

Göran von Sydow, Valentin Kreilinger,
Patricia Wadensjö (eds)

Perspectives on enlargement and reform of the EU:

Fit for 35

Veronica Anghel, Steven Blockmans,
Antoaneta L. Dimitrova, Christophe Hillion,
Saskia Hollander, Erik Jones, Michael Leigh,
Daniela Schwarzer

Göran von Sydow, Valentin Kreiling,
Patricia Wadensjö (eds)

Perspectives on enlargement and reform of the EU: Fit for 35

SIEPS 2025:2op

Report No. 2op
August 2025

Published by the Swedish Institute for
European Policy Studies

This publication is available at www.sieps.se

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

Printed by EO Grafiska AB
Stockholm, August 2025

ISSN 1651-8942
ISBN 978-91-89498-19-8

Preface

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 has profoundly changed the security situation in Europe. One consequence is that EU enlargement is back on the agenda. Despite the uncertainties surrounding these processes, the EU could be set to become a union of 35 or more member states. This, in turn, has spurred a debate about the extent to which it is necessary to reform the EU simultaneously.

SIEPS aims to promote and conduct research on European integration. We strive to build bridges and foster exchange between academia and policymakers. In order to contribute to a discussion on how to make the EU 'fit for 35', we published the edited volume *Fit for 35? Reforming the Politics and Institutions of the EU for an Enlarged Union*, in September 2023. As a second step, we invited a number of experts to write short contributions with their thoughts on the most pressing issues. Starting in February 2024, they made contributions to the 'FitFor35 Forum' that were published over a year. By putting all pieces together in one volume we hope that it can make a multi-faceted *problématique* accessible. We also hope that this can contribute to further stimulating a necessary discussion about key aspects for the future of the European Union.

Göran von Sydow

Director

About the authors

Veronica Anghel is an Assistant Professor at the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute.

Steven Blockmans is an associate Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS), a Senior Fellow at the International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS), and a Visiting Professor at the College of Europe.

Antoaneta L. Dimitrova is a Professor of Comparative Governance at the Institute of Security and Global Affairs, Leiden University, and a member of the European integration committee of the Advisory Council on International Affairs (AIV) of the Netherlands.

Christophe Hillion is a Professor of European Law at the University of Oslo and a Visiting Professor at the College of Europe.

Saskia Hollander is a Senior Research Fellow at the Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael.

Erik Jones is Director of the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute.

Valentin Kreiling is a Senior Researcher in Political Science at SIEPS.

Sir **Michael Leigh** is a Senior Adjunct Professor at SAIS Europe Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies and a former Director-General for Enlargement of the European Commission.

Daniela Schwarzer is a member of the Executive Board of the Bertelsmann Stiftung and Honorary Professor of Political Science at Freie Universität Berlin. She was co-rapporteur of the working group on EU reform and enlargement, convened by the French and German governments, which submitted its report in September 2023.

Göran von Sydow is Director of SIEPS.

Patricia Wadensjö is Editor at SIEPS.

Table of contents

Preface	5
About the authors	6
Executive Summary	8
Introduction	11
1 Enlargement and Institutional Reform: How to make a credible security commitment	14
2 EU Enlargement: Exporting Stability or Importing Instability?	18
3 Gradual EU integration: limits to an à la carte approach	22
4 Enlargement will only succeed if the EU embraces more flexibility	26
5 EU Enlargement: A Strategic Imperative for Survival	33
6 Dilemmas of EU Enlargement: Geopolitics, Conditionality, and Citizens' Concerns	37
7 Ready, set, go? How to prepare EU democracy for enlargement.....	44
8 Making a success of EU enlargement: three proposals	51
9 Concluding remarks.....	58
Sammanfattning på svenska	63

Executive Summary

It had long been widely considered an improbable scenario that the European Union, comprising 35 members, would be a realistic prospect by the 2030s. In light of the prevailing uncertainty surrounding how and when this could be achieved, SIEPS published the edited volume *Fit for 35? Reforming the Politics and Institutions of the EU for an Enlarged Union*, in September 2023. As a second step, we invited eight leading experts on EU reform and enlargement to contribute short responses that explored this question in a series that was published over a year, the *FitFor35 Forum*, starting in February 2024. The responses given vary, yet it becomes evident that there is a necessity to undertake work in order to ensure that the European Union, its current members, and its prospective members are all able to be considered ‘Fit for 35’.

Introduction

In their introduction, Göran von Sydow and Valentin Kreilinger set the scene by explaining what they mean by ‘Fit for 35’ and what the big questions about enlargement are.

1 | Enlargement and Institutional Reform:

How to make a credible security commitment

The initial essay operates under the assumption that the challenges associated with enlargement are significant, while the costs of non-enlargement are deemed to be even more substantial. In his contribution, Erik Jones draws attention to the factors that European policymakers must take into consideration when pledging their commitment to enlargement as a strategic investment in peace, security and stability.

2 | EU Enlargement: Exporting Stability or Importing Instability?

Notwithstanding the inherent security risks, it is imperative to acknowledge the EU’s unwavering commitment to a revitalised enlargement process. Michael Leigh delineates the measures that policymakers must undertake to ensure the realisation of the EU’s objective of maintaining stability: continue to support Ukraine, communicate about the overall enlargement process, and concrete deliverables from both sides in the negotiations.

3 | Gradual EU integration: limits to an à la carte approach

Whilst the recently proposed plans for the incremental integration of

candidate countries may facilitate the acceleration of their accession process in specific policy domains and align with EU interests, Steven Blockmans contends that such advancements should be firmly embedded within the formal framework of membership negotiations and evaluated in conjunction with comprehensive reforms.

4 | Enlargement will only succeed if the EU embraces more flexibility

The concept of enlargement has been re-discovered as the most powerful tool to stabilise the EU's neighbourhood. Daniela Schwarzer holds that the EU must adopt a more flexible approach when integrating new members and in its own functioning. This, she argues, would also enhance its legitimacy and enable it to protect its fundamental principles more effectively.

5 | EU Enlargement: A Strategic Imperative for Survival

The European Union must activate the enlargement process in order to survive. Veronica Anghel posits that the concept of enlargement is inextricably linked to the institutional survival of the EU, the implementation of substantial reforms, and the development of a strategic response to the competitiveness gap.

6 | Dilemmas of EU Enlargement:

Geopolitics, Conditionality, and Citizens' Concerns

However, while decisive actions have reinvigorated the discourse surrounding enlargement within the EU, constraints and challenges persist. In her contribution, Antoaneta Dimitrova elucidates three dilemmas facing the leaders of EU members and candidate states: geopolitics, conditionality, and the concerns of citizens.

7 | Ready, set, go? How to prepare EU democracy for enlargement

The question that also needs to be addressed is whether the EU has the capacity to accommodate an increased political and cultural diversity following subsequent rounds of enlargement. Saskia Hollander assesses the impact of EU enlargement on the EU's capacity to uphold democracy and the rule of law, and to project core values within its borders.

8 | Making a success of EU enlargement: three proposals

EU leaders asserted that the expansion of the European Union is a strategic investment in peace, security and stability. However, as Christophe Hillion argues in his contribution, the credibility of the promise of EU membership is pivotal for such an investment to yield the anticipated returns.

Concluding remarks

Finally, in their conclusion, Göran von Sydow and Valentin Kreilinger revisit the five cross-cutting issues of the eight contributions and offer four additional thoughts that are relevant for the debate about EU enlargement and the question of whether the EU is 'Fit for 35'. They relate to aspects that currently seem to be below the decision-makers' radar: the risk of institutional stagnation, the risk of further democratic backsliding, the need for more efficiency and accountability, and the need to decide whether to change the treaty or not.

SIEPS' Conference 'Making Enlargement Work, Again'

On 27 September 2024, SIEPS organized a full-day conference on the further enlargement of the EU with contributions from leading experts, including several of the authors of this volume. Find recordings of panels and speeches on our website:

<https://sieps.se/en/seminars/making-enlargement-work-again/>

Introduction

Göran von Sydow and Valentin Kreiling

The future enlargement of the European Union (EU) suddenly has risen to the top of the political agenda. After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, it took only a few days for Ukraine to submit its application for EU membership. Accession negotiations have started and previously stalled processes with other candidate countries have also been revitalised. The policies of the new Trump administration and the changing dynamic between the US and Russia are also affecting EU integration.

This raises the issue – as in earlier enlargement rounds – of whether the EU must first change internally. In this context, questions are raised about policies, the financial framework, decision-making rules, institutional arrangements and the treaties. Some argue that reforming EU governance is unnecessarily time-consuming and difficult, not least because there are many other challenges. Others refer to the concept of 'absorption capacity' and emphasise the risk that the EU will cease to function after enlargement unless it undertakes serious reforms.

Is the EU willing and able to reform in order to welcome new members into the club? Or is the approach of simultaneously pursuing internal reform and enlargement doomed to failure? Could the EU enlarge and continue to enlarge without reform? Are the 1993 Copenhagen criteria, which established a merit-based, politically managed accession process that takes into account the EU's absorption capacity, still the blueprint and benchmark to be kept in mind?

Introducing more flexibility into a sometimes-rigid system with procedures that would allow future EU member states to participate, possibly even in decision-making, would also require internal reforms. How could a gradual, functional and sectoral integration process before formal accession be designed? Would it be attractive for accession countries or be perceived as yet another waiting room on the way to eventually becoming a full member?

The renewed attention to enlargement comes with a geopolitical framing. The 27 member states are already struggling to finance all the budgetary

needs to support Ukraine and build up their defence capabilities. Can the EU embed the new geopolitical considerations that drive the enlargement into its existing processes? These are just some of the big questions about enlargement that look for responses and that structure our collection of contributions to the *FitFor35 Forum*.

‘Fit for 35’: foundational volume and *Forum*

The prospect of enlargement to a Union of 29, 32 or even 35 members raises the question of whether the EU needs to become fit for enlargement and, if so, what exactly it needs to do to become fit for 35. ‘Fit for 35’ refers to an EU of 35 members, the current 27 plus 8 new members. Alongside Ukraine, the six Western Balkan countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia) and Moldova add up to 35, while Georgia and Turkey are possibly future members, too. The term ‘Fit for 35’ was invented for the volume ‘Fit for 35? Reforming the Politics and Institutions of the EU for an Enlarged Union’, published by SIEPS in September 2023.¹

When we first raised the question of what the EU can or should do to be ‘Fit for 35’, five scholars – Tanja Börzel, Sergio Fabbrini, Yves Mény, Sonja Puntischer Riekman, and Frank Schimmelfennig – responded with their analyses of how the EU should prepare, if it can muddle through or if there must be fundamental reforms instead.

SIEPS then created a new forum where more voices from research, policy and think tanks could present their thoughts on EU reform and enlargement in shorter texts. The *FitFor35 Forum* aimed at continuing the debate. Contributions by eight experts are included in this collection: Veronica Anghel, Steven Blockmans, Antoaneta Dimitrova, Christophe Hillion, Saskia Hollander, Erik Jones, Michael Leigh, and Daniela Schwarzer.

Throughout 2024 and 2025, SIEPS’ usual work on enlargement has continued: to date, a total of seven longer studies and reports have been published. And at a one-day conference in Stockholm in September 2024, many authors of these publications and from the *FitFor35 Forum* participated and presented their research.

¹ von Sydow, G. & Kreilinger, V. (eds) (2023). *Fit for 35? Reforming the Politics and Institutions of the EU for an Enlarged Union*, 2023:20p, Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies (SIEPS), <https://sieps.se/en/publications/2023/fit-for-35-reforming-the-politics-and-institutions-of-the-eu-for-an-enlarged-union/>

One set of the *FitFor35 Forum* contributions looks at how security and stability are linked to enlargement: **Erik Jones** discusses how to make a credible security commitment when EU leaders see enlargement as an ‘investment in peace, security, and stability’. **Michael Leigh** follows with his contribution ‘EU Enlargement: Exporting Stability or Importing Instability?’. Later in this collection, **Veronica Anghel** considers the expansion of the EU, particularly to Ukraine during wartime, to be a strategic imperative.

The need for flexibility and gradual integration of candidate countries is another major theme in the next set of contributions to this collection at a time when enlargement policy has been rediscovered as the most powerful tool to stabilise the EU’s neighbourhood. **Daniela Schwarzer** argues that enlargement will only work if the EU becomes more flexible while **Steven Blockmans** points to the limits of an ‘à la carte approach’ for future members.

A third set of contributions turns to long-standing constraints and challenges: Citizens’ concerns and other dilemmas facing EU and candidate state leaders are discussed in **Antoaneta Dimitrova**’s contribution. After that, **Saskia Hollander** addresses the need to prepare democracy for EU enlargement and if the EU can accommodate increased diversity after a next round of enlargement. Finally, **Christophe Hillion** emphasises that the credibility of the EU’s commitment to these objectives is essential for achieving peace, security, and stability.

We wrap up the collection with a conclusion that highlights five cross-cutting issues: internal reforms, geopolitical and security considerations, differentiated integration, financial and economic implications, and public debate and legitimacy. Finally, we offer our thoughts on the current situation. We see a risk of institutional stagnation and further democratic backsliding as well as a need for more efficiency and accountability, and a decision on treaty change.

1 Enlargement and Institutional Reform: How to make a credible security commitment

Erik Jones, February 2024

At its meeting last December,² the European Council underlined ‘that enlargement is a geo-strategic investment in peace, security, stability, and prosperity.’ The Council then set itself the challenge of ‘addressing key questions related to the [European Union’s] priorities and policies as well as its capacity to act.’ In doing so, the Council explicitly recognized that institutional and political reforms are necessary to match power to purpose. ‘This will make the EU stronger and will enhance European sovereignty.’

That is a bold assertion. The danger is that European power and purpose will fail to align. As enlargement is a necessary investment in peace and stability, this risk should be recognized. The main priority is therefore to match the identified purpose with the power necessary to achieve it.

A commitment to collective security is not enough

For enlargement to succeed as an investment in peace and security, the European Union will somehow have to create (or rely upon) a security guarantee that is credible both to the people who live in those countries that are candidates for membership and to the people who would do harm to them. The assertion of a commitment to collective security is not enough. That commitment must be backed by real political determination. That is why Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty is more credible than Article 42.7 of the Lisbon Treaty, despite having intentionally weaker language. (The U.S. negotiators of the North Atlantic Treaty rejected a security guarantee like that found in the Lisbon Treaty as uncredible.) And it is unclear that NATO enlargement will precede EU enlargement as it has in the past. So, the question is how the European Union can make

² December 2023.

a credible security commitment either to its Eastern partners or to the countries of the Western Balkans.

A staged enlargement like that proposed by Frank Schimmelfennig in his chapter ‘Fit through Flexibility? Differentiated Integration and Geopolitical EU Enlargement’³ could work in that direction. This method, where candidate countries are brought gradually into the European Union depending upon their performance across a range of indicators and their acceptance by existing member states, has implications that raise key questions for the European Union.

How to handle possible threats to the EU’s own security

As candidate countries become ever more deeply entangled in the EU economy and its institutional arrangements, the cost of external aggression against those countries – or destabilization within them – will increasingly spill across the rest of the European Union. That spillover creates an incentive for the European Union to push back against any aggressors, and the greater the cost, the greater the incentive. But the implication is that enlargement makes the candidate countries more secure by making the European Union more vulnerable.

Hence, a key question is what the European Union is going to do about that vulnerability both in terms of shoring up its own security and in terms of deterring possible threats. De-risking the European economy is not going to be sufficient, and neither is the use of economic sanctions. On the contrary, both de-risking and sanctions have the effect of channelling potential conflict into the realm of hard security.

How to overcome internal tension when resources become scarce

A staged accession has further implications. The second is that the progressive entanglement of the candidate countries in the European Union’s economy and institutional arrangements will inevitably increase congestion in decision making and competition for scarce resources – which run from market share and employment opportunities to financial assistance, regulatory priorities, and legislative time and attention. This increase in congestion and competition is not the ‘fault’ of the candidate countries; it is the consequence of enlargement for any club, international

³ In: von Sydow, G. & Kreilinger, V. (eds) (2023). Fit for 35? Reforming the Politics and Institutions of the EU for an Enlarged Union, 2023:20p, Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies (SIEPS), <https://sieps.se/en/publications/2023/fit-for-35-reforming-the-politics-and-institutions-of-the-eu-for-an-enlarged-union/>

organization, or regional polity like the European Union. The point to underscore is that any effort to address this increase in congestion and competition is going to change the experience of membership for all member states⁴ and not just those seeking to gain entry. At the same time, this competition and congestion will make it harder for the European Union to identify new resources to invest in its security and to take difficult decisions about how and how forcefully to push back against any aggression.

If the purpose of enlargement is to invest in peace and security, a key question for the European Union will be to overcome these internal points of tension. It remains to be seen whether existing member states are willing to embrace such an ambitious reform agenda.

How to ensure that candidate countries can pursue necessary reforms

A third implication of a staged accession is that the pace of entanglement is inevitably going to be threat-based as well as merit-based. The countries most in need of a credible security guarantee will have to be brought into the European Union quickly. The governments of those countries will have to engage in the reforms necessary to meet the accession criteria, and the European Commission will have to do the checks necessary to ensure that this approximation of the *acquis communautaire* is meaningful rather than simply pro forma. But none of that can eliminate the security imperative that is the purpose of this kind of ‘geostrategic investment’. The evidence for the accelerating influence of this kind of security imperative⁵ can be found in the ‘big bang’ enlargement that took place at the end of the 1990s and the start of the 2000s. It can also be seen in the speed with which Ukraine and Moldova have been allowed to start negotiations while Georgia has been given candidate status. So long as the purpose is to promote peace and security, there is little alternative.

Thus, a key question is what the EU can do to ensure the candidate countries can set the necessary pace in terms of their own reform agendas.

How to reconcile reversibility with the security imperative

A fourth implication of staged accession is that the threat of reversibility necessarily diminishes as the entanglement of the candidate countries

⁴ Anghel, V. & Jones, E. (2024). The enlargement of international organisations. *West European Politics*, 48(1), 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2024.2311044>

⁵ Anghel, V. & Jones, E. (2021). Failing forward in Eastern Enlargement: problem solving through problem making. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 29(7), 1092–1111. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2021.1927155>

in the economy and institutions of the European Union increases. The European Council insists that it 'remains committed to advancing the gradual integration between the European Union and the [Western Balkans] during the enlargement process itself in a reversible and merit-based manner'. The reversibility of integration is important as a check on backsliding in the reform effort made by the candidate countries. What is unclear is how this reversibility can be squared with the need to provide a credible security commitment or at what point the threat of reversing the enlargement process loses credibility in light of the security imperative. Even the economic and political costs of disintegration cut both ways and at some point it may not be worth it for the European Union to go through with its threat to reverse enlargement. There is a clear source of tension here that can also be seen in the aftermath of previous enlargements.

The key question is whether this is a tension that can be resolved through institution building or whether this is something that the European Union is going to have to learn to live with.

No excuses for putting off the enlargement

These key questions should not be used as excuses for European policymakers to try to put off enlargement. The European Council is right to underscore its commitment to making this geostrategic investment in European peace, security, and stability. The prosperity of Europe cannot be assured without that investment, particularly given the political turmoil on the other side of the Atlantic. The challenges of enlargement are great, but the costs of non-enlargement are greater – because failing to provide a credible security commitment to the EU eastern and southeastern neighbours will jeopardize the security of the European Union. The European Council has identified its purpose; now it needs to make sure to exercise the power necessary to secure it.

2 EU Enlargement: Exporting Stability or Importing Instability?

Michael Leigh, April 2024

European Union membership negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova are due to start this spring.⁶ Bosnia and Herzegovina has edged forward in the queue, and Georgia's not far behind. There's talk of Montenegro joining the EU by 2030. The EU has re-launched the enlargement process in record time because of the precarious geopolitical situation in Europe. This is meant primarily to express solidarity with Ukraine after Russia's invasion and signal to Vladimir Putin that Brussels rejects any notion that Ukraine, its neighbours or the Balkans form part of a Russian sphere of influence.

Impact on EU security: Ukraine's vulnerability could become the EU's

The EU's offer of eventual membership to Kyiv is intended to bolster the security of both Ukraine and the European Union. Yet the true implications of Ukraine's potential membership for European security have been largely ignored. Security would not be enhanced by admitting a country partly occupied by a hostile foreign power. On the contrary, Ukraine's vulnerability would become the EU's vulnerability if it joined without concluding a peace treaty with Russia and without obtaining NATO guarantees. The EU could stipulate that a peace treaty is a precondition for membership, but this would be handing a veto to Vladimir Putin. A peace treaty is unlikely when fighting finally stops, given the two sides' diametrically opposed war aims. A ceasefire or armistice are probably the most that can be expected. Skirmishing could continue after the war has ground to a halt.

Russian-occupied territories comprise 20% of Georgia's national territory and Transdnistria in Moldova is a Russian-sponsored pseudo-state. The EU's Cyprus experience should be a warning about taking in a new member whose government does not fully control its national territory and which

⁶ Spring 2024.

comprises an unrecognized separatist authority. This greatly complicates the EU's relations with Turkey and is the main political constraint on EU-NATO cooperation. A similar situation with Ukraine would expose the EU to much greater security risks. Passing over this issue in silence stores up problems for the future.

Before Russia's invasion, there had been no question of offering Ukraine (or its neighbours) an EU membership perspective. This was among the pretexts that the pro-Russian Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich used to refuse to sign the association agreement with the EU in 2013. The 'Euromaidan' demonstrations, their violent repression, Yanukovich's flight to Russia and the annexation of Crimea followed. The association agreement, still lacking a membership perspective, was signed in 2014 by the new Ukrainian government.

The EU changed its position after Russia's attack on Ukraine because enlargement is its main foreign policy carrot, while sanctions are its main stick. Yet offering membership talks without a comprehensive impact assessment amounts to 'betting the house' on a highly uncertain prospect.

The EU insists that progress in membership talks is 'merit based.' Negotiations are meant to start with issues like human rights, the rule of law, the fight against corruption and judicial independence. But the candidates still face profound governance challenges quite apart from the war and Russian occupation. Just before the EU recognized Ukraine as a candidate for membership in June 2022, French President Emmanuel Macron told the European Parliament that accession might take decades.⁷ If negotiations eventually succeed, France, and probably several other member states, will hold a referendum on EU expansion, a notoriously unpredictable way to seek public consent.

Impact on EU decision-making: caught between a rock and a hard place

Analysts sympathetic to Ukraine's membership bid minimize its likely impact on the EU budget and major policies.⁸ But the Commission has

⁷ Clôture de la Conférence sur l'avenir de l'Europe, Élysée, 9 May 2022, <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2022/05/09/cloture-de-la-conference-sur-avenir-de-europe>

⁸ Darvas, Z., Dabrowski, M., Grabbe, H., Léry Moffat, L., Sapir, A. & Zachmann, G., Ukraine's path to European Union membership and its long-term implications, Policy Brief, Bruegel, 7 March 2024, <https://www.bruegel.org/policy-brief/ukraines-path-european-union-membership-and-its-long-term-implications>

recognized in its March 2024 communication⁹ that enlargement calls for internal reforms as well as a thorough review of EU policies. However, the EU's enlargement methodology, which was not designed for countries in the precarious situation of the present candidates, remains largely unchanged and should also be updated.

Expansion to as many as 36 countries, including Balkan aspirants, would transform the EU and make decision-making much more difficult. So, there have been calls to abolish the veto right of individual states in the few sensitive areas where it remains. But several smaller EU countries cling to the veto to protect their interests. Even the governments most avid for Kyiv's accession, to prevent Russian encroachment, are appalled at increased imports of Ukrainian farm products. Poland has led the campaign for import restrictions on Ukrainian agricultural products.

In light of these risks and uncertainties, the EU is considering proposals for gradual, step-by-step membership long advocated by think tanks. Increased financial assistance, joining the EU's single market and access to EU agencies could make the waiting room more comfortable.

But candidates might view this as a distraction from full membership, their main goal. More than twenty years ago, then Commission president Romano Prodi offered them, to little avail, 'a stake in the internal market' and participation in 'everything but institutions'.¹⁰ Today such piecemeal progress has little appeal to Ukraine, a country engaged in a proxy war to protect not only itself but Europe as a whole.

No going back: essential steps towards shared stability

The EU's commitment to further enlargement, mainly intended to strengthen European security, seems unequivocal. Yet many ambiguities and contradictions remain. What, then, is to be done?

Above all, the EU and its member states should be unstinting in economic and military assistance to Ukraine, especially if aid from the United States dwindles.

⁹ European Commission, Commission prepares for pre-enlargement reforms and policy reviews, Press release, 20 March 2024, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_24_1568

¹⁰ A Wider Europe – A Proximity Policy as the key to stability 'Peace, Security And Stability International Dialogue and the Role of the EU' Sixth ECSA-World Conference. Jean Monnet Project, Speech by Romano Prodi, President of the European Commission, 5–6 December 2002, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_02_619

There can be no going back on the EU membership path, despite the hasty way it began and the security risks involved. Several EU governments sought to postpone the start of accession negotiations until after the European Parliament elections in June, fearing that this would be unpopular with voters. Yet Euroskeptic and anti-immigration views are likely to strengthen their position in the elections. Hungary, under its Moscow-leaning government, will take over the EU Council's rotating presidency in July.¹¹ So, if enlargement is deemed important for Europe's future stability and prosperity, membership talks should begin without delay.

The EU should face down farm lobbies, demanding restrictions on imports from Ukraine. When the fighting stops, the EU will be a major contributor to the country's reconstruction. This assistance should be designed to help Ukraine meet European green, digital and single market standards.

Good communications about enlargement, countering fake news spread by Russia and its minions, will be essential to maintain public confidence. The emphasis in the negotiations should be on concrete deliverables from both sides. The accession process should be reversible in the event of democratic backsliding.

If these recommendations are followed, the EU can fulfil its aspiration to be an exporter of stability rather than an importer of instability.

¹¹ July 2024.

3 Gradual EU integration: limits to an à la carte approach

Steven Blockmans, April 2024

Over the past years there has been much – mostly loose – talk about frontloading the integration of candidate countries into the EU, with the aim of injecting much-needed dynamism into the lethargic enlargement process. The basic mechanism behind the idea is that domestic reforms by the candidates would be rewarded with concrete benefits, thereby stimulating further pre-accession reforms. In return for dynamic alignment with the *acquis* and, in terms of governance, a uniform and effective implementation and enforcement of all relevant EU rules, selective and later generalised participation in the work of the EU institutions would be foreseen, as well as substantially larger and progressively increasing funds to support socio-economic convergence with the EU average. Furthermore, early access to the Single Market would allow candidate countries' economic operators to integrate in European value chains and establish strategic partnerships in industrial sectors of mutual interest (e.g. raw materials, batteries, machinery). All this would create tangible benefits, translate positively at the ballot box, and thus raise political capital to keep up with otherwise difficult reforms, both in candidate countries and inside the EU.

The European Commission's revised enlargement methodology of February 2020 flagged the need to identify opportunities for 'phasing-in' the countries of the Western Balkans to individual EU policies,¹² but there was little to no follow-up. It took Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and the subsequent decisions by member states welcoming the European aspirations of the Eastern trio – Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia – for the European Council in June 2022 to reiterate the need to advance ways of

¹² Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, The European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans, COM(2020) 57 final, Brussels, 5 February 2020, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0057>

‘gradual integration’, already during the enlargement process itself, ‘in a reversible and merit-based manner’.¹³ Since then, there has been a flurry of activity, with the publication of a series of non-papers by member states and communications by the Commission. Think tanks have also weighed in.

Speeding up enlargement without reform: the advance integration of Ukraine

In his contribution to the ‘Fit for 35?’ report by SIEPS, Frank Schimmelfennig points to the second argument in favour of phasing in candidates before full membership: it is a means for the EU to ‘maximize the speed of enlargement while minimizing the need for ex ante reform’.¹⁴ Indeed, forms of pre-membership integration allow the EU to meet geopolitical needs while buying time to prepare itself for enlargement. This is vividly illustrated by the new European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS). Prior to any discussions about institutional rebalancing in EU defence policy,¹⁵ let alone agreement about introducing more qualified majority voting (QMV) in Council decision-making, Ukraine’s participation in the reinforcement of the European defence technological and industrial base is already being secured – for mutual benefit. During the development of the EDIS, consultations were held with the relevant Ukrainian agencies on the country’s experience in defending against Russia’s armed aggression, as well as its vision of the development of the European and Ukrainian defence industries. The EDIS is accompanied by a draft Regulation which provides for Ukraine’s participation in joint procurement and a EUR 1.5bn envelope from the EU budget to support Ukrainian defence companies in building capacity and cooperation with the European industry in the next two years. What’s more, the EU will open an Innovation Office in Kyiv to facilitate interaction between EU start-ups and Ukraine’s innovators and Armed Forces.

¹³ European Council meeting (23 and 24 June 2022) – Conclusions, EUCO 24/22, para 16, Brussels: European Council, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/57442/2022-06-2324-euco-conclusions-en.pdf>

¹⁴ Schimmelfennig, F., ‘Fit through Flexibility? Differentiated Integration and Geopolitical EU Enlargement’. In: von Sydow, G. & Kreilinger, V. (eds) (2023). *Fit for 35? Reforming the Politics and Institutions of the EU for an Enlarged Union*, 2023:20p, Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies (SIEPS), p. 15. <https://sieps.se/en/publications/2023/fit-for-35-reforming-the-politics-and-institutions-of-the-eu-for-an-enlarged-union/>

¹⁵ Benhamou, M., Blockmans, S., Ciolan, I., Chihaia, M., Fiott, D., Marrone, A., Mölling, C., Tessari, P., Vicente, A. & Welle, K. (2024). *The 7Ds for Sustainability – Defence in Depth*, Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, <https://www.martenscentre.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/7Ds-In-Depth-Defence.pdf>

This welcome form of advance integration falls outside of the EU's support under the Ukraine Facility, which is primarily geared at reconstruction and excludes defence. It also does not follow the rule of law and reform-based payment conditionality that underpins the methodology of the concept of 'gradual integration' which was pioneered by the Commission in the New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans of last November¹⁶ and then proposed for all candidate countries in a Communication of 20 March 2024.¹⁷

The Commission's Communication of March 2024: still stuck in silo-thinking

The latter Communication provides an insight into the European Commission's thinking about the governance and policy areas that would be impacted by future enlargement. It is not the final word. In anticipation of the in-depth policy reviews that President Ursula von der Leyen promised in her State of the European Union speech last September,¹⁸ the Commission chose to publish a placeholder which skirts around deep-seated problems in order to exude a 'can-do' attitude about future EU enlargement to voters headed for the EP elections. See, for instance, the encouraging language that enlargement can happen by using the full potential offered by the Treaties, which denies the fact that unanimity is required before member states can resort to more efficient governance arrangements; unanimity which has been elusive on these matters for many years.

The Communication is nevertheless of interest because it goes beyond the seven initial priority areas of the Single Market earmarked for 'gradual integration'¹⁹ in the Growth Plan for the Balkans and reviews, for instance, the area of defence. Whereas the Commission is right in saying that Single Market rights and obligations 'cannot be à la carte', the EU executive is

¹⁶ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. New growth plan for the Western Balkans, COM(2023) 691 final, Brussels, 8 November 2023, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/8f5dbe63-e951-4180-9c32-298cae022d03_en?filename=COM_2023_691_New%20Growth%20Plan%20Western%20Balkans.pdf

¹⁷ Communication on pre-enlargement reforms and policy reviews, 20 March 2024, European Commission, https://commission.europa.eu/publications/communication-pre-enlargement-reforms-and-policy-reviews_en

¹⁸ September 2023.

¹⁹ Free movement of goods; free movement of some e-commerce related services and mutual recognition of professional skills and qualifications of workers; access to the Single Euro Payments Area; facilitation of road transport; integration and de-carbonisation of energy markets; parts of the Digital Single Market; and industrial supply chains, notably concerning critical medicines and raw materials.

still wrong-footed into structuring gradual integration of candidates only along vertical, i.e. policy sectoral lines. Arguably, policy coherence would demand that the accession process be organised in a horizontal manner, joining reforms in policy areas up to the much heavier transversal reforms concerning the rule of law and public administration. The latter reforms cannot be properly assessed in the fragmented manner that the Commission currently suggests.

Hence the proposal by think tanks CEPS and CEP for horizontally ‘staged accession’,²⁰ which would be grafted onto the formal accession negotiation process,²¹ rather than separated from it, as seems to be the case in the Commission’s proposals so far. Similarly, the reconstruction of Ukraine should be linked to the formal negotiation process. Treating reconstruction separately and organising advance integration of candidate countries in policy siloes risk diverting attention away from conducting actual accession talks and thus decelerating the enlargement momentum needed to meet geopolitical ends.

²⁰ Emerson, M., Lazarević, M., Blockmans, S. & Subotić, S. ‘A Template for Staged Accession’. European Policy Centre / CEPS, 1 October 2021, <https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/a-template-for-staged-accession-to-the-eu/>

²¹ Introducing quantifiable monitoring would help justify the release of greater financial, market and institutional access when increasingly higher benchmarks are met – assessed through alignment scores across all negotiation chapters, which would therefore have to be opened all at once – in a process which, except for its conclusion, would be governed by QMV.

4 Enlargement will only succeed if the EU embraces more flexibility

Daniela Schwarzer, May 2024

Russia's war on Ukraine has mounted the pressure on the European Commission and EU member states to advance with enlargement, which has reemerged as the key tool of stabilization in geopolitical competition. If the EU does not take a more active role in its eastern and southeastern neighbourhood, conflicts within the region may increase. There is also a growing risk of increased Russian and Chinese influence in the region. The EU thus needs to assist candidate countries in their transformation, anchor them in the West and enhance their security during the negotiation process, which needs to be handled flexibly.

With up to nine additional countries,²² the EU would become a continental-scale entity which would have to adapt to its bigger size, its internal diversity and the fact that external and internal pressures will play out across borders. A larger EU would have to become more differentiated, while being more protective of its fundamental principles.

Flexibility in the accession process

For most candidates and EU members, full membership remains the ultimate goal, necessitating full compliance with the *acquis* and ratification of the accession treaty by both EU members and the candidate. However, given geopolitical pressures, the EU needs to review its policies towards candidate countries with several questions in mind: What can be done to best support countries preparing for EU accession? Which policies, beyond enlargement negotiations, can best be used to further this goal? Which political fora foster an honest and respectful relationship conducive to candidates' transformation towards a stable democracy and a market economy, as well as success in negotiations? How can mutual trust be built, aiding both acceding countries' preparations and the likelihood of accession ratification in old member states?

²² Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Georgia, Kosovo, Ukraine, Moldova.

In June 2022, the European Council stated that the EU should ‘further advance the gradual integration between the European Union and [the Western Balkans] already during the enlargement process itself in a reversible and merit-based manner.’²³ Advancing a country’s political association and economic integration with the EU as far as possible before its formal accession is the right approach, given geopolitical pressures and political uncertainties both within candidate countries and the EU. Moreover, regional integration should be supported where possible in anticipation of a future integration into the Single Market – and for the case that accession fails. Since there is no certainty of concluding negotiations, nor that accession treaties will ultimately be ratified, several proposals have been published on how to gradually shape policy access, financial support, participation in institutions and decision making.²⁴

Gradual market integration

A gradual integration into the EU’s internal market, including the application of regulatory measures, also among the candidate countries themselves, would be promising.²⁵ The EU can build on experience from enhanced association agreements (AA/DCFTAs) with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, and from the (less ambitious) Stabilisation and Association Agreements signed by the six Western Balkan countries 20 years ago.

But regardless of any new flexibility in the accession process, compliance with the political accession criteria and EU principles remains the precondition for EU and thus Single Market membership. The Copenhagen criteria need to be rigorously applied in the accession process and ongoing compliance needs to be ensured. Even any partial integration into the Single Market would require adherence to the rule of law and democratic principles. Staged participation in EU policies and institutions should be reversible if the EU’s principles, values, and strategic orientation are

²³ European Council meeting (23 and 24 June 2022) – Conclusions, EUCO 24/22. Brussels: European Council, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/57442/2022-06-2324-euco-conclusions-en.pdf>

²⁴ See, for example, Emerson, M., Lazarević, M., Blockmans, S. & Subotić, S. ‘A Template for Staged Accession’. European Policy Centre / CEPS, 1 October 2021, <https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/a-template-for-staged-accession-to-the-eu/>; Schimmelfennig, F., ‘Fit through Flexibility? Differentiated Integration and Geopolitical EU Enlargement’. In: von Sydow, G. & Kreilinger, V. (eds) (2023). *Fit for 35? Reforming the Politics and Institutions of the EU for an Enlarged Union*, 2023:20p, Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies (SIEPS); Franco-German Working Group on EU Institutional Reform (2023). ‘Sailing on High Seas: Reforming and Enlarging the EU for the 21st Century’, <https://institutdelors.eu/content/uploads/2025/04/20230919-Group-of-Twelve-REPORT.pdf>

²⁵ ‘A Template for Staged Accession’. European Policy Centre / CEPS, 1 October 2021 (see footnote 24).

no longer met. A candidate country that regresses on the participation criteria must feel the consequences, or else the reform process in all accession countries will lose momentum.

The November 2023 growth plan for the Western Balkans²⁶ offers multiple opt-ins to candidates, including: (1) Free movement of goods following harmonisation with the EU's horizontal product standards and improved customs and tax cooperation; (2) Free movement of workers and services; (3) Access to the Single Euro Payments Area; (4) Facilitation of road transport; (5) Integration of electricity markets and cooperation on decarbonisation; (6) Digital Single Market including cyber security and roaming charges; and (7) Integration into sustainable raw materials value chains. These measures can potentially boost economic integration in the region and provide the first elements of enhanced security, building on achievements of the Common Regional Market initiative, the Open Balkans initiative and the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA).

The plan also provides opportunities to improve governance and foster an alignment with EU standards. A first step has been made by including candidates in the annual rule of law review. In order to support economic reforms, an additional €6bn (1/3 grants, 2/3 loans) support over a 4-year period is planned. In addition, candidates should be integrated into the European Semester, an EU process for joint reviews of reform agendas and national economic reform programmes. Pre-accession funds provided to candidates could better incentivize jointly identified targeted reforms, with increased technical assistance and secondment of national and EU experts to support domestic reforms and enhance administrative and absorption capacity. Financial support to encourage the most security-relevant reforms should meanwhile be increased.

Given the relative poverty and the low competitiveness of the candidates' economies, there needs to be a heightened focus on cohesion. Increased EU transfers will be needed to mitigate the effects of market opening, as well as a regulatory approach to manage a transition phase. During this phase, measures to prevent core industry and asset buyouts in candidate

²⁶ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. New growth plan for the Western Balkans, COM(2023) 691 final, Brussels, 8 November 2023, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/8f5dbe63-e951-4180-9c32-298cae022d03_en?filename=COM_2023_691_New%20Growth%20Plan%20Western%20Balkans.pdf

countries and incentives for skilled labour to remain in or return to candidate countries should be foreseen.

Trust building and geopolitical alignment

Early socialization and trust building with future members have been part of enlargement policy for 30 years and remain particularly important given geopolitical challenges. An important signal to applicants, in particular those that have been waiting for progress for a decade, is that the EU commits to being ready for enlargement by 2030, while candidates commit to meeting the accession criteria as soon as possible.²⁷ This joint commitment could enhance trust in the accession process, which has been hindered by a lack of dedication and progress in recent years. The new EU political leadership should embrace this goal and the requisite reform process. A joint summit with the political leaders of all candidates should take place in early 2025, once the new EU leadership is fully in place, to provide new impetus and to kick off discussions about the future of the EU involving current members and candidates alike.

Secondly, geopolitical alignment should be fostered in the accession process, notably on sanctions policy, de-risking and, more fundamentally, the principles of the UN Charter. For this, a strategic dialogue on an equal footing among candidates and EU member states and institutions should be established. Also, the European Political Community (EPC) should be used every six months for related discussions.

Avoiding political blockages

Trust building and conflict resolution are also tasks for candidates among themselves, in particular if they risk blocking each other's accession. To address this risk, the European Commission should work with smaller groups of countries, notably those with bilateral conflicts, and move to a 'regatta accession' backed by a merit-based approach. Moreover, accession treaties could contain clauses on a transitory period that takes away these countries' right to vote on future enlargements for a jointly agreed timeframe.

In addition, the EU's ability to take decisions on the negotiation chapters independently of national interests and conflicts needs to be strengthened. Qualified majority voting (QMV) should be used to approve new stages,

²⁷ The proposals are based on the Franco-German Working Group on EU Institutional Reform (2023). 'Sailing on High Seas: Reforming and Enlarging the EU for the 21st Century', (see footnote 24).

preventing individual member states from blocking progress. In the end, however, the final decision on the actual accession of a candidate must be taken with ‘double unanimity’ of all member states in the European Council and national ratifications of the accession treaty, which is why measures to improve democratic legitimacy are needed.

Democratic legitimacy: parliaments’ and citizens’ participation

Democratic legitimacy throughout the accession process should be encouraged by close dialogue between the European Parliament and national parliaments of both member states and candidate countries, as well as peer-to-peer consultations between parliamentarians from the EU and candidate states.²⁸ Parliamentarians in EU and candidate countries alike will have to play a key role in explaining and legitimizing the accession and reform processes under way.

The accession of up to 65 million citizens, adding diversity in culture, languages, economic models, and education and media systems, will only fully succeed if acceptance is deep both within the EU and the accession countries. The EU should thus develop its participatory mechanisms by linking them more closely to EU decision making and by using digital tools more decidedly. Citizens’ panels should be institutionalized, enjoy high visibility and significantly support important decisions such as the realignment of existing policies, treaty reform or enlargement. The European Commission needs to consider the results of European Citizens’ Initiatives more transparently and should assess and support new civil society led participatory initiatives where they foster the EU’s goals (e.g. in the field of sustainability). Bringing together citizens, parliamentarians, and representatives from civil society, youth movements, and unions from candidate countries with their EU counterparts, would ensure that diverse voices are heard, encourage mutual understanding and establish a sense of ownership prior to formal EU accession.

A more flexible EU and the non-negotiable principles

With possibly over 35 member states, the EU needs to change in order to retain its capacity to act. The Union already has an impressive toolbox for differentiation, such as transition clauses after new member states’ accession, temporary derogations, enhanced cooperation, permanent structured cooperation (PESCO) or conditional participation and treaty-based opt-outs. Despite the need for more flexibility, differentiation should

²⁸ Ibid.

remain within the EU framework, to preserve institutional integrity and ensure that participation is open to all member states. Decision-making authority and cost sharing should align with participation in deeper integration formats. The development of fiscal capacities, in the form of new own resources, budgets based on member states' contributions and/or borrowing capacities, should become possible. In the absence of unanimity on treaty change, a supplementary treaty could be signed among member states willing to seek deeper integration.

In order to ensure that the willing can move ahead, pioneer groups should be able to protect their goals and principles: if a member state hinders the group's progress and diverges from its objectives, there should be a possibility to suspend its core group membership, while its EU membership remains in place. In a more diverse EU, there are also likely going to be more opt-outs, e.g. if a treaty revision deepens integration, either by adding new competences or extending QMV.

Yet, exemptions from the existing *acquis* or EU core values should not be possible. Internal differentiation indeed has limits, particularly concerning disagreements over the primacy of EU law or rule of law issues. The principles and values enshrined in Article 2 TEU are non-negotiable for EU membership and should underpin staged accession as early as possible. For countries unwilling to comply with the norms laid out in Article 2 TEU, a new partnership status with the EU should be designed.

New approaches in enlargement policy

In the new geopolitical reality after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and a rebalancing of global power relationships, enlargement is back as the most effective tool to secure geopolitical stability on the European continent. However, the EU needs to reconsider its current approach to the accession process. On a practical level, successful enlargement requires stronger pre-enlargement policies, aiding candidate countries' transformation and stabilization with sufficient financial backing and credible incentives. In this logic, the European Council Conclusions of June 2022 refer to gradual integration and the recently published new growth plan offers Single Market access to the Western Balkans. More offers on gradual integration should be developed to ensure practical progress with important stabilizing effects.

Besides increased flexibility in the accession process – to fit the new reality in a larger EU – the EU as a whole needs to embrace flexibility:

in the event of deadlock, member states seeking closer cooperation should advance in smaller groups based on the framework provided by the EU Treaty and embedded in the institutional framework of the EU. Irrespective of any new flexibility in the accession process or in the EU's functioning, compliance with the EU's fundamental principles and values and the *acquis* should remain indispensable for EU membership.

5 EU Enlargement: A Strategic Imperative for Survival

Veronica Anghel, September 2024

Why would the EU, of all things, choose to respond to a crisis by internalizing the security problems of third countries? The EU has important economic, political and structural challenges to deal with already. It also encompasses various members with diverse goals, as well as a wide range of non-state actors, such as firms and third country nationals, who benefit in different ways from participating in the EU's Single Market. So why would the European Union consider enlargement to even more diverse states that are either under direct Russian military threat such as Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, or vulnerable to internal political violence such as Bosnia and Herzegovina?

The answer is not immediately obvious, particularly when the EU's security is already vulnerable and highly dependent on U.S. and NATO security guarantees. And yet enlargement is the main response that the EU embraced since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The reason for this move lies in what effects an enlargement is expected to produce. The scale of the challenge might be different this time, but the EU has done it before.

Enlargement is the EU's strategic gamble for managing risk. By admitting new members, the Union seeks to exert greater control over unpredictable players and mitigate free riding, both from internal and from external actors. This is a classic response to how organizations deal with collective action problems,²⁹ and a strategy that is embedded in the EU's evolution. Enlargement not only broadens the EU's reach and governance but also offers an opportunity to strengthen its monitoring and control mechanisms, and to tighten the reins on member states and non-state actors that prioritize self-interest. Moreover, as new states enter the EU's

²⁹ Anghel, V. & Jones, E. (2024). The enlargement of international organisations. *West European Politics*, 48(1), 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2024.2311044>

inner circle of decision-makers, they will have a vested interest in the Union's collective achievements and the survival of that project, instead of only being beneficiaries of the Single Market. In that sense, paying for Ukraine's war effort or post-war reconstruction is not enough if the EU wants control over its own resources and interests.

Enlargement also serves as a mechanism for the EU to internalize negative externalities, thereby reducing the burdens it places on outsiders. The security dimension, fraught with vulnerabilities, exemplifies this approach. Europe developed its economy on cheap Russian energy sources but externalized indirect costs such as decreased security to Russia's neighbours, such as Ukraine. Now, these costs must be absorbed collectively by the EU. Similar dynamics play out in areas like human rights and climate policy, where successful collective action is paramount.

Institutional stagnation is the path to disintegration

The European Union is an entity that defies simple categorization. It transcends the traditional notion of a club as economists understand it; it operates more like a selective membership organization tasked with managing what are known as 'common resource pools' or 'commons.' The EU's objective is not merely to safeguard the resources it generates but to maintain and enhance the sustainability of these resources, ensuring they remain accessible and beneficial to a broad spectrum of people, firms, and organizations – including those beyond its current membership. In that sense, all processes of advanced cooperation which allow non-member states to only participate in some of the dimensions that make up the EU are delicate and must be well thought-out. Yet cooperation with outsiders also entails costs that not all countries can afford. While differentiated integration is a costly but acceptable arrangement for countries like the UK, Switzerland or Norway, the same collaborative approach would cost countries for whom EU membership is an existential project, such as Ukraine or Moldova, their sovereignty.

The EU operates on a flexible framework of rules and norms. Those rules and norms steer the Union through various trajectories over time, yet its course remains largely predictable. The decision to enlarge is crucial for the EU's resilience and progress towards deeper integration. Far from a mere benevolence, EU membership is a strategic means of managing risks and redistributing responsibilities. Expansion addresses issues like free riding, such as benefitting from EU funds, refugee support or cross-border financial services without paying the cost of maintaining

the Single Market. Expansion also mitigates the impact of destabilizing forces, while simultaneously granting stakeholders greater stewardship in the European project.

Most lessons for the EU's current policy making in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine come from how the organization dealt with enlargement to post-communist Central and Eastern Europe.³⁰ The European Union's enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe was a complex journey, far from the straightforward path envisioned following the fall of the Berlin Wall. Initiated at Copenhagen in 1993, the process was designed to unfold gradually, embedding robust safeguards to ensure candidate countries were thoroughly prepared before accession. This cautious approach continued with the criteria refined in Luxembourg in 1997, focusing on economic qualifications, and was later expanded in Helsinki in 1999 to accelerate and broaden the inclusion. Despite these meticulously crafted agreements, each fell short of fully achieving their objectives. Even the accession announced in Copenhagen in 2002 proved incomplete: Bulgaria and Romania were allowed to join subject to exceptional temporary safeguards.

Eastern enlargement suggested a necessary institutional recalibration of how new members influence internal integration, which the EU formally resisted. Yet the enlargement process itself inevitably propelled the EU forward towards more integration. This progression was not merely about fulfilling a predetermined plan but rather adapting responsively to emerging challenges and external pressures. The integration of democratically challenged countries such as Hungary has since consistently pressured the EU to tighten its oversight mechanisms and be creative in identifying formal ways to curb the individual country's access to the EU's common goods without following the rules that protect the generation of those goods.

The EU's Geopolitical Imperative: Adapt or Fail

The renewed push for EU enlargement is deeply entwined with geopolitical considerations.³¹ A strategic enlargement would not only enhance the EU's global stature and its competitiveness but also fortify

³⁰ Anghel, V. & Jones, E. (2021). Failing forward in Eastern Enlargement: problem solving through problem making. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 29(7), 1092–1111. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2021.1927155>

³¹ Anghel, V. & Jones, E. (2024). The Geopolitics of EU Enlargement: From Club to Commons. *Survival*, 66(4), 101–114. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2024.2380203>

its relevance. Particularly at a time when Europe faces pivotal challenges in the context of a disintegrating world order, the push for enlargement is a tactical move.

Historically, the accession of Turkey and the Western Balkan countries was not seen as vital for safeguarding the EU's core pillars: the Single Market, currency, and financial space. Today, the landscape has shifted dramatically. Russia's assault on Ukraine, coupled with its military threats to Moldova and Georgia and its destabilizing actions in the Western Balkans, now poses a direct threat to the integrity of the European project. The danger extends beyond military aggression. Nations within the EU that are geographically close to Russia and Ukraine, like the Baltic countries, worry that Russian advances could disrupt European supply chains and energy and agricultural markets, drive population displacement, fuel inflation, and trigger financial instability. These concerns are amplified by fears that other powers, such as China, might exploit European vulnerabilities to deepen divisions within the EU.

Geopolitical demands on the EU are amplified by the diminished attention that the U.S. is paying to the transatlantic partnership.³² Russia's escalated aggression against Ukraine momentarily reinvigorated transatlantic cooperation, casting a stark light on the persistent perils in global politics and the critical role of the transatlantic alliance. Yet, this resurgence of transatlantic unity is tainted by entrenched divisions, not just between the United States and Europe, but also within them, complicating the crafting of unified policies on Russia, the promotion of democracy, and the alignment of economic agendas. Despite the potential and goodwill to fortify these connections, historical patterns and domestic political challenges are likely to obstruct such efforts. Worldwide trends towards more transactional relationships and the rising ambitions of non-Western nations for an alternative global framework may further diminish the cohesion and leadership of the West.

Ultimately, enlargement secures greater influence for the EU in world affairs. In the end, it is hardly surprising that at a moment of existential crisis on the European continent, enlarging the EU is perceived as an imperative to avoid disintegration and irrelevance.

³² Anghel, V. & Jones, E. (2024). The Transatlantic Relationship and the Russia-Ukraine War, *Political Science Quarterly*, Volume 139, Issue 4, Winter 2024, pp. 509–527, <https://doi.org/10.1093/psquar/qqa051>

6 Dilemmas of EU Enlargement: Geopolitics, Conditionality, and Citizens' Concerns

Antoaneta Dimitrova, September 2024

Today we speak of a geopolitical turn in European Union's enlargement policy coming as a direct consequence of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Yet already in 2020 the European Commission warned that the EU was losing influence to rival powers in its neighbourhood.³³ Following a French proposal, the European Commission then proposed a substantial revision of the EU's enlargement methodology to address key weaknesses such as lack of credibility in the changing geopolitical context in the Western Balkans.³⁴

The revised enlargement approach in 2020, however, did not lead to substantially different dynamics in the negotiations or acceleration of reforms in Western Balkan candidate states.³⁵ It was only after February 2022 that the EU overcame deadlock in enlargement and took the historic decision to support Ukraine in its struggle to defend itself – as well as European values such as freedom, human rights and democracy – against Russia.

³³ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, The European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans, COM(2020) 57 final, Brussels, 5 February 2020, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0057>

³⁴ Mirel, P. (2019). European Union-Western Balkans: For a revised membership negotiation framework, Foundation Robert Schuman Policy paper, European issues, no 529, <https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/european-issues/0529-european-union-western-balkans-for-a-revised-membership-negotiation-framework>

³⁵ Dimitrova, A. L. 'The Russian War Against Ukraine as a Critical Juncture Defining a New Path for EU Enlargement'. In: Dzankic, J., Kacarska, S. & Keil, S. (eds) (2023). A Year Later: War in Ukraine and Western Balkan (Geo) Politics, Florence, European University Institute, pp. 55–64, <https://cadmus.eui.eu/entities/publication/6d9ab2b7-0f27-51e5-b8c6-8af91beba0f0>

The European Commission responded in record time to Ukraine's application for membership by formulating a positive opinion with some pre-conditions and, subsequently, recommending the start of negotiations. Bold decisions were taken by the European Council to open negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova,³⁶ to make Bosnia and Herzegovina and Georgia candidates and, recently, to launch the formal accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova.

The new dynamics have revitalized enlargement policy and brought it back on the Union's agenda, together with institutional and policy reforms, which the European Council envisaged proceeding on parallel tracks.³⁷ That the EU would be willing to start accession negotiations with a country in the midst of a war is a development that few would have predicted a decade or even a few years ago. It demonstrates the EU's understanding of the scale of the challenge to its security and values that Russia's continuing aggression represents. The constraints and challenges for enlargement policy, however, have been obscured by these bold steps and by the start of the negotiations in June 2024. These stem from several dilemmas that have played and will continue to play a role and create pressures for EU and candidate state leaders to make difficult decisions and accept important trade-offs between domestic and international stability.

A geopolitical logic vs a merit-based logic

The first dilemma is the choice between the ostensibly geopolitical logic in enlargement decisions and the merit-based assessment of candidates paired with a logic of conditionality. Political decisions in key stages of enlargement and conditionality – offering progress in accession when candidates advance with reforms – are in tension. This is especially problematic, as Börzel has argued,³⁸ for rule of law conditionality has become one of the fundamentals of governance at the centre of accession preparations and negotiations. Furthermore, the geopolitical

³⁶ European Council meeting (14 and 15 December 2023) – Conclusions, EUCO 20/23, Brussels: European Council, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/68967/europeanCouncilConclusions-14-15-12-2023-en.pdf>

³⁷ European Council meeting (14 and 15 December 2023) – Conclusions, EUCO 20/23, Brussels: European Council, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/68967/europeanCouncilConclusions-14-15-12-2023-en.pdf>

³⁸ Börzel, T. A., 'Widening without deepening: Why treaty reforms will not make the EU fit for enlargement'. In: von Sydow, G. & Kreilinger, V. (eds) (2023). *Fit for 35: Reforming the Politics and Institutions of the EU for an Enlarged Union, 2023:2op*, Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies (SIEPS), pp. 54–68, <https://sieps.se/en/publications/2023/fit-for-35-reforming-the-politics-and-institutions-of-the-eu-for-an-enlarged-union/>

logic undermines the threat of non-membership for reform laggards.³⁹ The different sides of these dilemmas are worth exploring in some more detail.

Strengthening, one-sidedly, either the geopolitical approach or the conditionality-led approach could have serious and potentially paralyzing consequences. On the one hand, proceeding on a political track driven by the security imperative without sufficient reforms in governance in candidate states may cost the EU instability and paralysis further on. If candidate states take insufficient steps to secure democracy and strengthen the rule of law, this would potentially create decision-making problems further down the road. Such consequences can be expected in the light of the fact that democratic backsliding in some member states has been matched by their increasingly obstructive behaviour at the Council of Ministers and European Council. The disruptive role of autocratizing leaders abusing their veto power⁴⁰ is evident especially when the Union needs to take a united position in foreign affairs and enlargement policy. For example, decisions on Ukraine – such as the European Council's decision on starting negotiations in December 2023 – have required painful trade-offs with the Hungarian government weakening the EU's internal rule of law conditionality.

On the other hand, emphasizing far-reaching conditionality focusing on institutions and the rule of law might – as it has done in the past decade – lead to stagnation in the candidate states' reform efforts as well as in membership negotiations. Whenever there are leaders leading their countries on an autocratization path, applying conditionality in a stringent manner means no progress in negotiations. This is not a hypothetical scenario. Various indicators show that democratic backsliding and state capture have worsened rather than improved in the last decade in most of the Western Balkan candidate states. Lack of improvement in governance also leads to weak economic performance and migration on a large scale, as witnessed in the Western Balkans.

³⁹ Schimmelfennig, F., 'The advent of geopolitical enlargement and its credibility dilemma'. In: Dzankic, J., Kacarska, S. & Keil, S. (eds) (2023). *A Year Later: War in Ukraine and Western Balkan (Geo)Politics*. Florence, European University Institute, pp. 185–193, here: pp. 190–191, <https://cadmus.eui.eu/entities/publication/6d9ab2b7-0f27-51e5-b8c6-8af91beba0f0>

⁴⁰ European Parliament resolution of 17 July 2024 on the need for the EU's continuous support for Ukraine (2024/2721(RSP)), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-10-2024-0003_EN.pdf

Closed intergovernmental negotiations vs open debates

The second dilemma represents the tension between intergovernmental negotiations and informing and consulting citizens on enlargement. This dilemma represents the two sides of communication in enlargement negotiations and confronts politicians with another set of hard choices. Enlargement negotiations and decisions are by their nature intergovernmental, happening behind closed doors and away from public debate. Yet politicisation of key enlargement decisions has increasingly been a feature of domestic politics in the member states, driven by parties on the extreme right or left.⁴¹ The danger of proceeding with negotiations without domestic political debates or with minimal such debates is clear: by the time broad agreement for ratifying an accession treaty is required – either constitutionally or through consultative referenda – far-right parties may mobilize the public and surprise governments with a no vote, as was the case with the Dutch consultative referendum on Ukraine's Association Agreement in 2016.

Public opinion research following the start of Russia's aggression shows that Europeans have become more supportive of potential Ukrainian EU membership.⁴² But their solidarity has limits: support for EU enlargement saw the biggest change compared to pre-war attitudes, a majority of 71% in favour of enlargement, according to a 2022 survey.⁴³ In the last two years, the support has however fluctuated and mostly focused on Ukraine, with other candidates receiving much less support as potential EU members.

Some research indicates that EU citizens would like to be better informed about enlargement before it becomes a *fait accompli*.⁴⁴ Opening political debates and consultation during enlargement negotiations, however,

⁴¹ Hooghe, L. & Marks, G. (2009). 'A Postfunctionalist Theory of European Integration: From permissive consensus to constraining dissensus', *British Journal of Political Science* 39(1): pp. 1–23, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/british-journal-of-political-science/article/abs/postfunctionalist-theory-of-european-integration-from-permissive-consensus-to-constraining-dissensus/60EAO58491C06327A235761B08878D6>

⁴² van Hees, C., van Schaik, L. & Zweers, W. (2023). The Dutch Dragging Their Feet: The Challenge of Being Constructive While Making the EU 'FitFor30+', Policy Brief, Clingendael, Netherlands Institute of International Relations, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/PB_FitFor30%2B_rev.pdf

⁴³ de Vries, C. E. & Hoffmann, I., Under pressure: The war in Ukraine and European public opinion, Study, Bertelsmann Stiftung, 5 October 2022, <https://eupinions.eu/de/text/under-pressure>

⁴⁴ Dimitrova, A. & Kortenska, E. (2017). 'What do citizens want? And why does it matter? Discourses among citizens as opportunities and constraints for EU enlargement' *Journal of European Public Policy* 24(2): pp. 259–277, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13501763.2016.1264082>

is difficult for governments and mainstream political parties for several reasons. First, making negotiating positions public leaves less room for compromise. Second, the effects of enlargement on the economies of candidate and member states and on specific sectors are inherently complex to capture. They may materialize in a year or two, or even a decade after enlargement. For example, the consequences of freedom of movement of CEE workers were feared by policy makers in Western European EU member states, after bilaterally negotiated transitional periods expired. Yet CEE workers had already been hired by companies and recruitment agencies long beforehand. Labour mobility effects are far-reaching and cannot be reduced to effects that benefit all. Some social groups would lose from the influx of Ukrainian and other labourers on the EU market. Others would benefit. Enlargement decisions affect different interests in society differently and certain interests might already mobilize to lobby against enlargement. Third, Euroscepticism and scepticism towards enlargement have a variety of underlying causes and sources⁴⁵ and only some of these causes can be affected by better communication.

The complex nature of enlargement effects makes them hard for mainstream parties to address in a manner that does not alienate some of their electorate. Nevertheless, communication is important. In contrast to the start of the previous enlargement, EU leaders cannot afford to avoid public debates on enlargement, for the simple reason that far-right and far-left parties would then grab the opportunity to frame the arguments against EU enlargement. Furthermore, by the time accession is complete, citizens may experience a double backlash – a lack of information as well as actual or perceived effects of adding new countries to the Union. Governments need to acknowledge that citizens would be affected differently by enlargement and target their communications accordingly, as well as discuss compensatory measures. This would be a political process that requires commitment and political capital to succeed, but it can succeed and make the EU's future enlargement more resilient.

Above all, EU politicians and citizens have shown themselves sensitive to arguments linking the preservation of security and democracy in Europe with EU's continued support for Ukraine. Having told Ukrainians that they are part of the European family, it would damage EU's credibility if they are not allowed to join due to domestic political costs in the member states.

⁴⁵ Hobolt, S. & de Vries, C. E. (2016). Public support for European integration. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 19. pp. 413–432, <https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/64843/>

Public support vs public discontent

A final dilemma is the one facing governments and elites in candidate states. It stems from the fact that costs and benefits of accession distribute differently over time for candidate states versus member states. Candidate states and their governments have to engage in far-reaching reforms before accession, and face the economic and political costs of transforming industries and introducing regulations. The more governments communicate about such costs, the more they are exposed to negative trends in politicization, attacks from anti-European and pro-Russian actors as well as disinformation. At the same time, not communicating about the purpose of accession preparations and the importance of being a member state can backfire in terms of public support.

From the perspective of the citizens of candidate states, especially those who have been engaged in the process since 2003, when the European Council in Thessaloniki agreed on an accession perspective, disillusionment with ever-receding prospects of enlargement is another danger. Paradoxically, so is societal response to rapid changes transforming sectors and society. Both can lead to diminishing support for European integration.⁴⁶ To make the dilemma of pro-European elites in candidate states even thornier, autocratizing leaders tend to use the public's disappointment to advocate for foreign policy orientations away from the EU and towards China and Russia – a scenario that we have witnessed in Serbia in the last decade.

Meeting the credibility challenge

The EU has been aware of its credibility and economic challenges in the Western Balkans. The original French proposal for a fundamentally changed approach to enlargement included a blueprint for staged accession that would have, had it been implemented, considerably increased the Western Balkan candidates' access to EU funding, thereby providing incentives to stay on the accession path and an economic boost.⁴⁷ This idea continues to be discussed as one of the viable solutions that would improve the credibility of the process and the EU in the Western Balkans.

⁴⁶ Poll: Western Balkan countries show pro-West trends, but support for EU shrinking. Garentina Kraja, Voice of America (VOA), 1 May 2024, <https://www.voanews.com/a/poll-western-balkan-countries-show-pro-west-trends-but-support-for-eu-shrinking/7594016.html>

⁴⁷ Mirel, P. (2022). 'In support of a new approach with the Western Balkans: Staged accession with a consolidation phase'. Foundation Robert Schuman Policy Paper. European issues no 633, <https://old.robert-schuman.eu/en/doc/questions-d-europe/qe-633-en.pdf>

Whether the EU develops the far-reaching adjustments needed to make staged accession work or focuses on reasonable trade-offs and compensations in the existing method of enlargement, the policy should not lose its renewed momentum. Taking further steps with Western Balkan candidates and continuing negotiations with Moldova and Ukraine will succeed only if leaders communicate the momentous significance of this enlargement to the broader public.

7 Ready, set, go? How to prepare EU democracy for enlargement

Saskia Hollander, December 2024

The enlargement of the European Union (EU) with the Western Balkan and Eastern candidates will further increase the Union's political and cultural diversity.⁴⁸ These candidates bring to the Union not only a diversity of cultures and languages, but also palettes of political-social values that are not fully in line with the liberal-democratic values that have long underpinned European integration. Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) assumes that all member states subscribe to the EU's core values – respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights – and that their societies are characterised by pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and gender equality. These values are already under pressure in several EU member states.⁴⁹ With the accession of current candidate countries, the group of member states and citizens in the Union who do not fully subscribe to these core EU values will likely increase (even) further.

Although this enlargement may be inevitable from a geopolitical perspective,⁵⁰ it raises fundamental questions about how much fragmentation of values the EU can accommodate. Reaching consensus on normative positions – such as condemning third countries' human

⁴⁸ The author would like to thank Louise van Schaik, Camille van Hees and Saskia Legein for their valuable input. The argument in this piece is based on an analysis conducted by Clingendael on the basis of data from the European Values Study (wave 2017–2021). See for the (Dutch) report: Saskia Hollander (2025) 'In waarden verenigd of verdeeld? De impact van EU-uitbreiding op de democratie en rechtsstaat in de Unie en haar lidstaten', Clingendael Institute, <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/de-impact-van-eu-uitbreiding-op-de-democratie-en-rechtsstaat-de-unie-en-haar-lidstaten>

⁴⁹ European Commission, 2024 Rule of Law Report, https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/upholding-rule-law/rule-law/annual-rule-law-cycle/2024-rule-law-report_en

⁵⁰ Cuperus, R. & Hollander, S., Beyond the EU enlargement paradox: Optimising opportunities and minimising risks, Report, Clingendael, Netherlands Institute of International Relations, 14 March 2024, <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/beyond-eu-enlargement-paradox>

rights violations – is already difficult in a Union of 27, let alone in a Union of 35 member states. Moreover, it raises questions about how much diversity the populations of the member states are willing to let into the EU in times of political polarisation and rising anti-pluralist forces. It points to the need for the EU's political leaders to stimulate more political and public debate on enlargement and include positions of EU citizens in the decision-making.

Whether Europe is ready for enlargement depends on the extent to which the acceding countries endorse the EU's fundamental values, but certainly also on how political leaders in current member states deal with EU enlargement at home. This contribution first assesses the state of the so-called *fundamentals* in the candidate countries. Thereafter it focuses on enlargement-readiness of the EU. First, by evaluating the EU's toolbox to uphold the rule of law and democracy after enlargement, and second, by assessing the embeddedness (or lack of it) of enlargement among the European public.

Fundamental values in candidate countries

Because of the importance of upholding the Union's fundamental values for the integrity of the internal market and the Union's capacity to act as community of values, the conditions for joining the EU – the so-called Copenhagen criteria – are strict. Moreover, the new enlargement methodology places a greater emphasis on adhering to these criteria than before. With the democratic backsliding in Hungary (and until recently Poland) fresh in mind, adherence to the fundamentals has become a central element of the EU-accession process. This includes, among others, that candidate countries need to adopt (and uphold) well-functioning democratic institutions, adhere to the principle of judicial independence, implement solid anti-corruption policies, and guarantee the protection of fundamental rights.

According to the Commission's latest Enlargement Package⁵¹ most candidates have made progress on the accession criteria but still have a long way to go. Montenegro is furthest in the process. It received a positive assessment on the interim benchmarks for the rule of law chapters, paving the way for the closing of some negotiation chapters and for joining the Union in foreseeable time. In addition, both Ukraine and Moldova have

⁵¹ European Commission, Commission adopts 2024 Enlargement Package, News article, 30 October 2024, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-adopts-2024-enlargement-package-2024-10-30_en

been able to maintain their reform enthusiasm, despite the tremendously difficult context. Also Albania and North Macedonia booked progress, notably with the adoption of roadmaps to the rule of law and public administration reform. At the same time, in North Macedonia, the adoption of the roadmap on the protection of minorities is still pending.

Serbia has officially fulfilled the benchmarks to open the negotiation chapters related to competitiveness and economic growth but is far from progressing on the fundamentals. This has to do with its warm relationship with Russia. These concerns about close ties with Russia also apply to Bosnia and Herzegovina, where progress on the fundamentals is equally limited. Moreover, Georgia has backslid on the fundamentals, leading to a *de facto* freezing of its integration progress. Also, based on value-research conducted by the European Values Study (EVS), it can be concluded that core EU values like gender equality, non-discrimination and tolerance towards LGBTQ are not fully undescribed by (part of) the citizenries of candidate countries.

This underlines that democratic reform and consolidation are delicate processes, which requires vigilance and time to ensure that the reforms are truly embedded rather than being merely box-ticking exercises. At the same time, the current geopolitical context may not allow for this time, and there is a need to make them members of the EU family rather quickly to avoid the region falling into the grip of Russian or Chinese influence.

Applying the EU instruments to protect the rule of law

Since the EU is about to enlarge to countries where the rule of law and democracy are vulnerable, it is even more important that the EU effectively applies its toolbox to protect democracy and the rule of law once countries have joined the Union. Until recently, the EU only had the treaties to address such vulnerabilities, namely *Article 7 TEU* – by which certain rights of a Member State can be suspended – and the *infringement procedure* – by which the Commission can refer a violation of the Treaties to the EU Court of Justice. Both instruments have been insufficient to address structural rule of law violations. Article 7 has never been fully triggered because this essentially requires unanimity of member states (minus the country in question), which was never feasible. In addition, although infringement procedures have been triggered to address rule of law violations in Hungary and Poland, both countries have in the past simply refused to abide by the Court's rulings – leading to high financial penalties.

The Union's rule of law toolbox has recently been expanded, most notably with instruments to uphold EU funding in case fundamental values are undermined. In 2020, the Rule of Law Conditionality Regulation was introduced (Regulation EU 2020/2092). Based on this regulation, funds can be withdrawn *ex post* if a country commits rule of law violations that affect the financial interests of the Union (such as corruption). Second, with the Common Provisions Regulation (CPR) (Regulation EU 2021/1060) of the current Multiannual Financial Framework (2021–2027), the reception of Structural Funds is made *ex ante* conditional on the adherence to the *EU Charter of Fundamental Rights*. Also the emergency funds under the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) that were introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic and the energy crisis, are based on this type of *ex ante* conditionality, meaning that to obtain them, countries must adhere to the rule of law and respect for European fundamental rights.

With these, the Commission certainly has more sticks to use to keep countries in line, including the potential new member states. Yet, there are still quite a few issues when it comes to the effectiveness of rule of law conditionality.⁵² Notably, the instruments have become politicised, thereby sacrificing long-term effectiveness. Under the CPR, funds have been withheld for both Hungary and Poland. Yet, for Poland, the funds have been fully released following Donald Tusk's election win in October 2023, despite rule of law vulnerabilities not being completely solved. In Hungary, part of the frozen funds were released after the country promised to implement a reform bill,⁵³ by which it would sufficiently comply with the condition regarding the independence of the judiciary. Nevertheless, this bill only partially addresses the long-standing issues that the country has with the rule of law and fundamental rights. Both experts⁵⁴ and the European Parliament argue that the decision to unblock funds was politically motivated after Viktor Orbán's threat to veto the start of EU accession talks with Ukraine.

⁵² Hollander, S., Economic governance and the Rule of Law in the European Union, Working Paper, RED-SPINEL, 7 June 2024, <https://redspinel.iee-ulb.eu/resource/working-paper-economic-governance-and-the-rule-of-law-in-the-european-union/>

⁵³ European Commission could unblock €10 billion in cohesion funds for Hungary as early as next month, Euronews, 30 November 2023, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/11/30/european-commission-could-unblock-10-billion-in-cohesion-funds-for-hungary-as-early-as-nex>

⁵⁴ Detre, L., Jakab, A. & Lukácsi, T., Comparing Three Financial Conditionality Regimes and their Application to Hungary: The Conditionality Regulation, the Recovery and Resilience Facility Regulation, and the Common Provisions Regulation, Max Planck Institute for Comparative Public Law & International Law (MPIL) Research Paper No. 2023-23, 26 October 2023, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4613941>

In addition, the distinction between the various budgetary instruments is ambiguous and they have not always been clearly applied. The Conditionality Regulation has only been used against Hungary, thereby freezing roughly 6.5 billion euro of three Cohesion Funds programmes. Accordingly, the Commission has not made clear why only these three programmes were affected by the risk of corruption and why this would add up to freezing this specific amount of money.

Such lack of clarity and transparency makes the EU's rule of law toolbox susceptible to political manoeuvre, thereby affecting its long-term effectiveness. Especially in the wake of EU enlargement, it is important to improve the application of the rule of law instruments and follow up on the recommendations of the European Court of Auditors in this respect.⁵⁵ These recommendations include, among others, to provide more clarity, to base proposals to lift budgetary measures on solid evidence (rather than political motivations) and to systematically assess how rule of law violations affect the financial interests of the EU. Having a strong toolbox that is applied consequently and in a non-political matter is crucial to accommodate enlargement risks related to possible backsliding on the fundamentals.

Embedding EU enlargement in Europe's public sphere(s)

In order to guarantee democratic stability in the post-enlarged EU, it is also crucial that member states have an eye on how the accession of new countries affects their democratic polities at home. EU enlargement stretches the boundaries of the European community at a time when many European citizens yearn for a clearer demarcation of their community – as demonstrated by increased support for nationalistic and Eurosceptic political parties. With the European public not being overwhelmingly enthusiastic about EU enlargement,⁵⁶ there is a risk that the issue will become a source of discontent, erode support for the EU as such and further fuel support for nationalist radical-right parties.

In this respect, it will be crucial for EU leaders to invest in their democracies *at home*. This implies, firstly, that citizens are not presented with a *fait accompli* and that their legitimate concerns and perspectives about this enlargement are addressed in the political debate and decision-

⁵⁵ European Court of Auditors, Special report 03/2024: The rule of law in the EU – An improved framework to protect the EU's financial interests, but risks remain, Luxembourg, 22 February 2024, <https://www.eca.europa.eu/en/publications/SR-2024-03>

⁵⁶ Standard Eurobarometer 101 – Spring 2024, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3216>

making. To enhance citizens' influence on the future of EU enlargement, it is important that national parliaments in the EU are actively involved and able to influence EU-accession processes. National parliaments have that influence formally by being able to hold government leaders accountable regarding decisions in the European Council. Yet, in practice this proves difficult due to a lack of timely information about important decisions or the prioritisation of other (geo)political interests.

Secondly, embedding enlargement in national democracies starts with properly informing the EU citizenries about the steps in the enlargement process, and by facilitating cultural exchange between them and the citizens of future member states. For a functioning democracy, such a well-informed *demos* is essential. Citizens who are not well informed on political issues are more susceptible to disinformation and framing. This risk is especially present in the context of EU enlargement, which is a process complex by nature, and which, moreover, confronts the public with an expansion of their community to new and largely unknown communities. Although having information available is by no means a sufficient guarantee for a well-informed and qualitative debate on enlargement (let alone for obtaining public support for it), a lack of it harms the democratic process and the credibility of the Union as such.

Communicating enlargement trade-offs and risks

In addition to facilitating knowledge and cultural exchange, political leaders in Europe – both those who are sceptic about enlargement and those who are vivid proponents of it – could also be more honest about inevitable trade-offs and risks that are associated with enlargement. For example the trade-off between geopolitical interests and the Copenhagen criteria, and the risk of compromising on either. Only when such trade-offs are communicated and weighted in an open political debate can there be a proper discussion on the necessary tools to mitigate possible negative impacts. It is, for example, important to address legitimate concerns about further enlarging the EU to countries and citizens who do not subscribe to core EU values, even if this enlargement is necessary for Europe's security. This furthermore necessitates debates on strengthening the tools that the EU has to interfere when countries violate the rule of law, also when this includes inference in current member states.

Including the European publics in EU enlargement, and the future of the EU in general, might be electorally sensitive in the short term, especially given the major electoral shift towards the radical and far right in several

countries. Stirring up public debate in already Eurosceptic member states could thereby weaken the negotiating room of governments at EU level. Yet, not including citizens could as well further erode support for EU (enlargement) policy and the Union as such. Such long-term political costs of not preparing our national democracies for enlargement are, arguably, much higher, not only for a Union that aims to uphold its democratic values, but also for a Union that aims to have geopolitical clout.

8 Making a success of EU enlargement: three proposals

Christophe Hillion, January 2025

In the years preceding Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the prospect of additional states joining the EU had faded.⁵⁷ The Union's deliberate downgrading of its enlargement policy after the 2004–2007 admissions, and its increased capture by some member states' domestic interests, contributed to slowing down the applicants' already sluggish membership preparations. The EU capacity to transform candidates into full-fledge members thus weakened, in turn deepening scepticism towards enlargement within the Union.⁵⁸

To break the vicious circle and make a success of an enlargement which they now frame as a 'geo-strategic investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity',⁵⁹ the EU and its member states ought actively to engage at three levels.⁶⁰ First, the fundamentals of membership must be restored and defended. Second, persistent impediments to the effective implementation of the enlargement policy must be addressed. Third, able candidates must be firmly anchored in the EU governance, *prior* to their accession.

The EU must defend the fundamentals of its membership

EU membership presupposes a state's respect for the rule of law, democracy, and human rights, as well as its loyal cooperation to secure the Union's fulfilment of its tasks. Commitment to these fundamentals has however been regressing severely in several member states, hampering the Union's functioning and corroding the very meaning of membership.

⁵⁷ See in this respect: European Commission, Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans, COM(2020) 57, 5 February 2020.

⁵⁸ See e.g. Mirel, P. (2022), 'In support of a new approach with the Western Balkans: Staged accession with a consolidation phase', Fondation Robert Schuman Policy Paper. European issues no 633.

⁵⁹ See the Granada Declaration of 6 October 2023: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/10/06/granada-declaration/>

⁶⁰ This paper is based on Editorial comments in *Common Market Law Review* 61; 1–14, 2024, as well as a speech at SIEPS' conference 'Making enlargement work, again' on 27 September 2024.

More concerning even is the failure by EU institutions (and other member states) to stop, let alone reverse that regression, and thus safeguard the EU's integrity the way they are mandated to do. Their prevarication undermines the Union's authority to uphold those fundamentals towards the candidates for membership. It also affects EU citizens' trust in the institutions and specifically in their ability to protect what the Union stands for. This could in turn further damage their support for EU enlargement, which is already fragile given the latter's likely implications in policy and financial terms. Such support is essential,⁶¹ not least since the ratification of future accession treaties involves a referendum in at least one Member State.⁶²

The internal regression from the commitments inherent to EU membership thus directly impedes the Union's ability to welcome new members, and in turn the credibility of its promise to enlarge. Resolute engagement to repair and safeguard the integrity of membership is therefore essential to demonstrate that the Union can continue to operate, and that it will cope effectively with the consequences of another enlargement. It is critical to boost support for the latter internally and reinvigorate accession preparations among the candidates.

But defending the fundamentals of membership is also a precondition to any institutional reform to improve the functioning of the Union, which incidentally could be introduced through future accession treaties. Increasing instances of qualified majority voting in EU law-making procedures will not in and of itself secure the Union's capacity to integrate if some member states keep on flouting EU decisions, including those of the European Court of Justice.

As confronting regressive member states is indispensable to enable the EU to enlarge, both its institutions and other member states must then make a more determined and coherent use of the toolbox they already have at their disposal. Article 7 TEU has hitherto been mismanaged,

⁶¹ See in this respect, the contribution by Antoaneta Dimitrova in this volume (pp. 37–43).

⁶² According to Article 88-5 of France's Constitution, 'Any Government Bill authorizing the ratification of a treaty pertaining to the accession of a state to the European Union shall be submitted to referendum by the President of the Republic. Notwithstanding the foregoing, by passing a motion adopted in identical terms in each House by a three-fifths majority, Parliament may authorize the passing of the Bill according to the procedure provided for in paragraph three of article 89'. The latter provision foresees that the 'Government Bill ... shall not be submitted to referendum where the President of the Republic decides to submit it to Parliament convened in Congress; the Government Bill shall then be approved only if it is passed by a three-fifths majority of the votes cast'.

while conditionality and infringement mechanisms have been activated too haphazardly, contributing to further damaging EU membership and enlargement readiness. Such practices need to be changed, before the Treaties.

The EU must address the weaknesses of its enlargement policy

If EU enlargement is geo-strategically critical for the security and prosperity of Europe, all EU protagonists will have to engage to make a success of it. This means that they should stop impeding the process they have activated.

First, member states and institutions should be consistent in the application of the accession conditionality which is the basic method to prepare candidates for membership. Lack of such consistency over the last years has hindered the EU transformational capacity. It has also fuelled distrust in the EU enlargement policy more generally, both among the candidates and within the Union. member states and institutions should therefore restore the fairness and rigour of the accession conditionality, on which they recurrently insist. They must acknowledge and reward each candidate's actual progress in fulfilling the requirements of membership and, conversely, sanction regression whenever it occurs. One way to do this would be to suspend the accession process, following the procedure they have themselves established in the negotiating framework for each candidate.⁶³

Second, member states must stop capturing the EU enlargement process for domestic gains.⁶⁴ What has amounted to a 'nationalisation' of the enlargement policy should be resolutely addressed to repair its effectiveness. Admittedly, member states are expected to play a key role in any EU enlargement.⁶⁵ Since the accession wave of 2004/2007 however, they have significantly tightened their grip on the process. Instances of unanimous decision-making have thus proliferated, prompting an inflation of veto opportunities which, coupled with the increased number of member states involved, has mechanically multiplied hurdles in the implementation of the EU enlargement policy. Some member states have

⁶³ See e.g. points 16 and 17 of the EU negotiating framework for Ukraine: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/hzmfwlji/public-ad00009en24.pdf>

⁶⁴ See e.g. Mirel, P. (2022), op. cit; Hillion, C. (2010), *The Creeping Nationalisation of the EU enlargement policy*, SIEPS Report 6/2010: <https://sieps.se/en/publications/2010/the-creeping-nationalisation-of-the-eu-enlargement-policy-20106/>

⁶⁵ See e.g. Hillion, C., 'EU enlargement'. In: Craig, P. & de Búrca, G. (eds) (2011). *The Evolution of EU Law* (OUP), pp. 187–216.

(ab)used their veto power deliberately to slow down (some) candidates' accession.⁶⁶ Some have also instrumentalised the policy to obtain from candidates – or from other member states – concessions whose connection with preparation for membership, and/or with the tenets of European integration more generally, was questionable.

If enlargement is a 'geostrategic investment',⁶⁷ it is debatable whether it should be subject to dozens of unanimous decisions of member states, and an equal number of possible vetoes. It is worth recalling that Article 49 TEU foresees only two procedural points at which member states have a decisive say. First, they must decide whether to *initiate* the Union's enlargement to an applicant state, and then they have to *accept the 'conditions of admission and the adjustments to the [EU] Treaties'* which they have negotiated with that state, for its admission to take place.

At that initial point, member states do enjoy a wide political discretion – as typified by France's double veto over the UK's membership application in the 1960s. However, such a discretion diminishes once the fundamental political decision to activate the enlargement procedure is taken, and particularly as the latter proceeds to its *implementation* phase, namely the negotiations of the terms of accession governed by the second subparagraph of Article 49 TEU. Provided the candidate otherwise meets the conditions of membership, the initial political decision prompts an obligation for the member states to take 'any appropriate measure, general or particular, to ensure fulfilment of the obligations arising out of the Treaties or resulting from the acts of the institutions of the Union' (Article 4(3) TEU). In particular, they are bound to support and implement the EU policy they have activated, and deliver on its objective, not only in the application of accession conditionality, but also in the conduct of accession negotiations, and later in the process of ratification of the accession treaty. A similar obligation of sincere cooperation does apply to EU institutions, including the European Council and the Commission, as foreseen in Article 13(2) TEU.

Therefore, the more the enlargement process advances, the less room the policy allows for obstructive postures and *vetocracy*. Thus, a Member State's negative stance – e.g. in relation to the opening or closing of a

⁶⁶ See e.g. Fouéré, E. 'EU enlargement and the resolution of bilateral disputes in the Western Balkans', <https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/eu-enlargement-and-the-resolution-of-bilateral-disputes-in-the-western-balkans/>

⁶⁷ As recalled in the Conclusions of the European Council, 19 December 2024, pt. 20.

particular chapter of the accession negotiations – must not be permitted to hold up the process *unless* that stance is adequately justified. Such justification entails that the Member State concerned compellingly establish that a fundamental EU interest is being affected as a result of a contentious behaviour of the candidate at hand,⁶⁸ *and* the demonstration that suspending the negotiation process would be the proportionate means to address the issue, i.e., that there is no other, less disruptive, method available to safeguard that interest.⁶⁹

The EU must facilitate accession preparations by anchoring the candidates in its governance

Not only should member states and institutions refrain from hampering the enlargement process they have activated, but they should also facilitate its success. One way would be to foster the progressive inclusion of each candidate country in the *EU governance structures* prior to its full-fledged membership. This incremental institutional integration would further contribute to consolidate the candidate's preparations, by training its authorities to operate as if the state were a member, while giving a tangible perception of integration to its population, ultimately contributing to forging mutual trust. It would follow and build on the well-established legal parameters of association to the EU (as articulated by the European Court of Justice's case law), while not impinging on the EU principle of autonomy. It could take at least two forms, both of which have already been tested.

First, a candidate ought to be included in the EU governance and policy discussions (as is partly the case for EEA/EFTA states with respect to the Single Market and the Schengen area) on the basis of—and as reward commensurate to—their genuine progress in meeting membership obligations, particularly with respect to the 'fundamentals'. The progressive inclusion ought to take place policy by policy. Hence upon the closure of a particular accession chapter, testifying the fulfilment of the related conditions, the candidate should be able to participate in the EU policy-shaping relating to that chapter. Its representative(s) would thus be included in the relevant expert/working groups in the Commission, the

⁶⁸ In line with the conditions for the suspension mechanism envisaged in the EU negotiating framework for e.g. Ukraine at pts 16-17: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/hzmfwlji/public-ad00009en24.pdf>

⁶⁹ See, in this regard, Zweers, W., Ioannides, I., Nechev, Z. & Dimitrov, N. (2024). 'Streamlining decision making in enlargement: Qualified majority voting as a way forward', Clingendael/DGAP/Eliamep, <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/unblocking-decision-making-eu-enlargement>

Council, and/or in the EP committees, as observer(s) at an earlier stage than it is presently the case, namely before the Treaty of Accession is signed rather than after. The European Economic and Social Committee has inaugurated the practice and so have various EU agencies.⁷⁰

Such an earlier institutional inclusion would give a new vigour to the conditionality that structures the enlargement process. It would offer intermediate, tangible, tailored but reversible rewards to each candidate state in exchange for genuine efforts to prepare membership. In turn, it would stimulate the internal articulation of its policy position, which would itself require a consolidation of its administrative and competence structures. An incremental participation in the EU governance would increase the sense of shared ownership of the EU's future. At the same time, it would allow EU institutions and member states to lock the candidate in, further to keep it in check and, in case of regression, to reverse its involvement. It would thus help entrench its membership preparation and ascertain that it is ready to take part as a fully operational Member State.

Second, candidates should be included in the conversation on further EU (institutional) reforms, the way candidates from Central and Eastern Europe were invited to participate in the Convention on the Future of Europe that drafted the defunct Constitutional Treaty. Contrary to what has been suggested, EU enlargement and reforms should not unfold 'in parallel' (worlds); the two processes should instead intersect through a degree of participation of candidates in the future design of the Union, as indeed foreseen by Article 49 TEU. While the European Political Community is a useful forum for European states to meet, it falls short of providing the adequate structured conversation between existing and future Member states about their shared constitutional future.

Conclusion: a matter of survival

In their Granada Declaration, the 'Leaders of the European Union' asserted that

Enlargement is a geo-strategic investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity. It is a driver for improving the economic and social conditions of European citizens, reducing disparities between countries, and must foster

⁷⁰ EESC, 'Enlargement Candidate Members' Initiative', <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/initiatives/enlargement-candidate-members-initiative>

the values on which the Union is founded. Looking ahead to the prospect of a further enlarged Union, both the EU and future Member States need to be ready.’

To be ready, and thus able to reap the benefits of such an investment, the EU must first repair the fundamentals of its membership, and decisively confront those member states that have been dilapidating it. The EU’s capacity to restore its credibility vis-à-vis the candidates depends on that decisiveness. So does its trustworthiness in the eyes of citizens, and, ultimately, its very survival.

9 Concluding remarks

Göran von Sydow and Valentin Kreiling

This collection discussed some of the major challenges related to the enlargement and reform of the European Union (EU). Building upon the foundational volume ‘Fit for 35? Reforming the Politics and Institutions of the EU for an Enlarged Union’, edited by us in 2023, the *FitFor35 Forum* has been set up and organised to continue the debate on this complex and multifaceted issue.

Following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the enlargement of the EU has gained importance, especially with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia applying for membership. The *Forum* aimed to address the challenges and opportunities of expanding the EU to 35 members. The context in which the EU navigates the volatile geopolitical environment has substantially evolved due to the way in which the new Trump administration handles the transatlantic relationship and security on the European continent. The main findings and discussions in this volume are, however, still most relevant and summarized in these concluding remarks.

Five cross-cutting issues in the *FitFor35* Forum

The eight contributions by Veronica Anghel, Steven Blockmans, Antoaneta Dimitrova, Christophe Hillion, Saskia Hollander, Erik Jones, Michael Leigh, and Daniela Schwarzer have highlighted five cross-cutting issues: **Internal reforms of the EU, geopolitical and security considerations, differentiated integration, financial and economic implications, and public debate and legitimacy.**

There is a discussion to what extent the EU needs to undergo internal reforms to ensure its good functioning before it expands to 35 members. This includes institutional, financial and policy changes. Several contributions emphasised that the EU must provide a credible security guarantee to ensure the security of new members. Furthermore, it has often been proposed that new member states should be integrated into the EU gradually, depending on their performance and acceptance by existing member states. This could include sectoral integration before formal membership. Of course, enlargement will require substantial

financial resources and there will be a debate on how these resources can be raised and distributed. The next financial framework of the EU is the centrepiece to this issue and both the political and technical discussions within the institutions have already started. Finally, public debates on the future of the EU and enlargement are important, particularly in the light of European and national elections and possible referendums. There is the question of how the EU can make its institutions more efficient and accountable to meet the challenges of an enlarged Union.

The *FitFor35 Forum* contributors overwhelmingly emphasised the need to reform the EU internally while pursuing enlargement in order to ensure long-term peace, security and stability in Europe. This will, of course, require a simultaneous, substantive building-up of European defence capabilities.

More specifically, the authors' proposals and assessments provide valuable guidance in these turbulent times, as the following closer look back at those five cross-cutting issues in the *FitFor35 Forum* reveals.

Internal Reforms of the EU

Many contributions highlight the debate among decision-makers and experts on whether the EU needs to undergo **significant internal reforms** before it can successfully enlarge to 35 members. The key areas that such reforms should focus on include policies, the financial framework, decision-making rules (the possible abolition of national vetoes in certain policy areas), institutional arrangements, and even the EU treaty. Some of our experts argue that without these reforms, the EU risks becoming dysfunctional with an increased number of member states. But the debate about such reforms has not really gained momentum in 2024 and at the beginning of 2025, because it was mostly superseded by geopolitics.

The concept of **absorption capacity** is emphasized, which refers to the EU's ability to integrate new members without compromising its functionality. There is a concern that without serious reforms, the EU may struggle to operate effectively after enlargement.

Geopolitical and Security Considerations

Enlargement is now often framed, for example in European Council conclusions, as a **strategic investment in peace, security, and stability**. The EU has recognized that expansion is crucial for maintaining geopolitical stability, particularly in the face of Russian aggression. Several

authors underscore the need for the EU to provide credible security guarantees to new member states to ensure their safety and stability. The proposal of a European peacekeeping force for Ukraine as part of a lasting peace (and the open questions around it) shows the limitations that the EU and its member states currently face in this domain.

With respect to the importance of creating a **credible security commitment** for candidate countries, especially those in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans, this should be considered in conjunction with a staged accession process, where countries are gradually integrated into the EU based on their performance and acceptance by existing members.

Differentiated Integration

A key proposal in the concept of differentiated integration is that prospective new member countries are **gradually integrated** into the EU. This approach would allow for a phased inclusion based on the candidate countries' progress in meeting EU standards and balance the need for enlargement with the EU's capacity to absorb new members.

New members could be **integrated into specific sectors** of the EU before achieving full membership. This could include participation in the Single Market, access to EU agencies, and involvement in EU policy discussions. Such an approach would provide tangible benefits to candidate countries while ensuring they are adequately prepared for full membership. But the modalities for this must be spelt out clearly and the enlargement methodology be modified accordingly.

Financial and Economic Implications

Enlargement will require substantial **financial resources**, and the latest debate on how these funds can be raised and distributed has only started. It is widely acknowledged that the EU will need to find new financial resources to support the integration of new members and ensure that existing members do not face undue financial burdens.

Several of our experts highlight the importance of **economic integration** for new members. This includes access to the Single Market, financial assistance for socio-economic convergence, and participation in EU economic policies. Such measures are seen as crucial for ensuring that new members can fully benefit from EU membership and contribute to the Union's overall prosperity.

Public Debate and Legitimacy

The importance of involving the public in the debate on the future of the EU and enlargement is emphasized in several contributions to the Forum. Some authors highlight the need for political leaders to engage with citizens and address their concerns about enlargement. This is particularly important considering the European elections of June 2024, which were a missed opportunity to debate the future organization of the EU.

Building mutual trust between current and future member states is also seen as essential for successful enlargement. This includes fostering political and public debates on enlargement, ensuring transparency in the accession process, and addressing the legitimate concerns of citizens in both current and candidate countries.

Final thoughts: below-the-radar issues

In the current focus on the defence and security of Europe, which is very important and even existential for the survival of the continent as a free and prosperous part of the world, there remains the prominent question if enlargement-related issues will risk losing attention in 2025. We think that building on the eight contributions to the *FitFor35 Forum*, considering what they addressed and did not address, and when we look at expert debates across the EU as they currently unfold, there are at least four issues that currently seem to be below the decision-makers' radar:

- The risk of **institutional stagnation**: There is an implicit warning against institutional stagnation in most contributions. This could even lead to the disintegration of the EU. Enlargement is also a strategic means of managing risks and redistributing responsibilities that could help the EU to adapt to new challenges – to remain relevant and effective.
- The risk of **further democratic backsliding**: One can also see the risk of democratic backsliding and the need for the EU to ensure that new (and old) members adhere to its core values, such as the rule of law, democracy, and human rights on a regular basis. There is also a widespread concern that without rigorous enforcement of these values, including internally, the EU's stability and cohesion could be seriously undermined.

- The need for more **efficiency and accountability**: Institutional and political reforms to make the EU more efficient and accountable should not be ignored or neglected. This includes potential changes such as abolishing national vetoes in certain policy areas, which are at the roots of some of the problems that the EU currently faces, and increasing the use of qualified majority voting in the Council.
- The need to decide on whether to **change the treaty or not**: There is a longstanding debate on whether treaty changes are necessary to accommodate this big enlargement(s). Some experts argue that without amending the treaties, the EU may face significant challenges in integrating new members and maintaining its functionality. Other experts think that the existing treaties offer enough possibilities. So it seems necessary to decide whether there will be treaty change before enlargement or not.

It seems more important than ever that political parties and leaders present their ideas and plans about the future of the EU to citizens and voters in all 27 member states, offering them a clear choice of what the EU should look like and how it should function. In this sense, enlargement is an opportunity to engage with the public and extend the debate – an opportunity which should not be missed.

The EU should undoubtedly undertake significant internal reforms while advancing the enlargement process to ensure long-term peace, security, and stability in Europe. This includes addressing institutional and political challenges, ensuring financial and economic integration, engaging the public in the debate on enlargement, and building mutual trust between current and future member states. The *FitFor35 Forum* has aimed to contribute to this discussion and provide a platform to explore the best ways to achieve these goals. SIEPS will continue this conversation.

Sammanfattning på svenska

Europeiska unionen är på väg att utvidgas igen: efter att ha varit frånvarande på EU:s agenda under en längre tid har utvidgningen blivit föremål för både politiska beslut och debatter. Bakgrunden är Rysslands invasion av Ukraina 2022: det geopolitiska läget skyndar på de processer som skulle kunna leda till ett EU med 35 medlemsstater.

Mot bakgrund av den rådande osäkerheten kring hur och när detta skulle kunna uppnås publicerade Sieps antologin *Fit for 35? Reforming the Politics and Institutions of the EU for an Enlarged Union*, i september 2023. Därefter bad vi åtta ledande experter på reform och utvidgning av EU att bidra med korta svar som utforskar frågan om vad som krävs för att unionen ska lyckas med en utvidgning. Deras bidrag publicerades under ett års tid, i serien *FitFor35 Forum*, med början i februari 2024. Hur de svarade på frågan varierar, men alla visar att det fordras arbete för att såväl EU som unionens nuvarande och blivande medlemmar ska kunna anses vara 'Fit for 35'.

Inledning

I sin inledning ger Göran von Sydow och Valentin Kreilinger en bakgrund genom att förklara vad de menar med 'Fit for 35' och vilka stora frågor som följer av valet att utvidga EU.

1 | Utvidgning och institutionell reform: Hur EU ska kunna ge trovärdiga säkerhetsgarantier

Utvidgning är förknippad med stora utmaningar, men det skulle kosta mer att inte låta Europeiska unionen växa. Det skriver Erik Jones i volymens inledande bidrag. Den största utmaningen är hur EU kan erbjuda kandidatländerna trovärdiga säkerhetsgarantier. Och enligt författaren erbjuder gradvis integration ett svar. Men en sådan process för med sig särskilda dilemman som Europas beslutsfattare måste lösa om utvidgningen ska kunna bli en strategisk investering i fred, säkerhet och stabilitet.

2 | EU:s utvidgning: Exportera stabilitet eller importera instabilitet?

EU:s ledare har återupplivat utvidgningsprocessen och är fast beslutna att fullfölja den. Michael Leigh pekar dock på att processen medför säkerhetsrisker och lyfter därför fram vad beslutsfattare måste göra för att

EU verkligen ska nå målet om att upprätthålla stabilitet: fortsätta att stödja Ukraina, kommunicera om den övergripande utvidgningsprocessen och se till att både EU och de anslutande länderna kan visa upp konkreta förhandlingsresultat.

3 | Gradvis EU-integration: en *à la carte*-strategi är inte hela svaret

På senare tid har det kommit flera förslag om hur kandidatländerna kan integreras stegvis. I sitt bidrag skriver Steven Blockmans att ett gradvist inträde i EU både kan påskynda anslutningsprocessen inom specifika politikområden och ligga i linje med EU:s intressen. Samtidigt understryker han att sådana framsteg bör vara fast förankrade i de formella medlemskapsförhandlingarna och utvärderas i samband med omfattande reformer.

4 | Utvidgningen kan inte bli en framgång utan ett mer flexibelt EU

Utvidgning har än en gång kommit att betraktas som det mest kraftfulla verktyget för att stabilisera EU:s grannskap. För att utvidgningen ska lyckas menar Daniela Schwarzer att EU måste inta ett mer flexibelt förhållningssätt, både när det gäller att integrera nya medlemmar och när det gäller EU:s sätt att fungera. Detta, menar hon, skulle dessutom stärka EU:s legitimitet och göra det möjligt för EU att skydda sina grundläggande principer på ett mer effektivt sätt.

5 | EU:s utvidgning: En nödvändig överlevnadsstrategi

För att EU ska finnas kvar i framtiden måste unionen fullfölja utvidgningsprocessen. Det skriver Veronica Anghel, som menar att det inte finns något annat val om EU ska kunna undvika att falla sönder och bli irrelevant. En utvidgning av EU är därför oupplösligt förknippad med EU:s överlevnad liksom en viktig drivkraft för att genomföra nödvändiga reformer och hinna ikapp andra ekonomier i fråga om konkurrenskraft.

6 | Dilemman kring EU:s utvidgning: geopolitiken, kraven på kandidatländerna och medborgarnas ansvar

Avgörande beslut och åtgärder har gett nytt liv åt diskussionen om en utvidgning av EU. Men begränsningar och utmaningar kvarstår. I sitt bidrag belyser Antoaneta Dimitrova tre dilemman som ledarna för nuvarande och framtida medlemsländer står inför: att väga geopolitiska hänsyn mot kraven på reformer i kandidatländerna, att hantera spänningen mellan slutna förhandlingar och öppna debatter, och att kommunicera om utvidgningen för att få medborgarnas stöd och samtidigt undvika att oro och missnöje utnyttjas politiskt.

7 | Klara, färdiga, gå? Hur EU:s demokrati kan rustas för utvidgning

Har EU kapacitet nog att hantera den ökade politiska och kulturella mångfald som kommer att uppstå efter de kommande utvidgningarna? Saskia Hollander diskuterar hur ett större EU påverkar förmågan att upprätthålla demokrati och rättsstatens principer i hela den framtida unionen. Hon tittar på i vilken utsträckning kandidatländerna står bakom EU:s grundläggande värden, om EU är rustat för att upprätthålla sina kärnvärden efter en utvidgning och om utvidgningen är ett väl förankrat projekt i medlemsländernas demokratier.

8 | Att lyckas med EU:s utvidgning: tre förslag

EU:s ledare hävdar att utvidgningen av Europeiska unionen är en strategisk investering i fred, säkerhet och stabilitet. Men för att en sådan investering ska ge förväntad avkastning måste löftet om EU-medlemskap vara trovärdigt. Det skriver Christophe Hillion i det sista bidraget, där han pekar på att EU:s nuvarande medlemsstater bör engagera sig för tre centrala uppgifter: att stå upp för vad EU-medlemskapet i grunden innebär, att undanröja det som står i vägen för en effektiv utvidgningspolitik och att tidigt förankra kandidatländerna i EU:s styrning och framtidsdiskussioner.

Avslutande kommentarer

I sina avslutande kommentarer går Göran von Sydow och Valentin Kreilinger igenom fem övergripande frågor i de åtta bidragen och lägger fram fyra ytterligare aspekter som är relevanta för debatten om EU:s utvidgning och frågan om EU är 'Fit for 35'. De berör frågor som för närvarande inte tycks vara uppmärksammade på politisk nivå: risken för institutionell stagnation, risken för ytterligare demokratisk tillbakagång, behovet av ökad effektivitet samt behovet av att diskutera om fördragen ska ändras eller inte.

Sieps konferens om EU:s utvidgning: Making Enlargement Work, Again

Den 27 september 2024 anordnade Sieps en heldagskonferens om EU:s fortsatta utvidgning där ledande experter deltog, däribland flera av författarna i denna volym. På Sieps webbplats finns inspelningar av tal och panelsamtal samt en sammanfattning på svenska:

<https://sieps.se/seminarier/making-enlargement-work-again/>

The enlargement of the European Union is once again at the top of the political agenda. This has raised issues related to internal reforms and to the geopolitical challenges that restarted the enlargement process: what exactly does the EU need to do to become fit for 35 member states? This question is the starting point for our collection of perspectives on enlargement and reform of the EU, the *FitFor35 Forum*.

SIEPS carries out multidisciplinary research in current European affairs. As an independent governmental agency, we connect academic analysis and policy-making at Swedish and European levels.



Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies