness. War damage, displacement, lack of community services and insufficient local budgets slow the transition from institutional care to community-based support. The risk is especially serious for people in institutions close to the front line or in facilities without adequate shelters and evacuation plans.

Ukraine has also made progress in child-friendly justice, including pilot projects and judicial specialisation in family and child matters. These steps should be scaled nationally and linked to training standards for judges, prosecutors, social workers and child-protection services.

Anti-Discrimination, Hate Crime and LGBTIQ+ Rights

Ukraine's anti-discrimination framework remains incomplete. Protection against discrimination on grounds such as sexual orientation, gender identity, health status and internal displacement is either insufficiently explicit or weak in enforcement.

Criminal-law provisions on hate crime and hate speech also require further alignment with EU standards, including Council Framework Decision 2008/913/JHA and Directive 2012/29/EU on victims' rights. Ukraine lacks a comprehensive and consistent data-collection system for hate crimes. Draft legislation on combating discrimination has been registered but requires further work and parliamentary progress.

The absence of legal recognition for registered civil partnerships remains a long-standing gap for LGBTIQ+ people. A relevant draft law has been pending since 2023, despite its link with the EU integration agenda. This restricts access to basic rights in family, property, inheritance, medical and military contexts.

Personal Data Protection and Media Freedoms

Personal-data protection is a sensitive EU acquis area governed by the GDPR. Ukraine's Association Agreement with the EU includes cooperation on ensuring a high level of personal-data protection. Draft laws on personal data and a supervisory authority have been pending for several years, and the European Commission has repeatedly noted delays in this area (Association Agreement, 2014; European Commission, 2025; Regulation (EU) 2016/679).

Freedom of expression and media freedom remain broadly protected under wartime conditions, but attacks on journalists and investigative media remain a concern. Ukraine should proceed with anti-SLAPP legislation in line with Directive (EU) 2024/1069 and Council of Europe recommendations. Other media-related amendments linked to the European Media Freedom Act and audiovisual media acquis should continue, but they should be implemented through transparent consultation with civil society and media organisations.

Freedom of Assembly, Conscience and Minority Rights

Practice concerning peaceful assemblies remains uneven across regions. Some oblasts impose broad bans or restrictive conditions, while others have no general rules. Wartime restrictions may be justified in specific security contexts, but they must remain proportionate, legally clear and sensitive to the distance from active hostilities.

Protection of national minorities remains politically sensitive and important for EU accession, particularly in relations with neighbouring EU member states. Ukraine adopted a law on national minorities and an action plan, but implementation remains uneven.

Harmonisation Assessment Table

Sub-area	Approximate level of alignment	Implementation level	Main challenge
Judicial independence	Medium to high	Medium	Staffing deficit, disciplinary consistency, sustained international participation in selection bodies
Efficiency of justice	Medium	Low to medium	Backlogs, procedural delays, weak digitalisation, overloaded Supreme Court
Prosecution service	Medium	Medium to low	Insufficient safeguards for procedural independence and politicised appointment of the Prosecutor General
Anti-corruption	Medium to high	Medium	Need to preserve independence of NABU, SAPO and HACC; limitation periods; regional corruption risks
Fundamental rights	Medium	Medium	Implementation gaps in deinstitutionalisation, anti-discrimination, personal-data protection

Recommendations

1. Judicial governance and prosecution reform

❖ **Preserve integrity-based judicial selection and disciplinary standards** by maintaining the decisive role of international experts in future HQCJ and high-integrity judicial selection bodies, ensuring stable

support for the Public Integrity Council, and avoiding legislative changes that weaken public complaints or create artificial limitation barriers.

❖ **Accelerate court staffing and digitalisation**, especially at appellate level, by completing competitions, filling priority vacancies, using temporary secondment where courts face critical shortages, and introducing electronic judicial dossiers, digital case files, electronic service of documents and secure remote hearings.

❖ **Strengthen procedural efficiency while protecting fair-trial guarantees** by expanding simplified and written procedures where appropriate, introducing stronger cassation filters, monitoring procedural deadlines automatically, and developing a preliminary-reference mechanism for repetitive legal issues.

❖ **Improve prosecutorial independence and accountability** by requiring reasoned decisions when prosecutors are removed from cases, introducing an appeal mechanism in line with GRECO recommendations, and creating a more transparent and merit-based procedure for appointing the Prosecutor General.

2. Anti-corruption and regional accountability

❖ **Safeguard the independence and capacity of anti-corruption institutions** by strengthening statutory guarantees for NABU, SAPO and HACC, increasing HACC judicial and administrative capacity, and closing procedural loopholes that allow high-level corruption cases to end without final accountability.

❖ **Strengthen regional anti-corruption implementation** by introducing a unified digital reporting system for oblast and local anti-corruption programmes, requiring timely publication of implementation reports, and shifting from formal activity counts to impact-based indicators in high-risk areas such as land, construction, procurement and administrative services.

❖ **Create a dedicated local-government corruption-risk framework** that identifies risks specific to municipalities, oblast administrations and communal enterprises, with standard indicators, open data, and proportionate consequences for systematic non-reporting or weak implementation.

3. Fundamental rights and vulnerable groups

❖ **Strengthen the Ombudsman institution and regional human-rights monitoring** by revising the draft Ombudsman law in line with the Paris and Venice Principles, ensuring transparent selection, and providing stable funding for regional representatives and the National Preventive Mechanism, especially in war-affected areas.

❖ **Prioritise protection of vulnerable groups at regional and community level** by accelerating evacuation and relocation planning for detention facilities, residential institutions and children's facilities near hostilities, and financing community-based services, personal assistance, supported living and family-based care.

❖ **Improve equality and hate-crime protection in practice** by adopting stronger anti-discrimination and hate-crime legislation and creating a standardised data-collection system involving police, prosecutors, courts, victim-support services and regional administrations.

❖ **Align personal-data protection and civic-space safeguards with EU standards** by adopting GDPR-aligned legislation, establishing an independent supervisory authority, advancing anti-SLAPP protections, and strengthening safeguards for journalists and investigative media.

Conclusion

Ukraine's progress in Chapter 23 demonstrates a clear movement toward the EU's rule-of-law and fundamental-rights framework. The country has preserved functioning judicial and anti-corruption institutions during full-scale war, adopted strategic roadmaps required for accession, and continued legislative work in areas linked to judicial governance, anti-corruption, human rights and fundamental freedoms.

At the same time, Chapter 23 remains one of the most demanding parts of Ukraine's accession process. The EU will assess not only the adoption of legislation, but also whether institutions are independent, whether courts are accessible

and efficient, whether anti-corruption bodies can act without political pressure, and whether fundamental rights are protected in practice across all regions.

For Ukraine's EU accession, Chapter 23 should therefore be treated as both a legal and institutional transformation agenda. Its success will depend on sustained international safeguards, credible domestic institutions, adequate resources and the capacity of regional and local authorities to implement reforms in everyday governance.

Justice and Security Governance under Wartime Conditions

Chapter 24: Justice, Freedom and Security

Executive Summary

Chapter 24, Justice, Freedom and Security, is part of Cluster 1, Fundamentals, and is one of the most sensitive chapters of Ukraine's EU accession process. It covers border management, Schengen-related rules, visa policy, migration and asylum, police cooperation, organised crime, terrorism, trafficking in human beings, drugs, judicial cooperation in criminal and civil matters, and related security policies.

Ukraine's has maintained the visa-liberalisation framework, continued cooperation with EU agencies and preserved basic state capacity despite the full-scale war. At the same time, the European Commission's 2025 Ukraine Report indicates that further work is needed on integrated border management, migration and asylum procedures, fight against organised crime, police cooperation, and the alignment of national rules with the Schengen acquis.

The regional dimension is especially important. Once Ukraine joins the EU, its western and south-western borders will become part of the Union's external border. At the same time, many Chapter 24 policies are implemented locally: identification and support of victims of trafficking, assistance to migrants and stateless persons, cooperation with border communities, prevention of exploitation, and local police cooperation. National legislation therefore needs to be matched by effective implementation in regions and communities.

The main implementation gaps concern fragmented coordination between state bodies, limited measurable indicators in integrated border management, insufficient local capacity to identify and support victims of trafficking, weak access to asylum and protection procedures, the absence of a fully developed migrant-integration policy, and incomplete adaptation of police cooperation and information-exchange rules to EU standards.

1. Border Management and Visa Policy

Border management is strategically important because Ukraine's borders will become external EU borders after accession. The EU framework requires alignment with the Schengen Borders Code, rules on carrier obligations, passenger data, Frontex cooperation, Schengen evaluation standards and integrated border management principles. Relevant reference points include Regulation (EU) 2016/399, Council Directive 2001/51/EC, Directive 2004/82/EC, Directive (EU) 2016/681, Regulation (EU) 2019/1896 and Regulation (EU) 2022/922.

Ukraine has adopted and implemented elements of integrated border management, including an action plan for 2023-2025. However, the European Commission and Ukrainian expert assessments continue to highlight the need for clearer measurable indicators, stronger interagency coordination and a new implementation framework for 2026-2030 (European Commission, 2025; Europe without Barriers, 2024).

Visa policy is more advanced than border-management policy. Ukraine continues to meet the benchmarks of the EU visa-liberalisation regime, but full accession preparation will require greater alignment of the Ukrainian visa list with the EU Schengen visa lists. This includes gradual alignment with the EU's "white list" and "black list" of third countries. Although full visa-list alignment is usually finalised later in accession negotiations, preparatory work should begin earlier to avoid political and administrative pressure at the final stage.

The main practical problem is not the absence of formal border-management rules, but the uneven implementation of integrated border management across institutions. Border management depends on coordinated work by the State Border Guard Service, State Customs Service, State Migration Service, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Security Service of Ukraine, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and local authorities in border regions.

Wartime conditions complicate implementation. Some border areas face security restrictions, while others are affected by increased movement of people, humanitarian traffic, military logistics and disrupted infrastructure. This

makes risk-based border management, digitalisation, training and interagency information exchange particularly important.

2. Fight against Organised Crime, Terrorism and Trafficking in Human Beings

The fight against trafficking in human beings is part of both EU security policy and human-rights protection. Article 79 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union links common immigration policy with the prevention of trafficking, while Articles 16 and 22 of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement provide a framework for cooperation on migration, smuggling, trafficking and organised crime.

Ukraine's legal framework on trafficking in human beings is broadly aligned with EU standards, but important gaps remain. Full transposition of Directive 2011/36/EU and Directive (EU) 2024/1712 requires stronger rules on victim non-punishment, confiscation of assets, recognition of coercion and vulnerability, support for victims of sexual and labour exploitation, and inclusion of new forms of exploitation.

Directive (EU) 2024/1712 expanded the EU anti-trafficking framework by explicitly adding forced marriage, illegal adoption and the exploitation of surrogacy as forms of exploitation. Ukrainian criminal law does not yet fully reflect this updated EU approach. This is especially relevant because Ukraine has a significant surrogacy sector and wartime poverty can increase vulnerability to coercive or exploitative arrangements.

The full-scale war has increased trafficking risks. Large-scale displacement, loss of income, family separation, irregular movement across borders and the vulnerability of women, children and men fleeing mobilisation or occupation all create conditions in which exploitation can grow. Risks include labour exploitation, sexual exploitation, forced involvement in criminal activity, exploitation of children, and coercive practices in territories under Russian control.

The strongest implementation gap is local. Victims often need to seek recognition and assistance through regional or district-level structures, while municipalities and hromadas are not sufficiently involved in identification, referral and support. This weakens access to protection, especially in smaller communities and for internally displaced persons. Local authorities also often lack trained staff, safe referral channels and stable financing for victim-support services.

3. Migration and Asylum

Migration and asylum remain among the weakest parts of Chapter 24 alignment. Ukraine still needs to approximate EU rules on third-country nationals, family reunification, long-term residence, the EU Blue Card model, intra-corporate transferees, seasonal workers, the single permit, asylum procedures, reception conditions and integration policy.

The European Commission's 2025 Ukraine Report notes that Ukraine must continue aligning its migration and asylum framework with EU standards. Expert monitoring also points to serious gaps in access to protection procedures and reception conditions (AIDA, 2025; Europe without Barriers, 2025).

A particularly sensitive issue is Law No. 2952-IX, which introduced wartime changes affecting foreigners and stateless persons. Civil-society and asylum-monitoring sources have criticised the law because it limits access to asylum at the border and gives the State Border Guard Service and the Security Service discretionary powers to forcibly remove foreigners and stateless persons without a prior court decision (AIDA, 2025). Such powers raise concerns under the principle of non-refoulement, which is protected by international refugee law, Article 19 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and Article 16 of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement.

In practice, access to asylum and complementary protection remains difficult. Problems include the absence of a fully developed asylum procedure in the EU sense, limited access to interpreters, oral refusals or informal barriers, long processing times and weak practical value of the certificate confirming that a person has applied for protection. These barriers reduce legal certainty and increase vulnerability.

Integration policy is also underdeveloped. Ukraine lacks a systemic approach to language courses, language certification, access to social services for foreigners and stateless persons, and structured involvement of local self-government. In the EU model, integration is largely implemented in communities. For Ukraine, this means municipalities should not only provide administrative services but also help migrants access language learning, employment, social assistance and local civic life.

4. Police Cooperation and Information Exchange

International police cooperation is a key element of Chapter 24 because organised crime, cybercrime, trafficking, terrorism and smuggling are cross-border by nature. Ukraine has a developed national legal framework for international cooperation, including the Constitution, the Law on the National Police, the Criminal Procedure Code, the Cabinet of Ministers regulation on the National Police, ministerial orders and the operational and strategic cooperation agreement with Europol.

Ukraine's cooperation agreement with Europol, ratified in 2017, created a basis for strategic and operational cooperation, including exchange of information, cooperation through secure channels and support for joint investigations. Ukraine also cooperates through Interpol and other international formats. However, the EU framework has continued to evolve, and Ukraine needs to approximate new standards on law-enforcement information exchange, cross-border operations and data protection.

Important EU reference points include Council Recommendation (EU) 2022/915 on operational law-enforcement cooperation, Directive (EU) 2023/977 on information exchange between law-enforcement authorities, Regulation (EU) 2024/982 on automated data exchange for police cooperation (Prum II), and the wider EU standards on personal-data protection. These instruments set higher expectations for deadlines, interoperability, data quality, safeguards and cross-border cooperation.

The main gaps are strategic and operational. Ukraine lacks a comprehensive strategy for international police cooperation that would set priorities, responsible institutions, timelines and measurable indicators. Existing cooperation is real but fragmented.

Additional gaps concern professional training, police ethics and information exchange. Ukrainian law does not yet sufficiently regulate international training through CEPOL-type mechanisms, recognition of international certificates, language standards for officers involved in international cooperation, or systematic human-rights training for officers deployed in international operations. It also lacks a unified platform for routing international information exchange across channels such as SIENA, Interpol I-24/7 and future forms of cooperation with EU systems.

Full access to systems such as SIS, SIRENE, Prum II and EUCARIS will depend on EU membership, Schengen-related conditions and specific agreements. However, Ukraine should already prepare legal, technical and data-protection standards compatible with future participation.

Harmonisation Assessment Table

Sub-area	Legislative alignment	Implementation level	Key challenge
Border management	Medium	Medium to low	Need stronger IBM indicators, interagency coordination and 2026-2030 planning
Visa policy	Medium to high	Medium	Further alignment with Schengen visa lists and final accession-stage requirements
Trafficking in human beings	Medium	Low to medium	Weak local identification and support; incomplete transposition of Directive 2024/1712

Migration and asylum	Low to medium	Low	Limited access to asylum/protection procedures and weak integration policy
Police cooperation	Medium	Medium	Fragmented strategy, training gaps and incomplete information-exchange architecture
Regional implementation	Low to medium	Low	Communities lack resources, trained staff and clear referral mechanisms

Recommendations

1. Create local referral mechanisms for victims of trafficking

Communities should establish clear referral protocols between social services, police, healthcare institutions, education institutions, employment centres and NGOs. Local staff should know how to identify potential victims, where to refer them and how to ensure confidentiality. Special attention should be given to internally displaced persons, women, children, persons with disabilities and people in precarious employment.

2. Support migrant and stateless-person integration at community level

Communities hosting foreigners, stateless persons or people seeking protection should provide access to information on legal status, healthcare, education, employment and social services.

3. Strengthen cooperation in border regions

Border communities should cooperate with border guards, customs, police and regional administrations to identify operational bottlenecks, humanitarian needs and trafficking risks. Local authorities can help by maintaining communication channels with civil society, transport operators and service providers near border crossings.

Conclusions

Ukraine's progress in Chapter 24 demonstrates a clear but incomplete movement toward integration with the EU area of freedom, security and justice. The country has preserved key elements of visa liberalisation, maintained cooperation with EU law-enforcement structures and continued to approximate border, migration and security policies despite the full-scale war.

The most urgent gaps concern integrated border management, asylum access, safeguards against forced removal, local support for victims of trafficking, migrant integration and modern police information exchange. These areas are directly linked to the future role of Ukraine as a guardian of the EU's external border and as a participant in the Union's security architecture.

Overall, Ukraine has built a foundation for Chapter 24 alignment, but full readiness will require stronger coordination, better implementation capacity, protection of fundamental rights and closer operational convergence with EU standards.

Regional and Local Implementation of EU Standards: Sociological Research Findings

This chapter integrates the findings of a sociological study conducted in February-April 2026 on how territorial communities assess the implementation of European standards at the regional and local levels. The study complements the legal and policy chapters of this report by showing how national EU-aligned reforms are perceived and implemented by local authorities, civil-society actors and community-level practitioners.

Executive Summary

The study confirms the central thesis of this report: formal alignment at national level does not automatically translate into effective implementation at regional and community level. Local leaders generally recognise the importance of European standards and associate them with transparency, decentralisation, anti-corruption measures, digitalisation, accessibility, green energy and cooperation with international partners. However, many local officials do not clearly identify which specific measures are EU accession obligations and which are general domestic reforms.

The main practical barriers are security risks, financial constraints, shortage of qualified personnel, fragmented competences between local self-government and military administrations, and insufficient communication from central authorities on EU-related standards. Communities are particularly active where EU-oriented reforms directly support survival and resilience: energy autonomy, social support for veterans and internally displaced persons, digital services, anti-corruption procedures and cooperation with donors.

The findings also show a strong regional differentiation. Western communities generally report more stable energy and security conditions, while communities in northern, eastern, southern and central regions face more serious disruptions from shelling, damaged infrastructure, business relocation, labour shortages and reduced investment attractiveness. This regional asymmetry should be reflected in future EU-support instruments and in Ukraine's own implementation planning.

1. Methodology of the Sociological Study

The key purpose of the study was to understand how territorial communities assess the progress of their regions toward European integration through the implementation of European standards in five areas covered by this report: energy; social policy and employment; enterprise and industrial policy; judiciary and fundamental rights; and justice, freedom and security.

Element	Description
Research design	Combined sociological research consisting of a qualitative study and a pilot quantitative survey conducted in parallel.
Period	February-April 2026.
Target audience	Heads or leading specialists of local authorities and civil-society organisations competent in issues of implementing European standards in territorial communities.
Qualitative component	Eleven in-depth interviews, each lasting approximately 90 minutes.
Pilot quantitative component	Online survey distributed through a Google questionnaire. A total of 299 completed questionnaires were received.
Important limitation	The quantitative component was a pilot online survey and is not representative. Its results should be interpreted as preliminary observations and hypotheses for future research.

The pilot survey respondents were concentrated in the western region, which accounted for 65% of responses; the east, south, north and centre together accounted for 35%. Representatives of local self-government bodies formed the largest group of respondents (53%). The sample was predominantly female (70%) and mostly aged 36-55 (68%).

Different types of communities were represented: large communities with more than 50,000 residents (34%), medium-sized communities with 10,000-50,000 residents (40%) and small communities with fewer than 10,000 residents (24%).

2. General Situation: Awareness and Local Implementation of EU Standards

A key finding of the qualitative interviews is that community leaders and local officials often implement measures that correspond to EU standards without necessarily understanding them as EU accession requirements. Several respondents said that tasks delegated by central authorities are not always explained as part of European integration. This creates a communication gap between national policy design and local implementation.

One respondent stated: *“It is difficult to say what exactly is being implemented in the community, because when the central government gives tasks to local self-government bodies, it does not always indicate that these are tasks connected with European integration processes” (IDI3). Another noted: “A lot has been done, and to be honest I do not fully understand what counts as European Union standards and what does not” (IDI7).*

The pilot survey confirmed this knowledge gap. Ordinary employees of local authorities, deputies and some civil-society representatives often had difficulty answering questions about specific EU-related standards. The gap was especially visible in the energy sector, where more than 60% of respondents could not answer some questions on the implementation of European requirements.

At the same time, all interviewed local leaders recognised the importance of European standards. For them, EU-oriented practices are linked to successful cooperation with donors, international organisations and partner municipalities. Respondents also stressed that transparency, anti-corruption safeguards, openness and digital communication are important for all communities, regardless of whether they are located near the front line or in the rear.

Standards already implemented or widely recognised	Standards in the process of implementation
Decentralisation and increased local discretion over community resources	Digitalisation of local-government work and service delivery
Transparency of local authorities, including open documents, public discussion of decisions and online broadcasting or publication of meetings	Green energy projects, including wind power, biofuel and solar generation
Accessibility requirements in public facilities	Expansion of alternative and autonomous energy sources for public buildings and critical infrastructure
Administrative service centres	Preparation of local development strategies aligned with oblast and national strategies
Local anti-corruption programmes and authorised anti-corruption officers	More systematic communication with residents on the benefits of EU-oriented reforms
Waste sorting containers for paper, glass and other materials	More structured cooperation with European partner communities and donors
Solar panels and energy-resilience measures in social, administrative and critical-infrastructure facilities	Development of waste-management infrastructure, including recycling facilities and modern landfills

The most frequently cited cross-cutting barriers were the difficult security environment, uncertainty about the future, reduced local revenues, shortages of young and qualified staff, and regulatory ambiguity. Some respondents also criticised the partial rollback or suspension of decentralisation practices during wartime, including the transfer of military personal income tax from local to state budgets. In border regions, respondents also pointed to overlapping competences between military administrations, councils and state administrations, which can create confusion and additional costs.

3. Sectoral Findings

3.1 Energy

Energy is the sector where community-level implementation is most directly connected with survival and resilience. The situation differs sharply by region. Western communities more often described power interruptions as moderate and manageable, while communities in northern, eastern, southern and central regions faced more frequent and severe disruptions caused by Russian attacks.

During winter attacks in 2025-2026, local authorities supported residents through resilience points, emergency communication, heating points, charging stations and rapid restoration of damaged infrastructure. However, the strategic shift is toward decentralised generation and autonomous supply for critical infrastructure, social facilities, housing and administrative buildings.

- Solar power plants, solar panels, batteries and inverters are the most visible energy-resilience measures, but they remain expensive and less effective in areas with limited sunlight.
- Generators are widely used as an emergency solution, but they are costly to operate, require fuel and maintenance, and are environmentally problematic.
- Cogeneration units are important for larger cities, district-heating systems, water-pumping stations and large enterprises, but are often less relevant for small settlements.
- Wind generation is seen as promising, but permitting procedures and technical requirements remain difficult for many communities.

The pilot survey suggests that autonomous energy sources for critical infrastructure are already fully or mostly available in more than half of communities in the western region and in more than one third of communities in other regions. However, awareness remains uneven: around 40% of respondents did not know whether cogeneration projects existed in their communities, and 64% did not know whether class-A energy-efficiency requirements were applied in reconstruction.

The main principle identified by community leaders is decentralisation: the more small energy-generation sources a community has, the less vulnerable it becomes to missile attacks. A respondent summarised this logic as follows: *“Energy should not be centralised, but decentralised. The more small power plants are installed, the better, because no one will spend an expensive missile on a small hybrid power plant” (ID111).*

Key barriers include high equipment costs, bureaucratic permitting procedures for wind and solar installations, lack of clear rules for feeding surplus electricity into the grid, shortage of qualified installers and maintenance specialists, old transformer substations, vulnerable district substations, weak condominium activity in old housing stock, and the inability of communities within approximately 50 kilometres of the front line to attract donors or investors.

3.2 Social Policy and Employment

Before the full-scale invasion, many communities had already implemented practices broadly aligned with European social-policy standards: inclusive centres, family-type homes for orphaned children, employment centres, unemployment benefits, retraining opportunities, employer compensation mechanisms and employment quotas for persons with disabilities. Since 2022, the main focus has shifted to veterans, families of military personnel, families of fallen soldiers, internally displaced persons and elderly or disabled persons in vulnerable areas.

Many communities have introduced case-management approaches for veterans and created departments or units responsible for veteran policy. In some cases, demobilised soldiers are employed as case managers because they better understand the needs of veterans. In Kharkiv, respondents reported work toward a veteran hub functioning as a specialised administrative-service centre for veterans.

The pilot survey showed that 52% of respondents assessed case-management services as effective. Around one third reported that their community had approved a strategy or programme to support employment of veterans and veterans

with disabilities. At the same time, 42% said that the absence of adapted workplaces for persons with disabilities remains a frequent or very frequent problem.

Respondents generally did not perceive discrimination in hiring as a major local issue under current conditions, mainly because labour shortages force employers to hire anyone willing and able to work. Some communities reported a trend toward training women for traditionally male occupations, including tractor driving, work in critical infrastructure, policing and industrial work. However, this should not lead to the conclusion that equality problems have disappeared: care responsibilities, accessible workplaces and gendered sectoral segregation remain important.

- Promising local practices include social taxis for persons with reduced mobility, free rental of rehabilitation equipment, mobile social assistance for elderly and disabled persons, specialised services for survivors of physical violence, and support for youth involvement in local government.
- Key barriers include the cost of accessibility upgrades, especially in old buildings and basement shelters; lack of adapted workplaces; demographic decline; shortages of labour; limited psychological support for veterans and their families; and insufficient local funding.
- Digitalisation through social-service systems is considered useful, but older people and rural residents often still need face-to-face assistance.

The most serious structural problem is financing. Communities report that they are expected to implement social standards and increase salaries in social and educational sectors, while also losing significant revenue after the wartime transfer of military personal income tax to the state budget. This creates unequal capacity among communities and unequal support for residents in similar life situations.

3.3 Enterprise and Industrial Policy

At local level, enterprise and industrial policy is dominated by wartime survival. Communities are trying to support local businesses through grants, co-financing, reduced land rent or land tax where possible, assistance with applications, partial interest compensation, support for alternative energy sources, and emergency help after shelling.

Local authorities also described efforts to attract investment through investment passports, investment managers, industrial-park planning and cooperation with international partners. In some communities, business-support functions were placed within administrative-service centres. However, the scope of support varies greatly because many local budgets are absorbed by security and energy-resilience needs.

The pilot survey suggests that many respondents do not see clear improvement in business-support conditions. Around one third said that the situation had not changed in areas such as investment attraction, enterprise modernisation, start-up and R&D support, and corporate social responsibility. In the east, south, north and centre, perceptions were more negative, with a significant share reporting deterioration in business conditions.

- Key problems include relocation of large businesses to safer regions, loss of budget revenues, difficulty attracting investment to border and southern regions, closure of enterprises previously linked to Russian markets, energy costs, shortage of labour and lack of assistance for large taxpayers whose facilities were destroyed.
- Small and medium-sized enterprises survive largely through creativity, adaptation and grants. Taxation of grant funds received from charitable or civil-society organisations was viewed negatively by respondents.
- In many communities, reconstruction and post-war recovery plans linked to EU integration are still at the discussion or strategy-development stage. Among ordinary officials and civil-society respondents, 60% did not know whether such a plan existed in their community.

The local enterprise-policy finding is therefore practical: for many communities, EU integration currently means access to European grants, investor confidence and survival mechanisms rather than systematic implementation of the full EU enterprise-policy framework. This creates a need to connect national Chapter 20 reforms with concrete business services at local level.

3.4 Judiciary and Fundamental Rights

Respondents generally saw judiciary reform as a national-level issue rather than a matter within community competence. Most had limited information about EU-related standards in the judicial sphere and did not observe major local changes in the work of courts over the previous two to three years. The pilot survey confirmed this perception: many respondents said the situation in justice and protection of rights had not changed.

The most visible positive change is digitalisation of court services. Respondents mentioned electronic document flow, e-mail or messenger notifications, online submission of claims, remote participation in hearings and the creation of electronic registers. These tools make court interaction more convenient and may reduce corruption risks.

At the same time, greater openness creates a new tension with personal-data protection. Some respondents expressed concern that open court data may allow excessive access to information about individuals. This confirms the need for a balance between transparency and privacy, which is also important for EU alignment in personal-data protection.

Respondents also mentioned local anti-corruption officers, local anti-corruption programmes, monitoring of procurement and construction, and use of the DREAM system as tools that can reduce corruption risks. However, the pilot survey showed divided views on the effectiveness of local anti-corruption measures: almost equal shares considered them effective and ineffective. A majority of respondents also supported more active EU influence in promoting judicial and anti-corruption reforms.

3.5 Justice, Freedom and Security

In justice and security, respondents again considered many issues to be within the competence of central authorities. Nevertheless, they observed several local-level practices connected with openness, community policing and respect for human rights.

- The introduction of municipal police and community police officers was viewed positively, especially for remote settlements. Such officers often act as communicators between residents and public institutions.
- Video cameras in police premises and body cameras for police officers were seen as tools that improve accountability and reduce the risk of unprofessional or abusive behaviour.
- International contacts between police units and European partners were viewed as useful, although wartime restrictions on travel limit opportunities for exchange.
- Local authorities often provide financial or logistical support to law-enforcement bodies.

The main negative factor is continued public distrust toward police, aggravated by joint patrols with territorial recruitment centres. Police work has also expanded considerably in regions affected by shelling: officers respond to attacks, evacuate residents, maintain order near schools and work in higher-risk environments. Respondents identified a need for specialised training in dealing with armed and psychologically traumatised persons.

Regarding internally displaced persons, most surveyed communities host IDPs, and the pilot survey suggests that they are generally integrated into community life. The main obstacles are lack of housing, insufficient state financial assistance, cultural adaptation difficulties in some regions and different legal conditions for IDPs displaced since 2014 and those displaced after 2022. Communities have created IDP councils, reception centres, special assistance programmes, compensation mechanisms for employers and local officials responsible for IDP support.

Foreign citizens live in around one third of surveyed communities. Where foreign residents or national communities are present, local authorities generally report willingness to support them. A useful practice from the Shevchenkivska community in Mykolaiv oblast was the introduction of an administrative-service-centre function assisting foreigners with work visas and employment.

4. Cross-Cutting Barriers to Local Implementation

Across all sectors, the same structural barriers appear repeatedly. These barriers explain why legal approximation at national level often does not produce immediate change in communities.

- Security risks and shelling, especially in border, frontline and recently de-occupied regions.
- Limited local budgets and reduced fiscal autonomy, including the loss of military personal income tax revenues.
- Shortage of qualified personnel in local authorities, social services, courts, law-enforcement bodies, energy installation and maintenance, and business-support services.
- Bureaucratic procedures and unclear permitting rules, especially for energy infrastructure and investment projects.
- Fragmented competences between local self-government, regional administrations and military administrations.
- Weak awareness of which reforms are EU accession requirements and how their implementation benefits residents.
- Unequal access to donors and investors, especially for communities near the front line or perceived as high-risk.
- Insufficient mechanisms for sharing successful practices between communities.

5. Practical Implications

The sociological findings strengthen the conclusions of the sectoral chapters. They show that EU integration should be assessed through two lenses: national legal alignment and local implementation capacity. In many areas, communities are implementing EU-compatible measures because these measures solve urgent problems, even when they are not explicitly presented as EU standards. This is especially clear in energy resilience, digital services, anti-corruption procedures, accessibility and support for vulnerable groups.

The findings also show that communication is a policy instrument. If local officials and residents do not understand why a standard is European, what practical benefit it brings and how it should be implemented, reform becomes fragmented and dependent on individual initiative. Central authorities and EU partners should therefore provide clearer guidance, model procedures, training and practical toolkits for communities.

Finally, the findings suggest that regional differentiation should be built into EU-support instruments. A single implementation model will not work equally well for western, frontline, border, de-occupied, industrial, rural and small communities. Financing, technical assistance and monitoring indicators should reflect local conditions and risks.

Way Forward: From Legal Alignment to Regional Delivery

Ukraine's EU accession is no longer mainly a question of drafting EU-compatible laws. The central challenge is whether the state can implement, enforce and deliver the EU *acquis* across institutions, regions and communities under wartime conditions.

Ukraine has made strategically important progress. Energy integration is the strongest area, especially through synchronisation with the continental European electricity system and deeper cooperation with European energy institutions. However, electricity market coupling remains incomplete, price caps and public service obligations continue to distort the market, and gas-market liberalisation remains unfinished.

Progress in the other chapters is more uneven. Social policy and employment remain at an early stage, with major gaps in labour inspection, occupational safety, social services, accessibility and employment support. Enterprise and industrial policy shows moderate progress, especially in SME support, deregulation, digitalisation and business recovery, but practical implementation remains uneven. In justice, fundamental rights, anti-corruption, migration and border governance, reforms are advancing but remain politically sensitive and institutionally fragile.

The main bottleneck across all chapters is the gap between central legislative reform and local delivery. Regional and community-level capacity remains limited by staff shortages, weak coordination, budget constraints, uneven expertise and wartime pressure. This affects child welfare, labour inspection, local anti-corruption programmes, border management, human-rights protection, municipal energy resilience and business support.

Ukraine is politically ready to move forward in accession negotiations, but its institutional and territorial delivery capacity still needs strengthening. The next phase should combine strict rule-of-law conditionality with practical support for regional implementation, project preparation, local capacity-building and public monitoring.

Key Findings

Ukrainian communities understand the importance of European standards and are already applying many EU-compatible practices under extremely difficult conditions. Before the full-scale invasion, many communities introduced transparency tools, anti-corruption measures, digital services and social-policy mechanisms. Since 2022, local priorities have shifted toward standards that support survival, resilience and cooperation with European partners.

Energy is the clearest example of practical implementation. Communities are investing in decentralised generation, solar energy, generators and autonomous supply for critical infrastructure. However, high equipment costs, complex procedures and shortages of specialists slow progress.

In social policy, communities focus on veterans, families of military personnel, persons with disabilities and internally displaced persons. Case management, veteran support, social taxis, rehabilitation-equipment services, childcare and local social-service initiatives show important innovation. At the same time, accessibility, psychological rehabilitation, adapted workplaces and sustainable financing remain difficult.

Enterprise policy is shaped by wartime survival. Local authorities try to support business, but investment risks, relocation, energy costs, labour shortages and weak local budgets limit results. For many businesses, EU integration is currently experienced mainly through grants and donor programmes rather than through systematic regulatory convergence.

Judiciary and fundamental-rights reforms are often seen as national-level issues, but communities recognise the importance of electronic court services, transparency, personal-data protection and local anti-corruption measures. In justice, freedom and security, the most visible local practices are community policing, body cameras, support for internally displaced persons and cooperation with local law-enforcement bodies.

Ukraine's EU integration will succeed only if national reforms are translated into clear, financed and locally understandable implementation mechanisms. Communities need training, resources, simplified procedures, peer learning, stable communication and differentiated support. Without this, the gap between formal Europeanisation and everyday local practice will remain one of the main risks for the accession process. Implementation gaps differ significantly between oblasts and communities. The accession process should therefore measure not only national legal adoption, but also regional and local implementation.

Priority Recommendations

For the European Union and Member States

- 1. Build regional delivery partnerships with Ukrainian oblasts and major municipalities.**
EU institutions and Member States should create structured partnerships with regions and communities to support accession-relevant reforms in energy resilience, social services, SME development, border management, anti-corruption and fundamental rights.
- 2. Finance local project preparation, not only infrastructure.**
EU support should advice on feasibility studies, design documentation, procurement planning, environmental and social assessments, maintenance plans and staffing models so that communities can prepare bankable projects.
- 3. Create regional implementation benchmarks for accession support.**
EU monitoring should track whether reforms are reaching oblasts and communities, including indicators on service delivery, staffing, budget execution, procurement quality, public reporting and citizen access.
- 4. Strengthen independent monitoring and integrity safeguards at local level.**
EU-funded programmes should include transparent procurement, open data, civil-society oversight, conflict-of-interest controls and complaint mechanisms, especially in reconstruction and infrastructure projects.

5. **Expand peer-to-peer cooperation with EU regions and municipalities.**

Ukrainian communities need practical support from European counterparts on energy planning, social-service procurement, SME support, industrial parks, waste management, accessibility, local anti-corruption and emergency preparedness.

For the Ukrainian Central Government

6. **Create a national regional-implementation framework for EU accession.**

Each accession-relevant ministry should define what reforms mean for oblasts and communities, what local authorities must do, what resources are available, and how progress will be measured.

7. **Lock in Cluster 1 reforms and prevent backsliding.**

Ukraine should strengthen judicial independence, protect anti-corruption institutions, improve prosecutorial accountability, adopt personal-data protection legislation, advance anti-discrimination standards and ensure credible fundamental-rights safeguards.

8. **Deliver an energy market and resilience package with local implementation tools.**

The package should include electricity-market integration, a roadmap for reducing distortive price caps and public service obligations, protection for vulnerable consumers, municipal distributed generation, grid connection support and oil-stock planning.

9. **Deliver a social acquis package focused on community-level services.**

Ukraine should adopt a modern Labour Code, strengthen occupational safety and health, rebuild labour inspection capacity, improve social-service procurement, and expand employment support for veterans, persons with disabilities and internally displaced persons.

10. **Deliver an SME and industrial competitiveness package for regions.**

The government should introduce the SME Test, reduce regulatory costs, strengthen regional business-support systems, support clusters and innovation vouchers, improve access to EU programmes, and link industrial recovery to European value chains, including defence and dual-use sectors.

11. **Deliver a justice, freedom and security readiness package with territorial coverage.**

Ukraine should update integrated border management, Schengen planning, asylum procedures, anti-trafficking mechanisms, API/PNR legislation and migration governance, while ensuring that border and frontline regions receive the staffing, infrastructure and digital tools needed for implementation.

For Oblasts and Communities

12. **Prepare local EU accession action plans.**

Oblasts and municipalities should identify which EU-related reforms affect their responsibilities, set local priorities, assign responsible departments and publish simple progress reports.

13. **Build project pipelines for EU and reconstruction finance.**

Communities should prepare investment-ready projects in municipal energy, social infrastructure, accessibility, industrial parks, business support, border infrastructure, digital services and public safety.

14. **Strengthen local business and SME support.**

Regions should create or upgrade SME support desks, export-readiness services, business incubators, cluster platforms and advisory services helping entrepreneurs access national and EU programmes.

15. **Improve local social-service delivery.**

Communities should prioritise veteran support, disability inclusion, psychological rehabilitation, childcare, supported living, social transport, deinstitutionalisation and services for internally displaced persons.

16. **Use open data and public reporting to build trust.**

Local authorities should publish information on procurement, reconstruction projects, anti-corruption programmes, social-service coverage, energy-resilience projects and business-support measures.

17. Invest in administrative capacity.

Regions and communities need trained staff capable of project preparation, EU funding applications, procurement, monitoring, reporting, stakeholder consultation and inter-municipal cooperation.

Appendix: In-Depth Interview Participants

No.	Participant	Position / Community
1	Oleh Savchuk	Village Head, Poromiv Village Council, Volodymyr District, Volyn Oblast
2	Yaroslav Shchaslyvtsev	Deputy Mayor for Socio-Economic Affairs and International Investment Development, Shostka, Sumy Oblast
3	Rostyslav Bortnyk	Mayor of Berezhany, Ternopil Oblast
4	Iryna Diadenko	Deputy of Sumy City Council
5	Olena Kasianchuk	Village Head, Lytovezh Village Council, Volodymyr District, Volyn Oblast
6	Bohdan Kyrlyk	Settlement Head, Velykyi Bereznyi Settlement Council, Uzhhorod District, Zakarpattia Oblast
7	Oleksandr Skoryk	Deputy of Kharkiv Oblast Council
8	Roman Kaznovetskyi	Mayor of Lanivtsi, Kremenets District, Ternopil Oblast
9	Sofiia Khodiuk	Deputy Village Head, Kuialnyk Village Council, Podilsk District, Odesa Oblast
10	Valerii Vesniani	Mayor of Tulchyn, Vinnytsia Oblast
11	Oleh Pylypenko	Head of Shevchenkivska Territorial Community, Mykolaiv District, Mykolaiv Oblast

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 ants.org.ua

 info@ants.org.ua

This project, «Stronger Europe, United Front – Advancing Ukraine’s EU Membership for Greater Resilience and Security», was funded by the European Union. The content of this material is the sole responsibility of the «ANTS» NGO and does not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.