



## POLICY POSITION

# A Resilient Europe: Enhancing EU Enlargement for a Stronger and Safer Union

## INTRODUCTION

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has fundamentally reshaped Europe's security landscape, putting the European Union's (EU) enlargement policy into a renewed position of strategic importance. The war has underscored the need to enhance security and stability across Eastern Europe, where countries like Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, as well as countries in the Western Balkans, are particularly vulnerable to Russia's influence. In response, EU enlargement has become a critical tool for supporting these countries' sovereignty, strengthening democratic governance, and deepening political and economic ties. We welcome and fully support the EU's commitment to enlargement, recognising it as a strategic investment in democracy, as well as in the security and prosperity of the continent.

In light of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and the new geopolitical landscape it ushered in, Ukraine and Moldova have taken significant steps towards EU membership. After applying in February 2022, Ukraine and Moldova were granted a European perspective in June of that year, with the European Council opening formal accession negotiations in December 2023. For Ukraine, the first intergovernmental conference was held on 25 June 2024, followed by the initial bilateral screening in July 2024, setting the stage for further

negotiations. Moldova has similarly advanced on its path towards EU membership, with close monitoring of its alignment with EU standards.

Moreover, the European Commission's recent inclusion of Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia in its yearly rule of law report and the new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans reflect this renewed commitment to enlargement.

However, moving forward will require more than solely political will; substantial reforms, including Treaty changes, are necessary to accommodate new members while ensuring the EU remains effective and competitive in an increasingly complex global environment. At the same time, the EU must adopt a stronger and more serious stance on democracy and the rule of law within current Member States, particularly by rigorously enforcing mechanisms to protect its values, such as the rule of law framework enshrined in Article 7 of the Treaty on the European Union (TEU) in the case of Hungary. By addressing internal governance challenges, the EU can set a clear example and enhance its credibility, showing that it holds all members — current and future — accountable to its core democratic values.



## **BOLSTERING STABILITY AND GOVERNANCE THROUGH ENLARGEMENT**

The ongoing war in Ukraine has highlighted the inseparable link between EU enlargement and security, reinforcing the urgency to integrate new members. EU enlargement is not just a matter of political alignment but a strategic investment in the peace, stability, and prosperity of the European continent. In the context of Ukraine's fight to defend its sovereignty, expanding the EU to include countries in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans would not only bolster regional security but also act as a safeguard against external influences, particularly from Russia and China. Ukraine's ongoing accession process underscores how closely enlargement is tied to the EU's broader security and defence objectives, as incorporating countries like Ukraine strengthens their resilience against aggression and aligns them with the EU's security framework.

The expansion of the EU's borders would enhance collective security by extending the mutual defence clause in Article 42(7) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) to new Member States, ensuring a unified response to acts of aggression. Moreover, the accession process requires candidate countries to implement critical democratic and governance reforms, adhere to the rule of law, and foster good governance, making them stronger against external influences from

authoritarian regimes and hence contributing to long-term regional stability. Economically, enlargement drives growth by expanding the European single market, which leads to higher employment, increased economic opportunities, and shared prosperity for both EU and accession countries.

Furthermore, enlarging our Union and extending the sphere of peace, stability and rule of law would better equip the EU to address cross-border challenges such as organised crime, terrorism, and ensuring safe migration — reinforcing overall security. By promoting a more united and resilient Europe, the enlargement process enhances both internal stability and the EU's influence on the global stage, positioning it as a stronger advocate for peace and security in an increasingly volatile world.

## **ENSURING AN INCLUSIVE AND TRANSPARENT PATH TO EU MEMBERSHIP**

To ensure that the EU enlargement process is transparent and inclusive for both the EU and candidate countries, it is essential to involve a broader, diverse range of stakeholders and enhance communication efforts.

Involving organised civil society from both the EU and accession countries is a fundamental step. Regular consultations and dialogues with civil society organisations (CSOs), youth groups, local

local and regional authorities, as well as with social partners can provide valuable insights and foster a sense of ownership over the enlargement process. These groups can help bridge the gap between policy-making and public understanding, ensuring that the process reflects the concerns and aspirations of the people it affects.

Moreover, improving communication from EU missions in accession countries and from the governments of these countries is also crucial. EU missions should be equipped with adequate resources to engage in effective outreach, while governments must be incentivised to communicate more vigorously the benefits and progress of the accession process to their citizens, debunking the myths and fears related to enlargement.

Clear, consistent messaging about the accession criteria (Copenhagen criteria) and the benefits of EU membership can counteract misinformation, disinformation and can strengthen public support. To make the enlargement process more tangible and less technocratic, interim benefits for candidate countries should be introduced as they progress towards full membership. These could include access to certain EU policies, programmes or funding as milestones are reached.

For example, the European Commission's recently adopted New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans

could provide a model for such interim benefits. This plan aims to bring the Western Balkan partners closer to the EU by offering them some of the benefits of EU membership in advance of full accession. Key elements of the Growth Plan include the introduction of the €6 billion Reform and Growth Facility, which includes both grants and concessional loans to support economic growth and accelerate socio-economic convergence.

The plan features four main pillars: enhancing economic integration with the EU's single market, boosting economic integration within the Western Balkans, accelerating fundamental reforms, and increasing financial assistance. Benefits under this plan include access to the Single Euro Payments Area (SEPA), integration into the digital single market, and support for de-carbonising energy markets. By adopting such measures, the EU can provide meaningful, concrete support to candidate countries, thus reinforcing the enlargement process and demonstrating tangible progress towards full membership.

Moreover, the European Parliament's report "On Deepening EU Integration in View of Future Enlargement" highlights the necessity of synchronising enlargement with institutional reforms to ensure a cohesive and functional Union. Similarly, Enrico Letta's report on the Future of the Single Market underscores that a larger EU remains the most



effective tool to protect European interests and prosperity, uphold the rule of law, and defend EU citizens from external threats. The Commission and the EU Member States need to follow up on these documents. By integrating insights from these reports and implementing interim measures like those proposed in the Growth Plan, the EU can demonstrate tangible progress and reinforce its commitment to a unified and robust enlargement process.

Finally, the transparency of the enlargement process can also be further enhanced by increasing the involvement of national parliaments and the European Parliament in scrutinising progress, publishing detailed reports on Council discussions, and allowing greater public access to meetings and decisions related to enlargement. By making the process more open and participatory, the EU can build trust and support for enlargement. Addressing misinformation and disinformation regarding the potential negative impacts of enlargement, particularly concerning budgetary concerns with countries like Ukraine, is essential to maintain public support and transparency.

## **BRIDGING INSTITUTIONAL GAPS WITH TARGETED EU INVESTMENTS**

To provide more effective support to candidate countries in meeting the accession criteria and implementing the

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necessary reforms, the EU must adopt a more tailored and comprehensive approach. This begins with enhancing financial assistance through mechanisms like the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA), which should be expanded to mirror the structural funds available to EU Member States. By increasing investment in critical sectors such as governance, business environment, connectivity and infrastructure, education, and the green and digital transitions, the EU can help candidate countries address institutional weaknesses and in closing the economic gap more effectively.

In the case of Ukraine, the newly established Ukraine Facility — a €50 billion fund for 2024-2027 — serves as an essential tool to support Ukraine's recovery, reconstruction, and modernisation efforts while fostering its EU accession path. This facility not only provides financial resources but also aids Ukraine in aligning with EU standards, promoting a green and digital transition, and supporting key reforms critical to its membership ambitions. Furthermore, offering technical support and expertise tailored to each country's unique challenges is crucial. Deploying EU experts to work directly with national institutions can facilitate the transfer of knowledge and best practices, ensuring

at reforms are better implemented.

Engaging organised civil society and social partners in candidate countries is another vital component of this strategy. By supporting CSOs and fostering public participation in the reform process, the EU can promote transparency, accountability, and public understanding of the accession process. This involvement is key to creating a more inclusive and democratic environment that aligns with EU values. The EU should also strengthen bilateral partnerships between candidate countries and current Member States, encouraging knowledge transfer and capacity-building through programmes such as twinning and peer learning. These partnerships, combined with public awareness campaigns to inform citizens about the benefits and requirements of EU membership, will help build broad-based support for the necessary reforms and ensure a smoother path toward accession.

## **BALANCING ACCESSION BENEFITS AND GOVERNANCE REFORMS**

To better support the EU accession goals of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) should be enhanced with a more inclusive, merit-based approach that emphasises pre-conditionality and a target-based framework.

This means linking financial assistance and other benefits to the concrete progress made by candidate countries in implementing EU standards, particularly in critical areas such as judicial independence, anti-corruption measures, and governance reforms. The EU should also enhance the SAP by providing clear, transparent communication about the accession criteria, progress, and timelines, offering detailed roadmaps that outline the specific steps required for accession. This will help manage expectations, reduce enlargement fatigue, and keep all stakeholders engaged in the process.

A successful implementation of the Copenhagen criteria is crucial for a strong enlarged EU, as it ensures that new members meet the fundamental requirements necessary for cohesion and stability within the Union. Strengthening the capacities of public institutions and CSOs through targeted training, exchange programmes, and peer learning initiatives is crucial for building the administrative and institutional frameworks required to meet EU standards.

Additionally, promoting regional cooperation through initiatives like the Berlin Process can foster a sense of shared progress and mutual support among Western Balkan countries, helping them collaborate on common challenges and reinforcing their

collective commitment to EU integration. However, the key challenge lies not in the idea itself but in ensuring effective implementation, sustained political commitment, and the establishment of clear, measurable monitoring mechanisms. These factors are crucial to ensure that concrete actions are taken and progress is consistently tracked.

Finally, integrating these countries more fully into already existing EU initiatives like the European Green Deal (EGD), the Just Transition Mechanism, and the Biodiversity Strategy — before full membership is attained — can help them transition to cleaner energy sources and protect their natural resources, further aligning them with EU goals and values.

## **ENHANCING STABILITY AND DEMOCRACY THROUGH TREATY REFORMS**

To effectively support an enlarged EU, ensure competitiveness, and drive growth, comprehensive institutional and policy reforms are of the utmost urgency. One of the main objectives for Treaty change is to amend the way the EU makes decisions by shifting from unanimity to qualified majority voting (QMV) in the Council to allow the EU to respond to emerging challenges and for those policy areas to which competences have been conferred by the Treaties to the EU. This change would streamline the accession process, reduce the risk of

Member States blocking progress, and allow the EU to respond more effectively to emerging challenges. Unanimity in decision-making currently allows a single Member State to hinder the EU's ability to deliver on its competencies as conferred by the Treaties. Therefore, it is crucial to move away from unanimity to QMV, particularly in matters of foreign and security policy.

Additionally, the balance of power within EU institutions should be reconsidered, transferring more prerogatives from the Council to the European Parliament and the Commission. This would ensure that the interests of Europeans are better represented and protected in an expanded Union, while enabling more efficient governance overall.

Furthermore, Treaty reform should also consider granting candidate countries observer status in key EU institutions, such as the European Parliament, to ensure closer integration during the accession process.

Another crucial reform area is the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and cohesion policies, which need to be adjusted to address the specific challenges for an expanded EU. Opening the EU market to Ukrainian agricultural products will be beneficial for consumers and taxpayers, while pushing for changes to the current scale and forms of support for specific sectors of the EU agriculture. This would require a new approach to food security, protection against rapid



income losses, and a gradual transition to a new, more efficient model of European food self-sufficiency.

Equally important is the transition towards greater sustainability in these sectors, aligning agricultural practices and regional development with the European Green Deal goals. This shift towards more sustainable farming and resource use is critical for long-term economic and environmental resilience. Furthermore, the introduction of new own resources would cover the additional costs associated with enlargement, particularly in agricultural and cohesion policies, while ensuring these costs are outweighed by the geopolitical benefits of expansion.

These reforms would also enable the EU to respond more swiftly, act faster, and overcome potential deadlocks in decision-making, making it more agile in addressing emerging challenges. Overall, these reforms would ensure that the EU remains a stable, democratic, and effective union, capable of integrating new members while upholding its core values and maintaining the confidence of its citizens.

## **THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY AND CITIZENS IN SHAPING EU ENLARGEMENT**

Strengthening citizen participation in the context of EU enlargement and Treaty reform is vital for promoting a more

inclusive and democratic Europe. To achieve this, the EU needs to increase transparency and actively involve citizens through public consultations and deliberative initiatives, civic education, and the use of digital platforms that enable broader engagement. Public meetings, citizens assemblies and referenda are effective tools for directly involving citizens in the enlargement process, while organised civil society, as well as social partners, should play a pivotal role in enabling this dialogue and make the decision-making process more inclusive and participatory.

To ensure a sustainable and inclusive enlargement process, adopting a youth-centred approach is essential, particularly given the rise in Euroscepticism among young people in candidate countries. Prioritising policies that directly affect youth, such as education, employment, and mobility, alongside better financial support for youth initiatives and their integration into decision-making structures, is crucial. The EU should also expand access to European programmes like Erasmus+ and foster cooperation between youth in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries.

Particularly in Ukraine, where civil society plays a critical role in maintaining social cohesion and resilience amid the war, increased support for civil society organisations (CSOs) is essential. The war has made this engagement even more important, as CSOs provide a crucial link

between citizens, policymakers, and international institutions, ensuring that the voices of those affected by the conflict are heard and that Ukraine's path to EU accession reflects the needs of its people.

Funding and support for CSOs, particularly those that create networks between EU civil society and their counterparts in accession countries, are crucial. Additionally, structured dialogues and open citizens' consultations and assemblies in both candidate countries and EU Member States can help maintain public engagement and address any potential concerns or scepticism regarding the enlargement process.

The European Parliament and MEPs should take an active role in engaging with citizens, bringing EU-level debates to the local level. Public opinion polls can gauge public sentiment and guide strategic engagement efforts. Deliberative initiatives, building from the experience of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE), could serve as an example for citizen participation.

Expanding such frameworks and utilising platforms like the Citizens' Engagement Platform or establishing a European Citizens' Panel on Future Enlargement could further enhance citizen participation. These expanded frameworks would offer significant benefits, including increased

transparency, strengthened accountability, and broader representation, as they would provide structured and inclusive channels for citizens to engage in meaningful dialogue about the EU's future. They would also foster a sense of ownership and trust in the decision-making process, leading to improved policy outcomes and greater public support for the EU's actions.

## WANT TO KNOW MORE?

*Only by working together can we provide common solutions to the challenges Europe faces and ensure that Europeans' ambitions mirror the future work of the European Union. By bringing our member organisations together in our Political Committees, we continuously develop new policy positions and put existing ones to good use. Please visit our website*

*[www.europeanmovement.eu](http://www.europeanmovement.eu) to take a look at our main policy positions that guide our current work and get in touch if you would like to join us or support our work.*



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