

# **COSTS OF NON-ENLARGEMENT**

**PUBLISHED BY VISEGRAD INSIGHT  
AND ZEIT STIFTUNG BUCERIUS**



## **FORESIGHT REPORT ON EU ENLARGEMENT AND NEIGHBOURHOOD**

Visegrad Insight is the main Central European platform of debate and analysis that generates future policy directions for Europe and transatlantic partners.

This report has been developed in cooperation with ZEIT STIFTUNG BUCERIUS. The Hamburg-based foundation promotes civil society in Europe and supports initiatives in the fields of research, art and culture, journalism and education.



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# Editorial

**E**uropean enlargement cannot be a failure. It threatens to cripple Europe — stripping away strength, fostering vulnerability and depleting vital resources. This would mark the disappearance of one of the EU's foremost foreign policy tools for decades to come. Furthermore, it would also leave the EU without its known instrument to manage relations in the neighbourhood.

The future of the enlargement project is susceptible to numerous apparent and hidden obstacles. Some of those obstacles can be well-intentioned in trying to develop rigid procedural requirements ensuring solid institutional performances. To appease enlargement sceptics, some mid-way solutions have been offered as a compromise, but they only lead to middling results and in the complicated realm of accession,

more is needed. Then there are those without good intentions, trying to obstruct the entire proceedings.

How the EU deals with these instances will have far-reaching consequences for the Union itself. Broken accession promises will leave the Southern and Eastern Flanks vulnerable to Russian and Chinese meddling and has the potential to upset the internal cohesion of the Union as well. However, enlargement has the potential to reinvigorate the entire project by deepening integration, facilitating much-needed treaty reforms and providing a positive discussion cleavage for public debate.

The following report outlines the findings of a foresight project led by Visegrad Insight – Res Publica Foundation and ZEIT STIFTUNG BUCERIUS together with a group of over 40 scholars and

fellows of both organisations who come from the EU and EU neighbourhood. At the beginning of 2023, the project started by considering the potential of foresight analysis stemming from a decade of research, reporting and networking conducted with scholars and policy leaders on the ground. Besides the review of scholarly research, the joint project has involved consultative meetings with policymakers in Brussels and foresight workshops that produced the scenarios.

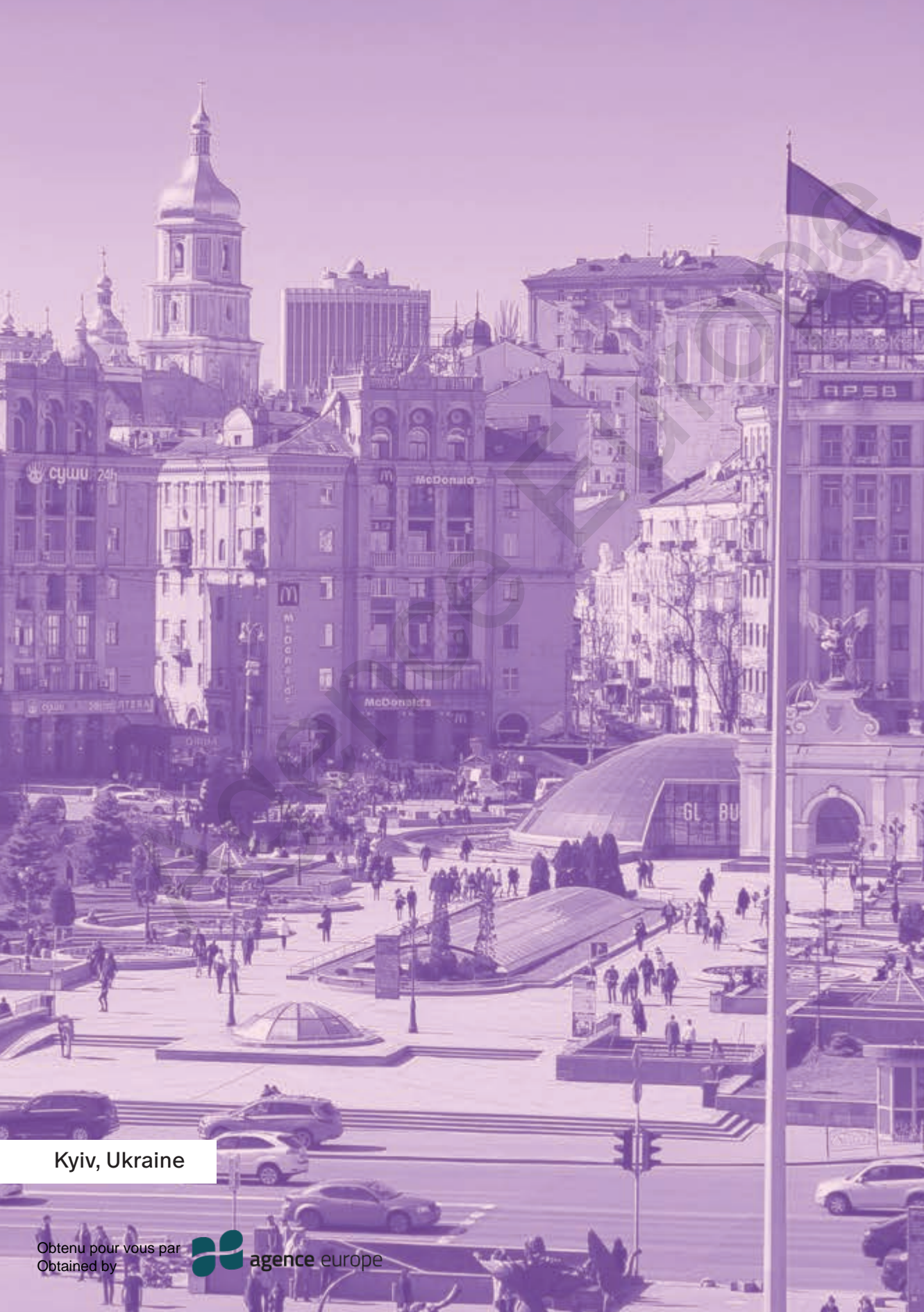
**Trajectories of Change – Strategic Foresight for EU Enlargement and Neighbourhood** fosters exchange between academic and policy networks in Europe and provides policy briefs and recommendations related to

the dynamics of EU enlargement with a particular focus on Southern and Eastern Neighbourhoods.

This project aims to facilitate the constructive input of academic networks in the ongoing debate about the long-term vision on the future of Europe. It seeks to overcome an image of recalcitrance associated with the Southern and Eastern Neighbourhoods by elaborating on concrete proposals through extensive workshops, consultations and policy interventions on the future of Europe from the perspective of civil society stakeholders. It gives voice to actors that may not be heard through conventional and state-led channels.

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Kyiv, Ukraine

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# Recommendations

1. The European Union must understand the consequences of a failed enlargement process to mobilise its full resources and ensure a positive outcome.
2. The prospect of non-enlargement scenarios — however undesirable — should be considered in the policy planning for the Union and countries in the neighbourhood.
3. The urgency of this strategic plan must be consistently emphasised throughout the current enlargement process for both the EU and candidate countries.
4. The enlargement process should not be conditioned on the full policy preparedness of the existing bloc to accept new member states. None of the past enlargements were prepared institutionally. Administrative proceedings should not obstruct the ongoing enlargement process when there is clear political momentum for change.
5. EU policy planning must estimate cost-benefit ratios for each scenario to flush out real interests and downplay disinformation on the enlargement.
6. To enhance EU-neighbourhood connectivity, the Union should employ differentiated financial incentives, and grant observer status in the EU Council and Parliament to foster successful enlargement and mitigate potential challenges.
7. Post-enlargement conditionality, extended from the examples of Bulgaria's and Romania's accession, will expedite the enlargement process to neutralise security threats of foreign interference. Additionally, post-accession conditionality aims to ensure that newly admitted states catch up with EU regulations.

# Introduction

**I**n contrast to past enlargement phases, the upcoming EU expansion is a proactive Union response to mitigate instability in the neighbourhood and address global tensions arising from armed conflicts, climate change, demographic challenges and democratic backsliding. Europe faces a pivotal moment which will redefine the political space of shared values and geostrategic resilience.

## Ukraine's accession process

The EU should perceive enlargement through the lenses of future security architecture, not just in the immediate war-setting of Ukraine. Larger geostrategic competition for resources will become even more pressing in the years to come. The agricultural and natural resources, encompassing rare materials, along with the demographic potential of a country like Ukraine, should be evaluated in conjunction with the smaller yet equally noteworthy capabilities of nations in the Western Balkans and the remaining countries in the Eastern Partnership. Their contribution would expand the EU's resource base, limit energy dependence and ameliorate the demographic implosion. Conversely, the costs of abandoning any of the future or potential member states will backfire. It will ultimately force these nations into

a grey zone exploited by EU strategic rivals.

The European Union must make sure that the economic exchange with neighbouring countries continues regardless of any surrounding or internal tensions. The bloc's capacity to act is conditional on the type of rules that regulate fair trade and guarantee prosperity and security, but a partially united Europe cannot strive to be whole and free.

Furthermore, while engaging in the prospective enlargement during the ongoing (and potentially protracted) war will be challenging, it will also give valuable experience and make the EU better prepared to confront the emerging multipolar world that will dominate our horizon for decades to come.

## Exporting the EU

The EU should be prepared for non-enlargement scenarios where European power would be questioned. To mitigate the costs of failed enlargement promises, the EU should facilitate growing connectivity with the neighbourhood. It should build upon existing partnership schemes and provide structural loans for the growing connectivity of the neighbourhood through



North Macedonia

the integration of transport and energy infrastructure. This modified framework of cooperation between the EU and the neighbourhood acknowledges the power relations between the two and scaling zones of potential agreements.

Financial incentives for closing chapters should follow existing frameworks with differentiated financial incentives for candidate states. Staged funding for closing chapters but also a flexible system of targeted support and well-defined programmes modelled after the European Endowment for Democracy should be increased. Public partnerships with local companies should come as differentiated sources of funding increasing the capacity of local businesses to invest in diverse initiatives and country-specific issues, but also incentivising business investment from abroad. Finally, the greater socialisation of political elites coming from candidate states across the European institutions

should be ensured by granting observer status to candidate states in the Council and the Parliament.

### **Curbing reforms**

Enhanced monitoring systems and post-accession conditionality should become an integral part of the enlargement process. The EU should establish regional monitoring centres that would come up with annual impact assessments. These assessment reports would be country-specific, identifying accession chapters which are most likely to be closed in the near future. Local centres for administrative excellence should enforce post-accession conditionality against rushed reforms, and their implementation can be closely scrutinised by extended powers of the Article 7 procedure. These new ex-ante Copenhagen criteria will be monitored on an annual basis, whereas newly admitted states are grouped in regional clusters.

# Scenarios



Tbilisi, Georgia

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# 1

Prospective members are invited to the eurozone sandbox as observers that increase the degree of monetary cooperation. Payback time arrives in 2030 when an enlarged European Union necessitates treaty change.

Pressed by the geopolitical urgency, the EU is keen to demonstrate its agency but is fundamentally divided over how to achieve this strategy. Candidate states are presented with a tangible accession roadmap and with the extension of the EU single market.

# Staged Accession

**F**rance, the Netherlands and Germany remain sceptical towards an outright enlargement, and in addition, several CEE countries are starting to question their future net contribution if the enlargement takes place immediately. European Council leaders go forward with the accession which is divided into gradually progressing phases to demonstrate some degree of agency and address these grievances.

The EU resigns from its own institutional reform and opens a track of four stages for prospective member states along the path sketched by the European Policy Centre and Centre of European Policy Studies in 2021: 1) Initial accession stage with partial funding and observer status in the institutions, 2) Intermediate stage conditional on progress in meeting the criteria, more participation and funding, 3) New Member State stage for states with top scores for reforms, full policy participation, prospects for Schengen and eurozone plus some voting rights, 4) Full membership in all institutions of the reformed EU.

## Context

The purported accession promise wins over reluctant member states to allow another enlargement process. The new accession prospects reinvalidate

the union with a sense of optimism. This positive mood is reinforced by increased yields from investments in the candidate states, whereas an influx of qualified workers satisfies labour shortages among member states. Initially, the benefits of staged accession satisfy the broad political spectrum among countries of old Europe. From increased economic activity, flourishing civil societies in the candidate states and enhanced climate regulations, the forgotten benefits of enlargement are gleaming as in the early 2000s.

Access to the single market, Schengen zone, observer status in the Council and enhanced funding are all on the table to encourage candidate states to undertake painful reforms. At the same time, the delayed promise of becoming part of the decision-making process is expected to appease member states who are still reluctant about enlargement prospects.

However, traditional opponents of enlargement push for more restrictive criteria for tier 3 and final accession. Accession-related cleavages are mushrooming across a wide spectrum of issues. There is growing sentiment that staged accession would riddle the European project with double standards, where countries' democratic processes are on the menu but elected representatives are off the table.

## EU in 2030

The EU of mid-way solutions comes with middling results. Everything seems to change, but nothing changes in the end. European elites realise that the breathing space is over and a future with 30-plus-member-states depends on treaty change. The discussion on qualified majority comes with a full-force, and divided member states grapple with the prospect of payback time.

### Impact on EaP, WB and MENA

After initial hesitation, candidate states decide to seek opportunities offered by staged accession. Ukraine - still pushing back Russian invaders - Montenegro and North Macedonia come at the forefront of introducing difficult reforms. Over time, many candidate states move to the second accession stage, becoming single market members. Both Western Balkans and EaP countries are witnessing increased economic activity. FDIs and European structural funds flourish, resulting in a construction boom. With a clear accession promise, Russian and Chinese influence in the region diminishes, reducing the volatile character of the region. Candidate states are pushing forward despite difficulties in introducing complex reforms and increased brain drain to member states. Taken by the promise of accession, civil society thrives and provides robust support to state institutions, which bend under the weight of difficult reforms to be introduced.

Towards the end of the decade, Montenegro and North Macedonia make it to stage 3 of accession, receiving observer status in the Council. There are increased talks of their official accession to the eurozone, while prospective new member states are invited to join the eurozone in the future. For the interim period, they enter the eurozone sandbox,

having special monetary agreements with the EU and adopting the euro while trying to meet the Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM II) for the durative period.

However, behind closed doors, anxiety is growing. Since no structural reforms were implemented, the accession glass ceiling is looming over veto rights, proportionality and all issues that haunted the enlargement process in the previous three decades.

Ukraine cannot move to the third stage of accession since member states cannot agree on agricultural policies and how to integrate Ukraine into the common output system. By 2030, it becomes clear that further accession talks cannot proceed without treaty changes. Across the neighbourhood, there is a growing sentiment that a new accession "purgatory" has been made instead of a clear pathway. Eurosceptics at home are on the rise and claim that all has changed for everything to remain the same so the EU could exploit the region under the guise of staged accession. This sentiment is further reinforced by a massive exodus from candidate states to the core member states that topples over the migration numbers coming from MENA countries. Increased competition between different ethnic groups increases over time in the key member states, turning at times into open hostilities.

New staged enlargement leaves the EU preoccupied with integrating candidate states, neglecting the relations with the Southern Neighbourhood. Whereas Ukraine and Moldova are scheduled to join the Union, other countries of the EaP are left out since they are considered too distant from the EU membership prospects. This double-speed accession leads to frustration in Georgia feeling left out by the EU.



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# 2

Enlargement is perceived as a geopolitical tool, and the Copenhagen criteria are overhauled. Ushered inside the Union, new member states eventually catch up with normative agenda facilitated by post-accession conditionality. The EU becomes more resilient by building up a diversified energy supply system that curbs the Russian monopoly and manages to substantially de-risk its dependency on China.

Enlargement becomes the most successful geopolitical instrument for the EU. The EU becomes richer in natural resources and demographics with economic growth increasing across the regions.

The unanimity principle is replaced with supermajority voting, solidifying vertical integration after the horizontal one.

# Geostrategic Europe

**C**onsumed by internal struggles and dwindling economic performance, Russia limits its hostile activities. Territorial gains by Ukraine come in parallel to major investment packages that allow for a negotiated cease-fire in the Donbas region.

The sense of geostrategic urgency takes over in the EU agenda setting. To secure its frontiers and mitigate American preoccupation in the Indo-Pacific, the Union decides not to allow any "buffer zones" in between. Enlargement is perceived as a geopolitical tool, and the Copenhagen criteria are overhauled.

Despite democratic shortcomings, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia and ultimately also Ukraine, are ushered inside the Union. In this "asymmetric enlargement" the normative element would be expected to catch up with post-accession conditionality once the European Union controls its neighbourhood. The EU proceeds with swift accession to begin a more active stance in world politics but would gradually integrate those countries in the EU mechanisms. Mirroring Bulgarian and Romanian accession from 2007, some join immediately since they meet many of the criteria whereas the remaining aspects of integration, including Schengen membership, are off the table for the coming years.

## Context

Economic competition between BRICS and the US pushes the EU to further consolidate around existing strategies. Ushered inside the Union,

North Macedonia, Montenegro, Ukraine and Moldova are expected to catch up with their normative agenda. Preoccupied with global politics, candidate states' shortcomings are seen as minor issues and the EU captures the moment - to enlarge and to agree on changes to the decision-making process by the block. The European Council decides to deal with these issues by post-accession conditionality.

Geostrategic enlargement empowers the European Union. The 55 million new citizens, large sways of fertile land, rich in iron ore and lithium, as well as enormous reservoirs of drinking water make Europe more self-sufficient. Moreover, the relative bargaining power of the EU increases with new member states. The dream of uniting the entire continent comes closer than ever.

By 2028, a new transatlantic trade pact will succeed in creating an expanded economic sphere. The next US president, while being more isolationist, does not have the appetite to end it.

Emboldened by its extended economic base, the European Union makes a great stride towards realising one of its strategic agenda - "Economy that works for all." Initially, welfare incentives were applied voluntarily, but over time, those mechanisms gained popularity and transcended the traditional welfare state domain of member states, becoming adopted on the systemic level across the entire Union.

This marked a social provisions heyday, coming with an introduction of the mandatory minimum wage

alongside an extension of the European Pillar of Social Rights and the European Social Fund. The most daring element of those far-reaching changes was an unprecedented increase of "Support to Mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency" which established unified unemployment provisions across the European Union.

### **EU in 2030**

By 2030, the recently admitted countries are catching up on their normative agenda. Successful asymmetric enlargement boosts internal confidence and transforms into increased economic attractiveness of the EU. Together with enhanced social provisions, there is a growing popular support for the European project. The increased legitimacy of the Union transforms into popular support for vertical integration. Treaty change becomes a reality with unanimity voting being replaced with a "super qualified majority" requiring 85% of EU countries. The Treaty Convention comes as a meteoric milestone. Many previously voiced concerns related to a union of 30+ countries have become obsolete. With veto provisions gone, the road for the remaining candidates to join is open.

### **Impact on EaP, WB and MENA**

The new social provisions introduced in the EU become a magnet for the new "European way of life". Candidate states admitted to the accession process rush to undertake necessary reforms before accession.

Despite promises of vast welfare provisions, the EU introduces new control mechanisms for the fiscal flows, trying to prevent an outward migration from candidate states to member states. Extended transition periods for opening job markets to newly admitted countries

are introduced to further curb migration. At the same time, EU structural funds for welfare provisions are introduced in new member states to reduce push factors. Those welfare provisions will be applicable across the entire EU, but they would correspond to local economies to prevent further migration flows and brain drain offering meaningful incentives at home.

With a clear promise of accession delivered by the Union, the Russian and Chinese influence is rapidly dwindling across new member states. Furthermore, these countries undergo major digitalisation, with cyber-security playing an important role.

New infrastructure contracts are taken by the EU ensuring enhanced protection of environmental aspects and labour conditions. With increased economic activity, newly admitted countries introduce reforms that can leapfrog older member states, better preparing them for the EU climate policies and promoting sustainable practices.

As a newly consolidated powerful economic block with geopolitical ambitions, the EU starts playing a more active role in the Caucasus. Multi-billion euro energy contracts with Azerbaijan come with broad conditionality mechanisms, forcing Baku to normalise its relations with Armenia. The Southern Gas Corridor becomes the symbol of increased European presence in the Caucasus region. At the same time, Georgia falls under the European orbit and receives an accession pathway by 2040. Although Cyprus remains a bone of contention between the EU and Turkey, a new special treaty on a "close neighbourhood" is signed with formidable trade incentives between the two players.





# 3

A pan-European enlargement debate gives way to negative cleavages increasing rifts between north-south and east-west divisions across member states. The growing energy dependency on countries outside the Union adds to the diminishing legitimacy of the EU in the neighbourhood where value-based leadership becomes increasingly overshadowed by transactional relationships.

With the increasing isolationism of the EU – fortress Europe endures, with fences mounting up alongside its frontiers. There is a power vacuum in the region with weaponised interdependence of the Southern and Eastern neighbourhoods susceptible to growing Chinese and Russian influence.

# Fortress Europe

**D**espite initial hopes, the prospects of new EU members remain very unlikely. Russian resilience and no clear Ukrainian victories leave the EU with little appetite to risk any major enlargement wave.

Growing international volatility makes Europe increasingly inwards looking. Mustering its energies, European elites are trying to keep the European project afloat and protect what has been already achieved in previous decades. While enlargement promises continue, they morph into an endless labyrinth of elaborate and confusing procedural requirements. The enlargement momentum is lost.

## Context

Despite initial hopes, the war in Ukraine did not wake up European elites. The new enlargement drive lost its momentum within an endless labyrinth of elaborate and confusing procedural requirements. Over the years, Ukraine and Moldova joined the enlargement limbo where the Western Balkans had been grounded for decades.

After an extended preparatory phase for institutional changes and inquiries into

the EU's ability to reform and enlarge, member states have reached the conclusion that delivery is impossible. The cost-balance of the institutional setup is consistently projected negatively, and political will is lost. Decisions are solidified by a common declaration about the existing political borders of the European Union. Frontex's budget is increased to protect the EU from all directions rather than opening up

This became the second enlargement failure after a 20-year stalemate in the Western Balkans. One of the most influential foreign policy tools of the EU is gone for decades to come.

The broken enlargement promise has fundamental reverberations for the inner workings of the union as well. The discussion around treaty reforms eventually loses its prominence as the main impetus of change - the vision of an enlarged European Union is swept off the table. In turn, this leads to negative and corrosive cleavages around European legitimacy and exacerbates older divisions within the Union. There is a progressive rift between western and eastern parts of the Union over failed accession talks with Ukraine, whereas growing economic inequality between

northern and southern Europe once again becomes a major discussion in the absence of enlargement and treaty change debates.

With one of its most important foreign policy tools in the region lost, the European Union has to adopt more transactional language with the neighbourhood. This highlights the constraints stemming from the limited appeal of EU values, rendering the EU's transformative power redundant.

### **EU in 2030**

The Fortress Europe scenario leads to growing isolationism and an inward-looking EU, which is further reinforced by an increased Russian presence across Europe's Eastern Flank. This leads to growing defence spending and the buttressing of Fortress Europe, with member states trying to shield themselves from the volatile neighbourhood. In turn, European elites conclude that further enlargement attempts are futile. Gradually, the EU borders of today become the permanent frontiers.

### **Impact on EaP, WB and MENA**

Ukraine sees no real prospects of joining the Union. Eventually, other candidate states come to realise that any possibility of accession is off the table. Disillusioned both Southern and Eastern neighbourhoods become increasingly vulnerable to external influences. Traditional competition over infrastructural projects and energy sectors transforms into major rivalries over the supply chains.

Moreover, the EU's primacy on the continent is challenged by the UK. Although considerably smaller and with limited economic weight compared to the EU, the UK can channel its resources

and exert its influence more effectively. Contrasted with London, Brussels has a sluggish and cumbersome bureaucracy, and its reputation is tainted by unfulfilled promises.

Another facet of growing external penetration manifests itself in regions becoming more volatile. Russia deliberately escalates ethnic tensions in Bosnia and Kosovo which leads to pervasive instability of the region. Likewise, Moldova remains continuously overwhelmed by provocations in Transnistria. Further perplexities obstruct economic growth and curb FDIs coming from the EU, contributing to even further susceptibility to foreign interference.

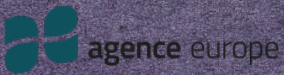
Russian and Chinese investments increase their market penetration, and the region witnesses labour and climate protection degradation. Abuses of working conditions, corruption and flawed public tenders become more common. With broken accession promises, liberal parties in the neighbourhood lose their credibility. Civil society starts retreating as clientelism becomes more common, and the degradation of state institutions continues as well as the consolidation of party-owned media all leading to an intensified brain drain.

Leading politicians in the EU neighbourhood countries, elected on the promise of accession, get replaced by populists venting their frustration and echoing the disappointment of disillusioned populations.

The bargaining power of the EU is reduced opening new spheres for Russian and Chinese interference in North Africa. Fortress Europe deteriorates relations with the Maghreb even further, reducing the cooperation to the issue of limiting migration flows.



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# 4

There is a dramatic failure of pro-accession leadership to deliver enlargement despite initial momentum. The Ukrainian war effort is exhausted, followed by a controversial Russia-EU deal leading to a great rift among member states. There is no major success in enlargement; the single most impactful EU policy thus far fosters disbelief in the EU's agency overall.

Increased division in the votes of the EU Council makes the Union progressively more dysfunctional. The Global Europe agenda is replaced with inward-looking strategies within the Council, and mounting pressure from isolationist and illiberal forces within the EU exacerbates the situation. The security vacuum in the neighbourhood is increasingly felt within the Union itself, rendering EU borders more susceptible to foreign interference.

# No Enlargement Chaos

**A**fter the initial promise of enlargement momentum, the EU becomes plagued by a wave of successive pitfalls that led to a dramatic failure of pro-accession leadership in Brussels. The treaty change initiative presented by the European Parliament was vetoed in the Council by the Netherlands and Hungary.

In another blow to the enlargement drive, Germany's insistence on meeting procedural requirements for the rule of law by all candidate states paralysed the efforts of the Austrian Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement in the second von der Leyen Commission. Without clear success, the biggest blow comes with an exhausted war effort by Ukraine. EU strikes a controversial deal with Russia, normalising the relationship. That treaty is seen as treason by the Eastern Flank of the Union leading to an outright conflict and divisions among member states.

## Context

The next election cycle brings about a rise of isolationist governments

whose policies oppose many strategic ambitions of the block including the most sensitive portfolio. Internal domestic political strife in France and Germany exacerbate this trend even further. In search of political manoeuvring, the EPP group is willing to align with many of the far-right parties to move forward in terms of the economy and security agenda. Enlargement policy becomes a trading card.

The Ukrainian war effort becomes extinguished. President Zelenskyy is forced to step down and difficult peace talks with Russia ensue. Without clear US leadership, which becomes fully absorbed in the Indo-Pacific, the EU proceeds with an appeasement policy towards Russia. The controversial normalisation treaty with Russia fosters CEE's animus towards Brussels.

European withdrawal from neighbourhood countries leads to a power vacuum. Eventually, Russian interference is increasingly felt in the Union itself, leading to further polarisation among the member states themselves - Hungary, Slovakia and Bulgaria are caught in exacerbating

polarisation which is provoked by foreign involvement. With loosening economic ties with its neighbourhood, the EU becomes more energy-dependent and more submissive towards US trade protectionism.

Increased division in Council votes transform into dwarfed budgets as a facet of the limited area of compromise. Russia buys support from Slovakia which is critical of Latvia's policy towards its Russian minority. China uses Budapest to fight off democratic resilience measures including investor monitoring at any rate.

Countering Russian and Chinese interference, the US offers special relations to a block of promising pro-US countries in the EU, leading to even further disintegration of the Union.

### **EU in 2030**

The Union becomes paralysed by the increased divisions in the Council. The power vacuum created in the neighbourhood by failed enlargement becomes progressively felt in the Union. Foreign powers buy smaller states' votes effectively blocking consensus voting in the EU. Budgets become increasingly smaller as a facet of the limited area of compromise, lacking any ambitious incentives. The brave optimism at the beginning of the decade becomes reduced to disillusionment in the EU's agency. Country-level bilateral trade agreements bypass EU agreements.

### **Impact on EaP, WB and MENA**

The collapse of the European presence in the neighbouring countries transforms into volatility levels unseen since the 1990s. The Russian success in Ukraine eventually leads to a puppet government being installed in Kyiv. Sporadic groups of Ukrainian freedom

fighters are neutralised and chased towards borders with Poland and Hungary.

Previous leaders of civil society are persecuted and replaced by social elites and opportunists loyal to the Kremlin. Following the blueprint from the Soviet invasion in Czechoslovakia from 1968, the Kremlin forces Kyiv to roll back on previous pro-EU reforms gradually dwarfing public discontent which has no leaders who could contribute. Over the years, Ukraine increasingly resembles Lukashenka's Belarus. Ukrainian dismay reinforces Russian grip on Minsk as well, leaving no illusions for prospects of change.

In the Western Balkans, clear disenchantment with enlargement prospects leads to thriving assistance from illiberal leaders. With Russian influence increasing polarisation, alongside Chinese investments, local autocrats receive a lucrative drip in exchange for continuous support against EU policies. Following suit, the last hopes for European accession are dashed in Georgia, with a strong authoritarian rule following orders from the Kremlin

Russian and Chinese interference in the Maghreb region consolidates as European countries limit their involvement in the region. Migration waves to Europe continue to be incentivised and weaponised by Russia, exerting constant pressure on the European Union. This trend bolsters controversial proponents of strong-handed politicians with links to the Kremlin

# Key Factors and Setting

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# Key Factors and Setting

The Russian invasion of Ukraine reinvigorated the European Union enlargement policy. As with previous enlargement waves, a geopolitical moment created a new accession opportunity, and thus Ukraine and Moldova have received candidate status. Instead of purported negotiations, Kyiv obtained a clear 10-point accession roadmap to open chapter negotiations. In the autumn of 2023, all major EU leaders promised an enlarged Union by 2030.

This lightning pace of change comes as a shock compared to the decades-long stagnation of the enlargement process in the Western Balkans. Yet, the failed promise of swift accession should also be a cautionary tale. After initial excitement, candidate states had to confront incessant bureaucracy and conflicting interests. For most of them, those obstacles morphed into accession limbo lasting 20 years.

Throughout those two decades, accession talks have degenerated into a game where candidate states pretend to make progress, and the EU pretends to take them in. Most importantly, however, the "final accession to the West" which was so eagerly desired by all Balkan states has changed – less than 50 percent of Serbs would opt for EU accession in a February 2023 poll.

Even more distressing is the cautionary tale of North Macedonia. In the pursuit of joining the EU, Skopje renounced its country's name and flag and devolved a third of its institutions to the Albanian minority. Subsequently, internal developments within the ruling coalition in Bulgaria used Skopje's EU accession process for

narrow political interests. Sofia blocked its neighbour and included pending bilateral issues in Skopje's EU negotiation framework.

Caught for over a decade in a state of uncertainty, the European Union enlargement process has pivoted towards change. The European Parliament is about to vote on the Constitutionalist Convention triggering article 48, which would ultimately open doors for treaty change negotiations. That "federalist push" of the major groups in the EP envisions the replacement of the unanimity principle with a "super qualified majority" of 85% of member states' vote. Effectively, this would put an end to structural obstacles for the new enlargement wave. This accelerated pace of developments instills confidence that the fatigue associated with enlargement from the previous decade has dissipated.

At the same time, the discussion on treaty change has already come with full force after Ursula von der Leyen's declaration at the 2023 State of the Union Address, where "A Union fit for enlargement can be achieved faster." This should not come as a surprise since enlargement is not about horizontal integration alone. As the Commission President remarked, "Each wave of enlargement came with a political deepening." The single market in the 80s, the Maastricht treaty with German unification and the Lisbon Treaty after the 2004 enlargement – all this made the Union stronger and ever closer.

Enlargement and treaty change are now discussed in the Council, Commission and the European Parliament. They are



discussed within member states as well, with the so-called "Franco-German report" and the Spanish Foresight Report being recent instances of how dynamic the enlargement discussion has become in recent months.

Yet, opponents of enlargement are still present. Belated responses to accession developments and continuous opposition to Schengen accession are just the tip of the iceberg. A trade-off – enlargement for a treaty change – would be hard to swallow for many CEE countries and the members of the Nordic Council. These concerns stem mainly from the signatories of a 2022 non-paper expressing their opposition to alterations in consensus-based decision-making within the realms of foreign and security policy.

Still, there is a growing search for compromise. Differentiated accession, divided into several stages, has been proposed by a considerable number of analysts. Staged accession is one facet of a compromise, another one associated with post-accession conditionality as

applied towards Bulgaria and Romania in 2007.

This heterogeneous nature of conflicting attitudes proves one thing - we are far from having a consensus on enlargement. To confront this, the four scenarios of this report are testing those differing visions for an (un)extended Europe.

The European Union needs to expand the zone of peace and prosperity while actively supporting Ukraine against Russian invasion and insulating other neighbours from militant subversion. At the same time, its founding principles oblige the block to ensure that new members will be equipped to deliver rule-based and shared values-driven governance. Given the rise of global conflicts with the participation or sponsorship of revisionist powers and the ongoing struggle to foster democratic systems, there is a need to examine several possible scenarios, which hopefully can prevent political mistakes resulting from negligence or complacency.

# Project Description

**T**he Trajectories of Change project brings together academic and policy networks in Europe to provide policy recommendations for EU enlargement, with a focus on the Southern and Eastern Neighbourhoods. The project aims to facilitate input from civil society stakeholders, focusing on strategic considerations for the EU's Southern neighbourhood and the Eastern Flank, including enlargement talks with Ukraine and Moldova. The project will end with advocacy campaigns among EU member states and is supported by the ZEIT STIFTUNG BUCERIUS.



**Katarína Matheriová**, Deputy Director General of DG NEAR and EU Ambassador to Ukraine (top left)

**Radosław Sikorski**, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Poland and former Member of the European Parliament (top right)

**Miroslav Lajčák**, EU Council as EU Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue (middle right)

**Andrius Kubilius**, Prime Minister of Lithuania from 1999 to 2000 and again from 2008 to 2012 (bottom left)

**Lisa Yasko**, member of the Ukrainian Parliament (middle left)

Foresight Meetings:  
Brussels 27-28 March 2023  
Brussels 18-19 April 2023

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Thank you to the remaining, unnamed contributors.



## Special Report Cost of Non-Enlargement

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