



Launch of the Carpathian Integration Initiative

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Initiated by Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the first summit of the regional format of the Carpathian Integration Initiative (CII)—originally known as the Carpathian Eight—took place on 18 September 2026 in Huta, Ivano-Frankivsk Oblast. Alongside Austria, Czechia, Poland, Serbia, Slovakia, Romania and Ukraine, Hungary was also intended to be a member. The platform is designed to enable Ukraine to participate on an equal footing in regional cooperation with EU member states and to streamline its integration with the EU. It is also intended to facilitate the development of infrastructure links in the region. However, Hungary's boycott of the summit and the ambivalent stance of Czechia and Slovakia may have a negative impact on the format's actual capacity for joint action and the implementation of agreements.

Ukraine's motivations. Ukraine's objective in establishing the CII is to join the mainstream trend [of regional cooperation in Central Europe](#). The country is not a full member of most regional formats. Its direct memberships are as a co-founder of the Lublin Triangle (established in 2020 alongside Poland and Lithuania), and the Odessa Triangle (launched in 2022 alongside Romania and Moldova), while elsewhere its status is limited, such as observer status at the Council of the Baltic Sea States and an associate participant seat [in the Three Seas Initiative](#).

Assuming the role of initiator of the new format is intended to ensure Ukraine has a leading influence on its agenda. Zelenskyy has signalled a desire to secure political and non-military support in this way, including from states that are avoiding taking a clear stance against Russia. The Ukrainian authorities also plan to use the format to streamline the EU accession process and develop infrastructure links between the border regions of Ukraine and EU member states.

The new format is also intended to help Ukraine increase pressure on Hungary. It remains sceptical about Ukraine's EU membership, and [Péter Magyar's government's](#) June 2026 withdrawal of its veto on Ukraine's accession talks was motivated solely by a desire to break Hungary's isolation within the EU. To encourage Hungary to participate in the new regional format, the authorities in Kyiv referred to the Slovak proposal for trilateral cooperation from 2024—which was also addressed to Poland—and promoted the establishment of

a forum of Carpathian states. This was intended to ensure the participation of all of Ukraine's EU neighbours. The inclusion of Serbia—a fellow EU candidate country favoured by Hungary—in the format was intended to further hinder Hungary's ability to obstruct Ukraine's progress in the negotiations.

The partners' motivations. The different levels of representation reflected the varying motivations of the other CII founders. Prime Minister Donald Tusk used the summit to improve the atmosphere in relations with Ukraine during a tense period following Zelenskyy's naming of a military unit after the "Heroes of the UPA." He also announced Poland's accession to the Anti-Ballistic Missile Coalition (established in Paris in July 2026 to enhance Europe's defence capabilities against ballistic missiles). Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić sought to build on the positive momentum in bilateral relations following Zelenskyy's first visit to Belgrade in August and to emphasise their joint efforts towards EU accession. Romania, represented by President Nicușor Dan, saw the CII as an opportunity to [strengthen bilateral relations with Ukraine](#) and build Romania's position within the regional cooperation framework, which it considers to [be dominated by Poland](#).

The level of representation from other countries was lower. Contrary to earlier announcements, Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico did not attend the summit. This coincided with comments in which he questioned Slovakia's obligations to its allies in the event of an armed conflict between Russia and

NATO. The downgrading of the delegation to the level of Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs demonstrates a desire to maintain the consistency of Fico's message, as well as a decline in interest in the expanded format compared with Slovakia's 2024 proposal. The President of the Federal Council (the upper chamber of parliament) of Austria took the opportunity to renew its offer to host an international conference on the reconstruction of Ukraine in 2028 (this year's conference took place in Gdańsk). Czechia was the least well-represented, sending the opposition First Deputy Speaker of the Senate, who was not authorised to sign the CII's founding declaration.

Hungary did not attend the summit and did not join the CII. However, it is unlikely that Magyar declined the invitation outright, given the visible embarrassment of the Ukrainian hosts and the presence of the head of the Hungarian embassy, who nevertheless did not participate in the proceedings. The Hungarian Prime Minister claimed his failure to join the CII was due to "important reasons," a diplomatic excuse, as the cited reason—the signing of a memorandum between MOL (which had no government authorisation) and Naftohaz regarding the construction of Ukrainian fuel storage facilities in Hungary—took place after the summit.

Ukraine had most likely sought the participation of a high-ranking EU representative at the summit, evidenced by Zelenskyy's accounts of his meetings with António Costa and Ursula von der Leyen, the Presidents of the European Council and the European Commission respectively. However, the Commission's Vice-President for Cohesion and Reforms, Raffaele Fitto, took part only in the economic forum, whilst von der Leyen merely expressed her support for the CII in a video message.

Outcome of the summit. The signatories to the final declaration announced their intention to strengthen cross-border, economic, social and sustainable development cooperation in the region. The CII is also intended to serve as a platform to facilitate—without specifying how—the implementation of infrastructure links using EU instruments for regional and cross-border cooperation (including Interreg, Interreg NEXT and the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation). The initiative is also intended to support EU candidate countries in implementing *the acquis*, although no specific instruments are mentioned. Furthermore, the signatories announced the establishment, within the framework of the CII, of mechanisms to coordinate cooperation at various national levels—including between local authorities and regions—and with EU institutions.

An economic forum organised in Bukovel as part of the summit was intended to boost the CII's appeal. A total of 123 projects seeking funding with a total value of \$71.3 billion were presented—comprising 86 Ukrainian initiatives, 9 Czech, 8 Slovak, 6 Serbian, 5 each from Poland and Romania, and 4 from Austria. These were mainly energy, transport and industrial projects, and most are domestic investments, loosely linked to the need for regional cooperation. Poland, for example, put forward plans for the construction of a nuclear

power station and offshore wind farms—projects that have been prepared for years—totalling \$40 billion (more than half the value of all the projects presented). Over 50 agreements were concluded at the forum between companies, development agencies and local authorities. Apart from MOL, the Czech group MND and Poland's Orlen signed memoranda of understanding with Naftogaz, and the Polish firm also concluded an agreement with Ukrnafta. Furthermore, Ukraine and Romania agreed on the modernisation of seven border crossings and the construction of ten new ones.

Conclusions and prospects. The establishment of the CII reflects a proliferation of regional formats in Central Europe and the growing overlap in their areas of focus. It also forms part of the intensification of multilateral cooperation following [the resumption of political consultations within the Visegrád Group](#). For Ukraine, this represents its first attempt to co-create a regional format larger than a trilateral one, and due to Hungary's non-participation, it can only be considered a partial success at this point.

The CII envisages closer cooperation between EU Member States and candidate countries. The proposal to streamline their accession process—both in terms of implementing *the acquis*, which would require the synchronised sharing of experience across different Member States, and in terms of accession negotiations, for which the European Commission is responsible—will be difficult to implement. However, the CII may help to resolve any disputes that could result in the blocking of EU enlargement, a benefit of significant importance [given the growing role of Member States in this process](#).

Like almost all platforms in Central Europe, the CII calls for cooperation on infrastructure. This is difficult to achieve in practice, and may therefore undermine the initiative's justification for involvement and the effectiveness of its activities. The announcement of plans to enhance transport and energy connectivity is in line with the objectives of the Three Seas Initiative, which is referenced in the declaration from the CII summit. However, despite these surface similarities, the two platforms are promoting different projects, and neither provides the tools needed for implementation, including coordination and financing mechanisms.

From Poland's perspective, the CII may provide an additional platform for cooperation with Ukraine. However, the format remains in its formative stage, with no clearly defined level of participation or mechanisms for implementing agreements, and is weakened by Hungary's absence and the ambiguous stance of Czechia and Slovakia. This means that, in practice, it may become merely another platform for dialogue, primarily involving local authorities and the business sector. The development—as was signalled at the summit—of an EU macro-regional strategy for the Carpathians would be beneficial for Poland. Such a mechanism does not provide new funds, but facilitates the more effective use of existing ones and the coordination of cross-border projects, as confirmed by strategies that have already been implemented, such as the Alpine and Danube strategies.