



# ENLARGEMENT ON HOLD: THE PRICE EUROPE PAYS

JELENA DŽANKIĆ, MATTEO BONOMI,  
JANA JUZOVÁ, BOJANA ZORIĆ



This publication is a result of the CERV research project, (Re)uniting the East and West: Reflections on the 2004 EU enlargement (REWEU), funded by the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (CERV) of the European Commission. The project focuses on the commemoration of the 2004 “big bang” EU enlargement at the occasion of its 20th anniversary in May 2024.

**The project is implemented by:**

- **EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy** (Czechia)
- **Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy - ELIAMEP** (Greece)
- **Istituto Affari Internazionali** (Italy)
- **Egmont - Royal Institute for International Relations** (Belgium)
- **Latvian Institute of International Affairs** (Latvia)
- **Finnish Institute of International Affairs** (Finland)
- **College of Eastern Europe** (Poland)

The document was produced by the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP) under Work Package 20 (WP20) of the REWEU project, which is coordinated by ELIAMEP.

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

**Authors**

**Jelena DŽANKIĆ**

Part-time Professor, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institute, Italy  
Senior Research Fellow, South-East Europe Programme, Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP), Greece

**Matteo BONOMI**

Senior Fellow, Istituto Affari Internazionali, Italy

**Jana JUZOVÁ**

Senior Research Fellow, EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy, Czechia

**Bojana ZORIĆ**

Associate Analyst for Western Balkans, EU Institute for Security Studies, France

**Recommended citation:**

Jelena Džankić, Matteo Bonomi, Jana Juzová and Bojana Zorić 2024. “Enlargement On Hold: The Price Europe Pays,” REWEU Project Publication No.01/2024.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The European Union (EU) enlargement process is currently undergoing a critical phase influenced by recent geopolitical events and internal dynamics. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has brought the question of EU enlargement to the forefront of discussions on European security architecture. This development has reignited debates on the future of Europe and its role in the broader European continent and the world.

Enlargement has historically played a transformative role in integrating Central and Eastern European countries into the EU, fostering democracy, stability, and prosperity. However, challenges in the Western Balkans have highlighted the need for a re-evaluation of how enlargement unfolds, taking into account realistic timelines and sustained commitment to the accession process.

As the EU grapples with the implications of prolonged enlargement, public and policy debates have predominantly focused on the EU's internal institutional reform, financial considerations, and border security. However, attention must also be directed towards the candidate countries, and the impact that the future enlargement decisions will have on them.

This paper assesses the effects and trade-offs of the different enlargement modalities that could be applied to the Western Balkan and Eastern European candidates, focusing on economy, democracy and security. The authors depart from the lessons of the past, drawing insights from the 2004 'Big Bang' enlargement, the 2007 enlargement to Bulgaria and Romania, and the two decades of European integration in the Western Balkan states.

Looking ahead, a common vision and strategy among EU institutions, member states, and candidate countries are crucial for navigating the complexities of the enlargement process. Coordinated decision-making and a commitment to upholding European values will be essential in ensuring the integrity and effectiveness of the EU's enlargement strategy, shaping the future of the European continent and the EU's role on the global stage.

## Enlargement on Hold: The Price Europe Pays

Jelena Džankić, Matteo Bonomi, Jana Juzová, Bojana Zorić

This policy paper was prepared within the framework of the project *(Re)uniting the East and West: Reflections on the 2004 EU enlargement (REWEU)* which is funded by the European Commission.

Russian invasion of Ukraine of 24 February 2022 has inextricably linked the question of European Union (EU) enlargement to the European security architecture. It has also opened up a series of questions about the future of Europe and its neighbourhood. The swift deployment of the promise of membership and a renewed focus on enlargement have created expectations among a line of (potential) candidates, but have come with no guarantees of accession.<sup>1</sup> Unmet expectations will have devastating consequences, not only for the EU's neighbourhood, but also for Europe, and for its role in the world.

Each previous enlargement round has come with its effects on the institutional setup of the EU, but has also had implications for democracy, stability, and prosperity in these countries. With the renewed 'enlargement momentum', it is essential to reflect not only on the implications of the enlargement policy on the EU's budget, but also on the potential impact and trade-offs that the way in which this policy unfolds will have on the current line of (potential) candidate countries.

After the introduction of the Copenhagen criteria in 1993, enlargement has progressed through the so-called '**merit-based**' model. In the subsequent two decades, this model brought in thirteen new countries - of which eleven from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) - as EU member states. Even so, 'merit-based' enlargement has proven to be far less effective in the post-war context of the Western Balkan countries, where the momentum for political and economic change has started a decade later than in CEE. The credibility of this model has been impaired by the 'enlargement fatigue' following the 'Big Bang' accession, as well as by the lack of political consensus on the use of veto rights in the context of enlargement. Applying this model in the same way in the long run would be *ineffective*, as it would dilute the positive momentum for reform in the aspiring countries.

While each and any enlargement has a geopolitical dimension, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has sparked different calls for a **fast-track (geopolitical) enlargement**.<sup>2</sup> Even though admitting countries into the EU merely as a result of the security imperative is *improbable*, the current geopolitical circumstances have had an important effect on the developments in the enlargement policy since February 2022. The pool of (potential) candidates has increased from six to ten, of which most have also opened the accession negotiations. Further geopolitical decisions concerning enlargement will inevitably impact the democratic and economic transformation of the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership countries, while also moulding their security, and the security of the whole European continent.

---

<sup>1</sup> Anghel, Veronica, and Jelena Džankić. "Wartime EU: consequences of the Russia-Ukraine war on the enlargement process." *Journal of European Integration* 45, no. 3 (2023): 487-501.

<sup>2</sup> Reuters. "Polish PM Says Fast-Track Route for Moldovan EU Membership Is Possible." April 6, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/polish-pm-says-fast-track-route-moldovan-eu-membership-is-possible-2023-04-06/>; Gawrich, Andrea, and Doris Wydra. "Conditions and Contestation: Ukraine on Its Way to EU-Membership." In *The War Against Ukraine and the EU: Facing New Realities*, 161-188. Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2024.

Political debates also point to the need for the process to unfold through various forms of ‘differentiated’ (external differentiated integration – associated membership), ‘staged’ (staged accession model – accession through different stages), or ‘gradual’ accession (external differentiated integration to full membership), which may or may not have EU membership as its end point. That is, they can be either complementary or alternative to the two main enlargement modalities. Each of them comes with benefits, costs, and trade-offs both for the EU and for the (potential) candidates. The common goal of the ‘differentiated’ integration models is to use the current EU toolkit to enable the participation of the aspiring members in selected policies, with the objective of building the sectoral and institutional capacity of the countries in the course of the accession process. Their outcome in terms of full membership is unclear.

To assess the implications of these different enlargement narratives, and attempt to understand the potential costs of non-enlargement, we depart from the lessons learned from the past. The disillusionment with EU membership in the Western Balkans is perhaps the best indicator of the costs of non-enlargement, or – of an extremely protracted merit-based model, which is how enlargement has unfolded since the ‘Big Bang’ enlargement. Low levels of economic development, captured states, eroding democracy, and growth of dependencies on authoritarian third countries have all flourished in the space opened up by non-membership. A similar scenario would have far more detrimental consequences in the Eastern Partnership countries.

This report addresses the enlargement trade-offs involved across the domains of economy, democracy, and security. Each section starts by discussing the implications of the protracted merit-based enlargement, as applied to the Western Balkan states, comparing the experiences of countries in CEE to those in the Balkans. It then assesses the impact of past geopolitically motivated enlargement decisions, and considers the costs and benefits of the differentiated integration toolbox.

## **Economy**

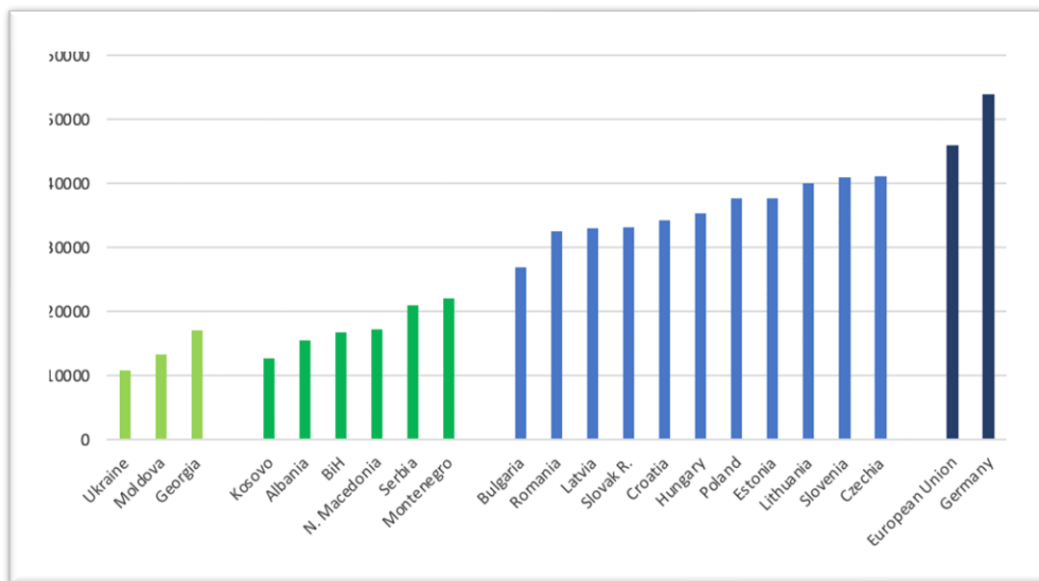
*When does the ‘merit-based’ enlargement foster economic development?*

The economic model applied in the context of the EU’s Eastern enlargement has been based on fast economic liberalisation and market integration. In the former socialist countries in Central-Eastern Europe, this model has been more successful than in the current candidate countries, manifesting in a number of economic indicators, including the GDP per capita (Figure 1 below). The absence of a clear accession perspective for the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership countries, coupled with limited access to the EU’s financial and technical resources, are the leading causes of such diverging outcomes.

Central-Eastern European countries have shown notable rates of economic convergence towards the EU living standards. The absence of armed conflicts, the speed of economic reforms, the prompt political and financial support of the EU, and the proximity of these countries to the EU’s industrial core, all feature as factors that have contributed to bringing the economies of these countries more in line with the EU averages even before accession. Such favourable background conditions facilitated foreign direct investment, rapid technological transfers, modernisation and restructuring of economies, and the full integration of the CEE countries in the EU Single Market and international value chains. The EU membership also came with a number of concrete

benefits, such as access to the Cohesion Policy and the Common Agricultural Policy, which sustained economic development after EU accession.

Figure 1: GDP per capita, PPP (constant 2017 international \$), 2022



Source: Author's elaboration based on World Bank's data.

The EU's economic model has proven to be less successful in the post-conflict context of the Western Balkans, where the EU accession agenda has proceeded much slower. It has been continuously challenged by structural problems in (actual and potential) candidate countries, such as contestations of nation- and state-building, state capture, and democratic decline. Since the early 2000s, the economies of the Western Balkan states have been privatised and liberalised stepwise. They are partially aligned with the EU acquis and are gradually integrating into the EU Single Market, as envisaged in the Stabilisation and Association Agreements (SAAs). Such an economic 'phasing-in' has taken place through continuous increases in trade, foreign direct investment inflows, and financial and banking sector integration. The EU is also the largest economic partner of the Western Balkan states, which stimulated economic recovery. However, it has rendered the region highly vulnerable to external shocks. For instance, the global financial and economic crisis and the eurozone crisis have had marked spill-over effects on all the Western Balkan economies, leading to multiple recessions and a remarkable slowdown in economic growth. The combination of structural problems and vulnerability to external shocks, in turn, led to insufficient competitiveness in foreign markets, the unfavourable sectoral structure of foreign direct investment, high unemployment, continuous brain drain, and growing income inequality.

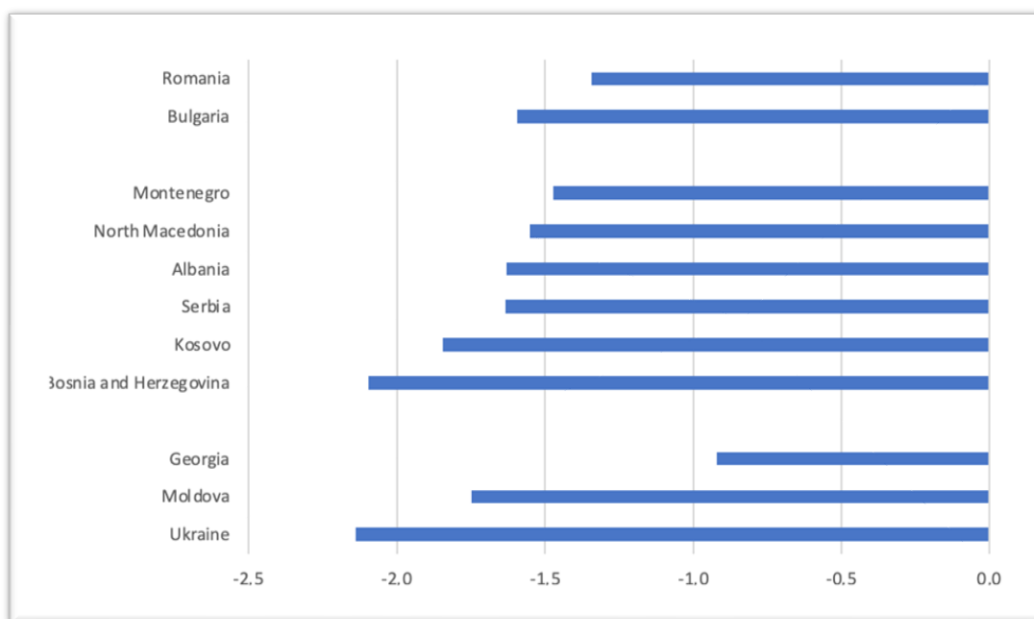
### *Economic development and geopolitically motivated enlargement decisions*

The accession of Bulgaria and Romania to the EU in 2007 stands in stark contrast to the experience of the Western Balkans. The grant of full membership to these two countries was accelerated by a series of geopolitically motivated enlargement decisions amidst concerns of several member states about their preparedness to join the Union. One such decision was the establishment of the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM) to ensure that the two countries complete the outstanding reforms after membership. Even so, the quality of institutions and economic governance

indicators in Bulgaria and Romania still appear far from the best EU practices (Figure 2 below).

While their economic transitions have yet to be an entirely successful story, Bulgaria and Romania still benefitted from economic convergence towards EU average income and standards. They have reached approximately 60 percent (Bulgaria) and 70 percent (Romania) of EU27's average GDP per capita in Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) in 2022. These better outcomes in convergence in comparison to the current candidates from the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries reflect multiple factors, including quicker access to the EU market, as well as political and financial support, such as access to the EU's structural funds. Such support has provided greater stability, favouring the transfer of public and private capital, know-how, and modern technology, which facilitated re-industrialisation and economic convergence.

Figure 2: Economic Governance Quality: Distance from Germany in 2022



Source: Author's elaboration based on World Bank's World Governance Index. Average between Government Effectiveness, Regulatory Quality, Rule of Law and Control of Corruption scores. Germany=0.

*Differentiated integration: a good remedy but an unlikely panacea?*

The current debates on the differentiated integration modalities seek to learn from the distinct enlargement and non-enlargement experiences to minimise the costs and maximise the benefits of a gradual economic and political integration in the EU for the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership countries. Yet, external differentiated integration as a permanent status is unlikely to be the panacea for all the current EU dilemmas.

This is well illustrated by the example of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, who have only recently received an explicit membership perspective. Instead, under the 'everything but institutions' logic, these countries were required to implement the EU *acquis* in exchange for market access and political cooperation. The signing of Association Agreements with the EU in 2014 and the subsequent entry into force of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTAs) has substantively advanced

economic integration between the three Eastern Partnership countries and the EU. The DCFTAs provide a nearly equivalent regulatory environment as in the EU Single Market in the exercise of the four freedoms (free movement of goods, services, capital, and people). As such, they have brought forward substantive economic benefits, not only for the Eastern Partnership countries but also for the EU. Russia's significance as a trade partner for these countries has declined while that of the EU has notably grown by 2022: reaching 60 per cent of overall exports in Moldova, 55 per cent of total trade of Ukraine, and 20 per cent of Georgian trade.<sup>3</sup>

Notwithstanding, external integration into EU markets has contributed only modestly to economic development, resulting in limited levels of alignment of these countries with the wealthier parts of Europe. The quick market opening and economic integration and the EU-based foreign capital have mainly boosted domestic consumption, but have had more modest effects on the real economy. Restructuring and modernisation efforts remained limited, like in the Western Balkans, while the EU's protectionist measures in the agricultural sector and hidden non-tariff trade barriers have curbed the Eastern Partnership countries' ability to place their products in the Union. This shows the limits of the differentiation contained in DCFTAs for sustaining rapid political and economic convergence of candidate countries in the pre-accession phase.<sup>4</sup>

## Democracy

### *The cost of time: democratic transformation through merit-based enlargement*

The push for the 'return to Europe' has been one of the main drivers of the democratic transformation of the Central and East European countries throughout the 1990s. It reinforced the power of the EU's democratic conditions precisely because there was an alignment in the motivations and expectations between the candidates and the EU.<sup>5</sup> The workings of the accession process unfolded in the timeframe of five years – between the 1997 Luxembourg summit - when the start of negotiations with the first group of countries was announced, and the 2002 Copenhagen summit - when negotiations were concluded with all countries except for Bulgaria and Romania. Such realistic timelines and the continuity of the process increased the credibility of enlargement based on 'merit' (i.e., compliance with the EU's conditions).

These two dimensions – realistic timelines and continuity – have both been disrupted in the context of the accession of the Western Balkans, whose 'democratic moment' happened a decade later than in CEE. In this region, EU accession has not been associated with the 'return to Europe', and the wars of the 1990s embedded populism and state capture into governance practices.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, since 2001, when Croatia and the then FYR Macedonia signed their SAAs, the accession timeframes have shifted.

---

<sup>3</sup> European Commission. *EU Trade by Country/Region*. 2024. [https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions\\_en](https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions_en)

<sup>4</sup> Adarov, Amat, and Peter Havlik. *Challenges of DCFTAs: How Can Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine Succeed?* Policy Notes and Reports, no. 18. 2017. <https://wiiw.ac.at/challenges-of-dcftas-how-can-georgia-moldova-and-ukraine-succeed--p-4233.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Schimmelfennig, Frank, and Ulrich Sedelmeier. "Governance by conditionality: EU rule transfer to the candidate countries of Central and Eastern Europe." *Journal of European Public Policy* 11, no. 4 (2004): 661-679.

<sup>6</sup> Bieber, Florian. *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans*. Germany: Springer International Publishing, 2019.

With the exception of Croatia, who became a member state in 2013, there has been no explicit time horizon for the conclusion of the accession negotiation with any of the other states. The elongated enlargement timelines have been caused by a number of factors at the EU level, including de-prioritisation of widening within the Union due to multiple crises and the substantive increase in and usage of the veto rights. The enlargement process has thus become less merit-based and is hindered by EU member states' political considerations and bilateral disputes with candidates. The 'slowing down' of the pace of enlargement<sup>7</sup> has also reduced the frequency of compliance rewards, degrading the trust between the Western Balkan candidates and the EU.

These EU-level developments went hand in hand with and perhaps even reinforced the democratic decline in the Western Balkans. The unpredictability of progress in the accession process as a reward for reforms has minimised the incentive to meet the EU's conditions. This is most manifest in the area of democracy and the rule of law, where reforms are politically and financially costly for political elites.<sup>8</sup> This traditional model poses the same risks for the Eastern Partnership countries. The expectations of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia are very high at the moment due to the geopolitical pressure on the EU and the fast pace of enlargement decisions; these expectations that the EU will deliver, together with the existential necessity of Euro-Atlantic integration for these countries, currently drive important reforms.<sup>9</sup> If these expectations remain unmet as a result of protracted accession timelines and politically motivated blockages, they might endanger the prospect for democratic reforms by harming the already fragile support for EU membership and reinforcing the authoritarian and anti-EU forces in some countries.<sup>10</sup>

### *The fast-ticking clock of geopolitics: any time for democratic reform?*

The geopolitical imperative calls for fast decision-making and has motivated an unprecedented sequence of decisions since February 2022. It has unblocked the enlargement process and substantively expanded the scope of the enlargement policy. At the same time, the fast sequencing of 'enlargement events' represents a risk for advancing democracy and the rule of law in the candidate countries. For the various actors at the EU level, the fast-tracking of enlargement procedures raises the dilemma of whether security and geopolitical concerns should outweigh the merit-based process built upon a near-full alignment with the EU's values and norms prior to accession.<sup>11</sup> While the immediate security-driven membership is unlikely, overlooking segments of

---

<sup>7</sup> Meyer-Sahling, Jan-Hinrik, and Klaus H. Goetz. "The EU timescape: from notion to research agenda." *Journal of European Public Policy* 16, no. 2 (2009): 325-336.

<sup>8</sup> Richter, Solveig, and Natascha Wunsch. "Money, power, glory: the linkages between EU conditionality and state capture in the Western Balkans." *Journal of European Public Policy* 27, no. 1 (2020): 41-62.

<sup>9</sup> Wolczuk, Katarzyna. *Overcoming EU Accession Challenges in Eastern Europe: Avoiding Purgatory*. Carnegie Europe, 2023. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/06/overcoming-eu-accession-challenges-in-eastern-europe-avoiding-purgatory?lang=en&center=europe>.

<sup>10</sup> Ciolan, Ionela. *Moldova's European Future: A Call to Open Accession Talks*. European Policy Centre, 2023. <https://www.epc.eu/en/publications/Moldovas-European-future-A-call-to-open-accession-talks~544e08>; Institute of International Relations Prague. *The Future of Enlargement in a Geopolitical Perspective*. 2024. <https://www.iir.cz/en/the-future-of-eu-enlargement-in-a-geopolitical-perspective-1>.

<sup>11</sup> Buras, Piotr, and Edona Morina. *Catch-27: The Contradictory Thinking About Enlargement in the EU*. European Council on Foreign Relations, 2023. <https://ecfr.eu/publication/catch-27-the-contradictory-thinking-about-enlargement-in-the-eu/>.

democratic reform to create assurances that the process is ongoing might create false expectations that accession can happen without reform.<sup>12</sup>

Balancing between pre-accession conditionality and security concerns is particularly important for upholding democracy and the rule of law in cases of geopolitically motivated enlargement decisions. Existing research shows that as soon as the accession negotiations are concluded, the compliance of the acceding country with EU requirements significantly drops.<sup>13</sup> Despite the application of the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism, the democratic standards in Bulgaria and Romania reached their highest level at the point of EU accession and gradually declined afterward. Similar scenarios unfolded across a number of other CEE states, such as Poland and Hungary.

These examples indicate that, if and when accession happens - especially through fast-paced enlargement - enhanced post-accession conditionality is essential. Financial consequences, including both positive and negative financial incentives, have proven at least partly successful for ensuring continued democratic compliance (e.g., in the cases of Hungary and Poland). Maintaining and reinforcing a system of financial consequences – both before and after accession - would be important for ensuring that democratic reforms take place in the candidate countries.

#### *Differentiated integration, differentiated democracy*

The effects of external differentiated integration on democracy depend on the timelines and credibility of the process, as well as on an understanding of its endpoint. This endpoint can entail either full membership (by means of sectoral integration ahead of accession) or associated membership (integration into different sectors without institutional representation).

Access to some of the benefits typically accessible only for EU members to candidate countries, including funding, know-how transfer, and EU-wide networks, could motivate leaders to undertake difficult reforms. A detailed assessment of the existing instruments for such ‘phasing in’ is yet to be performed, but initiatives following up on the recent Growth Plan for the Western Balkans or the restructuring of the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance have the potential to bring new energy into the reform process.<sup>14</sup> They can contribute to democratic progress, in particular when accompanied by a functioning negative conditionality, where benefits are withdrawn or withheld in cases of democratic backsliding. However, an inefficient or protracted gradual integration comes with a risk of further democratic stalling or backsliding of the candidates.

---

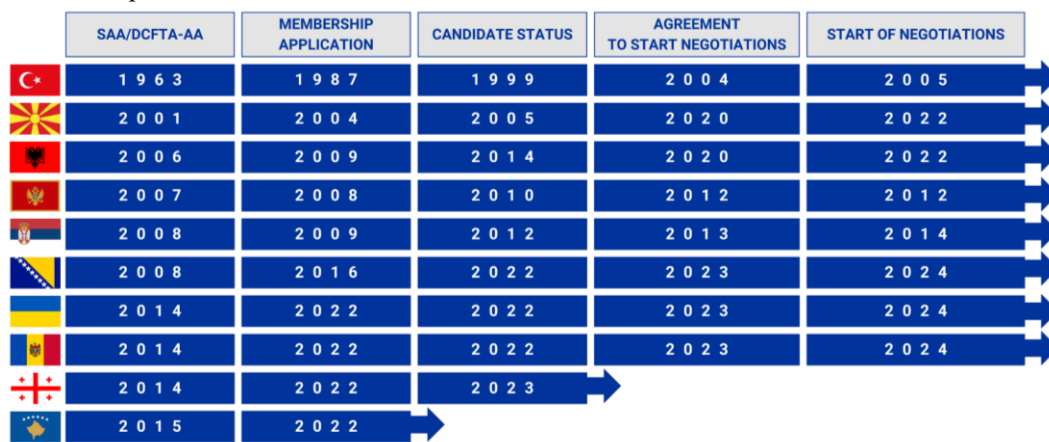
<sup>12</sup> *The Brussels Times*. “Bosnia and Herzegovina: Starting Accession Negotiations without Respecting European Court Ruling?” March 29, 2024. <https://www.brusselstimes.com/986085/bosnia-and-herzegovina-starting-accession-negotiations-without-respecting-european-court-ruling>.

<sup>13</sup> Böhmelt, Tobias, and Tina Freyburg. “The temporal dimension of the credibility of EU conditionality and candidate states’ compliance with the *acquis communautaire*, 1998–2009.” *European Union Politics* 14, no. 2 (2013): 250-272.

<sup>14</sup> Mihajlović, Milena, and Lukáš Macek. *New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans*. Jacques Delors Institute, 2024. <https://institutdelors.eu/en/publications/new-growth-plan-for-the-western-balkans/>.

In a similar vein, a process ending in associated membership might yield substantive benefits, primarily through single market integration.<sup>15</sup> However, it might curb the potential of EU enlargement to bring about democratic reform. It poses a risk of cherry-picking by the leaders of the candidate countries, searching for ways to obtain as many benefits of EU membership as possible without advancing democratic reforms that would threaten their grip on political power and economic influence. Associated membership can serve as an argument for semi-autocratic leaders to justify the lack of reform by highlighting the ‘broken promise’ of membership. For both the Eastern Partnership and the Western Balkan states, such associated membership would create frustrations among pro-democratic actors and citizens who see EU accession as the way toward a democratic regime.

Figure 3: Overview of the EU integration process of the ten countries aspiring to EU membership



Source: Author's elaboration based on European Commission data.

## Security

### *A house of cards: security vulnerabilities of prolonged enlargement*

Russian invasion of Ukraine has prompted discussions about European common defence and its relationship with the transatlantic community. The wars in the Balkans during the 1990s and 1999-2000 exposed the EU's limitations in acting outside the NATO framework.<sup>16</sup> As a result, reinforcing European defence capabilities to support Ukraine and preventing security escalation in the Western Balkans rests upon close coordination between the EU and NATO. The EU's enlargement policy thus aligns with NATO's efforts to enhance security in the Southern and Eastern borderlands. The ‘merit-based’ approach to accession has so far, in the Western Balkans, had conflicting results in the context of security. While on the one hand the required changes might strengthen the institutional capacities of the accession countries, process blockages might entangle the candidate countries in a lengthy spiral of accession requirements and have the opposite effect from the intended one. This challenge may be particularly evident in the case of post-conflict countries, where profound institutional reforms are

<sup>15</sup> Bertelsmann Stiftung. *Keeping Friends Closer: Why the EU Should Address New Geoeconomic Realities and Get Its Neighbours Back in the Fold*. 2023. <https://wiiw.ac.at/keeping-friends-closer-why-the-eu-should-address-new-geoeconomic-realities-and-get-its-neighbours-back-in-the-fold-dlp-6487.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> Radeljic, Branislav. *Europe and the Collapse of Yugoslavia: The Role of Non-state Actors and European Diplomacy*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016.

necessary, especially concerning the core principles of peace, reconciliation and post-war reconstruction.

Deployment of enlargement as an instrument integral to European security, has been successful in the short term: it has given security assurances to the Eastern Partnership countries, and has been reinforced by citizens' support for Ukraine.<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, as enlargement process prolongs, scepticism among EU member states may escalate, rendering decisions on new admissions increasingly elusive in the long term. In June 2023 already, just over half of EU citizens viewed enlargement favourably, with 53 per cent expressing support at the EU level. However, nearly four in ten (37 per cent) were against enlargement. Notably, in four EU member states (Austria, France, Germany, and Slovakia) a new enlargement was supported by less than 50 per cent of the population.

Furthermore, a prolonged enlargement could place candidate countries in precarious positions, rendering them vulnerable to Russian influence and subjecting them to additional pressure from disinformation and cyber/FIMI attack. In 2022, Ukraine was the country most frequently targeted by FIMI attacks, with 160 out of 480 cases registered. Serbia ranked sixth, with a total of 23 cases, following the US (58), Poland (33), Germany (31), and France (25 cases).<sup>18</sup> These attacks aim to destabilise the countries by disseminating fabricated content to manipulate voting patterns and spread disinformation about the Euro-Atlantic structure. Well-entrenched networks of Russian cyber-activist groups, such as Anonymous Russia, Killnet, and NoName pose a significant challenge to candidate countries and EU member states.<sup>19</sup> In 2022, Albania, Kosovo, and Montenegro experienced cyber-attacks, exposing their structural weaknesses to hybrid threats.

#### *Fast-tracking vulnerable candidates: a tricky solution*

The intensifying pressure for EU enlargement, accentuated by the war in Ukraine, underscores a pressing geopolitical necessity. The 2004 and 2007 rounds of enlargement were, to a significant extent, (geo)politically motivated. They were influenced by a range of factors, including high politics, geopolitical considerations, and pressure from individual member states.<sup>20</sup> The EU's proximity to a cluster of post-Soviet states grappling with socioeconomic and ethnic challenges, as well as an unstable democratic structure, presented a potential threat.<sup>21</sup> The decision to grant the

---

<sup>17</sup> European Policy Center. *Enlargement Package Marks a Turn in Policy to the East*. 2023. <https://www.epc.eu/en/Publications/Enlargement-Package-marks-a-turn-in-policy-to-the-East~558a70>.

<sup>18</sup> European External Action Service. *2<sup>nd</sup> EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats*. 2024. [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2024/EEAS-2nd-Report%20on%20FIMI%20Threats-January-2024\\_0.pdf](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2024/EEAS-2nd-Report%20on%20FIMI%20Threats-January-2024_0.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> European External Action Service. *2<sup>nd</sup> EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats*. 2024. [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2024/EEAS-2nd-Report%20on%20FIMI%20Threats-January-2024\\_0.pdf](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2024/EEAS-2nd-Report%20on%20FIMI%20Threats-January-2024_0.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> Pridham, Geoffrey. "Romania and EU membership in comparative perspective: A post-accession compliance problem? – The case of political conditionality." *Perspectives on European Politics and Society* 8, no. 2 (2007): 168-188. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15705850701322491>.

<sup>21</sup> Shea, Jamie. "An EU to cover the whole of Europe: the Union embarks on its greatest enlargement challenge ever." Friends of Europe, 2023. <https://www.friendsofeurope.org/insights/critical-thinking-an-eu-to-cover-the-whole-of-europe-the-union-embarks-on-its-greatest-enlargement-challenge-ever/>. Batorshina, Irina A. "The fifth wave of the European Union enlargement: pro et contra." *Baltic Region* 3 (2011): 42-50. <https://doi.org/10.5922/2079-8555-2011-3-7>. Frontex. "Migratory Routes." 2022. <https://www.frontex.europa.eu/what-we-do/monitoring-and-risk-analysis/migratory-routes/western-balkan-route/>.

candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova echo the 2007 enlargement and is driven by (geo)political considerations, particularly as a means to counter potential Russian influence and imperialistic ambitions. The initiation of accession negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina in March 2024 was a symbolic gesture affirming the EU's commitment to the Western Balkans. These geopolitically motivated enlargement decisions also reflect the EU's objective of enhancing stability at its external borders, but come with security risks as candidate countries are vulnerable to military and hybrid attacks from abroad and tainted with state capture and organised crime at home.<sup>22</sup>

The geopolitical push for enlargement and the vulnerability of the candidate countries to foreign attack inevitably raise questions about the complementarity between the EU and the NATO. This has been the case in the previous enlargement rounds. Poland, Hungary and Czech Republic first joined NATO in 1999 and the EU in 2007. Croatia became NATO member in 2009 and the EU in 2013. Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia joined NATO in 2009, 2017 and 2020, respectively. but other candidate countries seem far away from membership (particularly Ukraine under war and Serbia with military neutrality). NATO maintains a presence through peacekeeping missions in BiH (EUFOR Althea as per 'Berlin Plus' arrangements) and Kosovo (KFOR). Yet, peace-keeping missions alone cannot ensure the desired level of security and stability that NATO membership would provide.

At the same time, the challenges stemming from within these countries create conditions conducive to the exportation of criminal elements. The existing state capture across candidate countries, and the institutional weaknesses to address issues of organised crime, perpetuate illicit activities such as human trafficking, drug smuggling, and arms dealing.<sup>23</sup> The proliferation of the so-called Balkan route, with Albania serving as the primary transit country, exacerbates these challenges and places additional pressure on Frontex, Interpol, and the European Border and Coast Guard Agency to safeguard the Union's external borders.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, geopolitically motivated enlargement decisions, which overlook substantive domestic reform, might reinforce this challenge.

#### *Differentiated integration pathways: an opportunity for European security and defence*

The idea of differentiated integration might provide pathways to gradually integrate selected candidate countries into the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). NATO membership might further stimulate such integration pathways. Montenegro and North Macedonia serve as examples of how offering a Euro-Atlantic perspective significantly diminishes Russian influence. Along with Albania, these three countries demonstrated 100 per cent

---

<sup>22</sup> Dolan, Chris J. "Hybrid Warfare in the Western Balkans: How Structural Vulnerability Attracts Maligned Powers and Hostile Influence." *SEEU Review* 17, no. 1 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.2478/seeur-2022-0018>.

<sup>23</sup> Shentov, Ognian, et al. *Geopolitics, State Capture and Peak Corruption. What is Next for Anticorruption in the Western Balkans?* SELDI (Southeast European Leadership for Development and Integrity), 2022. [https://csd.eu/fileadmin/user\\_upload/events\\_library/images/2022\\_10/SELDI\\_Geopolitics-State-Capture-and-Peak-Corruption.pdf](https://csd.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/events_library/images/2022_10/SELDI_Geopolitics-State-Capture-and-Peak-Corruption.pdf); Frontex. "Migratory Routes." 2022. <https://www.frontex.europa.eu/what-we-do/monitoring-and-risk-analysis/migratory-routes/western-balkan-route/>.

<sup>24</sup> European Parliament. *Report on Cooperation on the Fight Against Organised Crime in the Western Balkans*. Report A9-0298/2021. 2021. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2021-0298\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2021-0298_EN.html).

alignment with CFSP.<sup>25</sup> The gradual integration in the sphere of CFSP/CSDP might initially consist in granting the selected candidates (that have already track record in CFSP alignment) an observer status in the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) and the Gymnich format (informal meeting of EU foreign ministers). With differentiated integration pathways, it would be possible to open up additional lines of strategic dialogue at FAC, sensitizing EU member states on the official candidates' presence, while allowing the candidate countries to further act in alignment with CFSP.

The synergy between NATO and the EU in ensuring stability and prosperity remains crucial, also in the context of differentiated integration. Following the Russian annexation of Crimea, all three NATO members in the Western Balkans have notably bolstered their defence expenditure. Their investments outstrip those of ten EU/NATO member states in 2023, namely Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal, Slovenia, and Spain.<sup>26</sup> This trend towards heightened military spending is evident throughout the region, with Serbia registering the most substantial increases of all Western Balkan countries. While NATO cannot offer security guarantees to the Eastern trio before they become fully-fledged members of the Alliance, being progressively involved within the EU accession framework, by means of a clear, consistent, and transparent accession path would deliver a strong message to Russia about providing the countries with a European perspective, which goes hand in hand with the Euro-Atlantic partnership.

### **So what, and what next?**

Enlargement is back on the EU's agenda, and it is likely to stay there for some time. In the coming years, it will likely become one of the central issues debated at the EU level, not the least because it is deeply embedded in the question of European security architecture, but also because it is crucial for understanding what the EU is, and what role it aspires to have on the broader European continent, and in the world. Enlargement is, in this sense, Janus-faced: with one of its aspects being related to internal institutional reform, and the other to external relations with countries seeking membership. Nonetheless, so far, much of the public and policy debates have been inward-looking: debating internal institutional reform, the financial implications of enlargement, and security for the EU's borders. Far less attention has been paid to processes in the candidate countries, which substantively shape the politics and policy of enlargement, drive its pace, and European public opinion on a further widening. The vision of enlargement as the key tool for shaping our European continent needs to be outward and forward looking.

The analysis of the implications of the different enlargement modalities on economy, democracy, and security reveal that in any case there are trade-offs for the candidate countries (and the EU). Protracted timeframes, unfulfilled promises, and uncertainty that membership will happen – as evidenced by the experience of the Western Balkans – bears the highest costs. It does not stimulate economic growth sufficiently for these countries to reach European averages, it creates political strongholds that capture the state and destabilise democracy, and opens up a space for other, often undemocratic,

---

<sup>25</sup> European Commission. *Strategy and Reports*. 2023. [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/strategy-and-reports\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/strategy-and-reports_en).

<sup>26</sup> NATO. *Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2023)*. Public Diplomacy Division, 2023. [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2023/7/pdf/230707-def-exp-2023-en.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2023/7/pdf/230707-def-exp-2023-en.pdf).

actors to exploit structural vulnerabilities of transitional countries. Geopolitically accelerated enlargement decisions are often more economically beneficial for the aspiring countries; but they come with the risk of stalled reforms, if progress is not conditioned by them. Differentiated integration might solve some of the economic issues, and potentially reinforce the security dimension, but runs the risk of ‘cherry picking’ of reforms by local political leaders.

Whichever the preferred route, we propose that the process is based on 4 Cs: Clarity, Credibility, Consistency, and Coordination.

**Clarity** over whether full membership or associated status will be the endpoint of the process is central. This clarity has driven the substantive reforms in the case of Central and East European Countries, but it no longer exists in the case of the current (potential) candidates. Clarity of the endpoint is in this sense more substantive for enlargement discussions than debates on ‘accession dates’, which even in the previous enlargements had not been known until very late in the process.

**Credibility** of enlargement as a ‘merit-driven’ process, where reforms are rewarded with progress or funds, and backsliding is sanctioned by appropriate mechanisms is crucial. For this reason, it is essential to develop and enforce a powerful conditionality mechanism, and use as a blueprint those examples (e.g., visa liberalisation) where it has had the strongest effects. Negative conditionality needs to be defined, as well as mechanisms for invoking it.

**Consistency** of the pace would substantively enhance the quality of enlargement as a process. After the ‘Big Bang’ enlargement, the sequencing of enlargement decisions and the timeframes in which the accession has taken place have expanded substantively. Following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, the *grave* tempo of enlargement has turned into a *presto*, perhaps even *prestissimo*. Yet, as the experience of Central and Eastern Europe shows, a moderate yet steady pace, with periods of accelerated enlargement decision-making has the greatest impact on reform in the candidate countries.

**Coordination** among the different actors involved in enlargement decision-making, including the European Council, the Commission, the member states, as well as the European Parliament. A common vision and strategy on how the process should unfold in the current circumstances should prevent the abuses of the asymmetries of power and veto rights, which might result in frustration and lower support for accession in the candidate countries, and for the mushrooming of political spaces contrary to European values. A common vision of Europe is key.



20YEARS.EU



Funded by  
the European Union