

THE MAIN CHALLENGES OF THE FUTURE EUROPEAN UNION ENLARGEMENT

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*Manuscript has been submitted on 27.09.2024, sent for review on 27.09.2024,
accepted for publication on 01.10.2024.*

Abstract

The article explores the European Union (EU) enlargement process and the challenges it faces in the context of current geopolitical dynamics. It outlines the key features of the enlargement process, including the Copenhagen Criteria, phased negotiations, while also addressing the internal and external factors shaping EU expansion.

The article is focused on significant challenges such as internal disagreements among member states, democratic backsliding in candidate countries, and the impact of geopolitical tensions – particularly with Russia – on the EU's ability to extend its borders. As the EU navigates its role in stabilizing neighbouring regions and countering external influences, the complexity of integrating new members grows.

Keywords: European Union, enlargement, accession criteria, challenges, candidate countries, member states, democratic backsliding, geopolitical tensions.

EU Enlargement Process and Features

The process of European Union enlargement has been one of the most transformative elements in shaping modern Europe. Starting as a small economic community and growing into a powerful political and economic entity, the EU's expansions have broadened its borders, diversified its membership, and enhanced its global influence. The process involves the gradual inclusion of new member states that meet specific criteria and is governed by a set of principles and features. However, enlargement is not a straightforward process; it involves a complex interplay of political, economic, and legal factors that determine whether candidate countries can meet the requirements for membership.

The Treaty on the European Union (Maastricht Treaty)* states that any European country can apply for membership if it respects the EU's democratic values and undertakes to contribute to their development (Official Website of the European Commission, n.d. a).

The EU accession process (membership) generally consists of the following main stages:

1. When a country is ready, it becomes an official candidate for membership.
2. The candidate country enters formal accession negotiations, a process that involves the adopting of established EU law, preparing to apply it properly, and implementing the judicial, administrative, economic and other reforms necessary for the country to meet the accession conditions (Official Website of the European Commission. n.d. b)., known as the Copenhagen criteria. They are:
 - stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities.
 - a functioning market economy and the ability to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the EU.
 - the ability to take on the obligations of membership, including the capacity to effectively implement the rules, standards and policies that make up the body of EU law, and adherence to the aims of political, economic and monetary union (EUR-Lex, 2021).

In the case of Western Balkans' countries, additional conditions for membership have been set, the so-called "Stabilization and Association Processes", which mainly refer to regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations (Official Website of the European Commission, n.d. a).

3. When the negotiations and accompanying reforms have been completed to the satisfaction of both sides, the country can join the EU (Official Website of the European Commission, n.d. b).

Negotiations for accession with a candidate country are initiated only after receiving the unanimous endorsement of all Member States from the European Council. Negotiations take place in intergovernmental conferences between the governments of the EU Member States and that of the candidate country. The purpose of these negotiations is to assist candidate countries in getting ready for EU membership. Once negotiations on all policy areas are concluded, and the EU determines that it is prepared for enlargement in terms of absorption capacity, the terms and conditions, along with potential safeguard clauses and transitional arrangements, are included in an accession treaty. The treaty requires the consent of the European Parliament and the

*See more in detail in Treaty on European Union. Maastricht. (1992).

unanimous approval of the Council before all EU Member States, and the candidate country can sign it. The contracting parties then proceed to ratify it in accordance with their respective constitutional rules (EUR-Lex, 2021b).

Enlargement policy is one of the most powerful tools of the EU, which has helped to increase its borders, creating a union of states with established democracies and developed economies. The union first added new members in 1973: the United Kingdom, Ireland, Denmark, and then Greece joined in 1981, followed by Spain and Portugal in 1986. On January 1, 1995, Austria, Finland, and Sweden joined the EU, bringing membership to 15 member states. 2004 was marked by the largest enlargement of the EU: Cyprus, Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia. The last three countries to join the Union were Bulgaria and Romania in 2007 and Croatia in 2013 (Archick & Garding, 2021, pp. 3-4). Currently, there are twenty-seven member states of the Union after the withdrawal of the United Kingdom in 2020.

As for candidate countries, there are currently nine countries that have been recognized as official candidates for EU membership and are at various stages of the accession process. These countries are Turkey (became a candidate country in December 1999), North Macedonia (became a candidate country in December 2005), Montenegro (became a candidate country in December 2010), Serbia (became a candidate country in December 2010), Albania (became a candidate country in June 2014), Ukraine (became a candidate country in June 2022), Moldova (became a candidate country in June 2022), Bosnia and Herzegovina (became a candidate country in December 2022), Georgia (became a candidate country in December 2023) (Official Website of the Council of the EU and the European Council, n.d.).

It is important to note that enlargement brings many benefits to the new member states, including political stability; freedom for citizens to live, study or work anywhere in the EU; increased trade via access to the single market; increased funding and investment; higher social, environmental, and consumer standards (Official Website of the European Union, n.d.). EU enlargement has been one of the world's most successful democratic state building projects. Even before they joined the EU, reforms in candidate countries transformed their economies and modernized public institutions, leading to impressive economic growth and greater prosperity. Close economic ties between old and new members boosted political stability and security for all. Each enlargement was a win-win for both old and new members. In December 2023, ten years after Croatia became the last country to join the EU, the European Council launched a new enlargement process to the east, initiating accession talks with Moldova and Ukraine and granting candidate status to Georgia. This move, even though prompted by geopolitical concerns over Russia's war in Ukraine,

has raised hopes that the EU is finally ready to take in new members once more (Shahini, 2024, p.1).

However, the journey to being a member is not easy at all. Accession is delayed by the complex interplay of political, economic or legal factors, as seen in the case for several Western Balkans' countries. Enlargement has effectively promoted democracy and growth in new member states, but every round of enlargement also raises questions about the EU's ability to absorb newcomers while not losing cohesion.

Challenges and Geopolitical Complexities in the EU Enlargement

In the 21st century, the challenges facing European Union enlargement have grown more complex, reflecting the shifting political, economic, and geopolitical landscape. While the EU's commitment to fostering stability, democracy, and prosperity through expansion remains strong, the path to enlargement is increasingly fraught with obstacles. Internal disagreements among member states, concerns over democratic backsliding in candidate countries have slowed the process of the future EU expansion. At the same time, geopolitical tensions – most notably with Russia – have added new layers of complexity, particularly in regions like the Western Balkans, Eastern Europe, and the South Caucasus.

As the European Union (EU) has expanded and deepened its cooperation, it has encountered a range of difficult questions that are central to its functioning and sustainability. These include how to balance the influence and interests of member states, how to share the benefits and costs of integration, and how to shape democracy at the supranational level. Therefore, the EU has faced many challenges and setbacks in trying to develop a regional integration that is effective and legitimate and that can withstand anti-European sentiments, crises (especially economic) and other similar processes (Cuyvers, 2017, p. 22).

The geopolitical dimension of enlargement policy became more pronounced in 2022, when Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia asked to join the EU. Since then, fresh geopolitical challenges have accelerated the need to reform enlargement policy and cemented a shift towards the merit-based integration of new countries (Stanicek et al., 2023).

Taking into account the important events that have taken place in recent years, such as granting candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova in June 2022, to Bosnia and Herzegovina in December 2022, and to Georgia in December 2023; the opening of accession negotiations and the first intergovernmental conference held with Albania and North Macedonia in July 2022, with Moldova and Ukraine in June 2024, which show that there is some progress in EU enlargement policy, however, a number of obstacles still remain.

EU Disunity on Enlargement Policy. One of the most pressing domestic challenges is the lack of consensus among current EU member states regarding the future enlargement. Russia's full-scale war on Ukraine has reenergised the enlargement debate. Most member states now see enlargement as a way to respond to the geopolitical reality and strengthen the EU in its immediate neighbourhood. However, while the geopolitical arguments in favour of enlargement are even stronger today than they were 20 years ago, the process is likely to face more obstacles than it did back then (Buras & Morina, 2023, p. 1).

According to conducted surveys in the framework of policymakers and political thinkers in all EU member states by the European Council on Foreign Relations' network of national researchers, enlargement is considered a way to respond to geopolitical changes. There is widespread agreement that enlargement would help the EU to assert itself as the dominant strategic player in its immediate neighbourhood, and a clear fear that a lack of EU integration could push candidate countries – particularly in the Western Balkans – into the Russian or Chinese sphere of influence. The geopolitical rationale for enlargement is shared by countries with different strategic cultures and security interests, such as France and Poland, Portugal and Slovakia, Sweden and the Czech Republic. Previously enlargement-sceptical countries, such as France, Sweden, Denmark, Belgium, or the Netherlands, have changed their approach. Speaking in Bratislava in May 2023, French president Emmanuel Macron, who in 2019 blocked the opening of accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia, stated that “the question is not whether we should enlarge ... but rather how we should do it”, adding that the EU should admit new countries “as swiftly as possible” (Buras & Morina, 2023, pp. 4-5).

However, the understanding of how to fulfill this geopolitical goal of enlargement varies across Europe. The most consequential dividing line runs between those who see EU enlargement as a security provider and a stabilizing tool for the EU and those who believe that ensuring security (through NATO membership) should be a precondition for EU enlargement. In Poland and the Baltic states, policy elites consider NATO enlargement, rather than future accessions to the EU, the geopolitical priority. The countries that are potentially most affected by security threats in the EU's eastern neighbourhood want to prioritise the enlargement of the transatlantic alliance, with accession to the EU as a next step. This was the order of accession that central and eastern European countries followed themselves: Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic joined NATO in 1999 and the EU five years later. Central and eastern member states believe that only NATO membership can guarantee security. For them, EU membership without NATO guarantees would not provide the new members with the level of security and stability

required for their integration process to be successful and could even pose risks for EU security (Buras & Morina, 2023, pp. 4-5).

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has indeed made EU enlargement a geopolitical imperative. But internal reforms may be needed before the union can integrate new members. Despite the push resulting from Russia's war in Ukraine, the union is in no position to take in further members from the Western Balkans, let alone from Eastern Europe. In a similar vein, no candidate country seems to be prepared to conform to the EU's accession criteria or indeed to make sure that no Hungary and Poland-style democratic backsliding will occur once membership is achieved. Montenegro, negotiating its accession since 2012, is probably in the best position to join. But it is difficult to envisage another Western Balkan nation making its way in – certainly not Serbia, which has to settle the Kosovo dispute first and undergo a process of radical re-democratization, which could be an even greater hurdle. A “geopolitical” enlargement to Ukraine is similarly unlikely so long as the war rages on (Dempsey, 2023).

Democratic Backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe and also Candidate Countries. In recent years, there has been a decline of democratic institutions and the rule of law in some member states and candidate countries. And though these developments have yet to have any tangible impact upon the process of policy decision-making within the EU, the issue remains and politicians continue to express their concerns (Gegeshidze, 2018, p. 15). Hungary and Poland were considered consolidated liberal democracies until the rise to power of Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Alliance and Law and Justice (PiS). Since then, both countries saw the largest drops in levels of democracy. Freedom House has registered a continuous decline in democratic indicators since 2010 in Hungary and 2015 in Poland. In 2020, the former was demoted to the status of “transitional or hybrid regime” and the latter to a “semi-consolidated democracy”. Of course, it is reasonable to assume that, had backsliding states not been EU members, deterioration would have been even more extensive (Holesch & Kyriazi, 2021, pp. 4-6).

However, the government of Hungary continues to display autocratic tendencies. After the European Commission (EC) halted the disbursement of EU funds allocated for Budapest in 2022 due to the erosion of the rule of law in Hungary, the government implemented a set of reform measures to address the commission's concerns. However, the reforms made no major changes to the political system. Hungary continued on an illiberal and authoritarian trajectory in 2023 and remained an entrenched hybrid regime (Végh, 2024).

As for Poland, national governance underwent a regime transition after eight years of single-party rule. During its eight years in power, PiS had solidified its grip over state institutions and resources. The most negatively

affected areas were the judiciary, local democratic governance, and the pluralism of civil society. The challenge currently facing democratic governance stems from the significant democratic backsliding observed during the PiS's two terms. The key institutions of the judicial system including the Constitutional Tribunal, the Supreme Court, and the National Council of the Judiciary, underwent reforms aimed at increasing the governing party's influence over them, often in ways that conflicted with the Polish constitution. The new coalition faces a delicate task in reforming these institutions to reverse the democratic backsliding (Bogusławski & Kolasieński, 2024).

Some candidate countries are also experiencing a decline in the level of democracy. The candidate status granted to Bosnia and Herzegovina by the European Union (EU) in December 2022 belied the lack of progress in democratic and economic reforms. Bosnian civil society worried throughout 2023 that the EU's decision could make it appear that Bosnia and Herzegovina's governing apparatus is genuinely trying to bring the country closer to the EU's standards. In reality, while all Bosnian political actors declare readiness for European integration, the necessary reforms are stalled by the same actors' inaction, obstruction, and active boycotts of politics (according to "Freedom House", the democracy score in Bosnia and Herzegovina decreased from 3.29 in 2022 to 3.18 in 2024). The EU announced 14 priorities for Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2019, but by December 2023 only one had been achieved (Anđelić, 2024).

Democratic backsliding is observed in Georgia as well. The candidate status granted to Georgia by the European Council in December 2023, which Georgia has been striving for since independence. According to Freedom House's 2024 annual report, the EU hopes to use the accession process to promote democratic reforms to bring Georgia into the European orbit. According to observers, Georgia has stopped progress in implementing the 12 priorities of the European Commission reforms. The EC's progress report proposed new steps for Georgia, such as fighting disinformation, defusing polarization and conducting credible elections. Judicial reforms are a key issue that Georgia must address to become an EU member. Despite some minor progress, Georgia needs to comprehensively reform its judicial system. The national-democratic governance in Georgia is formed in the conditions of deep political polarization, where the government is focused on maintaining managerial levers. Against the backdrop of weak opposition parties, civil society has remained a key political force. Although Georgia remains a leader in the South Caucasus region in the fighting against petty corruption, the perception of impunity regarding high-level corruption continues to be a serious challenge in the country (Freedom House, 2024).

Thus, in recent years, although Georgia's foreign policy has officially remained unchanged, aimed at European integration, the non-confrontation policy of the Georgian government towards Russia and its recent and "anti-Western" activities aimed at its international partners, have actually led to the increase of the influence of the Russian factor in the process of making foreign policy decisions of Georgia. In June, one month after the adoption of the controversial law "On Foreign Agents"* in Georgia EU Ambassador to Georgia, Pawel Herczynski announced that "regrettably, Georgia's EU accession process is stopped for now" ("EU NEIGHBOURS East", 2024).

Democratic backsliding in some member states and candidate countries makes the enlargement process even more complicated. It is clear that the priority for the EU in this case is the existence and preservation of democratic institutions and the rule of law in Central and Eastern Europe. As for the candidate countries, it is very important that they maintain the current democratization progress they made, otherwise it will further delay membership.

Geopolitical Tensions and Security Concerns. Geopolitical factors, particularly the influence and opposition of Russia, play a central role in hindering EU enlargement in regions like the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has increased the role of a geopolitical factor in EU enlargement. Countries like Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, which were granted candidate status, are in conflict zones or regions of strategic interest for Russia, which perceives EU (also NATO) expansion as a threat to its sphere of influence. Security concerns and the risk of conflict spreading from Russia remain serious challenges to further integration.

The security situation in Ukraine may remain precarious for some time to come, given the contested territories occupied or already illegally annexed by Russia. Similarly, neither Georgia (the breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia) nor Moldova (Transnistria) exercises control over the entire national territory with which they are aiming to join the EU (Lippert, 2024, p. 5).

In South-Eastern Europe, there are still unresolved conflicts over external borders, territories and ethnic affiliations within and between (potential) candidate countries. The EU is popular for bilateral disputes between its members and candidates blocking the enlargement process. In the face of such frictions, which contain the potential for violent escalations and incidents, the Western Balkans remains a region of instability and a fragile peace. The EU, along with NATO, the United States and the United Nations, will have to ensure over the long term that the situation continues to be under control – for

*See more in detail in Reuters. (2024).

this reason, there are the Kosovo Force (KFOR) troops on the border between Kosovo and Serbia and the European Union Force in Bosnia-Herzegovina (EUFOR) (Lippert, 2024, p. 5).

What path these countries take will be largely determined by developments beyond their control – in particular, the course of the war in Ukraine and complex intra-EU discussions about the future of the European project. If Russia is even partly successful in its war of aggression in Ukraine, destabilization or military action against its other neighbours cannot be ruled out. Conversely, Ukrainian military success against Russia and an accelerated path toward EU accession for Ukraine increases the European prospects of other states (De Waal et al., 2024).

The states of the Western Balkans are surrounded by EU countries, which necessarily limit Russia's political ambitions there – even as disillusionment with the EU over the slow pace of enlargement gives Russia leverage. The same cannot be said for Moldova, less still for Georgia. Georgia's border with Russia and three-decade-long conflicts over Abkhazia and South Ossetia, recognized as independent by Moscow in 2008, make it vulnerable to any shifts in Russia's war with Ukraine. It is likely this sense of vulnerability that drives the Georgian Dream government's soft rapprochement with Russia on many issues since 2022 (De Waal et al., 2024).

When it comes to Moldova, its two neighbours, by contrast, are Romania – a friendly EU country – and Ukraine, a fellow candidate for joining the union. The support of both neighbours has allowed Moldova to make the EU rather than Russia its main gas supplier since 2022, and to begin accession negotiations with Brussels without suffering (so far) a major backlash from Russia (De Waal et al., 2024).

In addition to the war in Ukraine, the medium-term future of these countries will be determined by three other geopolitical factors in which the EU and Russia will play a role: the countries' domestic security concerns, the choices and decisions made by political leaders, and how successfully and rapidly the EU's revamped enlargement policy proceeds (De Waal et al., 2024).

Of course, the war has brought enlargement high up on the EU's agenda. However, the process of enlargement involves multiple points where member states can veto and is time-consuming, there will be continuous negotiations between EU members with different preferences on the speed and feasibility of enlargement. It is nearly impossible to state a firm deadline for complex processes such as enlargement. On the other hand, if this were not done, that would increase the risk of a standstill. The year 2030 as a target year for the completion of a big enlargement wave, including Ukraine, has been suggested by Charles Michel, among others, and appears reasonable since it would both lower and increase expectations. The impact of enlargement on the EU should

not be underestimated. It would raise the EU's population to approximately 506 million inhabitants and expand the labor force by 28 million people. The EU would be larger but, in economic terms, poorer. The EU centre of gravity would move in the direction of the Black Sea, with EU member states to the West, North and East of this area. The inclusion of the Western Balkans would further increase the number of small-sized states in the EU, which could complicate decision-making. In addition, the enlargement to Georgia, which lacks direct borders with other single-market countries, would also generate practical problems (Braun et al., 2024, p. 2).

The challenges facing EU enlargement in the 21st century are more intricate than ever, influenced by a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape. While the EU remains committed to fostering stability, democracy, and prosperity through expansion, the path forward is increasingly obstructed by internal disunity, democratic backsliding in candidate nations, and rising geopolitical tensions, particularly with Russia.

The situation is further complicated by the persistent democratic backsliding observed in both member states like Hungary and Poland, as well as in candidate countries such as Georgia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Reports from Freedom House indicate a concerning decline in democratic institutions, which could hinder not only the enlargement process but also the internal cohesion of the EU itself.

The road to EU enlargement is laden with obstacles that necessitate a comprehensive approach to address both the internal and external challenges facing the Union.

Conclusion

The European Union's enlargement process in the 21st century faces a multifaceted set of challenges shaped by both internal disagreements and external geopolitical pressures. While the expansion of the EU is viewed as a vital strategy for promoting stability and democracy, the road ahead is fraught with obstacles. The resurgence of geopolitical tensions, particularly with Russia, has added urgency but also complexity to the enlargement debate. Democratic backsliding in both some member and some candidate countries complicates the integration process further, raising critical questions about the EU's capacity to foster democratic resilience.

In regions like the Western Balkans, Eastern Europe, and the South Caucasus, security concerns and ongoing conflicts impede accession prospects. Although recent events, such as Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia's candidate status, signal progress, substantial reforms are still needed both within the EU and in candidate countries to ensure a merit-based and sustainable enlargement. The road to EU membership remains long, with

internal EU reforms, geopolitical dynamics, and the stability of democratic institutions being crucial determinants of success. Ultimately, the EU's enlargement strategy will not only shape its future but also the broader stability of Europe.

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