

The First EU Cluster Will Be a Test for Ukrainian Institutions – Alona Lebedieva

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/EINPresswire.com/ -- The opening of the first cluster on Ukraine's accession to the European Union is an important political step. However, it is not an automatic acceleration of the process.

According to Alona Lebedieva, owner of [Aurum Group](#), Ukraine is entering a more complex phase, where every political agreement must be translated into laws, secondary legislation, procedures and the real work of state institutions.

On 12 June, the EU announced that member states had agreed to open the first negotiating cluster for Ukraine and Moldova, and on 15 June, at the Second Intergovernmental Conference in Luxembourg, negotiations under Cluster 1 were [officially launched](#). This fundamental cluster, "Fundamentals", includes five chapters: judiciary and fundamental rights; justice, freedom and security; public procurement; statistics; and financial control. It also covers democratic institutions, public administration reform and economic criteria.

At first glance, this may seem technical. In reality, this cluster contains some of the most sensitive issues for the Ukrainian state. It is not about a separate reform, but about the system's ability to operate according to EU rules: how decisions are made, funds are controlled,



Alona Lebedieva



Marta Kos on the opening of the first cluster for Ukraine and Moldova: it is the "biggest step" towards EU membership. Photo: Thierry Monasse/Getty Images

procurement is conducted, courts function, citizens' rights are guaranteed, and the state provides data European institutions can trust.

The formal opening of the cluster does not mean it will be closed quickly. For Cluster 1, the EU has already defined interim benchmarks for the horizontal level and Chapters 23 and 24, as well as closing benchmarks for Chapters 5, 18 and 32 – public procurement, statistics and financial control. This is similar to work with the IMF: one promise is not enough; implementation must be demonstrated continuously.

One of the most difficult areas is statistics. For the EU, statistical quality is not a formality, but the foundation of governance. Ukraine must transition to the methodology of the European System of Accounts so Eurostat can verify Ukrainian data. Data on gross national income already partly complies with ESA 2010 standards, but Ukraine still has to ensure full transmission of the required data to Eurostat. Without this, it is impossible to properly assess the economy, budget, labour market, social policy, regional development and reconstruction needs.

Another major area is public procurement. Ukraine must align its legislation with EU rules in public procurement, concessions, public-private partnerships and related procedures. The first step has already been taken: Draft Law No. 11520 "On Public Procurement" was adopted by the Verkhovna Rada on 27 May and returned with the signature of the President on 23 June. But the law itself is only the beginning. The government will also need by-laws, instructions, standard contracts, training materials and a risk-based approach at early tender stages in high-risk sectors, including defence, energy and reconstruction.

Alona Lebedieva notes that this is critical not only for meeting EU requirements, but also for future trust in reconstruction. Much infrastructure recovery funding will pass through procurement, concessions and PPPs. If these procedures remain opaque or dependent on discretionary decisions, this will become a problem for Brussels and investors. Private capital does not enter an environment where partner selection rules are unclear or changing.

A separate issue is the appeal of tenders before the Antimonopoly Committee of Ukraine and the selection of private partners in PPP projects. This will be especially relevant for infrastructure reconstruction, where competition, transparency and clear procedures must be a condition for major projects, not merely a declaration.

Financial control will also be one of the markers of trust. Ukraine must strengthen the role and independence of the Accounting Chamber in line with INTOSAI standards and IFPP principles. For partners, this is a matter of principle: Ukraine receives substantial international support, and scrutiny over the use of these funds will only increase.

The judiciary and justice block will be no less complex. It includes a new administrative court with judges selected with independent international experts, improvements to asset recovery and management, ARMA reform, and broader strengthening of trust in the judiciary. These reforms

are difficult to implement quickly because they affect interests within the state system itself.

The cluster also has practical and symbolic significance. It confirms that EU enlargement continues amid the war in Europe. For Ukraine, this is an important signal: European integration remains not a declaration of support, but a real negotiating process with specific stages, criteria and obligations.

At the same time, the opening of one cluster should not become an end in itself. Ukraine and the European Commission are ready to move forward, so it would be logical to open other negotiating clusters in the coming months. This would help maintain the pace of negotiations, prevent a slow bureaucratic procedure, and confirm the seriousness of the EU's intentions regarding Ukraine's future membership.

According to Alona Lebedieva, it is crucial not to lose momentum. EU accession will depend not only on diplomacy, but also on the quality of draft legislation, the parliamentary majority, the government's ability to explain difficult decisions, and the state's readiness to act systematically rather than in emergency response mode.

For business and investors, this also matters. European integration is not only about future access to the EU market. It is also about predictable courts, transparent procurement, reliable statistics, financial control, clear PPP rules and a lower cost of risk for capital. If Ukraine meets these conditions in substance, not formally, it will become much more understandable for long-term investment.

However, bureaucratic delays, formal compliance and rushed legislation could push back accession. Even if some reforms move forward on schedule, weak institutional preparation can slow the closure of the cluster and affect the negotiation calendar.

The opening of the first cluster is an important step. But it also shows that the stage of symbolic support for Ukraine is ending. A stage of testing the state's capacity is beginning. And this is where, Alona Lebedieva concludes, it will become clear whether Ukraine can not only politically aspire to the EU, but also technically, legally and institutionally withstand the pace of European integration.

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