

(English version)

**Question for written answer E-002200/25
to the Commission
Jean-Paul Garraud (PfE)
(2 June 2025)**

Subject: Democratic criteria and respect for the rule of law in candidate countries

The rule of law, separation of powers and fundamental freedoms leave much to be desired in several EU candidate countries.

Ukraine in particular has recently taken a number of alarming steps; for example, it has placed limits on opposition parties and the independent press, and made a series of controversial top judicial appointments.

Moldova and the Western Balkans also have major shortcomings, which are often flagged by NGOs and international institutions. In Moldova, accusations of judicial politicisation and media interference raise questions, while in the Western Balkans, some countries are still blighted by structural corruption and unresolved interethnic tensions, and have seen troubling democratic backsliding.

Against this background:

1. What specific criteria and targets did the Commission set to assess the rule of law and democratic safeguards in these countries?
2. Why is it keeping accession negotiations open despite these obvious failings?
3. Is it planning to suspend accession negotiations if it notes democratic backsliding?

Submitted: 2.6.2025

**Answer given by Ms Kos on behalf of the European Commission
(4 August 2025)**

The revised enlargement methodology provides for an even stronger focus on fundamental reforms in negotiations on accession to the EU. Credible and irreversible reforms in the policy areas belonging to the ‘fundamentals cluster’ (cluster 1 of the EU *acquis communautaire*), including democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights, determine the progress made on the accession path.

Negotiations start and end with these fundamental values. In the context of enlargement negotiations, the Commission proposes and the Council sets benchmarks in these areas for each country.

The Commission assesses the state of play and progress on reforms, including in the fundamentals cluster, in its annual Enlargement Package.

The package contains detailed analysis of developments in these areas as well as tailor-made recommendations to the countries. In addition, the sixth edition of the Rule of Law report was adopted on 8 July 2025 ⁽¹⁾ that along all Member States include also country chapters on four enlargement countries, namely Albania, Montenegro, North-Macedonia, and Serbia.

Their inclusion will support these countries’ reforms efforts and progress on democracy and rule of law ahead of the accession, and to guarantee that high standards will continue after the accession.

In case of serious or prolonged stagnation or backsliding in reform implementation in the fundamentals cluster, or in a situation where progress under the fundamentals cluster lags progress in other areas, the Commission stands ready to take appropriate action.

The decision to suspend accession negotiations ultimately rests in the hands of the Member States.

⁽¹⁾ https://commission.europa.eu/publications/2025-rule-law-report-communication-and-country-chapters_en.