



EUROPEAN POLICY ANALYSIS

Widening Without Falling Apart: Germany's EU Enlargement Policy

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Summary

This analysis outlines the development of Germany's policies on EU enlargement, explaining the 'yes, but' approach of the past, the strategic considerations and motives underlying the current policy course, and Berlin's striving for 'an enlarged and reformed EU'.

The *Zeitenwende* ('watershed') triggered by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has catapulted EU enlargement back to the centre of Germany's European and foreign policy. Geopolitics has thereby become the prime motive for supporting EU enlargement and Berlin has signalled a firm commitment to the accession prospects of the countries of the Western Balkans and, since June 2022, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia.

At the same time, German decision makers feel responsible for keeping the EU from 'falling apart' by preventing it from integrating ill-prepared candidates into an ill-prepared Union. For the candidates, Germany continues to insist on a merits-based approach, which is however complicated by the geopolitical imperative to speed up the process. For the Union itself, Berlin is effectively using the argument of absorption capacity as a driver to reform EU institutions and decision making.

Germany is thus leaving behind its policy of 'consolidation first' for a double strategy of widening and reforming the EU.

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The present article considers developments until January 2024.

The opinions expressed in the publication are those of the author.

Introduction

Since the very beginnings of European integration, Germany's European policies have been characterized by a 'double strategy'¹ of deepening and widening. Berlin wants it both ways: a strongly integrated political Union that is able to accommodate new member states. And, in its vision of a united Europe, the one should not come at the expense of the other. From this derives a two-pronged approach that Germany has pursued in EU enlargement policy to this day: a firm commitment to the membership prospects of both new and long-standing accession candidates, coupled with a strong focus on accession conditionality.

While Germany has taken this 'yes, but' approach towards (potential) candidates in the Western Balkans, its appetite both for the admission of new members and EU-internal reform diminished noticeably after the completion of the 2004/2007 Eastern enlargement and the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty. Particularly in the decade after Croatia's accession in 2013, enlargement was not treated as a pressing matter. It was only the shock of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and the change in the European security order at large that brought enlargement back to the top of Germany's EU and foreign policy agenda. Given its undeniable geopolitical dimension, enlargement has become an integral part of Germany's 'Zeitenwende' ('watershed') declared by chancellor Olaf Scholz in February 2022. An 'enlarged union of freedom, security and democracy'² is a cornerstone of Berlin's future vision of the EU. In the eyes of the 'traffic light' coalition, which had been in office for less than three months when Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, this also requires reform of the institutions and decision-making structures within the European Union. Germany is thus reestablishing the nexus between the deepening and the widening of the Union. At the same time, it is palpable that the tension inherent to these two goals has increased under the pressure of conflict

with Russia, with German decision makers feeling 'a responsibility of preventing the EU from falling apart'.³

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This paper first traces the development of Germany's approach towards EU enlargement policy, the domestic factors that have shaped it, and the positioning of Germany's three-party coalition that came into power in December 2021. Part 2 examines how the watershed of Russia's war against Ukraine is manifesting itself in the field of enlargement policy and takes a closer look at the strategic considerations and motives underlying Germany's current policy course. With enlargement being used as the central argument to leverage reform within the Union, part 3 explores how Germany intends to make the EU, in the words of chancellor Scholz, 'fit for this major enlargement',⁴ both with regard to a possible overhaul of the current accession methodology and to EU institutions and decision-making processes at large.

1. Between Widening and Deepening: Germany's Past and Present Approach to EU Enlargement Policy

Relying on the principle that the widening and deepening of the Union should go hand in hand, Germany's policies on EU enlargement have shown a high degree of continuity throughout the past decades. As the basic policy guidelines are generally agreed across different political camps and institutions, no major ruptures have appeared. The current 'traffic light' coalition sets new accents to EU enlargement policy, but it was only the outbreak of Russia's war against Ukraine in February 2022 that has led to a fundamental recommitment to the EU's enlargement agenda.

¹ B. Lippert, 'Die Bundesrepublik Deutschland und die Erweiterung der Europäischen Union', in K. Böttger & M. Jopp (ed.), *Handbuch zur deutschen Europapolitik*, Nomos, 2021, 453.

² German Federal Government, Speech by Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz at the Charles University in Prague, 29 August 2022, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/scholz-speech-prague-charles-university-2080752>.

³ German diplomat Catalina Cullas at the Panel Discussion "Zeitenwende" of the EU-Enlargement – How to Boost the Process?, Aspen Institute Germany, Berlin, 9 May 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4csxR83ZOoM>.

⁴ Speech by Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz at the Charles University in Prague, 29 August 2022.

1.1 The development of Germany's two-pronged approach towards EU enlargement policy

Traditionally a strong proponent of widening the circle of member states, Germany has supported each round of enlargement, starting with the accession of the United Kingdom, Ireland and Denmark in 1973. While it was adamant about developing and maintaining an identity as a political union and ensuring its ability to function, Germany was ready to accept that the admission of new members was not always preceded by a deepening of integration.⁵ From a German perspective, enlargement served as a means to foster democracy and stability in Europe. These two motives were – alongside economic considerations – prevalent with regards to the Southern enlargement which took in Portugal, Spain and Greece in the 1980s as well as the Eastern enlargement of 2004/2007.⁶

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Given its geographical position as well as its longstanding political and economic ties to the countries of Central, Eastern and Southeast Europe, Berlin was a leading force behind the EU's 2004/2007 enlargements which moved Germany to the political and geographical centre of the EU.⁷ From a German point of view, enlargement towards Central and Eastern Europe was to be understood 'as a strategic rejection of an intermediate Europe in which Poland, for example, vagabonded between the West and Russia'⁸ – a motive of striking topicality considering the newly pledged accession perspective towards Ukraine and neighbouring Moldova.

Following the 'big bang' enlargement of 2004 and the accession of Romania and Bulgaria in 2007, which on the grounds of an insufficient rule of law record many decision makers in Berlin judged as premature, a shift in Germany's policy priorities appeared. The focus was now on strict accession conditionality and the consolidation of the EU, by limiting the membership perspective to the (potential) candidates in the Western Balkans.⁹

With regard to these countries, Berlin adopted a more ambiguous approach which was both supportive and reluctant at the same time.

On the one hand, Germany has been a strong supporter of the Western Balkans' EU perspective since the 1990s¹⁰ and thus continued to assume a leadership role in this policy field. Compared to many other EU capitals, Berlin was more aware of the strategic importance of EU enlargement to prevent further conflict in the Western Balkans which, geographically speaking, constitute an EU enclave. Consequently, Germany showed great ambition in using the prospect of accession as a catalyst of transformation as well as a foreign policy instrument. It actively tried to counteract enlargement fatigue or outright indifference within the EU and to keep up whatever momentum was left in the accession process. This was also the intention behind the annual 'Western Balkans Conference' launched by chancellor Angela Merkel in 2014. The high-level meeting format, which soon became known as the Berlin process, aims at fostering regional cooperation and the European integration of the Western Balkans. Germany has also been a driving force in linking enlargement to EU foreign policy objectives in the region. Most crucially, as of 2011 it insisted that the 'normalisation of relations' with Kosovo should be part of Serbia's EU accession conditionality, thus breaking with the previous two-track approach.

⁵ Lippert, 'Die Erweiterung der Europäischen Union', 452–453.

⁶ K. Böttger & M. Jopp, 'Grundlinien deutscher Europapolitik', in *ibid.* (ed.), *Handbuch zur deutschen Europapolitik*, Nomos, 2021, 23.

⁷ F.-L. Altmann, 'The Western Balkans, a German View', in M. Uvalic (ed.), *Integrating the Western Balkans into the EU: Overcoming Mutual Misperceptions*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2023, 106s; 11th Genshagen Forum for German-French Dialogue, 'Im Osten was Neues: die Erweiterungsperspektiven der Europäischen Union', Genshagen, 8–9 June 2023; Lippert, 'Die Erweiterung der Europäischen Union', 447.

⁸ Lippert, 'Die Erweiterung der Europäischen Union', 457.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ Altmann, 'The Western Balkans, a German View', 108s.

On the other hand, with manifold crises demanding their attention both at the EU and the wider international level, German decision makers certainly did not display the level of urgency towards the Western Balkans that could have resulted in a push for their effective EU integration. After Croatia's EU accession in 2013, which also prompted critical voices questioning the country's preparedness in rule of law and economic terms,¹¹ for the remaining candidates the journey seemed to become the destination. While German policymakers were still keen to use the transformative potential and, in particular, the stabilising effect of the accession promise, they did not feel compelled to deliver on it. Pointing to the merits-based approach, German officials argued that candidate countries would come around if they were ready. At the same time, Germany, like its EU partners, did not hold governments in the Western Balkans accountable for reform standstill or even severe democratic backsliding. This may be attributed to Berlin not wanting to confront political leaders in the region who were seen as guarantors of stability and by its lack of appetite for a new round of enlargement which, in a vicious circle, further diminished in the face of democratic backsliding in candidate countries. It was only Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 that revealed the insufficiency of the EU's 'wait and see' approach and put the region's vulnerability to destabilising influences both from domestic and foreign disruptors on full display.

As will be discussed in Part 2, the Ukraine war has fundamentally altered the parameters of decision-making in Germany's EU and foreign policy and hence also in the field of enlargement. This has brought back its commitment to the two-fold goal of widening and deepening (or reforming) the Union.

1.2 A broad national consensus on EU enlargement

Germany's past and present commitment to EU enlargement is based on a broad domestic consensus across the political spectrum and shared by government and opposition parties alike.¹² Four out of the five parliamentary groups represented in the German Bundestag support the accession promise both for the Western Balkans and the new candidates in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus.

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The exception to this is Alternative for Germany (AfD), which is monitored by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution as a suspected case of right-wing extremism. AfD is not only opposed to Ukraine becoming an EU member state¹³ but would also like to see the Western Balkans' relationship to the EU restricted to a 'privileged partnership',¹⁴ a position that must be understood in the context of the party's broader anti-EU course. More recently, opposition to enlargement has also flared up from the far-left side of the party spectrum. Founded in January 2024, Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht, whose members mainly seceded from The Left, positions itself against accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova due to budgetary and rule of law concerns and demands a general moratorium

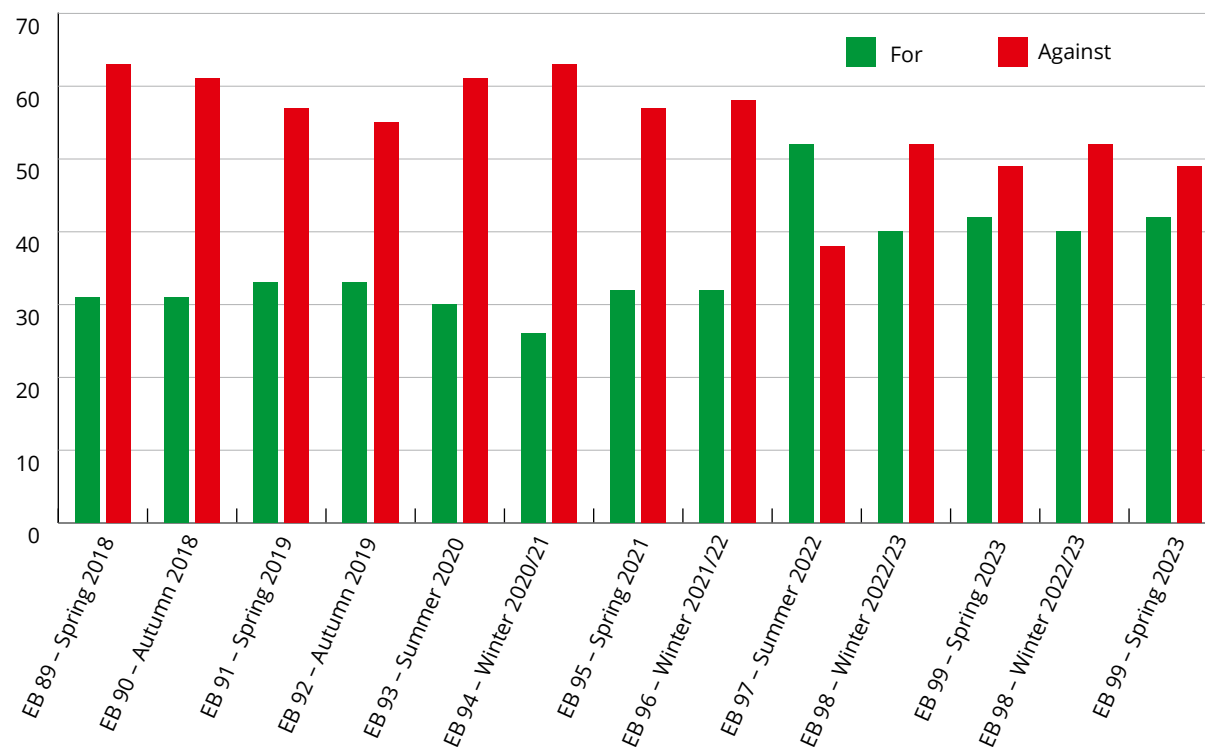
¹¹ T. Töglhofer & C. Adebahr, 'Firm supporter and severe critic – Germany's two-pronged approach to EU enlargement in the Western Balkans', *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 17/4 (2017), 526s.

¹² Lippert, 'Die Erweiterung der Europäischen Union', 452; Interview by the author with German government officials, April 2023, May 2023 (1), September 2023.

¹³ Alternative for Germany, 'Positionspapier der AfD-Bundestagsfraktion zum Russland-Ukraine-Krieg', 10 March 2022, <https://afdbundestag.de/positionspapier-ukraine-krieg/>.

¹⁴ German Bundestag, 'Antrag der Fraktion der AfD. Privilegierte Partnerschaft statt Vollmitgliedschaft – EU-Erweiterungspläne für den Westbalkan überdenken', Drucksache 19/9968, 8 May 2019, <https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2019/kw19-de-eu-westbalkan-640892>.

Figure 1. German public opinion on the future enlargement of the EU



Comment: ‘For’ and ‘against’ answers do not add up to 100 percent because respondents may refuse to answer or answer ‘don’t know’. Data extracted from: European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer: Public Opinion in the European Union Annex, EB 89 (2018) – EB 99 (2023).

on EU enlargement policy.¹⁵ As for the most controversial accession candidate, Turkey, there is neither agreement among nor within German political parties on whether the country should be granted full membership. Pointing to the dire situation with regard to democracy, the rule of law, human, women and minority rights, the coalition treaty of the current ‘traffic light’ coalition states that Germany will ‘not close chapters or open new ones’¹⁶ with Turkey.

The broad support for the existing enlargement policy on the German political scene contrasts with citizens’ views on enlargement which are more reserved. For many years, public opinion in Germany has been among the most sceptical towards the admission of new members. 63 percent of Germans opposed further enlargement in February/March 2021 (see Figure 1).¹⁷ A shift towards a more positive attitude has manifested itself since 2022, strongly correlating with Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Support for

¹⁵ Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht, *Programm für die Europawahl 2024* (undated), <https://bsw-vg.de/programm/europawahlprogramm-2024/>.

¹⁶ It thus adopted the same wording that was used in the 2018 coalition treaty between CDU, CSU and SPD (Coalition treaty between CDU, CSU and SPD, ‘Ein neuer Aufbruch für Europa. Eine neue Dynamik für Deutschland. Ein neuer Zusammenhalt für unser Land’, 12 March 2018, 150, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/themen/koalitionsvertrag-zwischen-cdu-csu-und-spd-195906>; Coalition treaty between SPD, Alliance 90/The Greens and FDP, ‘Mehr Fortschritt wagen. Bündnis für Freiheit, Gerechtigkeit und Nachhaltigkeit’, 7 December 2021, 122, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/koalitionsvertrag-2021-1990800>.

¹⁷ European Commission, ‘Public Opinion in the European Union. Annex’, *Standard Eurobarometer 94*, Winter 2020/21, T149.

‘including other countries in future years’ peaked in summer 2022 with 52 percent of those polled,¹⁸ while by spring of 2023 these numbers had fallen to 42 percent.¹⁹ Support has been notably higher when it comes to Ukraine: in March 2023, 61 percent of Germans pronounced themselves in favour of Ukraine becoming an EU member in the coming years, while 32 percent were opposed. But by December 2023, support to Ukrainian accession was down to 52 percent.²⁰ Generally, it must be noted that EU enlargement has so far flown under the radar of public attention and has not played a significant role in parliamentary elections or election campaigns. High-ranking government officials do, however, stress the need to spark a public debate in order to prepare citizens for new enlargements.²¹

1.3 New accents by the ‘traffic light’ coalition

The end of the ‘Merkel era’ (2005–2021) has marked a caesura for Germany’s EU policies. Determined to break with the country’s role as a ‘status quo power’, the so-called traffic light coalition (‘Ampelkoalition’) composed of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), Alliance 90/The Greens and the Free Democratic Party (FDP) has shifted the priority from focussing on the cohesion of the Union towards reforming and deepening the level of integration.²² The 2021 coalition treaty went as far as to express the ambition to develop the EU as a federal European state.²³ This is remarkable insofar as previous governments were, in particular since 2010, mainly preoccupied with ensuring

the ‘survival’ of the eurozone, the Schengen area and the European Union as a whole. They largely refrained from formulating a vision for the future of European integration,²⁴ and one important articulation of such a vision – the reform proposals set out by French president Macron in his 2017 Sorbonne speech – was left unanswered.

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At the same time, the new government coalition remains committed to the fundamentals of Germany’s integration policy. It sees the EU as a community of common basic values among which democracy and the rule of law constitute the centerpiece. Its interest in a strong EU is informed by the understanding that EU membership is not about giving up, but more effectively pooling sovereignty.²⁵ Crucially, this concerns the capacity to act on European security, where Germany does not want to be governed by Washington, Moscow or Beijing. Furthermore, Berlin’s transformation and modernisation goals in the areas of climate, energy, digitalisation and transport can only be achieved at the EU level.²⁶

¹⁸ European Commission, ‘Public Opinion in the European Union. Report’, *Standard Eurobarometer 97*, Summer 2022, 21.

¹⁹ European Commission, ‘Public Opinion in the European Union. Report’, *Standard Eurobarometer 99*, Spring 2023, 23.

²⁰ ZDF, ‘ZDF-Politbarometer: “Sollte die Ukraine in den nächsten Jahren in die EU aufgenommen werden?”’, 15 December 2023.

²¹ Minister of State for Europe and Climate Anna Lührmann at the online discussion ‘Die EU der Zukunft - Teil 1: Der deutsch-französische Expert:innenbericht zur EU-Reform’, Europe Calling, 21 September 2023.

²² R. Kempin & N. von Ondarza, ‘Von der Status-quo-Macht zum Reformmotor. Deutschlands künftige Rolle in der Europäischen Union’, *SWP-Aktuell*, 27 January 2022, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/deutschlands-kuenftige-rolle-in-der-europaeischen-union-von-der-status-quo-macht-zum-reformmotor>.

²³ Coalition treaty between SPD, Alliance 90/The Greens and FDP, 7 December 2021, 104.

²⁴ M. Große Hüttmann, ‘Leitbilder deutscher Europapolitik’, in K. Böttger & M. Jopp (ed.), *Handbuch zur deutschen Europapolitik*, Nomos, 2021, 52.

²⁵ Federal Foreign Office, ‘Foreign Minister Baerbock’s speech at the Conference on Europe in Berlin’, 2 November 2023, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/-/2629342#:~:text=The%20consensus%20within%20the%20EU,the%20way%20our%20union%20functions>.

²⁶ Kempin/Ondarza, ‘Von der Status-quo-Macht zum Reformmotor’, 27 January 2022.

As for the field of EU enlargement policy, the changes here have initially not been strongly pronounced. The secure consensus among German political parties translates into a high degree of continuity in policies across changes of government. The transition from the last Merkel-led government between the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), the Bavarian Christian Social Union (CSU) and SPD to the current ‘traffic light’ coalition in December 2021 is no exception to this rule. The coalition treaty expresses a clear commitment to the accession prospects of the Western Balkans²⁷ which was reiterated and extended towards Ukraine, Moldova, and prospectively Georgia, in Germany’s first National Security Strategy presented in June 2023.²⁸

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The government is acknowledged to have ‘a genuine interest’²⁹ in advancing EU enlargement policy, with Chancellor Olaf Scholz, Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock, and Minister of State for Europe and Climate Anna Lührmann being vocal on the topic and frequently visiting or receiving visits from candidate countries. What is more, Germany has appointed its own Special Representative for the countries of the Western Balkans, a position filled by Manuel Sarrazin, a politician from The Greens. With an exclusive focus on the region, he is able to consistently follow up on the implementation of measures agreed throughout the Berlin process and on advancing candidate’s EU integration more broadly. Also

thematically, the government has set its own accents towards accession candidates, for instance with regard to climate protection and the green transition³⁰ as well as the inclusion of civil society and citizens.³¹ Continuing the legacy from previous governments, it decided to initiate a new round of the Berlin process with a summit in November 2022 that put energy-related issues and the advancement of the Common Regional Market to the forefront.

Even though Germany’s three-party coalition is notorious for its disagreements on a range of issues, enlargement is not one of them. Insiders describe the coordination between the Federal Chancellery and the Federal Foreign Office – the two main institutions in charge of steering enlargement policy and setting the course together – as ‘close and good’,³² with a high degree of consensus on the direction of policies.³³ Chancellor Scholz is personally committed to the accession dossier, just as his predecessor Chancellor Merkel was. His commitment was demonstrated by his visit to the Western Balkans in June 2022, during which he reiterated that he would ensure ‘Europe’ showed sufficient ambition and drive to advance the accession of the Western Balkans.³⁴ The active role of the Chancellery in EU enlargement policy can inter alia be explained by the so-called *Richtlinienkompetenz*, as defined by Article 65 of the Basic Law, which confers on the Chancellor the power to set policy guidelines to be followed by the line ministries. The overall responsibility on enlargement issues lies however with the Federal Foreign Office, which ensures the coordination with the relevant line ministries, gives directions to the Permanent Representation in Brussels, and briefs the parliament.

²⁷ Coalition treaty between SPD, Alliance 90/The Greens and FDP, 7 December 2021, 109.

²⁸ German Federal Government, ‘Nationale Sicherheitsstrategie’, June 2023, 39, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/publikationen/nationale-sicherheitsstrategie-2197780>.

²⁹ Interview by the author with a German government official, April 2023.

³⁰ Germany has for instance initiated a Regional Climate Partnership with the Western Balkans which resulted from the 2022 summit of the Berlin process.

³¹ See for instance: ‘Coalition treaty between SPD, Alliance 90/The Greens and FDP’, 7 December 2021, 109.

³² Interview by the author with a German government official, May 2023 (1).

³³ Interviews by the author with German government officials, April 2023, May 2023 (1), August 2023.

³⁴ Press Conference by Chancellor Scholz and Serbian President Vučić, Belgrade, 10 June 2022, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/pressekonferenz-von-bundestkanzler-scholz-und-dem-serbischen-praesidenten-vu-%C4%8Di%C4%87-am-10-juni-2022-in-belgrad-2051158>.

Another distinctive feature of how Germany defines its stance on enlargement is the active role of the Bundestag, which saw its participation rights in EU affairs considerably widened by the 2009 Act on Cooperation between the Federal Government and the German Bundestag in Matters concerning the European Union.³⁵ Not only does the Bundestag participate in decision-making on enlargement policy for the ratification of an accession treaty, but even the opening of membership talks with candidate countries requires the Federal Government to reach agreement with the Bundestag,³⁶ thus also strengthening Germany's position in the Council.³⁷

2. The Ukraine War as a 'Zeitenwende' for German Enlargement Policy

An incomparably bigger rupture for Germany's positioning than the change of government in 2021 was Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Since 24 February 2022, EU enlargement policy has become a cornerstone of the 'Zeitenwende' declared by chancellor Scholz, a term that is used to describe both a historical turning point triggered by Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the ensuing call for Germany to more resolutely embrace hard power.³⁸ Geopolitical motives have since then been seen as the main driving force of enlargement policy.

Beyond asserting the EU's influence in its neighbourhood in the wake of the 'Zeitenwende', EU enlargement policy should, in the eyes of German policymakers, ensure peace and stability as well as fostering political and economic transformation in candidate countries. It should leverage trade and investments and, last but not least, supply Germany's labour market with much sought-after workforce. Although conceptually

these motives complement each other well, their simultaneous pursuit often results in a delicate balancing act.

2.1 The return of enlargement to Berlin's European agenda

Russia's immediate threat to European security has sharpened the consciousness that enlargement is closely linked to the EU's geopolitical interest.³⁹ As a consequence, Germany has partly altered and partly intensified its policy course in three central ways.

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First, with regard to the Eastern neighbourhood, Berlin made a U-turn by breaking with its policies of limiting the accession perspective to the countries of the Western Balkans. Its earlier focus on consolidation, with a view to maintaining the functioning of the European Union, has been replaced by a focus on the geostrategic value of opening up the geographic realm of potential future member states. This did not happen immediately, however. It took several weeks until the Federal Foreign Office and the more hesitant Chancellery – working closely with other member states – made up their mind to declare Ukraine, Moldova and potentially Georgia accession candidates. As late as April 2022, granting candidate status to Ukraine was hardly conceivable for German diplomats,

³⁵ The law was drafted and approved in the wake of the German Federal Constitutional Court's judgment of 30 June 2009 which made Germany's ratification of the Treaty of Lisbon conditional upon the 'legal elaboration of the parliamentary rights of participation.' (Federal Constitutional Court Press Office, Press release, no. 72, 30 June 2009, <https://www.bundesverfassungsgericht.de/SharedDocs/Pressemitteilungen/DE/2009/bvg09-072.html>)

³⁶ The government is solely allowed to 'take divergent decisions for good reasons of foreign or integration policy'. (Act on Cooperation between the Federal Government and the German Bundestag in Matters concerning the European Union, §9.)

³⁷ For a more detailed analysis, see Töglhofer/Adebahr, 'Firm supporter and severe critic', 530–532.

³⁸ B. Tallis, 'The Zeitenwende Is Here, It's Just Unevenly Distributed', *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, 3 April 2023, <https://ip-quarterly.com/en/zeitenwende-here-its-just-unevenly-distributed>.

³⁹ German diplomat Catalina Cullas at the panel discussion 'Zeitenwende' of the EU Enlargement', 9 May 2023.

with a decision only crystallizing in June 2022 when chancellor Olaf Scholz visited Kiev jointly with French President Emmanuel Macron, Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi, and Romanian President Klaus Iohannis. Rather than being in the driver's seat this time, Germany followed the lead of other EU heavyweights. Berlin's hesitations were informed by a concern not to raise false expectations on which the EU could not deliver. They were however finally superseded by the conclusion that there was no alternative to showing an unequivocal commitment towards Ukraine.⁴⁰

'Rather than being in the driver's seat this time, Germany followed the lead of other EU heavyweights.'

Second, the German government has pledged to speed up the accession process for (potential) candidates in the Western Balkans. On her visit to Pristina in March 2022, foreign minister Baerbock described Russia's attack against Ukraine as a 'wake-up call' for Germany 'also with regard to the strategic importance of the Western Balkans'.⁴¹ Both she and Special Representative Sarrazin conceded that mistakes had been made in neglecting the region and delaying decisions at the EU level.⁴² Hence the need to bring back 'the credibility of the European enlargement promise'.⁴³

Third, and as a consequence of this (renewed) commitment, enlargement has returned to the heart of Germany's European policy agenda. In his Prague speech delivered at the Charles University in August 2022, Chancellor Scholz set out his vision for an 'enlarged union of freedom, security and democracy'. Among the four ideas that he presented for the future of the EU, enlargement came first. In his words, the Western Balkans, Ukraine, Moldova, and 'down the line, also' Georgia, belong to the free, democratic part of Europe, with their accession being in the EU's interest. It is from this commitment that he derives the need for an institutional reform of the European Union.⁴⁴ Germany's 'traffic light' coalition is thus returning to an approach where the widening and the 'deepening' – or, as German diplomats prefer to call it, reform – of the Union is supposed to go hand in hand (a nexus that will be treated in more detail in part 3).

2.2 Geopolitics as a main driver of EU enlargement policy

The geopolitical turn that can be observed more widely in the EU's enlargement policy from 2017 onwards⁴⁵ has clearly manifested itself in Germany's positioning. Over the past decade, geopolitical motives⁴⁶ – i.e. the EU asserting its influence in candidate countries against the backdrop of the 'increasing presence of other external factors and powers'⁴⁷ – have replaced the stabilisation of the Western Balkans as the major driving force to

⁴⁰ 11th Genshagen Forum for German-French Dialogue, 8–9 June 2023; Interview by the author with a German government official, May 2023 (1); Interview by the author with a representative of the European Commission, September 2023 (1).

⁴¹ AP Archive, 'Baerbock: Ukraine war a 'wake up call' for Balkans', YouTube, 10 March 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pk6H2XEcEKk>.

⁴² German Federal Foreign Office, 'Außenministerin Baerbock vor ihrer Abreise nach Bosnien und Herzegowina, Kosovo, Serbien und Moldau', *Press release*, 9 March 2022, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/newsroom/bmin-reise-bosnien-und-herzigowina-kosovo-serbien-moldau/2516212>; J. Xharra & P. Isufi, 'EU Must Correct 'Big Mistakes' on Western Balkans – Manuel Sarrazin', *Balkan Insight*, 19 May 2022, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/05/19/eu-must-correct-big-mistakes-on-western-balkans-manuel-sarrazin/>.

⁴³ Xharra/Isufi, 'EU Must Correct 'Big Mistakes' on Western Balkans', 19 May 2022.

⁴⁴ Speech by Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz at the Charles University in Prague, 29 August 2022.

⁴⁵ M. Petrovic & N. Tzifakis, 'A geopolitical turn to EU enlargement, or another postponement? An introduction.' *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 29/2 (2021), 157–168.

⁴⁶ See for instance: Committee on European Affairs of the French Assemblée nationale & Committee on EU Affairs of the German Bundestag, Joint digital session on the topic of EU enlargement and the institutional reform of the European Union, 10 May 2023, <https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2023/kw19-pa-europa-38-sitzung-946050>; Interviews by the author with German government officials, May 2023 (1/2); German diplomat Catalina Cullas at the panel discussion 'Zeitenwende' of the EU Enlargement', 9 May 2023.

⁴⁷ Petrovic/Tzifakis, 'A geopolitical turn to EU enlargement'.

support EU enlargement. While in 2014 concerns were still first and foremost directed towards sources of instability created by actors within the Western Balkans, the influence of non-European, illiberal powers has since moved to the centre of attention of German policymakers.⁴⁸ In addition to the central pillar of security, efforts to bring candidate countries firmly within the EU's sphere of influence also encompass economic and trade relations as well as the promotion of liberal democracy and other core EU values. It is also worth noting that prior to 24 February 2022, geopolitical concerns were primarily raised with regard to Chinese influence in the Western Balkans.

'In addition to the central pillar of security, efforts to bring candidate countries firmly within the EU's sphere of influence also encompass economic and trade relations as well as the promotion of liberal democracy and other core EU values.'

While geopolitical motives were thus already the main factor behind German support for EU enlargement policy prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the latter compelled decision makers in Berlin to translate this already existing awareness into concrete policy action. In his Prague speech, chancellor Scholz highlighted the geopolitical dimension of the decision to grant an accession perspective to Ukraine, Moldova, and prospectively Georgia, stressing that *realpolitik*

in the 21st century necessarily involves acting on common values.⁴⁹ Equally, foreign minister Baerbock reiterated that the enlargement of the EU is a 'geopolitical necessity' as it counters Russian attempts to 'drive an imperialist divide through Europe, intended to separate us not only from Ukraine but also from Moldova, Georgia and the Western Balkans'.⁵⁰ The long-term destabilisation of these countries by Russia would make the EU vulnerable too, according to the reasoning in Berlin.

Fearing Russian spoiler effects in the Western Balkans, Germany has intensified its efforts to reach an agreement in the Serbia-Kosovo conflict. Together with France, it came up with a proposal to formalise relations between Belgrade and Pristina, which was fed into the EU-mediated dialogue between the two parties. The proposal, which was agreed upon (but not yet signed) by both sides in February 2023, is based on the model of the 1972 Basic Treaty between the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic. Its implementation would result not in a *de jure*, but a *de facto* recognition of Kosovo's independence.⁵¹ Germany has also stepped up its military contributions to peacekeeping operations in the region. It increased the number of troops that it contributes to the NATO-led Kosovo Force and has reengaged in the EUFOR operation Althea in Bosnia and Herzegovina. After pulling out from the operation in 2012, the Federal Cabinet decided in June 2022 to send up to 50 troops, citing the danger of Russian destabilisation efforts in the Balkans.⁵² Furthermore, Berlin has adopted a tougher approach vis-à-vis the secessionist politics of Republika Srpska. Since June 2022 it has

⁴⁸ In research interviews conducted with German decision makers in 2014, stability was the most frequently invoked reason for supporting enlargement, followed by the potential for democratic transformation and economic development. It is also interesting to note that the influence of other global or regional powers was not raised at all by the interviewees at the time. (C. Adebahr & T. Töglhofer, 'Germany', in R. Balfour & C. Stratulat, *EU member states and enlargement towards the Balkans*, EPC issue paper 79, 2015, 32.

⁴⁹ Speech by Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz at the Charles University in Prague, 29 August 2022.

⁵⁰ Federal Foreign Office, Foreign Minister Baerbock's speech at the Conference on Europe in Berlin, 2 November 2023.

⁵¹ M. Vulovic, 'The Normalisation of Relations between Kosovo and Serbia', *SWP Comment* 17, 15 March 2023, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/the-normalisation-of-relations-between-kosovo-and-serbia>.

⁵² Federal Ministry of Defence, 'Erneuter Einsatz der Bundeswehr in Bosnien und Herzegowina', 15 June 2022, <https://www.bmvg.de/de/aktuelles/erneuter-einsatz-der-bundeswehr-in-bosnien-und-herzegowina-5448122>.

first suspended, then terminated €120 million of bilateral funding for infrastructure projects, arguing that German taxpayers' money cannot be expected to go to an entity that is endangering the territorial integrity of the Bosnian state.⁵³ An attempt to achieve the same with pre-accession funds at the EU level has, however, not borne fruit.

2.3 Balancing geopolitics with the need to preserve 'the EU's DNA'

There are naturally other motives driving Germany's support for enlargement, even if they are less prevalent than the security dimension. German decision makers emphasize the political transformation of candidate countries, value-based motives such as solidarity, European unification and the need to keep the accession promise, as well as economic benefits.⁵⁴ When it comes to rules and values, German diplomats see a clear connection between geopolitics and aligning candidate countries with these: there is an urgency to push back the influence of non-democratic regimes in the EU's neighbourhood precisely to foster and protect these values. On the other hand, they evidently perceive a tension between the two when they underline that the EU has to balance its geopolitical interest with the 'need to safeguard the DNA of the European Union'.⁵⁵ In particular, the prospect of integrating new member states that undermine rule of law standards within the Union is a concern for German decision makers, who stress that 'we have a responsibility of preventing the EU from falling apart'.⁵⁶

This results in Germany being a proponent of strict accession conditionality. German officials have repeated on multiple occasions that there will not be any shortcuts or 'discounts', no fast track or automatism on the path to EU membership,⁵⁷ 'least of all in connection with the rule of law'.⁵⁸ Wary of creating false expectations with regard to Ukraine, they have also stressed that accession is not something that can be completed in a few months, but rather implies an intense and far-reaching process of transformation.⁵⁹ At the same time, they insist that for the EU to remain credible, the reform progress of candidate countries must also be rewarded.⁶⁰

'German officials have repeated on multiple occasions that there will not be any shortcuts or 'discounts', no fast track or automatism on the path to EU membership [...]'

In practical terms, however, the pressure to speed up the accession process is increasingly challenging Germany's approach, hitherto, of 'political frontloading' of difficult reforms and the 'slicing' of the accession process into a sequence of small units to maximise its reform leverage.⁶¹ The issue of granting EU candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina is a case in point. Germany still opposed this step at the European Council

⁵³ Aspen Institute Germany/ Southeast Europe Association, 'International Conference on Bosnia and Herzegovina: 'New Government, New Reform Effort?', Berlin, 26 June 2023.

⁵⁴ German Federal Government, 'Address by Olaf Scholz as part of the European Parliament's series of plenary debates "This is Europe"', Strasbourg, 9 May 2023, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/search/address-by-olaf-scholz-2189412>; 11th Genshagen Forum for German-French Dialogue, 8–9 June 2023; Interviews by the author with German government officials, May 2023 (1), September 2023.

⁵⁵ German diplomat Catalina Cullas at the panel discussion "'Zeitenwende" of the EU Enlargement', 9 May 2023.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*

⁵⁷ *ibid.*; Interviews by the author with German government officials, May 2023 (2), September 2023.

⁵⁸ Federal Foreign Office, Foreign Minister Baerbock's speech at the Conference on Europe in Berlin, 2 November 2023.

⁵⁹ Federal Foreign Office, 'Gemeinsame Pressebegegnung von Außenministerin Annalena Baerbock mit dem slowenischen Außenminister Anže Logar', Berlin, 28 February 2022, <https://web.facebook.com/watch/?v=635971467460339>.

⁶⁰ Address by Olaf Scholz to the European Parliament, Strasbourg, 9 May 2023; Interview by the author with a German government official, September 2023.

⁶¹ Töglhofer/Adebahr, 'Firm supporter and severe critic', 528.

of June 2022, arguing that it would undermine accession conditionality and send the wrong message to candidate countries. It finally gave its green light at the December 2022 European Council, even though the European Commission's assessment had not substantially changed.⁶² This time, German officials interpreted the granting of candidate status as 'an important signal' that should encourage further reforms.⁶³ This illustrates the wider tension between enlargement as a transformative project and a foreign policy instrument, which has only grown against the backdrop of the Ukraine war.

2.4 Economic motives and trade

Opening up new markets for German industry has been a strong motive for advancing the widening of the Union, for instance with regard to the Southern enlargement towards Greece, Spain and Portugal in the 1980s, and especially the Eastern enlargement of 2004/2007.⁶⁴ This is much less the case, or at least not openly referred to, with regard to the current accession round. German entrepreneurs and business associations are, however, among the most adamant supporters of the EU integration of the Western Balkans and the 'Trio' (Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia). Meanwhile, others argue that a full membership is not necessarily required to successfully trade and invest.⁶⁵

Overall, trade relations with candidate countries reveal a pronounced asymmetry. Germany is the top trading partner of North Macedonia, Serbia and – jointly with Croatia, Italy and Serbia – of Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁶⁶ German enterprises employ around 77,000 workers in Serbia⁶⁷ and 22,000 workers in North Macedonia.⁶⁸ From a German perspective however, given the small size of the region's economies, the Western Balkans are not interesting as individual, fragmented markets but as a whole. It is thus not surprising that building a Common Regional Market, which should deepen regional economic integration and prepare countries for membership of the EU single market, is an important component of the Berlin process. Experts also point to the fact that the Western Balkans is an attractive terrain with regard to the near-shoring of different industries. Furthermore, German entrepreneurs see opportunities in building up green energy infrastructure in candidate countries and, in particular, in the reconstruction of Ukraine.⁶⁹

2.5 Germany's need for labour migration

Migration, though a controversial topic in Germany, is not an issue used to oppose further enlargement. Instead, the discourse is framed by the shortage of skilled workers, and workers more generally that is looming on the German labour market. Among the high influx of Western Balkans citizens to the EU – amounting to over 200,000

⁶² European Commission, Bosnia and Herzegovina 2022 Report, SWD(2022) 336 final, Brussels, 12 October 2022, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/bosnia-and-herzegovina-report-2022_en.

⁶³ Informally, policymakers would also argue that candidate status is after all a symbolic step with no concrete financial or legal implications on the accession dossier. (International Conference on Bosnia and Herzegovina: 'New Government, New Reform Effort?' by the Aspen Institute Germany and the Southeast Europe Association, Berlin, 26 June 2023; Interviews by the author with German government officials, May 2023 (1), September 2023.

⁶⁴ Böttger/Jopp, 'Grundlinien deutscher Europapolitik', 19; Lippert, 'Die Erweiterung der Europäischen Union', 456.

⁶⁵ B. Busch & S. Sultan, 'Die EU vor neuen Erweiterungen? Alternativen zur Vollmitgliedschaft', *IW-Analysen* 152, 59; Interview by the author with a German government official, May 2023 (1).

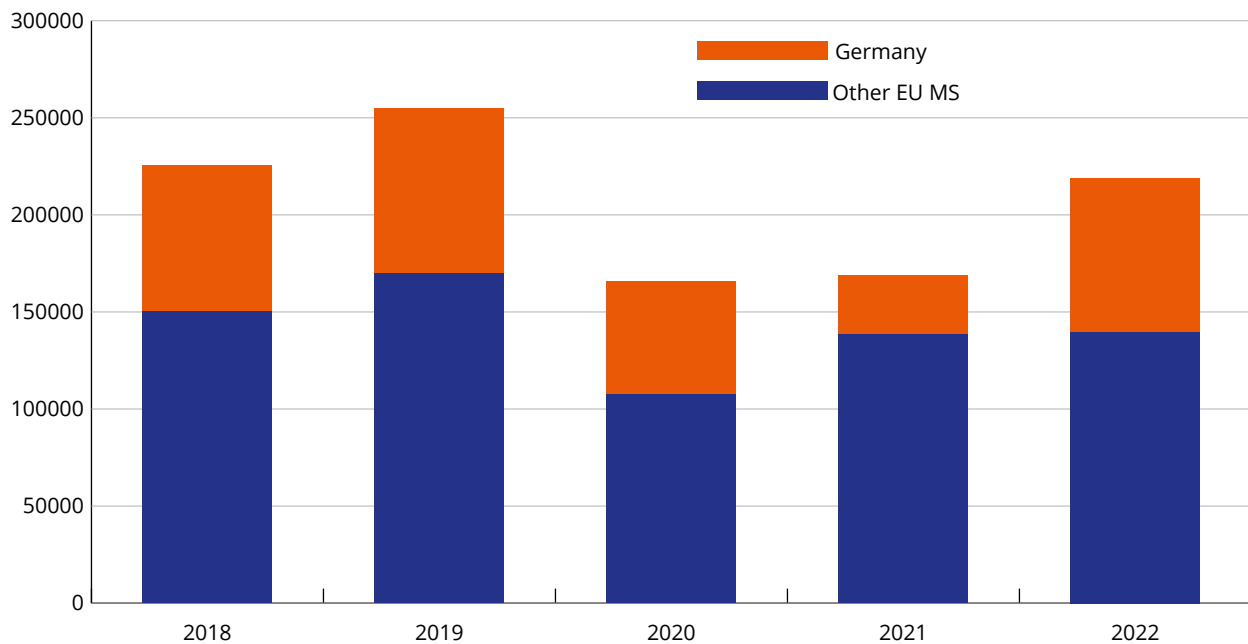
⁶⁶ In 2022, 14 percent of Serbian, 15 percent of Bosnian and 45 percent of Macedonian exports went to Germany, while 11 percent of imports to Serbia, 10 percent of imports to Bosnia and Herzegovina, and 8.6 percent of imports to North Macedonia originated from Germany. As for Moldova, Germany ranks fifth in terms of exports (5 percent) and sixth in terms of imports (6 percent). (Trading Economics, United Nations COMTRADE database on international trade, <https://tradingeconomics.com/serbia/exports-by-country>)

⁶⁷ Serbian President Vučić at a joint Press Conference with Chancellor Scholz, Belgrade, 10 June 2022.

⁶⁸ German Federal Government, Press Conference of Chancellor Scholz and the Prime Minister of North Macedonia Kovačevski, Skopje, 11 June 2022, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/pressekonferenz-von-bundeskanzler-scholz-und-dem-ministerpraesidenten-von-nordmazedonien-kova%C4%8Devski-am-11-juni-2022-in-skopje-2051280>.

⁶⁹ Interview by the author with a German government official, August 2023.

Figure 2: First permits of residence to citizens from the Western Balkans in the EU27 and Germany (2018–2022)



Source: Data extracted from: Eurostat, Database ‘First permits by reason, length of validity and citizenship’ (data retrieved on 1 April 2023). Definite numbers for 2022 are still pending as EU 27 data for 2022 do not contain numbers from Croatia yet (in 2021, 21,354 citizens from the Western Balkans Six received a first permit of residence in Croatia). Also the number of Kosovar citizens being granted a first permit of residence in Germany in 2022 is displayed with 0.

in 2022, which is more than one per cent of the Western Balkans Six population – around one third went to Germany (see Figure 2).

Labour migration from the Western Balkans was facilitated as far back as 2016, well before Germany introduced its first Law on Qualified Migration in 2020 (revised in 2023) which admits migrants from third states around the globe. In 2023, the government doubled the quota under the so-called Western Balkans Regulation, which now allows for up to 50,000 nationals from the region to be admitted annually. This is considered a gain for the German labour market, especially in the health and care sectors as well as in the restaurant industry,⁷⁰ but it leads to a ‘brain drain’ in the countries of origin. Conflicts of interest are thus pre-programmed. For instance, the Bavarian

Industry Association opened an office in Tirana in July 2023 which should help Bavarian enterprises in finding skilled workers. In the same month, Albania passed legislation that obliges medical students to work in the country for a period of five years after graduation, with prime minister Edi Rama emphasizing that Albania ‘cannot finance the German health service’.⁷¹

Nor does the high number of Ukrainian refugees in Germany – as of December 2023 there were over one million – seem to directly feed into the enlargement debate. Sympathies for Ukraine’s fight against Russia’s aggression are running high among the German public.⁷² These sympathies may also explain the fact that refugees from Ukraine were welcomed with lesser ambiguity than during the 2015 ‘refugee crisis’, when in particular applicants

⁷⁰ A. Mihm, ‘Albanien will das deutsche Gesundheitswesen nicht mehr finanzieren’, *FAZ online*, 16 July 2023, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/wirtschaft/fachkraeftemangel-warum-albanische-aerzte-nach-deutschland-wollen-19023476.html>.

⁷¹ A. Taylor, ‘Albanian government bids to stop young doctors, nurses emigrating’, *Euractiv*, 23 March 2023, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/albanian-government-bids-to-stop-young-doctors-nurses-emigrating/>.

⁷² L. Jakobsen et al. ‘Ukraine-Krieg: Wie die Deutschen über den Krieg denken’, *Zeit Online*, 26 February 2023, <https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2023-02/ukraine-krieg-meinungen-deutschland-waffenlieferungen-solidaritaet>.

from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq requested asylum. With regard to asylum seekers originating from the Western Balkans, their number has declined sharply after their states were declared ‘safe countries of origin’ in 2014 and 2015 respectively.⁷³

3. Making the EU ‘Fit for Enlargement’: Reforming the Accession Process and the EU At Large

The extension of the circle of candidate countries as well as the new sense of urgency driving EU enlargement policy has sparked a debate over whether the EU itself is capable of integrating new member states. Looking at the future of EU enlargement, two levels of reform are paramount:

First, given the meagre results and repeated stalemates of the past decade, it has been asked whether the accession methodology is in need of an overhaul or even restructuring. The most central ideas introduced by policy analysts and, more recently, EU decision makers revolve around different models of gradual integration that would replace the current ‘in or out’ approach, an increase in pre-accession funding to close the economic convergence gap between candidates and member states, and more generally around a more strategic and effective approach to candidates’ EU approximation, including the introduction of Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) in the field of enlargement policy and the definition of possible timelines. Second, the newly salient issue of the EU’s absorption capacity raises the question whether there is a need to reform EU institutions and decision-making processes at large. While the federal government has not (yet) positioned itself clearly on a possible overhaul of the accession process, it has been very outspoken on the fact that a widened EU requires internal reform, and it has come up with concrete proposals in this direction.

3.1 Reforming the accession methodology

Since February 2022, German decision makers have repeatedly expressed their interest to accelerate the accession process. For this to happen, they argue, reforms need to take place first and foremost in candidate countries.⁷⁴ There is, however, no consensus yet whether this would also require a reform of the EU accession methodology and, if so, which direction it should take. As one official put it, there are ‘one thousand opinions’⁷⁵ to be found in Berlin on whether the accession process is in need of a remake, and if so how to remake it.⁷⁶

‘There is, however, no consensus yet whether this would also require a reform of the EU accession methodology and, if so, which direction it should take.’

As a bottom line, policymakers in charge of the enlargement dossier roughly seem to converge on some basic ‘dos and don’ts’ of possible changes to the accession methodology. They state in unison that, even if the process were to be reformed, the goal needs to remain full membership. They are opposed to any measures that could undermine the principle of conditionality or lead to any kind of ‘automatism’, such as fixing accession dates or replacing the regatta principle (under which the accession process is conducted with each candidate individually, on its own merits) with another ‘big bang’ enlargement. Government representatives have also signalled that they would be open to introduce QMV in the field of enlargement policy in order to prevent individual member states from blocking a candidate’s accession process due to bilateral issues.⁷⁷ QMV would however only apply

⁷³ While asylum applications from the Western Balkans states to Germany amounted to 45,715 in 2016, they dropped below 7,000 in 2022. The number of applications from Moldova remains however high (which was already the case before Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine) and amounted to 2,590 in 2022. (Eurostat, ‘Asylum and new asylum applicants by citizenship, age and sex. Annual aggregated data (rounded)’, http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/en/web/products-datasets/-/MIGR_ASYAPPCT_ZA (data retrieved 27 August 2023)).

⁷⁴ Interview by the author with a German government official, May 2023 (2); German diplomat Catalina Cullas at the panel discussion ‘Zeitenwende’ of the EU Enlargement’, 9 May 2023.

⁷⁵ Interview by the author with a German government official, May 2023 (2).

⁷⁶ Interviews by the author with German government officials, May 2023 (1, 2), August 2023, September 2023.

⁷⁷ Minister of State for Europe and Climate Anna Lührmann at the online discussion ‘Der deutsch-französische Expert:innenbericht zur EU-Reform’, 21 September 2023.

to the intermediate steps of the process, while the final decision on membership would still need to be reached by unanimity.⁷⁸

Although there is no unified position on the matter, Berlin policymakers have expressed sympathies towards proposals of staged accession or sectoral integration.⁷⁹ Most prominently, Foreign Minister Baerbock argued in front of fellow European foreign ministers in November 2023 that there is a need to turn away from an ‘all or nothing, black or white’ model of accession and underlined the need ‘to think about ways to integrate candidate countries into the EU incrementally’.⁸⁰ This could for instance be achieved by opening up more funds, e.g. in the area of research, and EU programmes to candidates, and by inviting countries that have completed individual accession chapters to attend relevant Council meetings as observers.⁸¹ At the same time, German officials caution that the devil may lie in the detail of working out the political and legal framework of staged accession or sectoral integration.⁸² Introducing interim steps to accession should also not result in candidates benefitting from their EU approximation without respecting certain rules and obligations that come with it, or in ‘cherry picking’ by partially selecting areas of integration.⁸³ Furthermore, German policymakers have repeatedly questioned whether joining the

European single market might be an adequate interim step to be attained as this already requires high standards with regard to the rule of law, social and environmental protection and competitiveness, and would therefore not be far away from full membership.⁸⁴

‘Introducing interim steps to accession should also not result in candidates benefitting from their EU approximation without respecting certain rules and obligations that come with it, or in “cherry picking” by partially selecting areas of integration.’

Concerning proposals to increase pre-accession funding, officials express doubts as to whether this would prove to be the key to success as long as the political will for reform is lacking in candidate countries. It is also argued that current financial means should be used more efficiently, and that the absorption capacity of funds, as well as the control of their correct use, are two bottlenecks that would need to be tackled first.⁸⁵ An increase in

⁷⁸ German Council on Foreign Relations, ‘DGAP study group on European policy ‘The Future of Europe – The Role of Enlargement Candidates in the European Order’’, Berlin, 3 July 2023; Interviews by the author with German government officials, May 2023 (1), May 2023 (2).

⁷⁹ Interview by the author with a German government official, April 2023; German diplomat Catalina Cullas at the panel discussion ‘“Zeitenwende” of the EU Enlargement’, 9 May 2023. Also see the statements by the members of the German Bundestag and European policies spokesmen of their respective parliamentary groups Michael Link (FDP) and Gunther Krichbaum (CDU/CSU). (Committee on European Affairs of the French Assemblée nationale & Committee on EU Affairs of the German Bundestag, Joint digital session on the topic of EU enlargement and the institutional reform of the European Union, 10 May 2023.)

⁸⁰ Federal Foreign Office, Foreign Minister Baerbock’s speech at the Conference on Europe in Berlin, 2 November 2023.

⁸¹ *ibid.*

⁸² *ibid.*; IEP, Meeting of the Berlin Futures group ‘On the future of EU enlargement policy’, Berlin, 16 May 2023; German diplomat Catalina Cullas at the panel discussion ‘“Zeitenwende” of the EU Enlargement’, 9 May 2023.

⁸³ IEP, Meeting of the Berlin Futures group ‘On the future of EU enlargement policy’, Berlin, 16 May 2023; German Council on Foreign Relations, ‘DGAP study group on European policy’, Berlin, 3 July 2023; Interviews by the author with German government officials, April 2023, May 2023 (1), August 2023.

⁸⁴ Aspen Institute Germany, Panel discussion ‘The EU’s Geopolitical Awakening – New Impetus for the EU Integration Process of the Western Balkans?’, Berlin, 24 November 2022; Interview by the author with a German government official, April 2023; Interview by the author with a representative of the European Commission, September 2023 (1).

⁸⁵ Interviews by the author with German government officials, April 2023, May 2023 (1), August 2023.

pre-accession funding would need to be integrated in negotiations for the next Multiannual Financial Framework 2028–2035, but this is likely to already be strained due to the budgetary needs in other areas such as climate and energy. To create more leeway, State Minister for Europe Anna Lührmann, together with her French and Portuguese counterparts, advanced a proposal to furnish the EU with its own budgetary resources under the next MFF, e.g. in the form of a financial transaction tax or a corporate sector levy.⁸⁶

3.2 Enlargement as a driver for EU-internal reform

The need to improve the EU's absorption capacity in parallel to the accession process is already mentioned in the existing coalition treaty of December 2021.⁸⁷ However, it is only in the context of the Ukraine war and the integration of new member states becoming a concrete prospect again that decision makers in Berlin have returned to leveraging enlargement as a driver for overhauling EU structures and decision-making processes. German diplomats, in this context, avoid the term of *deepening* and speak of *EU-internal reform*, arguing that the focus should lie on maintaining and improving the EU's capacity to act.⁸⁸ While some have pointed to EU-internal reform as a precondition for enlargement⁸⁹, German diplomats are quick to stress that there is no *iunctim* between the two and that they should go in parallel.⁹⁰

As previously noted, in his Prague speech of August 2022, Chancellor Scholz presented enlargement towards the Trio and the Western Balkans as the first of four ideas for the future of the European Union. This was immediately followed by the

request that the widening of the EU needs to go hand in hand with its reform. The proposals for such a reform revolve around three main elements:

First – and currently the most pivotal issue for Germany – ‘a gradual transition to majority voting in common foreign policy, but also in other areas, such as tax policy.’⁹¹ Second, the need to avoid the bloating of the European Parliament by exceeding the current upper limit of 751 members. Third, as proposed by the Chancellor, to increase the number of commissioners to match the number of member states, while the number of directorates-general would be limited. This would result in two commission members sharing one directorate.⁹² Further elements frequently invoked in German reform discourse are the need to preserve the EU's capacity to act, the ramifications of enlargement on specific policy areas such as agriculture as well as on the EU budget, and, crucially, the respect of the rule of law as the very basis for the functioning of the EU and the internal market.⁹³

‘As to the question whether an EU-internal reform would necessitate treaty change, Berlin has stressed its flexibility.’

As to the question whether an EU-internal reform would necessitate treaty change, Berlin has stressed its flexibility. The 2021 coalition treaty expressed the ambition to hold a constitutional convention that should aim to further develop the EU as a federal European state.⁹⁴ The government has since reverted to a less far-reaching and more

⁸⁶ J. Hanke Vela, ‘France, Germany, Portugal pitch EU levies and Ukraine ‘Marshall plan’’, *Politico*, 31 August 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/newsletter/brussels-playbook/france-germany-portugal-pitch-eu-levies-and-ukraine-marshall-plan/>.

⁸⁷ Coalition treaty between SPD, Alliance 90/The Greens and FDP, 7 December 2021, 109.

⁸⁸ IEP, Meeting of the Berlin Futures group ‘On the future of EU enlargement policy’, Berlin, 16 May 2023; 11th Genshagen Forum for German-French Dialogue, 8–9 June 2023.

⁸⁹ O. Noyan, ‘German top aide: No EU-reform, no enlargement’, *Euractiv*, 28 November, 2022, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/german-top-aide-no-eu-reform-no-enlargement/>.

⁹⁰ 11th Genshagen Forum for German-French Dialogue, 8–9 June 2023; Interview by the author with a German government official, April 2023.

⁹¹ Speech by Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz at the Charles University in Prague, 29 August 2022.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*; IEP, Meeting of the Berlin Futures group ‘On the future of EU enlargement policy’, Berlin, 16 May 2023; German Council on Foreign Relations, ‘DGAP study group on European policy’, Berlin, 3 July 2023.

⁹⁴ Coalition treaty between SPD, Alliance 90/The Greens and FDP, 7 December 2021, 104.

pragmatic approach, exploring ways to introduce reforms within the existing treaty framework and stressing that many kinds of changes – small, big or something ‘in between’ – are conceivable for treaty reform.⁹⁵ In this vein, Foreign Minister Baerbock has initiated a ‘Group of Friends’ advocating the use of QMV in the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy, which looks into the possibilities provided for within the Lisbon Treaty. France and Germany also convoked a joint working group of experts on EU institutional reforms who presented their proposals in September 2023.⁹⁶ The group’s suggestions for a more robust protection of the rule of law by strengthening budgetary conditionality and a revision of the Article 7 procedure were reflected in Foreign Minister Baerbock’s Conference on Europe speech in November 2023.⁹⁷ Similarly, many of the group’s ideas on the reform of EU institutions – including limiting the number of MEPs to 751 and extending QMV decision making – are likely to find an open ear in Berlin.

More ambiguity can be expected with regard to the model of differentiated integration proposed by the Franco-German expert group. According to that model, which has both an internal and an external dimension, European integration would consist of four tiers:

The first tier, an ‘inner circle’, should be able to advance on deeper integration on a wide range of policy areas. The second tier, membership in the EU, would be based on current EU competencies. The third (or first outer) tier surrounding the European Union would then be formed by associate members. Crucially, this would entail participation in the single market as well as other forms of association such as speaking (but not voting) rights in the Council. In return, associate members would be bound by common EU

principles and values, which includes democratic and rule of law standards. The fourth tier would consist in an intergovernmental forum which serves geopolitical convergence and political cooperation and could be embodied in the recently established European Political Community. It would form the only tier where rule of law conditionality does not apply.⁹⁸

‘Foreign Minister Baerbock named 2030 as a time horizon to accomplish EU-internal reform, which would imply that reforms would be mainly carried out in the next EU legislative term.’

So far, however, the federal government has been sceptical of approaches of differentiated integration or a multi-speed Europe as this, in the words of chancellor Scholz, would only create ‘a confusing tangle’⁹⁹ that would be detrimental to European unity. While Germany does not want to commit to a date when the accession of new member states could take place, Foreign Minister Baerbock named 2030 as a time horizon to accomplish EU-internal reform, which would imply that reforms would be mainly carried out in the next EU legislative term.¹⁰⁰

Conclusions

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine marked a ‘Zeitenwende’ for Germany’s approach to EU enlargement policy. Under its current ‘traffic light’ coalition, the EU’s widening towards the East and South-East of the continent is key to Germany’s newly emerging vision for an ‘enlarged union of

⁹⁵ Meeting of the Berlin Futures group ‘On the future of EU enlargement policy’, Berlin, 16 May 2023.

⁹⁶ Franco-German Working Group for EU Institutional Reform, *Sailing on High Seas: Reforming and Enlarging the EU for the 21st Century*, Paris/Berlin, 18 September 2023, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2617322/4d0e0010ffcd8c0079e21329bbbb3332/230919-rfaa-deu-fra-bericht-data.pdf>.

⁹⁷ Federal Foreign Office, Foreign Minister Baerbock’s speech at the Conference on Europe in Berlin, 2 November 2023.

⁹⁸ Franco-German Working Group for EU Institutional Reform, *Sailing on High Seas*, Paris/Berlin, 18 September 2023, 6–7, 38–43.

⁹⁹ Speech by Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz at the Charles University in Prague, 29 August 2022.

¹⁰⁰ Federal Foreign Office, Foreign Minister Baerbock’s speech at the Conference on Europe in Berlin, 2 November 2023.

freedom, security and democracy'. The geopolitically motivated pledge to increase the number of (potential) candidate countries and accelerate their EU rapprochement, however, confronts Germany with the challenge of how to achieve this while, at the same time, preserving the EU's capacity to act.

'Berlin is thus sticking to the mantra of "strict, but fair" accession conditionality, even if geopolitical pressure is making this approach palpably harder to implement.'

To defuse this tension, German policymakers point to both political and economic transformation within candidate countries and intra-EU reform as prerequisites. Berlin is thus sticking to the mantra of 'strict, but fair' accession conditionality, even if geopolitical pressure is making this approach palpably harder to implement. By deriving the need for institutional reforms from future enlargement, Germany, together with France, brings the issue of absorption capacity back to the table. Both the conditionality principle and the EU's absorption capacity have traditionally been part of the enlargement sceptics' toolbox to set a (too) high bar for the EU's widening. German decision makers, on the contrary, insist that they are holding up these issues precisely because they want the integration of new member states to be a realistic prospect. There is nevertheless a risk that a stalled reform process within the EU would weigh on member states' readiness to enlarge. This would, in turn, severely undermine the merits-based approach.

With a tight-knit domestic consensus on its policy course, the trust it enjoys from the side of candidate countries, and the bridging function it can fulfil between member states that see widening and deepening as opposed to each other, Germany

is well placed to play (or rather continue to play) a leadership role on EU enlargement policy. While the German debate is currently focused on the internal dimension of EU enlargement, i.e. the reform of EU institutions and decision-making processes, it is striking that the question of how to design a functional accession process for candidate countries has received less attention, both with regard to the concreteness of proposals and the readiness to innovate. When it comes to fostering the rule of law, (socio-)economic convergence and guaranteeing a merits-based accession process, too often the attention is diverted from the question of what is necessary to what is (perceived to be) feasible. Reflexively pointing to what is achievable within the existing political, legal, and budgetary framework bears the risk of losing sight of the goals and needs – both geopolitical and transformational – of EU enlargement.

Time matters. The geopolitical environment continues to violently make itself felt, and instead of extending the accession process into the future 'as long as it takes', what is needed is a change of paradigm that would allow thinking and planning it from the end, i.e. the goal of accession. This could result in defining a comprehensive roadmap (that does not equal an 'accession automatism'), and corresponding timeframes (that do not equal a set-in-stone accession date) to move towards this goal. Since German policymakers aspire to develop a clear roadmap on how to achieve EU-internal reform, they should, in parallel, strive for a second roadmap on how to bring candidate countries into the EU's fold and ensure the impact of domestic policy reforms ahead of membership. The 'Zeitenwende' on Germany's approach to EU enlargement policy has been ushered in with German officials clearly defining the goal of an 'enlarged and reformed EU'.¹⁰¹ Living up to this commitment by designing policies that are time-sensitive and impactful will be the challenge to be tackled in the months and years to come.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*